



The Wine of Babel: Landscape, Gender and Poetry in Early Modern Damascus

Samer Akkach

*A garden in which the red anemone has blossomed,
mimicked by the rosy cheek of the beloved.*

*One day, the beloved said to it, while on him blew
the cool breeze and began to feel cold.*

*You stole my cheeks and forged my mole,
and this is because your heart is black.*

(*Al-Nabulusi*, Burj Babel, 25)

IN early modern Damascus (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) there emerged a secular urban space dedicated to pleasure, recreation, and entertainment.¹ The social elite—members of notable families, government officials, eminent scholars—gathered regularly in the city's private and public gardens for entertainment and social interaction. The main form of entertainment was spontaneous yet sophisticated poetic exchanges. According to the records of some of these gatherings, women were absent: these were not family picnics but rather men-only outings. The absence of women, however, was compensated by the amatory elegies and love poetry that often mapped the feminine virtues of the beloved over the landscape. The appreciation of nature's beauty was thus mediated by poetic imagery celebrating femininity and revealing men's effeminate languishing character that was often concealed in the presence of women. *The Wine of Babel and the Singing of Nightingales (Khamrat Babel wa Ghina'*

Literature & Aesthetics 17(1) July 2007, page 107





al-Balabel) is an anthology of such poems compiled by a leading literary figure of the period, 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (1641-1731).³ It features a large collection of poems by 'Abd al-Ghani and his close friends that were recorded over a period of thirty-five years. A three-line poem cited in the anthology describes one of these gatherings as including a composer (of poetry), a singer, a writer, and a listener. This indicates that the recording of poems composed impromptu and sung in these gatherings was part of the rituals.³ 'Abd al-Ghani, as the central figure and principal composer, collected these notes and assembled them in a single volume in the later part of his life.⁴

The anthology provides ample poetic references to the landscape and natural settings of these gatherings, identifying most of the palaces by name and location. Apart from a few distant places, all the gardens mentioned, public and private, were within or on the perimeters of Damascus' urban environs. Thus, in addition to its literary value of revealing the aesthetic sensibility of the period, and its social value of showing how the poetic presence of femininity was celebrated in the physical absence of women, the anthology has a historical value as an urban record of Damascus. It presents an image of the city's early modern urbanity that has been completely effaced by the rapid expansion and modernisation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although the names of the suburbs and places cited are mostly identifiable in today's urban formation of Damascus, virtually all of the gardens and recreational places mentioned have disappeared. It is therefore not possible to match any of the poetic descriptions with the actual landscaped and natural settings in which they were composed. It is possible, however, to analyse the poetic descriptions of these places as a base for reading Damascus' urban landscape history, while focusing on, firstly, the ways in which poetic imageries and figurative expressions were used to map emotive experiences over specific visual fields, and, secondly, the role gender played in determining the general aesthetic attitude towards nature and landscape in the Damascene society. These are the main concerns of this study.

Today's general understanding of "landscape" as "a view or prospect of rural scenery, more or less extensive, such as is comprehended within





the scope of vision from a single perspective,” is the legacy of the eighteenth-century picturesque tradition.⁵ This poses some conceptual and methodological difficulties. The concept of landscape—as a pictorial composition of natural or man-made scenery viewed from a vantage point and objectively disposed in the frame of a painting or the tourist’s eye—is alien to the Arab-Islamic tradition that developed no graphic representations of nature and had no word for “landscape.” In attempting to read and interrogate a spatial practice using a foreign interpretive tool one must, therefore, remain conscious of the distortion involved. But since this study is not concerned with a broad theory of landscape perception, but rather with a historicised reading of expressions by a specific community sharing a distinct social structure, poetic sensibility, and horizon of expectations, the distortion that the term “landscape” inflicts on the study is marginal.

In *The Wine of Babel*, the poetic exchanges took place in specific natural and designed visual fields that are identified by three Arabic terms: *bustan*, *hadiqa*, and *rawda*. With the little information available on the garden history of Damascus and greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham), it is difficult to identify the different formal characteristics, if any, that each term designates. Here, I loosely refer to these fields as “gardens” and “recreational places.” While *bustan* and *hadiqa* are often used interchangeably, generally, *bustan* tends to refer more to open sites designated for agricultural purposes, whereas *hadiqa* refers more to enclosures designated for aesthetic purposes. *Rawda* remains a vague term that can refer to both, as well as to undesigned natural settings. *Hadiqa* is the only term with visual connotations, as it shares with *hadaqa*, “iris,” the same root, of which *haddaqa* means to “stare” at, fix one’s “gaze” on, and “encircle” something.⁶ It is difficult to ascertain whether the original association between the eye and the garden was based on form or function. The etymology of the term, however, suggests that it was based on form, since a *hadiqa*, like an iris, was depicted as a planted circular enclosure conspicuously delineated from its arid surrounds. (Ibn Manzur)

‘Abd al-Ghani: A New Confluence

The novelty of the poetic space that ‘Abd al-Ghani constructed,



inhabited, and shared with others was tied to his unique personality that embodied an unusual confluence of secularity and religiosity, rationalism and mysticism. Understanding his personality would, therefore, help us understand some of the personal and cultural parameters of his poetic imagination. As Chris Fitter observes in *Poetry, Space, Landscape*: “No landscape can ever... be ‘autotelic’ - bearing a perennial and ‘objective’ appearance and significance independent of its reader: cultural projection by a landscape’s beholder will complete its necessarily partial ‘self-formulation.’” (9)

Born in Damascus in 1641, ‘Abd al-Ghani was a major Muslim polymath, whose complex and colourful personality is slowly being uncovered.⁸ Recognised as a Sufi master, a theologian, a *hadith* scholar, a historian, a traveller, and a poet, researchers find it difficult to capture the true depth and breadth of his contributions and influence from a single perspective without being reductive. A prolific author of over 280 works, ‘Abd al-Ghani made significant contributions to several disciplines; his main domain of influence was religious sciences.⁹ His conspicuous affiliation with Sufism is behind his current monochromatic image as a Sufi saint.¹⁰ Sufi saint though he was, his thought and teachings had much more to them than Sufism. His multifaceted personality and teachings reflect several aspects of the intellectual, social, and institutional changes of his time.

Through his personality, ‘Abd al-Ghani presented a new individualistic model of a self-made Sufi master, one who relied on texts rather than masters for spiritual attainment, and one who apparently saw no conflict between worldly pleasure and spiritual fulfillment. The engrossing sensuality of his poetry in *The Wine of Babel*, which is devoted to corporeal pleasure, stands in startling contrast to the transcendental spirituality of his poetry in *The Anthology of Truths (Diwan al-Haqa’iq)*, which is devoted to mystical revelations.¹¹ Both substantial anthologies seem to reflect concurrent experiences, paradoxical as they may seem, rather than different episodes of his life. According to his main biographer Kamal al-Din al-Ghazi, from the age of forty-one to forty-eight (1091-1098/1681-1687), ‘Abd al-Ghani went into a seven-year spiritual retreat (*khalwa*),



during which he isolated himself from social interactions.¹² According to the dates recorded in *The Wine of Babel*, however, this lengthy spiritual retreat, if it was so, was interspersed with several social outings, during which he seems to have been able to switch his focus from heaven to earth in a remarkable way.¹³

Through his teachings, 'Abd al-Ghani attempted to expand the scope of the rationality of Islamic religious thinking. He articulated a philosophy of religion that supported an ecumenical and egalitarian understanding of Islam, enhanced its scope of tolerance, as well as introducing a philosophy of being as a viable alternative to the natural theology that was emerging in Europe. Through his public readings of highly controversial mystical texts, he also strove to create a new social space for mysticism, one that promoted public participation rather than privacy, secrecy, and elitism. His attempt to exploit the power of the public to counter the rising antimystical sentiment was unprecedented in Damascus, generating at once much interest and unease.¹⁴

'Abd al-Ghani descended from a family of religious scholars that included many eminent lawyers, but no Sufis. They were well-respected in Damascus and admired for their scholarly contributions.¹⁵ 'Abd al-Ghani was the last eminent figure of the family, after whom the Nabulusis' commanding intellectual presence rapidly vanished, thanks largely to the modern reform movements that emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and cut all intellectual ties with the preceding masters. Today, 'Abd al-Ghani is only faintly present in the collective memory of modern Muslims. Very little has been written about him and most of his works are still in manuscripts buried in various libraries around the world.

Publicity, Secularity, and Fame

'Abd al-Ghani rose to fame in Damascus at the age of twenty-five in one of those urban recreational gatherings, which tended to cultivate secular sentiment. In one of the first few poems cited in *The Wine of Babel*, 'Abd al-Ghani openly expressed this sentiment:

*Respond to the callers for youthful pleasure and stay with the group,
and replace abstention from love with impious recreation.*





*And adhere to excessive desires and burning passion, and leave
behind the words of guidance, and stop listening to them.
Only the brave wins the pleasure, while fail
to reach it the coward and the hesitant.
Don't think that happiness will last, nor
will sadness, endless as it may seem, it will come to an end.¹⁶*

The Wine of Babel was chronologically assembled, and the first dated recording indicates that 'Abd al-Ghani most probably wrote these lines before the age of thirty-five. Yet, considering that he was already a celebrated Sufi at the age of twenty-five, it is difficult to reconcile the deep contradictions these lines reveal. Was this polarity particular to 'Abd al-Ghani's personality, or was it representative of a wider trend in the Damascene society, are questions that require more research before they can be answered adequately.

Through his father's connections, 'Abd al-Ghani maintained contacts with the dignitaries, religious leaders, poets and distinguished personalities of Damascus. His name arose as a potential successor to his father, who died relatively young at the age of forty-five when 'Abd al-Ghani was only twelve, and he was often invited to join the regular recreational gatherings. Poetic exchanges, exhibiting wit, literary skills, knowledge, and imagination, were the main currency of entertainment. In one of these gatherings, 'Abd al-Ghani took part in the poetic exchanges and recited a few lines of a long poem he had carefully composed. This led to him reciting more and more lines until he captured the attention of the audience. Members of the group were impressed by its sophistication and novelty, and, being unfamiliar with it, they inquired about its author. When 'Abd al-Ghani said it was his, many were sceptical. They demanded a second recitation of the whole poem. Upon the second hearing most of the audience praised 'Abd al-Ghani, yet a few remained doubtful. So that all doubts about its authorship might be resolved, he was asked to write a commentary on it. He agreed and asked for two weeks to complete his work, but the grandson of the Head of the Damascene Nobles, 'Abd al-Rahman Efendi, who was present at the gathering, gave him three weeks and invited everyone present to reconvene at his place to hear





the commentary. As scheduled, the group gathered at 'Abd al-Rahman's house where 'Abd al-Ghani delivered his commentary that came in two forms: poetic and prosaic. The audience was just as impressed with the commentary as with the original piece and acknowledged 'Abd al-Ghani's poetic talents.¹⁷

'Abd al-Ghani's original poem, *The Evening Breezes in Praising the Chosen Prophet* (*Nasamat al-Ashar fi Madh al-Nabii al-Mukhtar*), was composed of one hundred and fifty lines, each of which gave an example of one type of the poetic expressions known in the Arabic science of rhetoric, '*ilm al-badi'*, hence the poem's technical name *al-badi'iyya*. In content, the poem praised the Prophet Muhammad and celebrated his virtues. The commentary, *The Flowers' Fragrances on the Evening Breezes* (*Nafahat al-Azhar 'ala Nasamat al-Ashar*), included a new poem of the same length explaining the first and giving further examples of the rhetorical expressions. The technical difference between the two was that the first did not include an explicit reference in each line to the type it exemplified, whereas the second did. The commentary also included an extended explanation in prose studded with poetic citations from classical Arabic poetry. Both the commentary and the original poem formed the content of 'Abd al-Ghani's first major work *Nafahat al-Azhar 'ala Nasamat al-Ashar*, which he completed shortly after this event, marking his appearance on the literary scenes of Damascus at the age of twenty-five.¹⁸

The Wine of Babel was compiled over thirty-five years after *Nafhat al-Azhar*, although the first poems cited were perhaps composed in recreational gatherings shortly after he rose to fame. While both can be considered among 'Abd al-Ghani's contributions to poetry and literature, *The Wine of Babel* differs in being aimed not at showing off his literary and poetic skills, but rather at recording the poetic itineraries of social events. The objects of his poems—the visible natural settings and the invisible sensual and emotional overlays—are more important than the stylistic and technical qualities of the poems. Contextualised, experiential depictions as they are, the poems are a valuable, albeit unconventional, source of information on Damascus' urban landscape history. Together with contemporary sources, such as Ibn Kinnan's *The Islamic Convoys* (*al-*





Mawakib al-Islamiyya), and earlier sources, such as al-Badri's *The People's Stroll (Nuzhat al-Anam)*, al-Nabulusi's anthology forms a foundation from which a socio-urban history of Damascus' landscape can be constructed.¹⁹ A brief overview of Damascus urban environs and the culture of public recreation would help contextualise 'Abd al-Ghani's experiences and poetic representations.

Damascus' Beauties and Public Recreation (*tanazzuh*)

Damascus, often referred to as the oldest inhabited city, is characterized by a unique geography that provides an abundance of water despite its hot, arid and dry climate.²⁰ The runoff from the snowy mountains in the east as well as many fresh water springs fed the city's main life line, the Barada river that branches into several smaller rivers as it enters the city, creating a complex network of water supplies. Running through the city, these rivers irrigated its numerous private and public gardens and terminated at the rich agricultural plains of al-Ghuta that provided the city with an abundance of vegetables and fruits. Rising over 1,000 meters above sea level, Damascus is embraced from the North-West by the lofty mount Qasyun, at the foothill of which stood many of the city's most beautiful and most frequented gardens. Among the beauties of Damascus, Ibn Kinnan al-Salihi (d. 1740) wrote, was the Triumph Dome (*Qubbat al-Nasr*), a pavilion perched on the highest point on the Qasyun foothill, from which one views the entire fabric of the city, through which the rivers appear as "threads of silver."²¹

A census taken at the turn of the seventeenth century indicates that Damascus was an expanding prosperous urban centre. It might have lost some of its trade powers with most of the European diplomatic missions being based in the northern city of Aleppo. However, Damascus remained a centre of attraction for its natural beauty and cosmopolitan lifestyle. The French traveller Jacques de Villamont was taken by the natural beauty and richness of Damascus, as he wrote: "It is a very large and very powerful city, built on a very beautiful and very rich plain, through which run two rivers ... that subdivide into an infinity of brooks that water delightful gardens ... Whosoever considers the beauty, situation, and richness of





this city well would judge it paradise on earth not for the appearance of the city's buildings, but for the bounty of the land alone."²² "The beauties of Damascus" (*mahasen al-Sham*) became a popular theme among Damascene historians and scholars, whose accounts often include praise and admiration by the many eminent scholars who visited Damascus and experienced its beautiful gardens. In *The Wine of Babel* several poems by 'Abd al-Ghani himself corroborate the visitors' observations. One opens with the following lines:

*If you are in serious trouble and feeling uneasy,
settle in the land of Sham and live in Damascus.
You will find your desire in it and all that you aspire for,
you will even achieve renown and become eloquent in speech.
A town that rose above all towns in beauty,
and grew in splendour and increased in glamour ...
If you are to passionately love a home town, this is the one for you,
above all towns, that deserves to be loved and be enraptured with.*

(*Al-Nabulusi, Burj Babel 102*)

To enjoy their city's natural beauties, the Damascenes developed a sophisticated culture of recreation. They referred to this social practice as *tanazzuh*, literally "to distance oneself," a term that is commonly used today for "recreational outing," "picnicking," "leisurely walks," and "going on an excursion." According to the lexicographer Ibn Manzur, the original meaning of the word was to distance oneself from water and places of habitation, that is, cities and villages. But "lay people misplace things," he explains, "and are mistaken when they say: 'we went out *natanazzah*,' when they go out to gardens. They equate *tanazzuh* with going out to farms, parks, and gardens, whereas *tanazzuh* is to distance oneself from villages and water, and to be where there is no water or dew or a gathering of people, that is, at the edge of the desert."²³ Whatever the original meaning of the term might have been, for the Damascenes, lay and elite, the *tannazuh* meant one thing: to be in the city's *mutanazzahat*, that is, the numerous landscaped and natural gardens, where water, shade, trees, flowers, cool breezes, food, and entertainment engaged the senses and offered pleasure, refreshment, and delight. Ibn Kinnan devoted most of history *al-Mawakib al-Islamiyya* to the beauties of Damascus, offering





ample details on the city's recreational places and gardens, on Damascene horticulture, on species of trees and flowers, and on the socio-cultural practices associated with these places. He also cites numerous poetic representations of these places by renowned scholars, who invariably express attachment, delight, and joyful experiences.

'Abd al-Ghani's anthology and other pre-modern accounts that describe the urbanity of Damascus refer to private and public gardens but without any clear formal distinction between them. Government-sponsored public gardens and recreational places, impressively large and elaborate, had a long history in Damascus. A two-line poem by the thirteenth century scholar Taj al-Din al-Kindi (d. 1217), cited by Ibn Kinnan, praises the Ayyubid king Nur al-Din for having dedicated al-Rabwa, one of the most beautiful recreational places on the banks of the Barada river, to the public. He wrote:

*Surely when Nur al-Din saw that
in the gardens there are palaces for the rich.
He built the Rabwa as a lofty palace,
an absolute recreational place for the poor.*

(Ibn Kinnan 1:295)

The public recreational places were designed, urban sites with elaborate landscaping and commercial services. Ibn Kinnan describes one named al-Jabha, also on the Barada river, as follows:

Al-Jabha: it is a square site, the size of two *fiddan* (about 8,500 m²), with shading trellises, but without mud on top, [built] in between willow, poplar, and walnut trees, and with many plantations surrounding a water canal from the four directions, as well as fountains, ponds, and water-jets. Located on the side of the Barada river, one finds there waterwheels and shops for barbequed-meat sellers, cooks, butchers, snack sellers, drink sellers, fruit sellers, and herb sellers. There is also a mosque, two schools, and a lodge. There are waiters waiting to serve people; they have quilts, plates, pots, mattresses, and pillows for those who want to stay over. (Ibn Kinnan 1:222-25)

The thirteenth century Andalusian scholar Ibn Said al-Ghirnati (d. 1286) described his delightful experiences of the Jabha as he wrote:

For the Jabha in my heart I have love,





which I did not have for a beautiful face.
The water dances there with delightful pleasure,
and the branches incline for the shaded shadow.
The sun wishes to stay over there,
that is why she yellows at the time of setting.

(Ibn Kinnan 1:226)

Coffee Houses and Public Sociality

After citing more poems describing joyful personal experiences of the Jabha, Ibn Kinnan continues his description of the place, referring to two rivers that lie above it and from which water cascades down onto it. Above the rivers, he adds, there lies a public bath named Hammam al-Nuzha (Recreational Bath), next to which there is a *maqsaf*, which today means “canteen” or “refreshment shop.” Ibn Kinnan notes that the *maqasif* (pl. of *maqsaf*) were originally recreational places designated for the inactive soldiers and the unemployed (*battalin*) to pass time, “but now, they are called coffee houses (*maqahi*, pl. of *maqha*).” “In the past, before the coffee,” he continues, “they used to be called *maqasif*.” (Ibn Kinnan 1:229-30) He also notes that the person in charge of these apparently novel places, the *maqasifi*, “keeps cloaks, quilts, leather mats (used as tablecloths and game boards), even plates and spoons for those who want to eat. This does not exist anywhere other than Damascus.” (Ibn Kinnan 1:229)

Indeed, such spaces of public sociality seem to have emerged in the Ottoman Arab world long before they did in Europe. According to Degeorge in his history of Damascus, a new type of buildings known as *khammara* emerged in Damascus in the sixteenth century to facilitate a new type of public activity associated with coffee drinking. Although the name literally mean “a place of fermenting wine” and indeed later on became associated with bars serving alcohol, originally the *khammara* designated some kind of hostelry serving coffee. The coffee houses first appeared in Damascus in 1534 but were banned in 1546 in response to legal decrees issued by several local jurists. Shortly after, however, they were officially authorised by the Ottomans and rapidly multiplied. They reached Istanbul in 1555 “on the initiative of a ‘wag called Shams’, an inhabitant of Damascus.” (Degeorge 176)



The *khammaras* were novel establishments unparalleled in the West, in which coffee houses were introduced in the mid-seventeenth century. In December 1647, Balthasar de Monconys, French diplomat, physician and magistrate, while passing through Damascus, described these curious buildings as follows:

They are all covered over, with panes of glass in the middle; there is a beautiful fountain with several jets of water falling into a large square basin; all the benches are covered with rugs and there are theatres where divert drinkers are entertained by cantors and players of instruments. (in Degeorge 176)

Historians of early modern Europe highlight the significance of the public sphere in the experience of early modernity, and note particularly the active role spaces of public sociality, such as the salons, the coffee houses, and the Masonic temples, played in the emergence of the public.²⁴ Modern urbanism, they also argue, is a complex phenomenon closely associated with the intellectual and socio-economic developments that took place during the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, which resulted in a rapid secularisation of society, and which in turn led to significant changes at the socio-cultural and government-state levels. The emergence of the public as a space of communication, a domain where important issues affecting society were exposed, debated, and judged was one of the main hallmarks of this period. This was enabled by a burgeoning print culture that provided members of the public with important mass media—the newspaper and the journal—to express and communicate their opinions. Institutions of public sociality that developed in tandem with the public sphere were instrumental in cultivating a new public sentiment. The public sphere as a cultural and political arbiter grew in importance to occupy a central role in the emerging civil society, and the emerging authority of the public was critical in marginalising religious authority and in breaking its monopoly over truth.²⁵ Studies of the concurrent socio-urban developments in the Arab-Ottoman world, and especially in the Middle Eastern regions, are yet to show whether and to what extent the active public life in urban centres like Damascus had political or intellectual aspects.²⁶



Picturing the Landscape: Poetry and Gender

Since graphic representation of landscape was not a common practice in the Arab-Islamic tradition, poetry remained the main medium for picturing the landscape. Poetic imageries, more fluid than graphic imagery, were nonetheless governed by the decorum of genre in terms of representational techniques and aesthetic conventions. They were also expressive of localised varied experiences. While romantic representation of nature has always been a main theme in Arabic poetry, those concerned with the beauties of Damascus, in general, and those by 'Abd al-Ghani in particular, have a specific flavour expressive of the aesthetic attitude of the Damascenes toward their own landscape.

The desired yet unreachable imaginary beloved, with beautiful eyes and seductive glances, with slender body and delicate stature, who rejoices in ambivalence, and who is often portrayed in a masculine gender, is a governing theme of the genre that features prominently in *The Wine of Babel*. In fact, the first half of the anthology, most likely written by the youthful 'Abd al-Ghani, is dominated by such amatory elegies and love poetry. Some of the poems were event or context related, yet others were not. He wrote:

*The passionate lovers' eyelids are tired of your love,
continuously, with much grief, are tearful.
A body, the sickness nearly effaced all of its features,
so the events of its suffering can be seen on its sides.
Easy, O you, who has exceeded the limit in antipathy,
dispassionately leaving my heart while it is earnestly attached.*

(*Al-Nabulusi, Burj Babel 22*)

In this frame of representation, femininity—subtle and ideal—always remains intangible. It hovers as a mysterious quality created solely for the suffering of passionate men, who seem unable to unite with the objects of their burning desires. The intangible yet highly desirable femininity renders her qualities ethereal and detached from the embodied reality, thereby allowing the poet to map them over his immediate objects of engagement. In *The Wine of Babel*, the objects of engagement were, of course, elements of the landscape. The Sufis excelled in this technique, especially in mapping feminine qualities over divinity. Ibn 'Arabi's



Tarjuman al-Ashwaq is one of the finest examples of this genre.²⁷ As a passionate admirer and defender of Ibn ‘Arabi, ‘Abd al-Ghani was deeply influenced by the great master, yet it is important to note here that in *The Wine of Babel* he was certainly not following in the master’s footsteps. The engrossing sensuality of ‘Abd al-Ghani’s poetry was explicitly and unashamedly dedicated to earthly pleasure. His mystical poems were deliberately compiled in a separate anthology.²⁸

Within the governing decorum of the genre there are culturally-coded associations between elements of nature and elements of femininity that are expressive of the Damascene taste. For example, Damascus was famous for its red roses. Picturing the redness of the rose as mimicking the colour of the beloved’s cheeks is a common theme in ‘Abd al-Ghani’s imageries:

*To my eyes was revealed a rose on a branch,
red, like the cheek of my passionate lover.
Its whiteness in the middle of its redness has a glow,
like a crescent moon of pearls in a sky of carnelians.*

(*Al-Nabulusi*, Burj Babel 143)

Another recurrent image depicts the subtle swaying of a branch by a gentle breeze as mimicking the delicate and seductive swaying of the beloved’s body. In the following lines ‘Abd al-Ghani adds to the natural aesthetics of the feminine body the likeness of the hip’s curvature to the shape of a dune, and the blackness of the hair to the darkness of the night:

*He visited me as the night was pulling its tail,
in the likeness of full moon, too transcendent to be reached.
With a delicate body, he scored my heart by his sway,
as the branch went on deliberately exposing his swaying.
When he appeared, we thought it was a crescent moon,
one that from the sky of the heart never fades away.
A slender branch of a Ban tree, from his hip is the shade of a dune,
A full moon, from his hair is the darkness of the night.*

(*Al-Nabulusi*, Burj Babel 13)

In several poems ‘Abd al-Ghani reveals the feminine body’s main characteristics that were appreciated by Damascene men. They include



detailed references to the figure, the face, the smile, the teeth, the eyes, the hair, the stomach, the hands, the curvature of the body, as well as to certain types of seductive looks, body movements, poses, and dispositions. They reveal a desire for the body to be slightly plump, the figure to be delicate, the eyes' white to be bright, the front teeth to be with a slight opening, the stomach to be flat, and the hips to be fleshy and round.²⁹ Purity, softness, and delicacy, however, were the collective feminine qualities most repeatedly mapped over the landscape. Describing some of these feminine qualities, 'Abd al-Ghani wrote:

*Has soft fingers and pure cheek, so delicate
that it almost gets wounded by quick-passing glances.*

(*Al-Nabulusi*, Burj Babel 121)

*How do I rid myself of your eyes, how?
while drawing on me the swords of coquetry and seduction.*

(*Al-Nabulusi*, Burj Babel 121)

Some poems expressed the sensuality of the femininity-landscape association through explicitly wild and erotic imageries:

*A rose I came across in a garden,
red on its fresh tender branch.
It looks like the cheek of the beloved, that is
bleeding from excessive kissing and biting.*

(*Al-Nabulusi*, Burj Babel 143)

And:

*I embraced him while the night's attire was let down;
the more I kissed the more he smiled.
Until his chest absorbed mine in bonding,
And the two hearts warmed up the cold-hearted.*

(*Al-Nabulusi*, Burj Babel 188)

Not all poems presented femininity as a lens to view the landscape, of course. There are many poems that describe specific places and elements of landscape design, particularly fountains, using a wide range of non-gendered imagery and associations. The flickering of the sun's reflections on a running stream of water, for example, is often likened to a shining sword being drawn from its sheath. Describing a fountain in a garden setting, 'Abd al-Ghani wrote:



*A fountain with which the minds are dazzled,
and the thoughts are perplexed trying to describe it.
It looks like a gazing eyeball,
an eye unable to sleep from the ecstasy of love.
Crying without having left her hometown
one day, and without her family giving up their desires.
What a beautiful and well crafted pipe-work,
within which the water rises up and descends down.
A mace of silver, under which,
the water bubbles cast many circles.*

(*Al-Nabulusi*, Burj Babel 127-28)

In conclusion, the landscape sensibility and aesthetic attitude that *The Wine of Babel* reveals contrasts with those of the picturesque that developed in Europe around the same time. 'Abd al-Ghani and his group expressed no distinction in their appreciation of rural and urban landscape. Even as a traveller, 'Abd al-Ghani revealed no conscious search for virgin nature, nor did he seem to have an ideal landscape in mind. Engagement with native beauties and the sensuality of nature were always dictated by the state of the moment (*hal*) as it revealed its workings through the poetic imagination of the group. Many gatherings were repeatedly held in the same place and the poetic expressions were always different. *The Wine of Babel* presented what the educated, cultured taste of the Damascene considered to be aesthetically pleasing: a dynamic and imaginative interplay between the self, the place and the beloved, moulded within the decorum of Arabic poetry and the habitual exercise of comparison and association between femininity and landscape.

*Be gentle with the branches of the Ruba, O breeze,
because it is by passionate longing they are swaying.
Your wine has gone through them to intoxication,
so that they began bending their straight figures.
We were in an intimate gathering place,
whose air was freshened by delicious fragrances.
The water was flowing up and down,
in a pool, spreading and throwing ordered pearls.
Rods of glass bent by a hand,
made of pipes for the breeze to strike.*

Underneath us was a brook of running water
Flowing like a sharp-cutting sword...
What a day it was for us there, so delightful,
in a gathering place like the gardens of paradise.

(*Al-Nabulusi, Burj Babel 121-22*)

Notes

- 1 Conventional historiography of the Middle East considers the early modern period as coinciding with the systematic exposure to Europe in the nineteenth century. In the Arab world this is commonly known as the Arab Awakening, which Hourani calls the age of liberal thinking in his *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge, 1983). This view normally leaves the preceding two centuries as an ambiguous period. In my study *'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi: Islam and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), I have argued that there was an earlier phase to the exchange with Europe that was not based on a wholesale adoption of the Enlightenment ideas. It is this phase that I am referring to here as early modern.
- 2 The anthology was edited by Ahmad al-Jindi and published under a modified title, *Burj Babel wa Shadow al-Balabel* (Damascus: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1988). Substituting *Khamrat* with *Burj* (tower) reflects a desire to avoid the reference to "wine" in the title. Hereafter I will refer to the anthology by its published title.
- 3 Al-Nabulusi, *Burj Babel*, 18. These gatherings, which were held between 1085/1674 and 1120/1708, were generally restricted to a close circle of friends and relatives, but were sometime expanded by other groups that happened to meet at one place.
- 4 After 1096/1684 the introductory comments to the poems changed from first to third person, indicating that the later part of the anthology was completed by someone else. The published edition gives no completion date, thus making it difficult to determine whether this relatively small section, which nonetheless covers twenty-four years of activities, was completed during 'Abd al-Ghani's life or after his death. At the last dated recording 'Abd al-Ghani would have been seventy years of age, that is, twenty-three years before his death.
- 5 *The Macquarie Dictionary*, "Landscape." On the picturesque tradition see Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1989).
- 6 Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab al-Muhtit*, H.D.Q.
- 7 Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape; Toward a New Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 9.
- 8 There are only two recently published accounts on the life and works of 'Abd al-Ghani, one is mine, *'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi: Islam and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007); the other by Elizabeth Siyyriyeh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus: 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi, 1641-1731* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).
- 9 Of his large body of works only thirty or so have been published.
- 10 On his Sufism see Barbara Von Schlegell, "Sufism in the Ottoman Arab World: Shaykh 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1143/1731)," PhD dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), and Bakri Alldin, "'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (1143/1731): Oeuvre, vie et doctrine," PhD dissertation (Paris: Université de Paris I, 1985, 2 vols).
- 11 Al-Nabulusi, *Diwan al-Haqa'iq wa Majmu' al-Raqa'iq* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1986).
- 12 Kamal al-Din al-Ghazzi, "Al-Wird al-Unsi wa al-Warid al-Qudsi fi Tarjamat al-Shayk 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi" (Damascus: Zahiriyya Library, MS 281). In my book I disputed the accuracy

- of al-Ghazzi's narrative on this point, see Akkach, '*Abd al-Ghani*', pp. 36-39.
- 13 According to the dates of the recordings, 'Abd al-Ghani must have written almost half of the anthology by 1085h, that is, by the age of thirty-five. This is not certain, however, because his citations are not always event-related. In fact in many cases it is clear that poems written on different occasions are cited together for thematic connection.
 - 14 For a detailed discussion of these points, see Akkach, '*Abd al-Ghani*', Part 2.
 - 15 Al-Nabulusi prided themselves on their ancestral lineage to two eminent roots: the Jama'a and Qudama families. Through the Qudama family they trace their genealogy back to the Prophet's companion and second Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab (d. 644). Both the Qudama and Jama'a families are associated with the city of Jerusalem, and are often referred to as *al-maqadisa*, "the folks from Jerusalem." The family name al-Nabulusi, "the one from Nablus," however, identifies the family with the Palestinian city of Nablus, a historic town of Roman origin located about sixty-three kilometers north of Jerusalem. The new appellation refers to a brief stay of 'Abd al-Ghani's ancestors in the city of Nablus while on their way to Damascus, a reference that eventually eclipsed the reference to the familial roots.
 - 16 Al-Nabulusi, *Burj Babel*, p. 21.
 - 17 Al-Ghazzi, *Al-Wird al-Unsi*, 32-33
 - 18 Al-Nabulusi, *Nafahat al-Azhar 'ala Nasamat al-Ashar* (Beirut: 'Alam al-Kutub, 1984).
 - 19 See Ibn Kinna al-Salihi, *al-Mawakib al-Islamiyya fi al-Mamalik wa al-Mahasin al-Shamiyya* (Damascus: Wazarat al-Thaqafa, 1992, 2 vols); Abu al-Baq'a' al-Badri, *Nuzhat al-Anam fi Mahasin al-Sham* (Beirut: Dar al-Basha'ir, 2006).
 - 20 For a good general references on the history of Damascus, see Gérard Degeorge, *Damascus* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).
 - 21 Ibn Kinnan, *Al-Mawakib al-Islamiyya*, 1:384-85.
 - 22 Degeorge, *Damascus*, pp. 177-78.
 - 23 Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, N.Z.H.
 - 24 James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
 - 25 Melton, *The Rise of the Public*. According to Richard Lehan, the modern city and its urban environment are products of the Enlightenment in eighteenth century Europe. Urbanism as we experience it today is "at the very heart of Western culture." Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: an Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
 - 26 For a brief discussion of 'Abdal-Ghani's conscious effort to mobilise the public against the spread of antimysticism, see Akkach, '*Abd al-Ghani*', pp. 119-125.
 - 27 Ibn 'Arabi, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978).
 - 28 I translated parts of 'Abd al-Ghani's famous mystical poem on truth in my "The Poetics of Concealment: Al-Nabulusi's Encounter with the Dome of the Rock." *Muqarnas* 22 (2005): pp. 110-27.
 - 29 See detailed descriptions in *Burj Babel*, pp. 155-8.