

THE ARAB POET AND THE CITY: MODERNISM AND ALIENATION

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'Modernism' is "one of the most frustratingly unspecific of all 'isms'".¹ Different societies can have their own modernisms, which need to be appreciated within their historical, cultural and political contexts, including debt to, and interaction with outside influences. This study views 'modernism' and the city in relation to Arabic society, culture and literature, with special focus on the work of contemporary Arabic poets. It is understood simply as a trend or movement embodying a new vision of reality, aesthetic innovation and a will to ask new questions and challenge old ways. Modernism has its own diversity within the Arabic cultural context: in terms of position, method, orientation, range of interests, breaks in form and attitudes to the city. Issues of innovation and what 'modernism' can mean in the Arab context have preoccupied Arabic writers since the late nineteenth century.

It is possible to identify an earlier 'modernism' in Arabic poetry and intellectual outlook associated with ninth-century Baghdad.² This was represented by such leading poets as Abu Nuwas (757-814) and Abu Tammam (788-845), with their daring innovations in poetic form and imagery, their interest in details of urban daily life and the assimilation of newly Arabised philosophical ideas. Both poets rejected many literary conventions. While highly esteemed by insightful critics and generations of poetry lovers to this day, they have provoked harsh disapproval from conservatives.

What particularly justifies such reference to a pre-modern moment of 'modernism' is the fact that Arabic innovative poets of the twentieth century, like those of the ninth century, have had to contend with negative criticism and hostility from entrenched conformists and self-appointed guardians of 'traditions'. It is true that Arabic literature has always been essentially secular, despite the ostensible dominance of religion in Arab societies.³ We can speak of separation between poetry and religion in the Arabic tradition, the notable exception being the place of Islamic Sufi poetry. But the poet's mystical impulse is a liber-

ating force that is the diametrical opposite of the restrictive influence of religious ideology. The use of mystical themes and motifs by leading modernist Arabic poets, notably Adonis—a self-confessed iconoclastic secularist—needs to be seen in this liberating light. However, the centrality of both poetry and religion in Arabic society and culture has meant that poetic creativity and artistic innovation could not easily escape the misunderstanding and antagonism of the conservatives. Even those critics not known for their religiosity could dress up their comments in terms of religious morality or ideological censure, rather than aesthetic or intellectual criteria.

Thus a seemingly perennial problem facing modernism and critical innovation in Arabic literature—poetry in particular—has to do with responding to such pressures. Compromising between traditions and the modern world, and yielding to 'modern' ideologies are some of the unfortunate reactions. This has meant that modernism could be undermined both by suspicion from without and by a sense of self-doubt from within. The traditionalist *salafīyya* outlook is by no means restricted to religious conservatives alone: the new conformists of literature and literary criticism represent an equally entrenched *salafīyya*. Moreover, political ideologies are capable of distorting innovation and creativity and turning modernism itself into a misleading ideology.⁴ On the other hand, post-modernist trends have in recent decades found their way into the Arabic literary and artistic scene, thus providing an added challenge to the project of modernism.⁵

The 'beginnings' of Arabic modernist tendencies are usually traced back to the 'revivalist' neo-classicism of the so-called Arab 'Renaissance' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To a certain extent, innovation was not unconnected with the encounter with Western thought and culture. The creativity and vision of a few leading Migrant (Mahjar) Lebanese poets and intellectuals in America, notably Rihani, Gibran, and Na'ima (during the first three decades of the twentieth century) played an important role in articulating a conscious project of innovation in Arabic literature. They aspired to create ripples in Arabic literary circles back in the Arab homeland—Egypt, Lebanon and Syria—an aim that they expressed in their publications and correspondence.⁶ In a real sense they succeeded. Rihani was incisive in his cultural criticism and his call to free Arabic poetry from its traditional forms (he was actually the first to write Arabic free verse, 1905–12). Gibran's contribution to new Arabic poetic imagery was crucial. Na'ima's critical essays, collected in his *al-Ghīrbal* (*The Sieve*, 1923) and other writings, were extremely influential.

Gibran has been particularly associated with romanticism. But the three Mahjar authors embodied true aspects of modernism: rejection of old literary conventions, revolt against social and religious restrictions, learning from modern Western literatures and aesthetics, and the ability to express new concepts in innovative forms. Their writings reflect a distinct sense of disappointment with American materialism, annoyance with the harsh noisy industrial city, exemplified by New York, and a sense of *mal de siècle*. It is true, the Mahjar trio as well as the Diwan (1920s) and the Apollo (1930s) literary groups of poets in Cairo reflect strong influences from nineteenth century European romanticism. However, their work, particularly Rihani's ultimate rejection of romanticism, has paved the way for a broader modernist current in the next generation. By the mid-1950s a gradual turning away from romanticism and increasing exposure to Western influences led to a more articulated modernism in Arabic poetry.

It is impossible to understand modernism in Arabic literary and artistic creativity without attention to the impact on Arab cultural dynamics of the changing political map, socio-economic transformations, oil wealth and external interferences, especially since the 1940s. The Palestine tragedy of 1948 and the 1967 Arab defeat can be seen as both symptoms of a deep-seated socio-political and cultural predicament, and a catalyst for new soul-searching questioning, protest and alienation. Thus while deriving great inspiration from Western influences, directly or through translation, modernist Arabic poets were responding to their strong native individual impulses and social concerns. Their poetry is a vital part of wider socio-political, intellectual and aesthetic movements that have animated modern Arab culture, particularly in such cities as Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo and Damascus.

In addition to existential, metaphysical and aesthetic interests, most Arabic poets are concerned about the realities and future of their own societies, and about the identity and place of Arabic culture in the modern world. Interference by, and dependency on outside powers, oppression by national political authorities, and the scarcity of social justice and freedom, are among such concerns. It is against this background that the 'City' in the work of many Arab poets can become not only a hostile space for the poet's subjective alienation, but also a negative metaphor for oppression and cruelty in social and political terms.

The identification of modernism—and modernity—with the West has led Arab critics to raise serious questions as to whether many Arabic exponents of modernism have successfully embodied it, or even

properly understood its relevance to the Arab conditions. Such doubts need to be appreciated not only within the general problematic of the relationship between 'modernism' and 'modernity', including in the European context for example.⁷ They also need to be viewed within the specific context of the Arabs' own incomplete modernity and their long political and cultural encounter with the West.⁸ Related to this is the perception of a 'cultural invasion' and 'double dependency' in the Arab actuality. This dependency is exemplified by reliance on idealised inherited prototypes, while at the same time importing Western technological and cultural trappings and half-understood epistemological paradigms. Doubts about the ability to achieve genuine modernity without liberation from traditions have continued to be expressed since at least the 1930s.⁹

Since the late 1960s, several Arab critics have increasingly questioned the meaning of modernism and the vitality and future directions of modern Arabic poetry.¹⁰ The prominent modernist poet, Adonis, himself a pillar of the movement since the mid-1950s, has more recently called for a radical "critique of modernism".¹¹ Adonis is also a profound intellectual and cultural critic, whose contribution to the debates about modernism and the Arab-Western encounter warrants a separate study. Here I only refer to some of his views to illustrate my argument. Adonis sees modernism in arts and literature, specifically poetry, not as a value in itself, but as providing a distinct vision, structure and perspective. He asks with barely concealed irony: "How can a literary modernism flourish in a society whose fundamental structures are founded on traditionalism and emulation in all other spheres?"¹² Even before the 1967 Arab defeat in the war with Israel, he identified three critical challenges facing Arab intellectuals, particularly poets: How to become free of the cultural tutelage of the foreigner; how to value the intellectual heritage while being able and willing to supersede it; and how to reconcile Hallaj with Lenin (that is, mysticism with scientific socialism).¹²

Questions of beginnings have been debated in terms of who was (were) the first true pioneer(s) of modernist Arabic poetry, and where and when did it start? The question of "who" seems to hinge on the use of innovative forms rather than on themes or poetic vision. Until relatively recently, the debate has mainly been concerned with establishing a 'first' name, place and date and leaving it at that. But in fact it makes more sense to think of a constellation rather than just one star; of networks rather than isolated individuals or places, particularly in terms

of publication, mentoring and the role of literary critics. The question of "when was Modernism", as addressed by Raymond Williams in the European situation, has not been seriously raised in the Arabic context. There is need for this to be approached as "a questioning of a historical problem that has become now a dominant and misleading ideology".¹⁴

As to "where" Arabic modernism is supposed to have 'happened', the combined roles of Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus since the mid-1940s have been paramount. Indeed, Cairo had been the unrivalled centre for the Arabic press (and theatre) since the 1880s and the capital of Arabic cinema and modern music since the early decades of the twentieth century. Baghdad has always had a strong claim for modernism, through the influence of important poets such as Sayyab, and the Palestinian literary critic Jabra (who took refuge in Baghdad after 1948). But it is ultimately Beirut that became the most important capital of Arab literary modernism, and of Arabic publishing, since the 1950s. This is essentially because Beirut's environment of individual, social and political freedom has had no equal in other Arab cities from that time onwards. Beirut was able to launch most of the leading figures of modernist Arabic poetry during the 1950s and 60s (including works by Syrian, Iraqi, Palestinian, Egyptian and other poets). Beirut's leading literary journals, notably *al-Adib* (*The Writer*, 1942-), *al-Adab* (*Literatures*, 1953-) and *Shi'r* (*Poetry*, 1957-67) and their publishing houses were crucial in this respect. *Shi'r's* founder, the Lebanese poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917-87), collaborated with Adonis (who had just moved from Damascus) and with other talents in a project of conscious innovation (*tajdid*) in poetry with a theoretical underpinning. Hence this journal devoted ample space to theory, criticism and translations from world modernist poets and critics. T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Saint-John Perse were the leading inspirers among an array of Western modernists. Eliot's poetry has fascinated modernist Arabic poets and critics. His *Waste Land* in particular was variously translated (not always successfully!), and continues to attract interest in the Arab world. The 1950s thus witnessed the complete "recoil from romanticism" and the transition to a full-fledged modernism in Arabic poetry.¹⁵

One leading poet who independently embodied this transition was Nizar Qabbani of Damascus. He inaugurated a new era of Arabic sensual love poetry, with highly individual aesthetic sensibility and realistic urban themes. His first two collections, *Qalat liya al-Samra'* (*The Brunette Said to Me*, 1944) and *Tufulat Nahd* (*Childhood of a Breast*, 1948), received a mixed reception in his native city, traditional

Damascus, delighting the young in spirit, and outraging the conservatives. The disbelieving reaction to Qabbani's daring poetry is perhaps best reflected in a hostile review of his *Childhood of a Breast*, where the word *nahd* was transmuted to *nahr*, thus rendering the title as "childhood of a river"!¹⁶ By 1954, as Adonis was later to remember,

Nizar Qabbani was the talk of Damascus. He was stirring its stagnant waters with a fresh cascade originating from the actual city and its history, and above all from its ordinary daily life with its most intimate human details. He was teaching life itself how to become a poem.¹⁷

What kind of perceptions, attitudes, presentations or themes of the city, particularly the metropolis, do we find in Arabic modernist poetry, especially since the 1950s? Two important points should be made here regarding the relationship between poet and city. First, with the notable exception of Qabbani, practically all the leading Arabic modernist poets who expressed a conscious attitude to the city have a rural or small town background. Secondly, apart from profound experience of cities, these poets share defining life experiences of dislocation and deracination, including self-imposed exile within and outside the Arab world.¹⁸ While keeping in mind their diversity, I shall look more closely at the works of four leading poets: Nizar Qabbani (1923-98), Adonis (1929-) and Muhammad al-Maghut (1934-) born in Syria; and Ahmad Hijazi (Egypt, 1935-).

Nizar Qabbani was—and still is—the most widely read modern Arabic poet. He is undoubtedly the leading love poet in modern Arabic and is among the best love poets in the world. He is also perhaps the urban and urbane Arabic poet par excellence. His rich life experience includes twenty years as a diplomat in Cairo, London, Beijing and Madrid, before resigning to devote himself to poetry, living in Beirut and eventually in Europe. Qabbani's range of city themes is quite complex and varied. At one level, both his early poetry and the childhood sections of his *Autobiography* (1973), celebrate Damascus as the idealised city of his birth and early youth. He also adulates his adopted city, Beirut, as a cherished space of freedom and maturity. At another level, however, he has more objective perceptions of these two cities as negative environments: the former for its social oppression, the latter as the arena of a dreadful civil war.

Thus in his early poems, the city of Damascus is essentially the loving cradle and playground, the verdant and well-watered environment of the poet's love dreams and adventures. In his *Autobiography*,

Qabbani succeeds in evoking his love for the Damascus of his childhood and school days quite lyrically and convincingly.¹⁹ Both in this book and in several poems we find recurring images of his family's traditional spacious house with its fountains, citrus trees, paved courtyard, sunny patios and balconies, the family cats, the strong aroma of his mother's coffee with cardamom, and the scents of jasmine and roses. Beyond this, his father's confectionery factory, the old Spice Market, the minarets, domes and interiors of mosques, the mansions and public gardens, the river, plentiful fresh water everywhere in public and private fountains, form the traditional milieu of the city. All of these have left an indelible mark not only on his memory and personality, but particularly on his poetic imagery and vocabulary. This Damascus is the poet's city of the heart, of childhood memories and images and sensual aesthetics.

Qabbani's 'other' Damascus is a city whose cultural and religious establishment greeted his early love poetry with shock and hostility in the 1940s. It is a conservative and hypocritical city and a cruel, suffocating space. In Qabbani's later poems, and in specific sections of his *Autobiography*, Damascus is also the city that oppresses women and bans love. It is to be remembered that in his own lyrical way Qabbani is also a leading champion of women's rights in the Arab world. In some of his poems from the mid-1960s onwards, the speaker is often a woman. The strongest expression of this is his volume-size poem, *Diary of a Reckless Woman* (composed in 1958 and published in 1968), brilliant in its frankness and piercing social criticism.²⁰

In Qabbani's post-1967 'political' poems, often combined with new love themes, the Arab City in general, not just Damascus, appears in a very negative light. This is particularly true of poems written after the Lebanese civil war (1975). Having "decided to assassinate my homeland by leaving", Qabbani's poems, composed mostly in his self-imposed exile in Europe, often call upon his beloved woman to migrate from the "cities of dust and salt" and follow him to the "cities of water". We find him accompanied by 'Fatima', the liberated intelligent Arab woman, introducing her to the freedom, airy and watery spaces of loving cities, such as Geneva, London and Paris with their wholesome integrated historical and modern personalities. The somewhat idealised European city offers a sheer contrast with the suffocating, patriarchal and secret-police dominated cities of the Arab Middle East, with their indolent cafés and bored, and boring, overweight men. "I write to save the woman I love/ from cities of no poetry/ cities of no love/ Fatima refuses all texts/ She abandons the cities of dust/ and follows me bare-

foot/ to the cities of water".²¹

Adonis, who was born in a small village near the Syrian coast, lived in Damascus in the late 1940s and early 1950s, where he studied philosophy. He decided to move to Beirut in 1954 where he lived, on and off, until 1986, before residing in Paris, with visits to Beirut and other Arab and world cities. In his 1993 reflections on Beirut of the 1950s, he writes: "Beirut was like love, always a perpetual beginning; like poetry, continuously created anew".²² However in poems of the 1960s and after, he communicates objective images of both Damascus and Beirut as meeting environments of desert and civilization, locations for death and rebirth, and arenas of cruelty and milieus of hypocrisy and shallowness. In more recent poems (1980s and 90s), Adonis draws complex and sometimes quite detailed visual portraits of several Arab cities he has visited, entering into dialogue with them as historical and sensual spaces. These include Fez, Cairo, Baghdad, Sana, Amman, and the ruins of Petra in south Jordan. In a long complex poem on his encounter with New York in 1968, Adonis suggestively presents the city as emblematic of modern human civilization, noise, arrogance, misery and imperial schemes.²³ It is clear that Adonis, on the whole, speaks from a far less subjective perspective about his personal city experiences.

We find two different worlds of the city, at variance with those presented by either Qabbani or Adonis, in the poems of Hijazi and al-Maghut. A significant theme in their work is that of the city as an alienating environment, a 'crowd of strangers' lacking in spontaneous human feeling or concern. Both poets, coming from rural backgrounds, find this quite confronting. This is especially seen in Hijazi's poems about Cairo in the 1950s, where he went to study and later work. His first free verse collection, significantly entitled *A City Without a Heart* (1959), contains at least twelve poems with city themes.²⁴ As an outsider to the metropolis of Egypt (Egyptians often refer to Cairo as *umm al-dunya*: "the mother of the world"), the poet finds people walk too fast, are unconcerned about others and not interested in communicating. Cars swoop like birds of prey halting suddenly like "Fate", while passengers smile, calmly displaying white teeth. Within this picture of the crowded big city as an objective milieu of alienation, the poet can situate his sometimes melodramatic subjective sense of isolation and loneliness. The big city's conventions of interrelatedness, or the apparent absence of such, can be both puzzling and unsettling to the young stranger. In "The way to al-Sayyida", (the traditional Cairo neighbourhood portrayed in Naguib Mahfouz's novels and in Yahaya Haqqi's novella, *Saint's Lamp*), the poet speaks of his experience:

"Uncle
 where is the way?
 where is the way to Sayyida?"
 "turn right, then left, my son"
 he said, without looking at me!
 I walked on, O! City's night
 overflowing with a sad "oh"
 dragging my worn-out leg
 to al-Sayyida
 without money, hungry till exhaustion
 without a companion
 like an abandoned newly born
 for whom the passers-by have no time
 not even a glimpse of pity!
 [...]

People go forth fast
 unconcerned
 dashing off like ghosts. When the tram passes
 through the crowd
 they are not afraid
 but I do fear the tram
 all strangers are afraid of the tram!²⁵

The city is alienating at all times of day when you don't have friends. In "the City and I", the poet's subjective isolation and predicament is poignantly expressed:

This is me
 and this is my city
 at midnight
 the massive square
 [...]

walls are ridges
 appearing and disappearing one behind the other
 a small leaf, caught up in the wind, spirals to the ground
 and is lost into the alley ways
 a shadow diminishes
 a shadow extends
 and the eye of a boring curious street lamp
 I stamped on its reflection as I walked on
 bursting subconsciously into a sad song
 I began it... then I halted
 "you there! Who are you?"
 The stupid night-guard is oblivious to my story
 I was kicked out
 of my digs today

I am now lost, without a name
 this is me, and this is my city.²⁶

Nor is the city any friendlier at midday. In "Till we meet again", dedicated to the poet's friend, the literary critic Rajaa Naqqash, the city confronts the stranger with its "burning streets under the blazing sun, buildings and fences, more buildings and fences, squares and triangles, and stained glass [...] The night in the big city/ is a short-lived feast/ lights, music and youth/ crazy speed and drink/ a short-lived feast".²⁷ Elsewhere the poet's estrangement as a "crushed observer" (the phrase is Raymond Williams's, in another context),²⁸ is transformed into affinity not only with other strangers who are figuratively crushed by the city, but with one in particular who is tragically killed by a speeding car. In "Death of a lad", the inhumanity of the city is encapsulated in a moment of horror: "Death rang out in the square/ silence settled like a shroud/ and a green fly came forward/ from the sorrowful rural grave-yards/ beating its wings above a boy who died in the city/ and no one wept for him".²⁹ While citing this fragment in the context of her discussion of folklore and nostalgia, Salma Jayyusi omits the last line and argues that Hijazi "shows a great affinity with the spirit of the people, reflecting their attitudes and their traditions".³⁰ Clearly the poet's affinity is specifically with the young stranger, who was literally crushed by the city's cruel machine. As the rest of the same poem shows, the deceased lad was nobody in the eyes of the city: "For his name was known to no one but himself".³¹

It is perhaps in this context that we can understand Hijazi's other poem, entitled "Sudden death":

I carried my telephone number on me
 and my name and address
 so if I were to suddenly fall
 you would know who I was
 so my brothers would come. Imagine if you didn't
 what then?
 I would remain in the morgue freezer for two nights
 the cold phone would ring at night
 once, ... twice
 ... I wish my mother has tattooed my arm
 so my real face wouldn't be lost under my second face.³²

Hijazi's Cairo of the 1950s can still strike a cord with those who have known the poet and his city about this time, as confirmed in recent autobiographical reminiscences by a leading Egyptian literary critic.³³

The complex theme of the cruel alienating city is embodied in a much more complex manner in the work of the Syrian Muhammad al-Maghut, who experienced life, and poverty, in both Damascus and Beirut, having grown up in a small village in coastal Syria. His first collection, *Sadness in the Moon Light* (perhaps echoing Ritsos's *Moonlight Sonata*), was launched by the Beirut *Shi'r* group (1957). Al-Maghut's city appears unkind, hostile, boring. It is an arena where poverty, dust, inefficiency, curious tourists, peddlers, police and spies compete miserably. Like Qabbani's, though in a completely different style and timbre, Al-Maghut's poetry does not simply describe, or even criticise by implication, but also attempts to change the world and make it less ugly—partly by exposing ugliness. Unlike Hijazi's loneliness of the outsider, al-Maghut moves to the alienation of the conscious rejecter. By taking refuge in imagination, he is able to escape poetically to better places and times, and also to conjure up worse ones, if possible.

Al-Maghut is one of the best practitioners of prose poetry; a great lyrical artist with a creative imagination and powerful 'imaging' skills, able through discipline to evoke reality by way of illusion, with often riotous and painful irony. He is a pessimistic but relentless revolutionary, acerbic in his social criticism, melancholic in his subjectivity. He is also an accomplished playwright, and some of his shorter poems use dialogue effectively, allowing for interesting ambiguity in the range of voices. The following is an extract from a poem entitled "A prince of rain, and an entourage of dust" from his collection *Joy is Not My Profession* (1973). It illustrates the complexity and special irony with which the poet relates to the city:

"Who is this old woman frozen at the street corner?
mosquitoes hovering over her head... She neither asks nor answers
but shakes her head right and left
while chewing her veil drenched with tears?" "This is Damascus".
"Damascus? I know no mother or sister by that name
Is she a cupboard or a hammer or a mirror?" "It is your city my lord".
"My city? I have no city but my pockets". "Your city is your homeland"
"Homeland? I have no homeland
except these spots and squiggles on maps
and this smoke which I puff through my lips every moment".³⁴

The poem exposes the contradictory glories and miseries of Damascus, past and present, and explores layers of the poet's attitude to the city and what it stands for. Which voices are saying what, is left open:

Pelt her with stones... Tell her everything, men
but not in my name

for I will stand by lost causes till death... How can I forget her... There is
 not a single pebble on her roads
 that I haven't kicked
 no fountain tap in her narrow lanes
 that I haven't imbibed from
 no night-guard nor prickly pear seller
 with whom I haven't chatted in the moonlight... But there hasn't been a
 single door
 that ever opened for me at night
 and said: welcome stranger... Hit her with whips
 dismiss her from all doors
 books, taverns, weddings and funerals
 shut the entire world's gates in her face
 so that she might remain as lonely as the wind, as lonely as God. But
 listen, men
 before you do that, take out my eyes
 for I love her
 and will never betray her
 even if I had to shed endless tears of arithmetic fractions.³⁵

Another related theme in al-Maghut's work is that of the poet
 deciding to depart the city and all its misery. In "The traveller", from
 his first collection (1957), written before he left Damascus for Beirut,
 we read:

I shall say farewell to all my sad things
 I shall leave them and go
 far away; away from the city drowning in its gutters
 of TB and smoke; away from this whore who washes my clothes
 in the river, with thousands of eyes staring at her scrawny legs
 and from the cold coughing
 servile and desperate
 piercing through the broken window
 and across the alley
 like a twisted line of slave corpses.
 I shall leave all of these behind.³⁷

But once away from Damascus, the poet is able to express a fine sense
 of nostalgia towards the old city: "I think she is from the homeland/
 this cloud that comes like a pair of Christian eyes/ I think she is from
 Damascus/ this child with joined eyebrows/ these eyes clearer than
 blue flames between ships".³⁷

The city of Beirut can also be alienating if you are poor. In "a café in
 Beirut", from his *A Room with Millions of Walls* (1973), the poet refers to
 the intersection of two famous streets in the Alhamra area:

From "Jeanne D'Arc to Bliss"
 and from "Bliss to Jeanne D'Arc"
 I have raised my hand a hundred times
 greeting hundreds of people
 with the hand that eats
 the hand that writes
 the hand that is hungry

[...]

I have walked thousands of kilometres, one upon another
 I have seen tons of women and female servants
 I have gazed at foreign currencies
 and at sweet pastries roaring under the bridge
 I have watched the waiter's slim fingers
 wiping my tears from the table like soup.³⁸

In "A House near the sea" (written before 1973), the poet speaks of a plan to depart to European cities (a theme which is pursued in other poems as well):

... It is time
 to tear up something
 to sail by stealth under a sad, sad rain
 not as an adventurer
 surrounded by suitcases and flowers
 but as a miserable tearful mouse... O marvellous pavements of Europe
 O stones laid extensively since millennia
 under overcoats and umbrellas!
 Is there a tiny burrow
 for a Bedouin from the Orient
 carrying his history on his back like a gatherer of brushwood?³⁹

However, by insisting on travelling in style—as a stowaway in the back of a ship—he would end up on a tropical island, with his sweat dropping on the luggage and on the hair of women passengers from different periods of history, finally emerging:

Holding my village notebook up high like a shining sword
 in the face of the whole world... And at night
 when waves become as dark as the graves
 ... I would stand on the crest of a wave, like a general on his balcony, and
 would shout:
 I am all alone, my God.⁴⁰

Images of violence, hypocrisy, poverty, lack of freedom and corruption are also followed up in al-Maghut's ironic, confronting and deeply disquieting plays, the *Hunchback Sparrow*, and the *Clown*. Al-Maghut's irony is also used to great effect in his political and social satire, espe-

cially in his painfully realistic plays in colloquial Arabic, performed on stage in several Arab cities by Durayd Lahham and his troupe during the 1980s and screened on television to great popular acclaim. Since the 1980s, he has also explored and exposed daily examples of political oppression, absence of freedom, corruption and social hypocrisy, using the more accessible medium of the outrageous weekly newspaper column. A collection of these short pieces has appeared as a volume provocatively entitled: *I Shall Betray My Country* (1988).

I have only touched on some aspects of the city, modernism and the Arab poet in the present essay. Palestinian poets, notably Mahmud Darwish, as well as Iraqi poets, deserve particular attention, but have to be left out for reasons of space. The four poets discussed above, together with many other Arab poets, artists and intellectuals, share experiences of deracination, alienation and exile. While Qabbani alone celebrates his city of birth (Damascus) and his adopted city (Beirut), all of them, including Qabbani, as voices of their time, communicate vehement condemnation of the Arab metropolis. Qabbani and al-Maghut, in particular, demonstrate how poetry and art can also provide a lyrical safety valve for the Middle East pressure cooker. Apart from their aesthetic appeal, this fact may explain their seemingly enduring popularity.

NOTES

- 1 Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, edited and introduced by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989), p. 3, pp. 31-48.
- 2 Adonis, *Arab Poetics* (London: Saqi, 1990), pp. 75-102; *al-Thabit wal-Mutahawwil (The Fixed and the Changing)* (Beirut & London: Saqi, 1994), vol 4: 'Sadmat al-Hadatha' ('The Shock of Modernity and the Authority of Inherited Poetry'), pp. 5-17, pp. 237-252.
- 3 Ahmad Shboul, 'Between Rhetoric and Reality: Islam and Politics in the Arab World', in *Islam and Politics in the Modern World*, N. Lahoud and A. H. Johns (eds) (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 170-191.
- 4 Ghali Shukri, Burj Babil: *al-Naql wal-Hadatha al-Sharida (Criticism and Evasive Modernity)* (London: El-Rayyes, 1989); Izzeddin Manasra, *Haris al-Nass al-Shi'ri, etc (Guarding the Poetic Text: Testimonies from Poetic Experience)* (Beirut: Kitabat, 1993), pp. 121-139; for a comparative perspective see Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, p. 31.
- 5 May Ghousseub, *Ma Ba'da al-Hadatha: al-'Arab fi Laqat Fidyu (Postmodernism: Arabs in a Video Clip)* (London: Saqi, 1996); Ahmad Shboul, 'Tajawur al-Mawt wa Ma Ba'd al-Hadatha' ('Parallels of Death and Post-Modernism in Wadil Saada's Poetry'), *An-Nahar* Literary Supplement (Beirut, August 1994).
- 6 Ameen Rihani, *Rasa'il Amin al-Rihani (Letters: 1896-1940)*, second edition, edited by Albert Rihani (Beirut: Al-Jil, 1991), Gibran, *Rasa'il (Letters)* (Beirut: no place or date of publication, actual letters dated 1908-1923).

- 7 Raymond Williams, "Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism", in *The Politics of Modernism*, pp. 37-48.
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LITERATURE AND AESTHETICS

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