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Source: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Apr., 1974), pp. 202-215

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/162590>

Accessed: 04/02/2014 14:12

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*Arieh Loya*

## THE DETRIBALIZATION OF ARABIC POETRY

The rise of the waltz was the result of that longing for truth, simplicity, closeness to nature... which the last two thirds of the eighteenth century fulfilled...

(Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance*)

The forms, themes and patterns of classical Arabic poetry were laid down in the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam. Indeed the oldest poem of which we have any record dates back to the period of *ġāhiliyya*, a derogatory term meaning 'ignorance' coined by the early Muslims to denote the state of religious and moral depravity of pre-Islamic Arabs. This period covers scarcely more than a century and a half (c. A.D. 500-622). Yet when the Arabs first sprang onto the stage of world history to carve an empire for themselves, they already had an extremely complex and refined poetic art. This remarkable phenomenon has baffled the student of Arabic literature and history: 'The most striking feature in Arabic literature is its unexpectedness' remarks Gibb,<sup>1</sup> while Goitein refers to it as 'the miracle of pre-Islamic poetry and literary language'.<sup>2</sup> The *ġāhili* poets, though springing from primitive and illiterate nomadic tribes, were no beginners declaiming shaky lines in a mixture of dialects in prevalence at the time. These were a host of poets erupting all over northern Arabia, from Syria to Yemen and from the fringes of Iraq to the borders of Egypt, masterfully reciting highly developed *qaṣīdas* (odes) in one and the same language, betraying little of the dialects of their region. Above all, their poetry, vigorous and vivid as it was in general, was cast in the same steel structure of a set of complex metrical schemes.<sup>3</sup>

This poetry whose birthplace was the sandy plain of central and north-

<sup>1</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> S. D. Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Dr Tāhā Ḥusayn, the eminent Egyptian scholar, following D. S. Margoliouth and other European scholars (cf. Brockelmann's *GAL* 2, 1) made a brilliant attempt to explain both the absence of dialect and the masterful metrical schemes of *ġāhili* poetry by claiming that the greater part of this poetry was *manḥūl*, i.e. composed by others and attributed to the *ġāhili*s. Ḥusayn believes that many of the so-called *ġāhili* poems were composed during the first two centuries of Islam and attributed to *ġāhili* poets for tribal, political or religious reasons. Most of the scholars in the field of Arabic literature, however, are of the opinion that these contentions do not stand on sound scientific grounds. For Ḥusayn's thesis, see his book on pre-Islamic poetry *Fi'l-Shi'r al-ġāhili*, republished under the title *Fi'l-Adab al-ġāhili* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1927).

eastern Arabia, bare and monotonous, was to be the classical model which generation upon generation of Arab poets tried to emulate with remarkable and unflinching continuity. The *qaṣīda*, standardized, became the acme of poetic art for fourteen long centuries during which Arab society was undergoing the inevitable process of gradual change from tribal nomadism to a detribalized urban society. In spite of this change, Arab poets, adhered – with growing unease, one has to say – to the *qaṣīda* form with its specific, determined themes, its rigid metrical schemes and its inflexible symmetrical mold.

The unit of the *qaṣīda* was the *bayt* (literally, tent), or couplet, consisting of two symmetrical hemistichs (*ṣadr* and *ʿajz*) following a certain pattern of long and short vowels<sup>1</sup> and separated by a musical silence, the *caesura*. Each couplet had to stand by itself as a complete rhetorical statement, independent of the preceding or the following verses. *Enjambement* was therefore frowned upon and rarely practiced. Bernard Lewis aptly remarks: ‘The Arabic poem is a set of separate and detachable lines, strung pearls that are perfect in themselves, usually interchangeable.’<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, all the couplets of a given poem had to follow one specific meter and rhyme throughout. As if these were not sufficient restrictions, the classical tradition insisted on a strict choice of themes which were to be presented in a specific manner and sequence.

The standard definition of poetry held by the bulk of Arab prosodists was ‘speech, metrical and rhymed’. Thus any verse, lacking either meter or rhyme was excluded from being poetry.<sup>3</sup> Qudāma b. Jaʿfar, one of the earliest Arab prosodists (tenth century), makes a further stipulation: ‘A poet’, he states, ‘is so called only because he feels the meaning of words and excels in precise description, which others lack. . . Anyone devoid of these qualities is not a poet, even though he produces speech, metrical and rhymed.’<sup>4</sup> This vital qualification, seemingly obvious, did not, in any way, exonerate the poet from the exigencies of strict meter and rhyme. However, judging by the surprising lack of concern for the inherent qualities of the poetic content, it seems that form had an overwhelming precedence upon content and the touchstone of poetry was its excellence or defectiveness as a formal art. For Qudāma himself asserts: ‘The lowliness of the content in itself can in no way detract from the excellence of a poem, just as the bad quality of wood, for example, cannot detract from the perfection (of the art) of its carpentry.’<sup>5</sup> There was then no absolute necessity

<sup>1</sup> Unlike in Western poetry, the Arabic meter follows a pattern of long and short vowels. The *Tawīl*, one of the most common of Arabic meters, adheres to the following pattern: u-∅/u-u-/u-∅||u-∅/u-u-/u-∅/u-u- (‘u’ stands for short, ‘-’ for long vowels).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1960), p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Another qualification is the existence of the *niyya*, or intention to compose poetry. This made it possible for certain verses of the Qurʾān to be excluded from the category of poetry, even though they could be scanned according to one Arabic meter.

<sup>4</sup> Abuʿl-Faraj Qudāma b. Jaʿfar, *Naqd al-Shiʿr*, ed. Kamāl Muṣṭafā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānchī, 1963), p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

for meaningful content as long as the form was artful. Neither was a need for sincerity or integrity on the part of the poet: 'It is a poet's description which is admired, not his sincerity, since poetry is but a speech in which, if the speaker excels, sincerity is not required of him!'<sup>1</sup>

The old Arab critics and prosodists seem to agree on this subject. Al-'Askarî relates in his book on the art of prose and poetry that 'A certain philosopher was told that so-and-so lies in his poetry. The philosopher retorted: "It is demanded of a poet to excel in speech; truth is required only of prophets!"'<sup>2</sup> Critics found no fault with a poet even when he contradicted himself in two separate poems (cf. Qudâma). They continued to discuss with disdain the value of poetic content and to profess ardently the cult of the form.

It was Ibn Qutayba (tenth Century) who, by a systematic study of the poetic products of the *Jâhiliyya* and afterwards up to his own time, drew up the general schemes of the *qaṣîda* and thereby set the general rules governing Arabic poetry. Successive Arab prosodists and literary critics insisted on adherence to these binding rules in form, metrical schemes, genres and every other detail of *qaṣîda*-composition, with the effect that Arabic poetry became a stagnant pool whose water reflected innumerable faces of poets as if they were only a single face with hardly any distinctive features. Very few exceptions can be named.

Speaking in broad terms, this static and essentially formal concept of poetry became the model which Arab poets have mainly followed until late in the twentieth century. With few exceptions, most Arab poets for over 1,400 years were rarely able to allow themselves that freedom and integrity which alone could have enabled them to give free vent to their inner thoughts and feelings.<sup>3</sup>

Not that these poets, especially since the end of the nineteenth century, when the impact of the West began to affect the whole traditional structure of Arab society and its mode of thought, were at all times denied free expression of feeling and thought. Indeed, poets have often rebelled against the *qaṣîda* form as well as its contents on several occasions. Witness the derisive outcries of Abu Nuwâs, to mention only one example, already in 'Abbâsid times. But, as we will attempt to show later, they were inexorably trapped in the mesh of the traditional medium of poetic expression. This medium, of course, was the product of a different social structure, made obsolete by the new one in which the Arabs gradually found themselves in more recent times.

It is exceedingly hard to pinpoint the reason – or reasons – for this stubbornness in adhering to tradition which seems to have a spellbinding hold on the Arabs, especially in its manifestation in poetry and literary language in general. Joseph Schacht, discussing Islamic law, made the following observation:

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> Abû-Hilâl al-Ḥasan b. Sahl al-'Askarî, *Kitâb al-Ṣinâ'atayn* (Baghdâd, 1952), p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> Arab poets of the *Mahjar* (America), of whom we shall speak later, are excepted from this general statement.

At an early period the ancient Arab idea of *sunna*, precedent or normative custom, reasserted itself in Islam. The Arabs were, and are, bound by tradition and precedent. Whatever was customary was right and proper; whatever the forefathers had done deserved to be imitated. This was the golden rule of the Arabs, whose existence on a narrow margin in an unpropitious environment did not leave them much room for experiment and innovations which might upset the precarious balance of their lives. In this idea of the *sunna* the whole conservatism of the Arabs found expression.<sup>1</sup>

The reason for the adherence of the Arabs to old tradition, then, according to Professor Schacht, lies in their unpropitious and marginal environment. This, of course, may well have been so in the past when Arabs lived marginally and precariously as nomadic tribes, subsisting on the scanty oases of Arabia. However, it is hard to apply this theory when the Arabs, in their dynamic expansion with Islam, became urbanized and knew better times, ruling a vast and rich empire. Nevertheless, they stuck to tradition and precedent, and continued to think and act on the premise that whatever their forefathers had done deserved to be imitated. Environment, no doubt, can only be a partial answer to this question.

Another suggestion pins partial blame on the Qur'ân, the Holy Book of Islam,<sup>2</sup> with its *i'jâz*, a supreme literary model inextricably tied to the religion of Islam itself, untouchable and immutable. However, there are too many precedents with regard to the peoples of the area, and the East in general, who embraced other religions, had other cultures and lived in other times, but whose major aim was also the persistent imitation of the past. Professor Sabatino Moscati, Director of the Center of Semitic Studies in the University of Rome, remarks about ancient Sumerian literature that 'the material which has survived leaves no doubt whatever that the Sumerian men of letters regarded the imitating of earlier models. . . as one of the most highly esteemed of occupations regularly practiced, whereas they seem to have had no aspirations whatever toward originality or innovation'.<sup>3</sup> Nor did the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, Indians and many other peoples in the East.<sup>4</sup> As far as the Arabs are concerned, their religion, Islam, seems to have incorporated the *ġāhili* idea of precedent, as Schacht rightly points out, rather than to have established it. From this aspect Islam reflects the symptom rather than the cause. Be that as it may, we have first to examine the social background which gave birth to the Arabic *qaṣīda*, the traditional medium of Arab poetic expression.

We are told by Ibn Rashīq that

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Professor Bayly Winder, of New York University, for this suggestion.

<sup>3</sup> Sabatino Moscati, *The Face of the Ancient Orient* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> For adherence to tradition in literature of the Chinese and Indians I am indebted to Professor Derk Bodde of the University of Pennsylvania.

when there appeared a poet in a family of the Arabs... feasts would be got ready, the women of the tribe would join together in bands, playing lutes... [and] the men and the boys would congratulate one another, for a poet was a defence to the honour of them all, a weapon to ward off insult from their good name and a means of perpetuating their glorious deeds and of establishing their fame forever.<sup>1</sup>

This description points to the fact that Arab poets in *Jāhili* tribal society were placed in a very definite socio-political position within the tribe. They bore the crucial task of defending their tribe's cause and the ideals it held against opposing tribes. In other words, they were responsible for waging what in modern terms would be called 'psychological warfare' in order either to placate their tribe's enemies or enhance their tribe's prestige.

It follows then that these poets, by the very nature of their social function had to place their poetic production in subservience to it and themselves, as more or less passive, albeit eloquent conveyors of their tribe's message rather than their own. Tribal society, with its rigid traditions and age-old moral and social values, left no room for the personal will of the individual, nor was it conducive to any serious deviations from the mores and values of the tribe. The following verses, taken out of many, are illustrative and illuminating:

A-lam tarâ qawmî in da'âhum akhûhum: Ajâbû wa-in yaghḏab 'ala'l-qawm yaghḏabû!  
'Have you not seen my people answer their brother's call, and if he angers, they anger?'

Or better still:

La Yas'alûn Akhâhum ḥîna yandubuhum: fî'l-nâ'ibât 'alâ mâ qâla burhâna.  
Qawm<sup>un</sup> idha'l-sharru abdâ najiddhayhi lahum: Târû ilayhî zurâfât<sup>in</sup> wa-wihdânâ.  
They do not ask their brother for evidence when in affliction he calls them for help,  
For my people, when calamity bares its teeth, fly to him singly and in groups.

Thus, when faced by the will of the group, the individual had no right even to ask for evidence to defend a cause where he is liable to lose his life. Indeed, the *Jāhili* poet rarely speaks in the first person singular when he engages in *Fakhr* (self-glorification), but uses the plural 'we', since his glory is derived from his tribe's.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, praise is rarely extended in response to a personal sense of gratitude, but rather from a tribal feeling of gratitude. The poet Zuhayr is a case in point. Although indebted to one Haram b. Sinân for the gifts the latter had lavished on him, Zuhayr refused to salute him, lest he, the poet, might appear obsequious. Therefore when he met Haram in a group he addressed them: 'Good morning to you all, except Haram, and I have made an exception of the best amongst

<sup>1</sup> Quotation and translation by Sir Charles Lyall, *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry* (London: William & Norgate, 1885), p. xv.

<sup>2</sup> The case of 'Antara b. Shaddâd, who praised himself for his courage and prowess, is exceptional. His father refused him the honor of his name and therefore that of his tribe, due to the fact that 'Antara's mother was a non-Arab black slave. 'Antara had thus no tribe to glorify.



you!' (عمّوا صباحًا إلا همرمًا وخيركم استثنيت). However, when the same Haram did a favor to the poet's tribe, Zuhayr addressed to him one of his warmest panegyric poems.<sup>1</sup>

In general, pre-Islamic poetry, being primarily functional, occupied itself with the social aspects of tribal life, with those axiomatic moral and social 'truths' that were the outcome of age-old experience of facing the same problems that had been faced and solved in the past. When they arose again, the tribesman had very little real decisions to make, for these decisions, like British law were mostly based on precedent, or at least followed the traditional social and moral patterns of the tribe. The members of the tribe, then, knew the rules of life in their society and followed them without doubt or question. The truth that he uttered was not put by the *ǧāhalī* poet to a personal critical test, and he did not permit himself to draw from his personal feelings in order to determine his own reactions to the happenings he sang. To use a modern term again, pre-Islamic poetry was an *engagé* poetry *par excellence*, committed as it was to the cause of the tribe, its values, moral and social traditions, whose pronouncements were clear-cut and decisive and needed no inner deliberation.

This state of affairs could not but be reflected in the poetry of the time. The compact, independent and self-sufficient couplet (*bayt*) became the organic unit of the *qaṣīda*. For the Arabic poem dealt with simple, almost axiomatic 'truths' that lend themselves, or are better expressed, in short epigrammatic sentences. These wisdoms, it goes without saying, were not the outcome of deep inner meditation, but rather were drawn from the accepted values and mores of the tribal culture. Indeed, whenever the poet strayed from the main object of his poem, he did not indulge in introspection, but rather engaged in outer descriptions of his experience or environment. He described, with clarity and a certain rude force, his desert, its fauna and flora, the prowess of his tribe, wept over the loss of its men, or listed the good attributes of his beloved. Even when he engaged in erotic poetry he only retold what he said to his beloved and what she replied, what he did and how she reacted. So that these descriptions, though forceful and sometimes moving, remained for the most part detached from the inner motivation and the deep personal feelings of the poet. All *ǧāhilī* poets, for instance, moaned the departure of their beloved when coming across the barely discernible traces (*aṭlāl*) of her tribe's encampment. However, none of these poets ever showed or allowed himself to show that he was so much overwhelmed with love as to leave his tribe and follow her or join her! The social and moral traditions of the tribe never allowed such things, and accordingly, the tribal poet never allowed himself to deliberate on them let alone defy them. Even those poets like Imru'ul-Qays or 'Umar b. Abī-Rabī'a, or even Ṭarafa b. al-'Abd in his erotic prologues, who tried to describe their personal experiences, give us very little aside from surface descriptions of these erotic experiences

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by 'Āisha 'Abd al-Rahmān (Bint al-Shāṭi') in her book, *Qiyam Jadīda li'l-Adab al-'Arabī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1961), p. 31.

and the exchange of words or deeds connected with them. Najīb al-‘Aqīqī, a disciple of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and one of the more colorful modern Egyptian literary critics, likens the bulk of classical Arabic poetry to a ‘flight of a butterfly skimming the outer surface of things’.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that with the advent of Islam, Arab life acquired some new moral ideals and social values. However, while Islam tried to enhance the spirit and move the Muslim to thought and meditation, it limited these to the confinements of the new religious convictions. Moreover, with the establishment of the Islamic Empire and the shift of the center of power (during the Umayyads) from the tribal cities of Mecca and Madina to the sophisticated and urban city of Damascus, Arabic poetry, instead of undergoing the natural change evolving from a changed social structure with its new social ideals, values and problems, found itself otherwise preoccupied. Instead of mirroring the new social, ethical and psychological tribulations of the Arab torn between the simple values and tradition of his tribal culture and the complex ones of urban society, Arabic poetry found itself forced by political circumstances into deeper entrenchment in the past and its traditional tribal values.

Umayyad society, to quote Bernard Lewis, was based on the domination of the Arabs, who formed not so much a nation as a hereditary social caste which one could only enter by birth. This Arab aristocracy was furthermore beset by violent tribal strife and active opposition of the Islamicized subject peoples, the *mawālī*, who increased rapidly and soon outnumbered the Arabs. As partisanship flared, the Umayyad rulers were in strong need of poets to support them, defend their racial or tribal supremacy, uphold their political stands, present them to friend and foe as the champions of Islam, and claim for them the religious and political loyalty of their subjects. Poets were the ‘public relations’ media *par excellence* of the time. This vital function committed them to a certain stand, removing them even further from their feelings and the free expression of their personal likes and dislikes. On the formal side, the poet became closely chained to the tenets of tribal poetry because this traditional poetry was viewed as part of the most noble national heritage and because in the battle of words that raged between Arabs and non-Arabs, ‘the twin glories of which the Arabs could boast were the revelation specially vouchsafed to their race, and the language in which this revelation was couched’.<sup>2</sup> With this language, poetry was inextricably entwined and became the bastion of Arab national pride.

The ‘Abbāsid period (750–1055), which witnessed another shift of the ruling center from Damascus to Baghdād, deepened the process of urbanization which Arab society had undergone since it had ceased to be ruled from Mecca and Madina. The current challenges and themes of urban life, fired by the confrontation of Persian and Aramaic cultures with that of the Arabs, stimulated

<sup>1</sup> Najīb al-‘Aqīqī, *Min al-Adab al-Muqarin* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 1948), p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Montgomery W. Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain* (Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 69.



both by attraction and repulsion a wide range of emotional attitudes and reactions which found their artistic expression in poetry. It should be noted that the 'Abbāsids were brought to power by a coalition of different interests, held together only by the common desire to overthrow the Umayyads. Once victory was achieved, this coalition soon broke up into conflicting groups. For a while, the early 'Abbāsids maintained an alliance with the Persian aristocratic wing of the movement that brought them to power, but some thirty years later active conflicts broke out.

It followed that poetry, as the main medium of propaganda campaigning, was intensely enlisted in the political conflict of the 'Abbāsids against the *Shu'ūbiyya* movement (local nationalism of the *mawālī*, mainly Persians). In this way it continued a long tradition of what later Arab critics termed 'court poets', a tradition which started at the courts of the princes of Ḥīra and Ghassân, took roots in the Umayyad Caliphate, and became established during the 'Abbāsīd period. Nicholson warns us:

Passing to the characteristics of the new poetry which followed the accession of the Abbasids, we have to bear in mind that from first to last (with very few exceptions) it flourished under the patronage of the court...so that poets were usually dependent for their livelihood on the capricious bounty of the Caliph and his favorites whom they belauded. Huge sums were paid for a successful panegyric, and the bards vied with each other in flattery of the most extravagant description.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that new elements, both in form and in content, were gradually fused into the verses, reflecting the influence of the non-Arab cultures and the change and sophistication of the 'Abbāsīd Empire. This was done, first, by the school of minor poets in Basra, 'whose witty, and often scandalous verses met with a delightful reception in the new secular and pleasure-loving society of Iraq'.<sup>2</sup> They were followed by a poet who stands head and shoulders above all his contemporaries, Abū Nuwās (d. 803), who, after the fashion of 'Umar b. Abī-Rabi'a (d. 720), indulged in erotic verses and whose poetry possesses versatility and smoothness as well as obscenity. Abū Nuwās was at his best in the incomparable *khamriyyāt*, wine-poetry, which he profusely composed. The poet attempted to rebel against the tenets of traditional poetry, which he satirized and ridiculed, but was swayed by fear and temptation back to the safe and lucrative trade of poetical praise in the traditional metrical schemes. His younger contemporary, Abū'l-'Atāhiyya (d. 826), attempted to discard conventional themes and appealed to common feelings. Later, a few poets tried to break away from the conventions of the *qaṣīda*, such as Abū-Tammām (d. 846), who combined the sonority of the *jāhīlīs* with *badī'*,<sup>3</sup> as a result of which he strained his poetry with artifice. Al-Buḥturī followed suit (d. 897), but being a better poet

<sup>1</sup> R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Badī'* literally means the strange and the novel and designates verbal ornamentations in metaphor and simile by tropes and antitheses and the exploitation of the vast resources of Arabic morphology.

he was more palatable. Al-Mutanabbî, following them, maintained a higher level of neo-classical poetry due to his skill and mastery of the epigram. Then, of course, there was Sufism, which made a wide use of Arabic verse, just as did any other branch of Islamic religion or even science. But its poetry never reached the heights of real art as did that of the Persian Sufis, among whom Jalâl al-Dîn al-Rûmî is the most prominent representative.

It is also true that there emerged, in the extreme perimeter of the Islamic world, in Spain, a native form of poetry, the *muwashshah*, a novel strophic arrangement in four-, five- or six-line strophes of wide variation in structure, rhyme and themes. The *muwashshah*, however, rapidly degenerated into a mechanical exercise as stereotyped and as artificial as the *qaṣîda*. So in spite of these sporadic innovations, the older form of the *qaṣîda* and the general conventions governing its content never lost their dominance, despite these occasional bursts of change attempted by the few.

Thus, generally speaking, it can be said that the bulk of the poetic production of the Umayyads and 'Abbâsids remained subject to the rigid tenets of the old *qaṣîda* in form and structure, while in content it rarely left the fringes of outer descriptions, irrespective of the variations in simile, metaphor or new themes now and then introduced. With rare exceptions, Arabic poetry confined itself to the repetition of innumerable variations of the accepted 'truths' and concepts of the past, without any manifestation of the inner motivations, joys and agonies of the individual poet. It inevitably followed that, in general, subjects broached by our poets, the persons they loved, praised or elegized, lost their individual features. They appear to be stereotyped, even depersonalized, their particular traits, virtues or vices concealed under a huge equalizing mask of absolutes.

With the Ayyûbids and Fâṭimids, poetry emitted its last flickering of light before it plunged into that deathlike slumber from which it did not awake until the beginning of the present century. The rulers continued to assume the time-honored role of patrons of poets, and these in turn continued to copy the form and content of the old *qaṣîda*, presenting on the whole a series of worn clichés devoid of redeeming originality. Rhetoric overwhelmed Arabic literature. Poets sought to impress their audience with word juggling and etymological ornamentations, replacing depth with what they considered to be charming, and meaningfulness with what they deemed to be musical. This state of affairs in general continued until the end of the nineteenth century.

With the impact of the West in modern times, Arab poets, agitated by the new ideas and forms of Western literature, and feeling chained by the rigid mold of their traditional poetry, have striven to break away from this traditional poetic medium. Painful attempts were made to introduce new poetic forms better able to express the current themes of an awakening Arab world. But while Arab prose-writers gained considerable ground in freeing themselves from the traditional standards of prose-writing, with its overloads of rhetoric and ver-

bosity, the *poets* could not put their finger on what was precisely wrong with their poetry. At times they fumblingly tried to revive the strophic form. In Lebanon, Sulaymân al-Bustânî's 1904 translation into Arabic of Homer's Iliad in polymetric and polyrhymed verse was one of the earliest of these attempts. Later, strophic verse became firmly established through its continuous use by Lebanese and Syrian poets in the Middle East and in America. In Egypt, Khalîl Muṭrân advocated 'the liberation of Arabic poetry from its fetters',<sup>1</sup> and campaigned for truth in content and sincerity of feeling on the part of the poet. He strongly urged his fellow poets to mirror real life and to establish the whole poem, and not the couplet, as a unit. The *Diwân* School, comprising the three Egyptian poets Shukrî, 'Aqqâd and Mâzinî, demanded freedom for poetry from solemnity and gravity of style. These poets took it upon themselves to attack the old school of poetry in the persons of the then poets laureate (Mâzinî attacked Ḥâfîz Ibrâhîm, while 'Aqqâd attacked the redoubtable Aḥmad Shawqî, the 'Prince of the Poets'). But the *Diwân* school soon dissolved due to personal quarrels between its members, leaving behind the faint imprint of rebellion and some furrows in the field of modern Arabic poetry.

These pillars of dissension, despite all their fierce attacks on traditional verse, did not radically move Arabic poetry away from its old conventions, whether in meter or rhyme, although they contributed to the cause of sincerity of feeling and simplicity of style and expression.

The Syro-Lebanese poets in America, the so-called *mahjarî* poets such as Khalîl Jibrân, Nu'ayma and Abû-Mâḍî, to name only the most prominent at the beginning of the present century, drew their inspiration not only from the Lebanese tradition of strophic verse and simple style which the Maronite clergy and the Protestant missionaries helped to enhance since the seventeenth century, but from the literary and poetic trends (especially that represented by Walt Whitman) prevailing in the United States, their new homeland. The *mahjarî* poets discarded the rhetorical and verbose and wrote with clarity and simplicity poems about man, his life, loves, hopes and death. It was due to them that Arabic poetry came to be used as a vehicle for the expression of the inner world of the poet rather than the superficial record of the tangible and visible. But by far their main contribution to Arabic poetry was their removal of a serious impediment to a more natural flow of thought by their constant use of the *qâfiya muqayyada* (rhyme ending with an unvowelled consonant) instead of the prevalent *qâfiya muṭlaqa* (ending with a vowelled consonant). In this way they relieved the poet from subjugating his free flow of thought and expression to the unmerciful exigencies of Arabic grammar.

There followed, between the mid-twenties and forties of the present century, several rather lame experiments in an effort to adapt Arabic verse to the complexities of the times. The most conspicuous are those of Zahâwî, in Iraq, by

<sup>1</sup> Anwar al-Jundî, *Al-Shi'r al-'Arabî al-Mu'âşir* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Risâla, 196?), p. 241.

way of practising blank verse and similar devices. These poets, convinced as they were of the unsuitability of traditional poetry, tried to do away with some of its stiff tenets. They succeeded, however, only in doing away with the *caesura*, and by their use of *enjambement* invaded the sanctity of symmetry and unity of the couplet. In their reform they went so far and no more, maintaining the one and same meter throughout the whole poem. What is more important and just because they did not dare to choose an entirely new poetic medium, they failed to produce poetry which, by standing high above the poetic output of their time, could induce other poets to emulate their model and put an end to the incapacity of the prevailing traditional poetic medium to cope with the realities of the Arab world in the twentieth century.

Throughout the twelve centuries or so in which the Arabs passed from a tribal to an urban society, Arab poets were constantly frustrated by their realization that the *qaṣīda* medium was unsuitable to express the complex realities of their detribalized social life. They felt the rigidity of the fixed patterns of its metrical schemes, the acute sonority of its rhythm, its harshness and symmetrical monotony. They were aware that their poetry lacked subtlety and were conscious of the fact that the sophisticated ear of their urbanized society was not attuned to this cacophony of declamatory and oratorical poetry, but was more inclined to subdued and varying rhythms whose subtle schemes need intelligence to discern, follow and enjoy. Unfortunately, however, they did not quite discern that the real reason for the increasing unsuitability of their traditional poetic medium was the fact that they were increasingly being detribalized by the city and by literacy ever since the advent of the Islamic Empire in the second half of the seventh century A.D. The uniform, compact tribal culture was gradually exploding into a fragmented and particularized urban culture. The former unquestionable belief in the age-old values of tribal society gradually gave way to the complex doubts and relative 'truths' of urban society – doubts and questionable truths which could not be contained within a single self-contained, self-sufficient verse form, detached and saturated by self-righteousness as the couplet of the *qaṣīda* was.

At the same time, literacy, writing and printing were severing the spoken word from the magic of sound and gesture and the sway of pitch and tone. The spoken word's medium is the ear, and in this medium there was a necessity for sonority and loud beats. The message therefore had to know neither hesitation nor cross-purposes to be effective. These elements were the landmarks of traditional Arab tribal society, for which the poetic medium of the *qaṣīda* was remarkably suitable. Indeed these are characteristically tribal or at least primitive. For primitive societies seem to have a delight for strong beats, loud colors and heavy scents. Fixed traditions and axiomatic precepts regulate the lives of their members and determine their group actions and reactions. The more evolved the urban cultures are, the more they tend to favor subdued colors, patterns of greater variety and intimacy, and rhythms of far more subtlety and

refinement. After all, in Paris, London or even Cairo and Baghdad, the most expensive perfumes are those that are the least perceptible.

In the urban centers of the Arab world there was no longer a market for the jingling hardware with which the *qaṣīda* poets tried so persistently to ply their trade. But Arab poets kept on, for hundreds of years, hammering at the old *qaṣīda*, arranging and rearranging its strophes, yet never totally discarding it. It never occurred to them, it seems, that they were manipulating the wrong material. If we are allowed to extend the example of Qudāma about wood and the art of carpentry quoted earlier, we would say that these poets (carpenters), in their effort to manipulate wood (the *qaṣīda* form), in order to enable it to conduct a new form of energy, say electricity or heat (the social and cultural elements of urban society), had to fail in their venture, no matter how they shaped, reshaped or trimmed their wood. They were using the wrong material!

It is hardly surprising that the Arab poets did not realize for so many centuries that the reason for the increasing unsuitability of their traditional poetic medium lay in social rather than poetic determinants, for involvement often numbs the senses and perception of the involved. What is surprising is that so many eminent orientalist who, after all, are outside observers and, by that virtue, are expected to be more aware of the overall picture – have overlooked this basic fact. They have often attributed the Arab poet's failure to bring forth meaningful poetic output to the very nature of the Arabic language, sometimes advising the Arabs to reform it or replace it by the more expressive and readily understood vernacular.

Clement Huart in his *History of Arabic Literature* states, for example, 'To tell the truth, one obstacle lies always between the editor and his readers – the uncertainty which attends the reading of a language in which the vowels are very seldom marked. This drawback, it will be very hard to remedy.' He wonders further: 'Should Arabic writers, instead of producing their work in literal [*sic*] Arabic write in the dialect of the various countries in which Arabic is spoken?'<sup>1</sup> Then he rejects the idea, however, because of business considerations, maintaining that the published works 'would find no reader beyond the inhabitants of the country in which they appear'.<sup>2</sup> The redoubtable R. A. Nicholson for his part asks in his *Literary History of the Arabs* 'whether it (western culture) will eventually strike deeper and penetrate the inmost barriers . . . of literary tradition, so firmly rooted in the affections of the Muslim peoples, or whether it will always remain . . . an object of scorn and detestation to Muhammadans in general?' Nicholson leaves the question open because it 'may not be fully solved for centuries to come'. He ends with the compensating conclusion that 'meanwhile the past affords an ample and splendid field of study'.<sup>3</sup>

The question, however, did not need centuries to solve. Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb,

<sup>1</sup> Clement Huart, *A History of Arabic Literature* (Beirut, 1966), p. 445.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 446.

<sup>3</sup> R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 470.

a young Iraqi poet, evolved – towards the end of 1947 – what was to become known as the ‘New Poetry’<sup>1</sup> – a poetry form which, in less than two decades was to become prevalent in the entire Arab world. In this new form the *taf’ila* or ‘foot’ was made the basic structural unit of the poem, which the poet can use in any desired number within a single verse, thus making it possible for a verse to be composed of one foot or even only part of a foot. *Enjambement* is therefore freely practiced, giving the poem a great measure of unity and coherence. The poet is at liberty to follow or ignore a strict order or rhyme and he can shift at will to other metrical schemes to suit his mood. The breaking away from the compulsory monorhyme, monorhythm and the unity and symmetry of the couplet, which had forced the poet to diverge from the free expression of his own thoughts and mood, now permitted him maximum scope to communicate all shades of thought and mood. This new poetic medium represents the difference between the one-string tribal *rabâda* and the violin, or the even repeated harsh steps of the *dabka* tribal dance and the ballet! To use a McLuhan term, the medium was now brought to the complexity of the message. For a man in the Arab world today is no longer the uniform member of a monolithic tribal society whose poetry was, on the whole, a declamatory speech addressed to an audience. Rather, he is a member of a more or less pluralistic society with a multiplicity of social, intellectual, political and ethical shades of beliefs and tastes, within which the individual is involved in his personal crisis. His poetry therefore is no longer the voice of the tribe or the group, nor an address to these urging them to take action or endeavoring to defend their cause. Rather, it is the inner voice of the individual confronting his crisis at multiple levels, assessing himself and probing into his inner conflicts. These conflicts, like those of Hamlet, remain essentially confined to the inner self, not necessarily leading to action. It then follows that though his tribulations may have roots in his society’s general crisis, the modern Arab’s crisis remains essentially his own, to which only a flexible, versatile and free poetic medium can give full expression.

In conclusion we suggest that the trouble with Arabic poetry until the end of World War II lay not in the nature of the language (Huart), nor was it ingrained in the inalienable affections of the Muslim peoples for their old literary traditions as Nicholson claimed. Rather, it was rooted in the fact that while the Arabs were in the process of becoming more and more detribalized, the medium for their poetic output remained tribal – an obsolete vehicle no longer fit for the expression and communication of the intricate mosaic of urban life.

<sup>1</sup> On the same month that Sayyâb published his poem in the new style, a young Iraqi poetess, Nâzik al-Malâ’ika, a friend of his, published a poem based not on the couplet but on the stanza as a unit. Each of Nâzik’s stanzas contained the same number of feet, and each ended with a refrain. This form was already practiced by the *mahjarî* poets, who called it the ‘new *muwashshah*’. Sayyâb, of course, did not believe in such restrictions. Nâzik’s claim to be the first innovator of modern Arabic poetry does not, to our mind, have a very valid justification.



By inference, we venture to assume that the emergence and eager acceptance after the second world war of a new form in Arabic poetry is probably one of the surest indications that Arab society, at least that found in the urban centers of the Arab world, is entering the more advanced stage of detribalization.

Indeed, if we accept that art – painting and poetry in particular – is the first element of any culture to react to the underlying changes in that particular culture, then we should presume that the time is not very far for the remaining constituents of the former tribal social structure to crumble, be they social, political, economic or any other.

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