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The New Austerity in Syrian Poetry

A dissertation presented

by

Daniel Behar

to

The Department of Comparative Literature

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Comparative Literature

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Dissertation Advisor: Prof. David Damrosch Daniel Behar

The New Austerity in Syrian Poetry

Abstract

This dissertation relays a history of modern Arabic poetry from the previously unconsidered vantage point of modern Syria. It focuses on a corpus produced by Syrian poets who labored jointly to create lyric idioms both existential and realistic, attuned to urban everyday life, common sentiment, and styles of conversation. In the critical literature, the group is referred to as *shafawiyya* (orality), suggesting their lyricism's desire for the vernacular and its attempt to approximate everyday speech in literary Arabic. My study asks what went into the making of this poetic shift. It discusses the Arab precursors who are reshaped to legitimate the new *shafawi* tradition. It highlights the literary critics who make the low-key movement legible and presents the formative contacts with non-Arab poets who enter Syria in Arabic translation via the cultural metropole in Beirut or the Damascus-based state-sponsored literary venues. My larger comparative claim is that, *mutatis mutandis*, there is a common sensibility in the shapes poetry takes in response to the choke-hold of the one-party total state. I call these typical measures a mode of austerity and analyze it in relation to the symbolics of everyday political rhetoric with which civil society is inundated and with respect to previous conceptions of poetry pegged as overly estheticized and thus tainted with immoral obfuscation.

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Das Gedicht ist die einzige literarische Form, die heute wie vor ein paar tausend Jahren
im Kopf bewahrt wird, wenn auch in minimaler Dosierung: ein Text, der, als voralphabetischer Rest, ohne Schrift und ohne andere Speichermedien auskommen kann. Mit dem Witz und dem Gerücht teilt die Poesie die beneidenswerte Fähigkeit, ohne industrielle Vermittlungen zu zirkulieren.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Meldungen vom lyrischem Betrieb”

(Poems are the only literary form that, today as well as a couple of thousands of years ago, can be retained in memory even in minimal dosage: texts which, as pre-alphabetical residue, can manage with no script and no other storage media. Poetry shares with jokes and rumors the enviable ability to circulate without industrial mediations.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Notes from the Bussiness of Lyricism”)

INTRODUCTION: UNDER A LOW CEILING: TOWARDS A POETICS OF AUSTERITY IN SYRIA

What I hate most about despair is how easy it is.

Munzir Masri, *Hard Labor*[1]

I Poetry Made Out of Poverty

ONE GLARING afternoon in June, on the promenade of the port-city Tartus, the Syrian poet Munzir Masri accosts a stranger. The foreignness of this man– a Russian soldier named Victor – is visible by his sunburnt nose, obviously unacclimated in the Mediterranean region. It is 1976, and Masri – originally from the coastal city of Latakia – set up temporary residence in the smaller city down the coast after completing a diploma in regional planning from the University of Warsaw. Five years earlier, the Syrian state – already ruled by President Hafiz al-Assad – signed a treaty with the Soviet Union which provided Syria massive military aid in return for letting the USSR set up a supply and maintenance naval base staffed by Russian personnel. We are deep in the Cold War era and Syria had strategically stacked her cards with the Soviet side in the hope of winning powerful support in preparation of the payback against Israel after the humiliation of the 1967 defeat.

This geo-political alliance structures the encounter on the Tartus promenade. Masri's poem – "Victor with the Red Nose" – re-constructs it from an apolitical point of view, yet cannily makes visible a political reality which often goes unnoticed due to the public fixation in Syria on Western domination. The poem humanizes the bizarre forms of cultural encounter made possible by Cold War reality in Syria with no reference to anti-imperialism, Zionism, or Soviet

[1] Mundhir Misri, *al-Majmuᶜat al-Arbaᶜ*, 7.

hegemony. The irony is written into the poem's form by shaping it as a one-sided dialogue falling just short of mutual unintelligibility:

No more than two minutes
And already we are friends
Mariner, Victor
Your crooked nose
And your sea-filled eyes.

No, I am absolutely not Armenian
I'm Arab.
Agreed, agreed
Of course, there is no difference

May God curse all the languages
Look what they've done to us
Okay, fine, I have my fingers
And you just suddenly pulled out
A little notebook
From your shirt-pocket.

My name is Munzir
I am twenty-seven years old
How many children do I have?!
Two or three as far as I can recall, no more!
Oh, your teeth are so white, Victor
Your laugh is so international [*umamī*]!

I live here.
Why don't I show you
What I hung yesterday on my window-pane
And my aunt will make us
Two large cups of iced lemonade.
Ahlan wa-sahlan
Welcome, welcome.

This is Vladimir Ilich Lenin
He looks Asian.
And this one is Karl Marx
In a family sitting
And this one is me
A wonderful, brand new photo
Which I would really feel delighted
If you kept
Dear friend…

Tartus, June 13, 1976[2]

[2] Mundhir Misri, *Bashar Tawarikh wa-Amkina* [People, Dates and Places] (Wizarat al-Thaqafa, 1979), 149-151. All translations from the Arabic are my own unless otherwise noted.

Foreignness appears here as a coveted contraband, and Masri's over-eagerness to familiarize himself is to be read against the monotony of everyday life in Syria. Victor, on his part, stays mute. It is unclear whether he willfully participates in this moment of camaraderie or is simply coerced into it. For all we know, he could have discarded the photo presented to him by Masri immediately after they parted. The human aspect embodied in this interview can be confined to that defined in chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis, where humanity is sentenced to be divided by nations and languages. As punishment for raising a tower up to heaven with the cooperative power of one coherent language, God confounds human speech and scatters humans all over the earth. The sudden collision of disparate cultures, nations and geographies facilitated by Cold War struggles created many such funny and painful reminders of the Tower of Babel origin myth.

The technique introduced in this poem – a dramatized dialogue with a muted interlocutor – became a signature feature of what critic Muhammad Jamal Barut called *shafawiyya* or the turn to orality in the Syrian prose poem. The *shafawiyya* corpus of poems stands at the center of this thesis, and much of the effort in describing what came prior to it or in its wake is premised on the assumption that it consecrated a diwan of sufficient eminence to qualify as a turning point. Orality, as shown in the poem, is a mimetic sensibility situating speech acts in dialogue and a concrete place and time. It aims to create a vernacular literary idiom that bridges spoken and written languages. It also projects a cosmopolitan horizon by registering Victor's "international" teeth while recognizing the large gaps in culture between Syria and Russia. The scene realistically records the gross stereotypical misconceptions held by both sides: Victor views Masri in the general mold of the Oriental known to him from Russia, and Masri assumes that being Russian implies being a fan of Marx and Lenin. Both misconceptions appear to be easily

forgiven. Aside from smiles, iced lemonade and nodding at portraits of notable figures, what bridges their respective identities are universal markers of belonging – age, sex, marital status – and the quotidian formula *ahlan wa-sahlan* used to rehabilitate the trite trope of Arab hospitality. Is this a moment of overcoming barriers of national difference or an ironic representation of failure?

For Masri, Victor's red nose provides an escape from the dull sameness of day-to-day Syria. It is as if his manner of speech is transported to a foreign country, and it is precisely this fiction of internationalism, the surprise of a globalized Tartus and the distance quickly traversed, that makes the moment memorable. Reduced to a baseline translatability, Arabic may as well be Armenian. "To report, to describe, to inform": those are the functions of deliberate prose which Barut associates with *shafawi* poetic discourse. *Shafawi* inventiveness lies in charging these functions with poetic qualities, i.e., shifting their utility to serve as "provisional symbolic structures"[3] that integrate thought, feeling and imagination. An interesting feature of Masri's text is that a cultural encounter is imagined as occurring through human presence rather than books. Why would a poet look for a cosmopolitan horizon in Victor's smile rather than in a short story by Chekov? Why doesn't he show Victor his library rather than his cheap posters of Lenin and Marx? In al-Assad's Syria, there is not only a severe book shortage but also a general distrust about deriving meaningful experience from books in what is becoming a state-sponsored, and to great extent state-controlled print culture.

From the Arab reader's perspective, the question to ask is: why are none of the major literary, cultural, and political issues that press upon the minds of Arabs discussed? If the short answer is that Victor wouldn't understand, the follow-up question would be: then why stage the

[3] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

poem in this way and write it in such an insipid prosaic manner? The brief and profound answer given by Masri to that question is that the great causes are an easy trap for despair. The severe constriction and abstention from them liberate the poem from that fraught baggage. The poem's joyfulness, playfulness and ultimate value rest on its unrhetorical appearance, the felt liberation lodged in small hopes. From reduction of communication to a minimum proceed new possibilities for communication. From book shortage, absence of emulative models, and bad translations proceed new possibilities for books, for generative human models, and for reading translations creatively. From reduction of quintessentially poetic qualities – both Arab and modernistic – to a minimum proceed new possibilities for poetic expression. This is growingly the situation in which Syrian poetic culture finds itself operating. It is this process of paradoxically simultaneous contraction and expansion that informs the main interest of my thesis on the development of modern Arabic poetry in Syria.

And with this statement, the page is instantly filled with a mouthful of terms and queries. How Syrian is this corpus and how Arab? Is modern poetry in Syria sufficiently distinguishable from diwans of modern poetry in other Arab countries and from diwans of modern poetry around the globe? What is the adjective "modern" doing in this signifying chain if not locating this corpus in a transnational space of world poetry? An over-simplifying starting point would be that this corpus is Syrian in subject matter, Arabic in language, and international or transnational in form. Thus, in terms of the represented world in Masri's poem, we are clearly situated in Tartus in the year 1976 and are asked to picture a scene that could take place there and nowhere else. But this basic truth is shaken by the fact that this site is already "glocalized,"[4] a microcosmic version of global exchange happening in many iterations across the landscape of the Cold War

[4] On glocalism as a characteristic of global writing see David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (2nd ed.), 162.

era: encounters between foreign military men and local populations eliciting puzzlement, humor, misunderstanding, and sometimes violence and tragedy. Lenin and Marx, mass reproduced posters, photographs, and even ice-cold lemonade likewise reflect a rapidly globalizing Cold War setting and are surely no less international than Victor's laugh.

As to the language of the poem, it is written in Modern Standard Arabic, a Europeanized modification of classical literary Arabic used across the Arab world for a variety of communication types. Yet it is curiously uninterested in flaunting the beauty of the Arabic language in the domain most invested with preserving that beauty. The poem is offensively translatable: not only are meter and rhyme absent, but there is no complex patterning of sounds, images and words that would flag it as poetic. The fictional situation compels a register of language so basic that it defies classification as Arabic in the charged emotional sense with which Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani loads this adjective when he speaks of Arabs as a nation of poetic beings.[5] Nor is it recognizably flavored with Syrian dialect. It reshifts the stress of a "popular" poetic idiom from qasidas and wedding songs to a scantly explored middle area: a bastardized Arabic born in and for easy transport in translation. It severs the constructed connection between poetic untranslatability and national pride. This is the importance of the formal decision to stage the conversation rather than report about it: how else would Victor be able to understand?

In terms of form, the poem is written in *qasidat al-nathr*, the Arabic prose poem, a genre free from the external regulation of meter and rhyme and claiming the status of poetry by internal self-regulation of rhythm. As Robyn Creswell shows, *qasidat al-nathr* is a "genre in translation" meaning that it was established and legislated as template for poetic practice by an effort of

[5] For Qabbani's claim see Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*, 259.

textual and cultural translation from Western poetries.[6] Its chief promoters – the modernists Yusuf al-Khal, Adonis and Unsi al-Hajj – did so from the pages of the all-important avant-garde magazine *Shi^{c}r* (*Poetry*, 1956-1964) named after its American precursor and based in Beirut. By Arabizing pivotal figures of French and Anglo-American modernism such as Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Antonin Artaud, Ezra Pound and Saint-John Perse, they consolidated this genre as a legitimate vehicle of expression to explore modern Arab consciousness. That Masri and other Syrian poets feel at home writing in this genre indirectly results from the endless turf wars that this first wave of modernists conducted to domesticate *qasidat al-nathr* as an Arab tradition with an international horizon. So how international is this form if massive efforts of creation and re-invention, intellectual determination, and the drudgeries of grey institutional work – all undertaken in Arabic – are needed to make the genre usable in Arabic and for Arab poets and poetry readers?

That a western style of modernization in Syria of the 1970s passes through Beirut of the 1950s signifies that intellectual production is plagued by diminishing rations and narrowing horizons. Though virtually cut off from the modernist phase of Beirut, poets in Syria still look to Beirut as both a symbol of openness to western culture and a concrete possibility for a freer culture at home. They still rely on the random trickling of works produced in that modernist phase to engage with their changing reality. In a companion poem to "Victor," Masri addresses the other side of the Cold War bipolarity by representing the sort of cultural hybridizations promised by Beirut and eventually defeated by politics and war. He captures the hope and its defeat through the eyes of a Syrian friend, an ordinary Arab Casanova and not a poet or intellectual. The implication is that not only intellectuals had much to lose from the decline of a

[6] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*, 179.

cosmopolitan Arab city: in Beirut the friend "learned to swim" and came back with a pliable Lebanese accent, but had nowhere to exercise his swimming skills or his adaptable tongue and flirtatious masquerades. Beirut remains a nostalgic time capsule enhancing the sense of a present impasse and inevitable decline:

In Beirut He Swam Like an Englishman
In Beirut he swam like an Englishman
And wasn't ashamed
To pinch girls from their backs
And dive in
They would see him and scream:
"Crab, Crab!" [*sarta^{c}un, sarta^{c}un*]
He worked as a barman for an indefinite period of time.
The American put her hand on his …
And asked for nothing but Coca Cola
The small Frenchwoman
Opened the door for him
Bare naked.
He amazed everyone
When he asked the Italian guy with the Italian beard:
"What would you like for dinner, *signore*?"
And of course he refused to take tips
Because, my dear friend,
He too considered himself
A tourist.

He returned in the end
With an outstretched accent
And slim-fit trousers with no pockets.
He learned many things
To say goodbye with ease
"That's life in Beirut."

He loves America
Especially Hollywood
Where he took a photo
Next to a cardboard
Marilyn Monroe.
His father said: "Go!"
But he became fully convinced
That Hollywood
Is not the place
He was born to live in.

Two weeks ago, he bought
A used Jovial.
On the first of the current month
He put down his salary
For a fake Seiko.
In one year
He switched twelve watches

Hoping to get a job
Sometime soon
Tu, tu, tuuuuuu
Gone the train of his dreams….

Tasil-Hawran, February 11, 1974[7]

II The Syrian Contribution to Arabic Poetry: A Modernism from Below

Say to one of them 'al-Mutanabbi' up-close three times, he will fall flat on his face; but let one of them, from a kilometer away, but hear the name Jacques Prévert, and he will stand enthralled, or leap ebulliently several meters in the air as if he had drunk lion's milk. Why? Simple answer: because this one is Arab and that one is western. [8]

Muhammad al-Maghut on the poets of *Shi^{c}r* magazine

The premise of this thesis is that the poetry written in Syria and by Syrians made a unique contribution to the diversified writing of the prose poem in Arabic while also exemplifying recurring dynamics of modern poetry in the Arab world and in other literatures written in the Cold War era. It might be better to speak of Syrian poets, or a Syrian experience both locally and internationally constituted and articulated in mixed poetic genres, rather than Syrian poetry or a Syrian poem. There is a history of modern Arabic poetry encoded in this thesis and the prism of Syria makes a difference in telling it. This history is both idiosyncratic in its forms and sensibilities and similar enough to other literary histories to shed light on the processes by which poetry changes and renews itself. Renewal happens through both cross-cultural contact and greater inclusion of materials from everyday life never before set in the center of poetic experience. Furthermore, the social forms manifested in improvised intellectual salons and private gatherings – from Urkhan Muyassar's Surrealist circle in the 1940s to the Aleppo Forum – indicate that modern poetry formed a reservoir for values of cultural openness, toleration, and pluralism that were mostly lacking in a public sphere governed by what Lisa Wedeen has thickly

[7] Misri, *Bashar Tawarikh*, 51-55.
[8] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab Kana wa-Akhawatiha* [Raping Kana and Her Sisters], 54.

described as the "ambiguities of domination" in Syria.[9] It thus merits interest that goes beyond aesthetics. I argue that there is a telling affinity between these forms and the cultural forums that mushroomed all over Syria and advocated for civil society during the short political thaw in the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's reign, between 2000-2002.

One commonplace way in which both fields of Arab poetics and modern poetry studies are enriched by the emphasis on Syria is that poets and poetic texts previously unseen have been incorporated in the literary-historical *diwan*. Both Urkhan Muyassar and Khayr al-Din al-Asadi – the pioneers of the modern prose poem in decolonized Syria who preceded the modernism enshrined in *Shi*ᶜ*r* magazine – present unique models of poetic modernism rooted in Aleppine cultural sensibilities. Both lent a transnational or transcultural profile to their formal experiments. Muyassar and his companion ᶜAli Nasir re-wrote Freudian theories of the self into a poetic idiom which declares itself to belong to the tradition of Surrealism. Their brand of Surrealism sets out to undo and correct that of André Breton since it purports to restore the rational integrity of Doctor Freud from the wild symbolic aberrations of automatic writing and to reinstate scientific exactness. Al-Asadi, a devout Sufi and reclusive polymath, forged a highly coded language of Sufi love, collected in what appears like a deviant Islamic scripture. Al-Asadi's language of desire for the transcendent is not only rife with the tensions and intensity of the decolonized transitional period in which he lived, but also engages in a complex network of transmissions and re-writings of poetic and philosophical texts from both Arabic and Persian classical Sufi traditions. What complicates this re-composition is that these texts are felt to be internal to the Pan-Islamic tradition and are thus not conceptualized as subject to "translation." Al-Asadi finds refuge in Sufi love poetry as a trans-historical totality to counter violent historical forces of

[9] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). For the broad outline of her argument see pp. 5-12.

change. However transnational, both of these variants are firmly rooted in the locality of Aleppo with its brands of upscale mercantile refinement and pious cosmopolitanisms. Muyassar inaugurated a local literary salon which served as a cross-artistic Surrealistic workshop from which emerged the modern paintings of Fateh al-Modarres and through which Adonis and his wife Khalida Sa^{c}id became familiar with Surrealist writings. Al-Asadi, in turn, was a passionate Aleppine patriot who compiled a comprehensive "comparative encyclopedia" of Aleppo, in which the intimate crevices of its daily life are arranged alphabetically and indexed to lexical items from the Alepine dialect.

But these formative beginnings are discovered retrospectively and come late in the development of the prose poem in Syria. They appear only once Syrian territorial identity is empowered by a sense of cohesion among Syrian cultural elites and once mercantile Aleppo rises out of internal dynamics as surpassing Damascus' importance as an intellectual center. This moment is addressed in chapter 5. Proleptically, the true founding father of modern Syrian poetry is Muhammad al-Maghut, whose poems gave Syrian poetry its future horizon and, in English at least, have not received the critical attention prescribed by their formative role. The proliferation of Maghutian poets in the mid-1970s should give us pause, considering that, in its moment, al-Maghut's poetry was regarded as a peripheral, slightly clownish offshoot of the high modernism of *Shi^{c}r* magazine. Al-Maghut did not conform to the theories and translational practices codified by the magazine's pundits. His poems were not constituted by the fusion between a negation of modern Syria as benightedly backward and the modernist program for worlding Arabic poetry through reclaiming Near Eastern myths from the ancient past. It is said that al-Khal and Adonis gave credit to al-Maghut as a gifted writer of spasmodic inspiration, but, all appearances to the

contrary, looked down on him as beneath the level of *hadatha*.[10] Poems such as this one – "The Mailman's Fear" – were drunk up in Syria of the 1970s, but in Beirut they were viewed tepidly as falling short of the standard for modernist poetry as a heightened form of knowledge uncovering transcendental truths:

> Prisoners everywhere
> Send me all you have
> Your terrors, your wailing, your boredom
> Fishermen of all shores
> Send me all you have
> Your empty nets and seasickness
> Fellahin of all the land
> Send me all you have
> Flowers and worn-down rags
> All the breasts that were torn open
> The stomachs that were knifed
> The fingernails that were pulled out
> To my address… in any cafe
> On any street in the world
> I am preparing a huge report
> On human suffering
> to be submitted to God
> as soon as it is signed by the lips of the hungry
> and the eyelashes of the those waiting
> but – all you wretched of the earth everywhere –
> I'm seriously afraid
> That God is illiterate.[11]

The overarching argument of my first two chapters is that al-Maghut's poetry is not an isolated event of intuitive spontaneity; it could not but be affected by the magnetic force field of modernism in Beirut. Before being compelled to return to Damascus (a return after which came the repudiation of the modernist movement), al-Maghut benefited greatly from the brief exile in Beirut where he was sheltered by the *Shi^{c}r* group. He did not just raid Yusuf al-Khal's refrigerator while others were discussing Pound and Eliot, as the story goes.[12] The Beirut moment was crucial for the consecration of his poetic voice. The influx of literalizing poetry

[10] See televised interview with Muhammad Jamal Barut. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSFCC3nGeME&t=2146s , 28:24. The *Shi^{c}r* poets told Maghut that his poems are not *qasidat nathr* but *shi^{c}r manthur*, the very same category used to describe Khalil Gibran's poetry. This was offensive since it was tantamount to saying that he's a generation behind.
[11] *A^{c}mal Muhammad al-Maghut* (Damascus: Al-Mada, 1998), 185-186.
[12] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 50.

translations into Arabic expanded the bounds of poeticity and allowed his so-called chaotic structure and offensive imagery to flourish. Not to mention the fact that Beirut offered free venues of publication which would never have been offered in Syria. Moreover, al-Maghut's poetry is marked by a Rabelasian celebration of bodily realism which is born out of a polar tension with the aestheticism of the high modernists. There is a dialectical process at play whereby Maghut's fondness for materiality has internalized the new transcendental yardstick for poetry, otherwise he would have continued to write in the sentimentalist vein of Gibran. But out of disillusionment with the moral stance of aestheticism, that pole is kept concealed and publicly disparaged. As he scorns his peers for forgetting their Arabness and bowing before the idols of French poetry it is his poetic idiom and that of his progeny that come closer to the lyrical-realistic stance of Prévert's sensibility.

Another important facet in al-Maghut's afterlife is his sensitivity to a Syrian literary field increasingly determined by Zhdanovist dictates for popular commitment, and to the reality of state-imposed collectivism generating that ideological universe. This makes al-Maghut's work proleptic with respect to future pressures exercised on creativity by Baathist etatism. Though not changing much over the years, his work fixed a node for negotiating bipolar pressures from Beirut-based artistic autonomism (deriving from Paris and New York) and Damascene socialist art (deriving from Moscow). Contrary to the modernists' "rhetoric of interiority,"[13] al-Maghut develops a rhetoric of sincerity whose authority stems partly from free-floating aesthetic autonomy legislated by translations, and partly from inveterate Arabic molds of public rhetoric – the parallelistic sentence, the anaphoric address – now harnessed to legitimize political causes or serve as state-propaganda. These habits of thinking are satirized and undermined, as al-Maghut

[13] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 116-117.

ridicules the parallelistic gravity with deflating ironies and profane contents. In chapter 2, I analyze in detail the forms by which al-Maghut appropriates recognizably Arab characters and types of speech to reveal and interrogate the deformities of the modern Arab psyche.

My lead question is how al-Maghut's poems become a beacon for innovative poetics even though their level of self-reflection is that of a satirical *feuilleton*. The short answer is that al-Maghut was inspiring because he was able to navigate between the Scylla of autonomy and the Charybdis of socialist realism. The Syrian literary critic Muhammad Jamal Barut argues that al-Maghut's breakthrough lies in his inclusion of objects, characters, and speech-types from a modern urban environment.[14] His idiom of self-mocking protest poetry builds on an "aesthetics of prosified reality" diverging, per Barut, from the modernist metaphysical tendencies. Al-Maghut develops "a modernism from below" to offset the high-minded disdain with which the *Shi*ᶜ*r* poets held commonly lived experience in the Arab world. His modes of expression – however grotesque and histrionic – represented a psychological intensity that felt true to life, tapping as it did into the existential frustration of being Arab in a modern political world and giving voice to collective distress in a chaotic present with hazy horizons of change. The engagement with historically situated materials indexed to a lyrical subjectivity felt alluring to a group of poets coming of age in a time when vacuous political jingoism engulfed subtler forms of public discourse. And the category of the "everyday" which al-Maghut brought to the poem's center proved for future poets a fertile middle ground fusing connectedness to the Syrian everyman with philosophical distance.

This is laid out in Barut's *Poetry Writes Its Name*, a critical work which serves as the most authoritative point of reference for my study yet was written in 1981 as an academically

[14] Muhammad Jamal Barut, *Al-Shi*ᶜ*r Yaktubu Ismah* [Poetry Writes Its Name] (Ittihad al-Kuttab al-ᶜArab, 1981), 92-94.

distant manifesto for the new poetics, and thus requires some critical supplementation. In chapter 3, I introduce Barut's critical consecration of the new realistic poetics heralded by al-Maghut and continued by the poetic generation of the 1970s as *shafawiyya*, a modern poetics of orality. Notably, there are still disagreements about the adequacy of the term, as there is about the consolidation of a new poetic sensibility in the 1970s. I consciously choose to follow the term and treat the corpus as a turning point meriting close attention. The term is worth preserving for both its historical value and its wide acceptance among Syrian poets and critics. Its misleading connotations notwithstanding, *shafawiyya* performs a fine double duty. It connotes the socio-political function of samizdat-like poetic missives furtively copied, circulated in small circles, and enshrining an ethos of cooperation and cordiality in defiance of the vitriolic rhetoric of state-media. It is here that the medium of poetry as short memorizable forms that manage with minimal industrial mediation comes to the fore. *Shafawiyya* also suggests the voice-realism effects aimed for by this poetics – the mimetic movement of the lip[15] – and its reaching down to the vernacular and the low-mimetic. Unlike Lebanon and Egypt, Syria did not have a robust tradition of public poetry in dialect, and the Syrian poets of most popular appeal –Nizar Qabbani and Badawi al-Jabal – were in different degrees formally conservative. It is thus appropriate to see the *shafawiyyun* as stand-in modern vernacular poets, exploring zones of language unvisited before by Syrian poets in radically simplified literary Arabic.

Yet these poems were in the end print products. Most passed through the conventional channels of publication set up by the state. This has to do more with necessity than initiative. Had these poets had the means and leeway for literary entrepreneurship, things might have gone

[15] A phrase taken from Osip Mandelstam's brilliant and evocative essay on Dante's *Divina Commedia*, casting Dante in the image of a Russian *raznochinets* [intellectual of humble birth]. Mandelstam particularly focuses on the moments of high concentration captured in the *Inferno*'s conversation fragments to articulate an idea of sonorous poetic speech close to the lips. See "Conversation About Dante" in *The Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam* (trans. Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin), 101-153.

differently. The entire gestalt of *shafawiyya* as a socio-poetic phenomenon is incomprehensible without realizing the extreme material and spiritual deprivation under which these poets were operating. It is a poetics taking shape "under a low ceiling," as per the title of Nadhir Jaᶜfar's novel depicting the *shafawi* way of life.[16] I state this fact with no intention of pathos, since I regard the constriction as opening up avenues for energized home production of poetry. Narrow existence and book scarcity led them to huddle close together underneath al-Maghut's punctured umbrella and use each other as emulative models when other literary sources did not materialize. It drove them to invent genres, revive themes, and find new tones of voice: an anthology-poem to replace the lack of publishing power to issue anthologies; the indoor chamber lyric in lieu of the Whitmanesque great democratic outdoors for which their luxuriating mode of speech was suited; and the poetic in-group correspondence and friendship *leitmotif* as residue of oral conversations conducted in the absence of a proper magazine. It also made them so critically thirsty for outside poetry that they gulped down whatever translations were at hand no matter how turbid. Chapter 3 takes the reader through some of the forms, themes and genres instituted by *shafawiyya* in greater specificity than Barut's book allowed and discusses them against the backdrop of the cultural, political and social developments in al-Assad's Syria.

With no manifestoes, group-anthologies, or robust literary platforms, can *shafawiyya* be considered a coherent movement? It is Barut who in a 1978 article pointed to these poets – and namely "The Gallant Four": Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh, Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid, ᶜAdil Mahmud, and Munzir Masri – as re-shifting the function of poetry. Once Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn is added to the roster there grows a critical mass of poetry collections appearing between 1978-1983 which have some salient common features. This substantial mass of material can then lead us to

[16] Jaᶜfar, *Tahta Saqf Watiʾ* [Under a Low Ceiling] (Aleppo, 2009).

recuperate unnoticed manifestoes written as prefaces or re-examine belated works such as *Munzir Masri and His Associates* (2011) as quasi-anthologies. These poets are all visibly indebted to al-Maghut's expressivity, toning down his street prophet clamor and expanding the lyric repertoire of psychological realism to many more moods and timbers. This earned them a secondary title as the "Maghutian lineage," a name coined by Lebanese critic ᶜAbbas Baydun, who rightly discerns the collaborative nature of this endeavor. The crux of my characterization of their frame of writing is that they keep what has been established as conventions for the poetical to a stark minimum, avoiding learned intertextual references, incorporating bits of realia and turns of phrase from the lifeworld, and establishing transmission chains from historical speakers who would otherwise not enter the sphere of writing. Taken in aggregate, their manifold attitudes and tones share an impulsive desperation to generate and solicit warmth. Various strategies are devised to do so, most prominently the removal of screens between a poet's empirical and poetic selves. Since excessive starkness can be off-putting and slide into utter impersonality, the *shafawi* poems strive to retain a sense of ludic humanism. In this respect, one of the great tutelary spirits hovering over *shafawiyya* is that of the French lyricist Jacques Prévert, whose debut collection *Paroles* (1945), published in the bleak days of post-war Paris, proposed a populist plainspoken idiom to restore freshness to sentiment and solidity to everyday trivilaities. Prévert's "Alicante" pictures a moment of unimpended joy on what seems like a bourgeois vacation in southern Spain, a moment set against the general collapse of civil routine in the wake of the war:

> Une orange sur la table
> Ta robe sur le tapis
> Et toi dans mon lit
> Doux présent du présent
> Fraîcheur de la nuit
> Chaleur de ma vie.

[An orange on the table
Your dress on the rug
And you in my bed
Sweet present of the present
Coolof night
Warmth of my life.][17]

In chapter 4, we will trace a genealogy of poetically inconsequential joys – starting from William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just To Say" – constructed to protect the irreverent self-propriety of the lyric. "Smoke" – the inaugural poem of al-Husayn's oeuvre – is a case in point. It is fit to pose as model for *shafawiyya* as a whole:

Depressed and swelling like the sea, I stand to tell you all about the sea
Sad and depressed from this world, I stand to tell you all about this world
Self-possessed, firm and continuous like the river
I stand to tell you all about the river.

and when the window will have eyes to see my despair
and the walls will have fingers to feel my ribs
and the doors will have tongues to talk about me
and when water will have the taste of water
and the air will have the smell of the air
[…]
I too will stand, I will stand to tell you about myself.

To tell you all about my love that shoots down the elegies
About the elegies that would open their notebooks for kings
To record your names on the list of those killed
About those killed hanging on to the bandages and antiseptic
That failed to arrive.

And I too will stand, I will stand
To tell you about myself
As the dictator tells about his prisoners
And the millionaire about his millions
And the lover about his beloved's breasts
And the child about his mother
And the thief about his keys
And the world about its rulers
I will tell you with love, with love, with love
After I light up my cigarette. [18]

[17] Trans. Lawrence Ferlinghetti in *Selections from 'Paroles'*, 14.
[18] Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal al-Kamila* [The Complete Works] (Milan, 2016), 15-16.

Al-Husayn specializes in the genre of the "overturning poem"[19] and develops it in peculiar mixtures of jest and earnestness. In this instance, *shafawiyya* consists of enacting idle palaver as a screen of "smoke and mirrors," preliminary small talk before some important matter we never arrive at. The anti-poetic para-speech is performed to highlight the circumstances that condition it, a reality where fresh air, water, and basic medical aid are denied. It is this state of poverty that informs the deceitful methods of sustaining attention by withholding closure. There is faithful compatibility with the formal characteristics of oral composition as proposed by Walter Ong, namely that the construction is additive (rather than subordinate), aggregative (rather than analytic) and copious (that is, fond of redundancy).[20] Defining the aggregative quality of oral composition, Ong writes that "the elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses."[21] The reference here is mainly to the habit of attaching standard epithets to nouns in pre-modern orality, but the modern literate orality of al-Husayn allows for a more drawn-out aggregative structure that stretches the auditor's attention-span over several lines. In stark opposition to the goal-directedness of the well-made *qasida* (whose stem-root suggests purposefulness), it elicits love through both directness and digression, sincerity and playful deferral, words used both instrumentally and gratuitously. The written form thus enhances the interest in what lies behind the speaking voice, governed as it is by a dialectic between what's said and unsaid, between revealing and concealing, between surface and depth-

[19] The Israeli literary scholar Menachem Peri has coined this term ("ha-shir ha-mithapech" in Hebrew) for some of Bialik's poems and I'm using it loosely here. For the original conception see: Menachem Peri, "Ha-Shir Ha-Mithapech: ʿAl ʿIkaron Ehad shel ha-Kompositsiah ha-Semantit be-Shirey Bialik," in: *ha-Sifrut* 1:3-4, 1968, 607-631.
[20] Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 36-55. For a critical appraisal of Ong's analysis see Alfred B. Lord, "Characteristics of Orality," *Oral Tradition* 2/1 (1987), 54-72.
[21] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38.

structure. The poem is unapologetically "about," but the object of this "about" is perennially deferred as an empty placeholder.

The promising nothing awaiting al-Husayn's auditors as he lights up his cigarette is premised on the unpromising saturation of official discourse in Syria and the trite symbols and political myths inundating the Syrian lifeworld. In many of these poems, this reality is counteracted by swellings of humanitarian lyricism. I trace the inception of *shafawiyya* to the months following the October War of 1973, exactly when the tense muscle of the new Baath regime is flexed after long years of fretful radicalization followed by the inclemency of total defeat to Israel in 1967 and leading into Hafiz al-Assad's calculating and stern style of governance. The restorative effect of that war ushered in several years of relative prosperity and peace, economic growth, urbanization, and augmented cultural production marshaled by the Ministry of Culture under the direction of the then highest ranking female official in the Arab world, Najah al-ᶜAttar. Al-ᶜAttar truly was a devotee of high culture, and she caringly nourished her Ministry with the judicious assistance of Antun al-Maqdasi, head of the Directorate of Translation and Composition and the doyen of Syrian letters in the Assadist era. The confluence between state power and literary culture generated genuine writerly activity, created jobs for writers, and started a small-scale translation movement, but also cemented the role of culture in venting out the political frustration of "pens for hire" in an environment of enforced non-involvement. Culture was heavily bolshevized and literary discussions quickly seeped into editorializing and commentary on current events, covering up the actual impotence and dreariness of daily goings-on. Operating against the all-pervasiveness of politicized writing, poems like "Smoke" clear the ground by locating potential for meaning in ordinary nothings and thus renegotiate the reader-writer contract as stipulating an irreverent reflective pause from the

grinding mills of public discourse. “And now, for something completely different,” the poem playfully announces: *nada*, room for air.

Positing a discursive universe outside the poems to which *shafawiyya* relates is what I add to Barut’s account. Though well aware of this universe, Barut was not at liberty to address it in a publication with the Syrian Ministry of Culture. A highly effective cure to the degradations of public discourse was found in cultivating an etiquette of comraderie to sustain dynamic transformations. Fictions of the staying power of friendship were constructed to articulate the difference of Syrian poetic experience, as there was something particularly Syrian about close-knit collectives of creative writers. The politics of Arab solidarity thus gained a self-reflexive subjective coloring that authenticated the plurality in a unity of plight. A poem by Munzir Masri with a title suggestive of a bad joke – “A Palestinian, A Sudanese, and the Third, A Moroccan” – locates the Syrianness of the narrating voice, by contrast to other Arab types, in the affability of colloquial intonations that remain in *fusha*. It comes into being in response to the kitsch of inflated tropes of solidarity with Palestine and the insipid literature classified as “resistance.” This poem nicely represents how difference within the Arab world can be asserted as keyed to a Syrian sensibility mindful of vocalization and of a dear one’s lips:

> In the second half of my student years
> I lined up for myself
> Three Arab friends
> (A Palestinian, A Sudanese, and the third, A Moroccan)
> We shared everything equally together
> For two years
> Well... almost everything:
> Food, drink, beds
> And female friends
> All but opinions;
> In the latter, each of us was perfectly
> Determined to remain
> Different.
> \
> ᶜUmar ᶜAbd al-Salam
> A dark sugarcane

In a checkered black-and-white suit
worn in full year-round,
A silent, introverted man
Until we take him out of himself
Or better say
Take him out of his skin
A real volcano of curses and blasphemy
I've lost his address
And have almost forgotten his face
But to my embarrassment
I will remember as long as I live
How he came to our graduation's
final thesis defense
before the examining committee
His mouth reeking of the strong,
foul odor of wine
And that's all
They could tell from his answers!
\
as for the Moroccan
I wish I could
show you his picture
He has a big head
Useless except for head-butting fights
And a beard, skinny as a viper,
Passing under his chin
As if he were a Jewish Talmudist.
We would call at him swearing:
"You damn Berber"
and he would reply with a cackle
that arched his back:
"You damn Arabs"
no one could understand precisely
what those sounds meant
when they left his mouth
but equally no one could deny
his ability in his own obscure way
to defend his standpoints
for instance, he would proudly take delight
in declaring himself a Proudhonian anarchist
and at the same time
declare Karl Marx to be
the Seal of Philosophers
\
Nuᶜman is a different breed altogether
limbs that grew in strange ways
And a tongue the length of both calves combined.
But I would see nothing
On his scrawny yellow face
Except two tears, always there
Filling his sockets
He liked to sing
And he turned beautiful when he sang
evenings
we would sit together to debate and argue

Or evenings
We would sit together with nothing
To fight about
His broad, sonorous voice was accompanied
By those two tears swelling-up slowly
Then slowly running down his cheek
Parallel to
His nose.
\
Since the summer of 1971
I have not seen any of the three
I received
Neither letters nor postcards from them
Despite their ardent promises
I heard that ᶜAwwada
Finished a Masters' degree in Cairo
Then returned to Morocco
ᶜUmar ᶜAbd al-Salam
Is maybe not doing anything
And maybe in a jail-cell somewhere in Umm Dorman.
As for Nuᶜman
I've gotten only scattered news about him
From Copenhagen and various other cities
And once I was able to recognize him
Wearing dark shades covering
Half of his face
In a newspaper photo
Of a Palestinian funeral
In Beirut.
\
He is still alive
That much I know
But where?
I don't dare guess
Because, as they say,
He really, but *really*
belongs
In no place.

Latakia, 12/12/1976[22]

III Syrian Poetry as *Weltsprache*

The spirit refuses to conceive a spirit without body
Oswald de Andrade, *Manifesto Antropófago*

My other addition is to view the corpus comparatively and transnationally. This step is required to prevent the impression that Syrian poetry is insular because of its confining political

[22] Misri, *Bashar Tawarikh*, 199-206.

habitus. On the contrary, the more doors close before these poets, the more inventive become their attempts to find other openings into global literary and cultural spaces. Influence and transmission between poetries need not be positively evidenced for there to be affinities meriting comparative analysis. There are what Justin Quinn refers to as isomorphisms or "mirroring mechanisms" between languages of modern poetry owing to the intensified forms of cultural interaction in the Cold War period, Iron Curtain barriers of language and politics notwithstanding.[23] These interactions continue to enhance the process of the internationalization of poetry which began in the mid 19th-century, erupted sometime around 1910, and multiplied quickly across countries, regions, and continents.

I posit a notion of modern poetry as a dynamic world-process working within and across national literatures through what Michael Walzer calls reiterative universalism. Walzer uses this concept to explain the tensions between universalism and particularism inherent to any given national liberation movement. There are two common types of universalist claims, argues Walzer, a "covering-law" type and a reiterative type.[24] The covering-law universalism holds that there is one correct view of the good life, one justice and one salvation for all humanity. It is contained in the reference to Israel as "a light unto the nations" (Isaiah 49:6) and is implied in Isaiah's prophecy that all nations – stripped of their narrow nationalities – will climb the mountain of the God of Jacob and follow His teachings. "Whatever its form," writes Walzer, "the result is an identical triumph of religious and moral singularity – many people will climb one mountain."[25] This is a familiar feature of the monotheistic religions and of enlightenment projects. It is highlighted in books of prayer, credos, and rituals and undergirds influential

[23] The argument runs through Quinn's book *Between Two Fires* (Oxford, 2015) and is spelled out forcefully in the section "Ways Through the Curtain," pp. 31-55.
[24] Michael Walzer, *Nation and Universe* (Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Oxford, 1989), 509-515.
[25] Ibid., 511.

political and social theories. It served to bolster missionary activity and was used as pretext for imperialist ambitions. Those who do not know or do not keep this universal law belong in an inferior moral category. Those who proudly keep it have confidence that they hold the absolute truth whose power will be incontestably revealed.

The second type of universalism concerns "repeated acts of specialization" or instances of self-determination that "produce a world of difference,"[26] a general rule applying to multiple cases but with qualitatively different results. This type can also be traced back to the Hebrew Bible, though, unlike the first that has become common property, it needs to be re-constructed from fragments. Walzer locates it in the following verses from the Book of Amos, uttered by the prophet as a warning to those who take the idea of divine election as pretext for acting unjustly: "Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? […] Have I not brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). Walzer interprets these verses to mean that there is no single redemption for all humankind. If so, then liberation from oppression is a particular experience repeated several times in different fashions, yet in all manners good, since God is the liberator. The exodus of the Ethiopians, Philistines and Syrians may not have ended in a covenant, yet it was still somehow championed by God. "Each people has *its own* liberation at the hands of a single God, the same God in every case, who presumably finds oppression universally hateful. I propose to call this argument reiterative universalism. What makes it different from covering-law universalism is its particularist focus and its pluralizing tendency."[27] A covering-law form may be given to reiterative universalism, but it will be qualified by enough difference to discourage homogenization into a sacred world-history where all the loose ends are tied. It will deny its

[26] Ibid., 518.
[27] Ibid., 513.

holders the enlightened arrogance of the first universalism, since its instances are relative and its plurality of experiences commensurable with each other. Reiterative processes are learned from concrete historical examples and can serve as exemplary, even pivotal, without surrendering their irreducible difference. Although the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt is well-known and served as paradigm for other liberation struggles, it doesn't devalue the liberation of the Philistines or the Syrians. On the contrary, from recognizing that the Israelites went through the redemptive historical experience as narrated by the biblical text, we may infer that the Philistine and Ethiopian liberation stories would have been just as gripping:

> The idea of reiteration […] reflects an understanding that morality is made again and again; hence there cannot be a single stable covering law. Moral creativity is plural in its incidence and differentiated in its outcomes – and yet, it is not wholly differentiated, as if the agents and subjects of all moralities had no common kinship. In fact, they can recognize themselves and one another as moral makers, and from this recognition there follows the minimalist universalism of reiteration.[28]

If national difference is taken as the chief proliferator of particularism, and poetry as chief agent of linguistic particularism, there is room to draw an analogy between Walzer's concept of moral reiteration and repeated acts of poetic assertion of autonomy which result in different kinds of self-possession. There is then not one form of modern or modernist poetry spread from the literary capital to the periphery, a poetic equivalent to the "light unto the nations." Because modern poetry had everywhere to struggle for autonomy long before it became an acceptable practice and long before it was enshrined by literature departments, we ought to assume that these struggles cannot be shrugged off as mimicry when they happen in places other than the familiar literary centers. Every time an experience of modern poetry is repeated and consecrated on a local scale, it affords a new, particular example for what poetry can be like,

[28] Ibid. 533.

how individuated human experience can be modelled in this or that time and place, this or that language. With every concrete historical instantiation, the whole is changed bit by bit.

It is this assumption that underlies the radical reversal of center-periphery power structures, as in Oswald de Andrade *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928), where the Brazilian periphery devours and transforms the imperial deposit of its European colonizers on Brazilian terms.[29] The cannibalism in Andrade's manifesto posits a mode of liberated consciousness as political liberation, a "Carib Revolution." It serves as a hyperbolic trope of humanism constituted by a "participatory consciousness," an identity independent of European culture and revolting against it by making carnal Europe's false moral transcendence: "the spirit refuses to conceive a spirit without body."[30] The carnal joys set against the ideologies of Christian sublimation are creatively couched in particularism with reference to words and images of the indigenous Tupi, the pre-colonial people of Brazil. This mode of argument illustrates how modernist revolutions in poetry are carried out not by mere copying but by particular reiterative experiences that differ across cultures. Even if there is a universal spirit of modern poetry, it does not exist without these particular incarnations. It does not dwell singularly everywhere and does not have to pass through the metropolitan clearing houses in Paris, London and New York.[31] It dwells here or there, in this or that time, in this or that language. It continues to extend itself in an open series to no end.

I thus hope to recover the possibility of speaking about a global scope of modern poetry without bemoaning the reduction of cultural specificity lodged in language materiality and social

[29] See English translation in *Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2nd ed.), vol. F, 38-43. A useful analysis of this manifesto in a postcolonial framework of translation studies is offered by Susan Basnett, "Postcolonialism and/as Translation," in: *Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, 352-353.
[30] *Longman*, vol. F, 39.
[31] Quinn develops an interesting critical discussion of Pascale Casanova's argument in the *World Republic of Letters* (2004) that "Paris serves as a clearing house for international literary reputations (*Between Two Fires*, 14)."

collectives to bland airline terminal lyric. When looking at the variety of modern poetic production and its acrobatic playing on multiple fields of meaning, the undertones of lament for the triumph of a bland idiom of modernist world poetry in Stephen Owen's "What is World Poetry?"[32] are uncalled for. Hans Magnus Enzensberger's foreword to the anthology *Museum der modernen Poesie* [Museum of Modern Poetry, 1960] provides helpful critical vocabulary to address the transnational phenomenon of modern poetry as a reiterative process on a world scale. Heir to a German lineage of poets combining biting social irony, sharp political instincts, and prosaic concision, Enzensberger (b. 1929) answers the need for unmasking the frauds of German idealism. As poet, essayist, translator, and anthologist, he sought to breach the deep chasms running through German culture between social life and the cultivated individual. Although the anthology is dubbed a *museum* to signal that the classical phase of modernism has passed, the mode of presentation is far from a mummifying curation in a sterile institution. Modern poetry is viewed not as a rigid canon of works but as an open-ended process, a world spirit in search of ever more embodiments. The critical mass of translations is meant to recuperate an international horizon for poetic composition in Germany in wake of the Nazi provincialization of German culture. The selections are limited to the "classic phase of modernism," i.e., the period between 1910-1945, and include a wide representation of European languages. Many of the poems appear in German for the first time or as if for the first time, since the moment for their reception was lost. The multilingual presentation of currents and movements in modern poetry is supposed to re-inspire confidence that modern poetry is a world language at the disposal of writers who feel unease with both nationally specific poetry and over-abstract ideologies.

[32] Stephen Owen, "What is World Poetry?" *The New Republic* 203 (21), 1990, 28-32. Owen has in the meantime presented a reconsideration of his position on world poetry in "Stepping Forward and Back: Issues and Possibilities for 'World' Poetry," in: *Modern Philology* (May 2003) 100 (4), 532-548. His sympathies still seem to lean towards an idiom of modern classical poetry that turns away from the "challenge" of modern poetry as defined by Enzensberger.

The anthology is interestingly arranged not chronologically or by name and country but by theme: *Augenblicke* [Moments], *Ortschaften* [Places], *Meere* [Seas] and more. It includes German originals and puts them on par with the German translations, with only the difference that the translations are given next to the poem's original in smaller print, as if in marginalia. This creates a reshuffled, de-temporized textual space that levels the playing field between smaller and larger poetic nations and undermines the illusion of a singularly linear modernist course of development from, say, Rainer Maria Rilke to Octavio Paz. Productively unorthodox sequences are constructed, allowing for a conversation staged between poets from different time-periods and national traditions. Global modernism appears here as a modular kaleidoscope shaped by contradictory trends, steps forward and back, currents and crosscurrents. The anthology opens with the extremely minimalistic poem "Mattina" [Morning] by Giuseppe Ungaretti: *m'illumino / d'immenso*.[33] It concludes with Brecht's political meditation "An die Nachgeborenen [To Posterity]."[34] Ungaretti's affirmative statement in favor of both aesthetics and nature as necessary complements to the human sphere is conversely mirrored by Brecht's thoughts in a dark political age with little human solidarity and where even a conversation about trees is prohibited. "Even hatred of vileness / distorts a man's features. / Even anger at injustice / makes hoarse his voice"[35] – it is as if Brecht's political break with Crocean aesthetic epiphanies suggested by Ungaretti's poem has come full circle to withdraw from the overexposure of poetry to historical experience. The ineluctable power of poetry's gentleness returns even for the most roughly formed political poet. Furthermore, the plea "judge us not too harshly" ending Brecht's message to posterity suggests the distance established from the various moral and political

[33] *Museum der modernen Poesie*, 22.
[34] Ibid., 372-374.
[35] Ibid., 374. *Auch der Hass gegen die Niedrigkeit / verzerrt die Züge. / Auch der Zorn über den Unrecht / macht die Stimme heiser*. Trans. Hamburger in *Truth of Poetry*, 192.

failings of this venerable society of poets. Enzensberger sets the literary past in some measure of order to allow contemporary poetry to take new directions while still drawing on modernist touchstones as a close and yet malleable tradition, "a challenge not a consecration."[36]

In the foreword,[37] Enzensberger marks the 100th anniversary of modern poetry beginning with Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire. What was ignited by these figures – the unique and rebellious few at first – was the autonomy of modern poetry as a process at once historical and trans-historical, "an inevitable element in our tradition."[38] The dynamic is played out between the irreversibility of modern poetry's consecrated moments and its challenge to produce ever-new repudiations of its past. Uncritical admiration and wholesale rejection are equally detrimental to its continuation: the one by reifying it into an "ensemble of individual works" and the other by belittling it and turning away from the challenge. Whatever came of age in the transatlantic nexus of modern poetry in the mid-19th century started, according to Enzensberger, with the revolution of consciousness generated by the historicism of the romantic period, the same turning point defined by Erich Auerbach as the "Copernican discovery" of modernity.[39] Historicism and subjectivism, realism and romanticism, are in fact intertwined, argues Auerbach, postulating that 19th century Realism with its serious attempts at representing the everyday life of ordinary people shares a close connection with the romantic exploration of inner human depths and tragic ironies.[40] Before becoming disheartened with the academic world, Enzensberger wrote an interesting doctoral thesis about the romantic poet Clemens Brentano as precursor to many of the trends of modern German poetry, including even Brecht's turn to functional poetry and

[36] Enzensberger, "The World Language of Modern Poetry," in: *The Consciousness Industry* (ed. Michael Roloff), 44.
[37] *Museum der modernen Poesie*, 8-19. For an English translation (excluding the discussion of the specific make-up of the anthology) see: Enzensberger, "The World Language of Modern Poetry," 42-61.
[38] Ibid., 44
[39] Auerbach, "Vico and Literary Criticism," in: *Time, History, and Literature*, 6.
[40] Auerbach, "Romanticism and Realism," in *Time, History, and Literature*, 145-147.

common speech.[41] Locating the germ for modern poetry in this stage rules out the possibility of coming up with a structural or technical definition: the modern language of poetry is implicated in the historical dynamics of its times and arises out of a quarrel with modern histories as embodied in particular cultures and societies. It rewrites its own history with every constructive annihilation of its past.

The claim is put forward that around 1910 what had been the domain of a few dispersed and rebellious individuals was amplified, qualitatively changed and disseminated. This is when the international formation of modernism emerged in multinational biographies and interpersonal rapports across national borders. "The fact that this or that poet has read the others does not explain the phenomenon. Quite the opposite is the case. In the most disparate areas of the world, writers who have never heard of each other are simultaneously and independently encountering the same problems and finding the same solutions […] Poetry no longer is nationalistic. The great masters of modern poetry from Chile to Japan have more in common than do all those who parade their national origin."[42] The feature setting apart this phenomenon from previous incidents of transnational cross-lingual poetic exchange – the sonnet, say, or Pan-European "mannerist" poetry – is Enzensberger's qualifier *Welt-* for the *Weltsprache* of modern poetry, connoting a truly planetary reach. "Only in the twentieth century has 'world' become the prefix to every productive and destructive possibility: world war, world economy, world literature – in earnest this time, in deadly earnest, and as a condition of survival. With this the historic process entered a new phase."[43] Widening global horizons and similarity of social circumstance but also a common awareness shape these works, leading Enzensbeger to assume that multiple cross-

[41] Published in book form as Enzensberger, *Brentanos Poetik* (Munich: C. Hanser Verlag, 1961).
[42] "The World Language of Modern Poetry," 50.
[43] Ibid., 52.

pollinating dialogues are taking place at an accelerated speed, which is what his anthology is meant to bring out.

As for world poetry being a space of unequal exchange, this truth also depends on the mode of attention. The optimistic view of this new reality is that it had a profoundly decentering effect on the political power structures of center-periphery. Wherever one's finger falls on the world map there may be a buzzing center of poetic activity kaleidoscopically refractive of both the contemporary world and the canons of modern poetry. To detect and open up these kaleidoscopic constructs requires a method comparable to the mode of reading proposed by David Damrosch to apply to works circulating outside their language of origin. Enzensberger's point is that these modes of reading are not willfully bringing this reality into existence but reflect the intentionality of the texts and their objective context of origination. Here is the key passage indicating what thinking of modern poetry as a "world language" would entail:

> The literary capital of the world could as well be Dublin as Alexandria; it is situated in Svendborg or Meudon, in Rutherford or Merano. An island off the Pacific coast of South America, a dacha in the Russian forest, a log cabin beside a Canadian lake are no less centrally situated than are the improbable London, Paris, or Lisbon dwellings to which writers like Eliot, Beckett or Pessoa have withdrawn. The arrogance of capitals has vanished along with the pejorative sense of the word "provinces." Its opposite is no longer Paris but universality, its reverse and complement. The special quality, the dignity, of what is provincial is released from its reactionary inhibitions, from the pigheaded narrowness of the local museum and assumes its rights; far from disappearing in the universality of a world language of poetry, it constitutes its vitality, just as the written language feeds off the spoken word of dialect. For the lingua franca of modern poetry is not to be thought of as vapid monotony, as a lyrical Esperanto. It speaks in many tongues. It does not mean standardization, or the lowest common denominator, but the reverse. It frees poetry from the narrowness inherent in all national literatures, but not in order to tear it from its provincial soil and plant it in the abstract. It cuts right across the old languages. As a concept it is valid in the same way as the language of the Bible, or technical language, is valid. It differs from this last because it does more than serve a useful purpose, because it not only owes its existence to the national literatures but revivifies them and unobtrusively changes them. Unlike the language of the Bible [...] it expounds no doctrine, except perhaps that it is no longer possible for any nation to sever its destiny from that of others.[44]

[44] Ibid., 54.

Even if there still is an extreme *Ungleichzeitigkeit* [non-simultaneity] in the material conditions that allow this language to flourish, the *omphalos* of poetry can be placed anywhere, and its cropping up defies expectation. Due to poetry's poor sales, Enzesnberger consistently refers to it as a *Grenzfall*, a limit case. It is the closest thing to anti-commodity in a hyper-capitalist marketplace.[45] As such, it can make do with very little to sustain and re-invent itself.

The philosophical content of the German *Welt* is operative within the notion of poetry as *Weltsprache*:[46] world language denotes not solely a geographical planetary range, but also "world" as a polar counterpart to the interior self. With this Enzensberger evokes the intensive anti-subjectivism of modernist poetries which, according to philosopher Charles Taylor, fragmented modern experience to sense its reality and assemble new unities and ways to inhabit time.[47] In other words, a world language is charged with enlarging the range of genuine world-information at the disposal of language users – be that the natural or social, religious or secular, public or private worlds – releasing this "information" from the hold of reigning formulas. And this task is arguably an elementary need across language communities. When Munzir Masri names his inaugural collection *People, Dates, and Places*, he reclaims whatever stands in these categories with a unifying poetic consciousness that cuts across them through the workings of elegiac recollection. No account of his influences and reading history is required to see that these poems claim to belong to the world language of modern poetry.

* * *

> *If only I could be as presumptuous, as beneficial,*
> *as recklessly helpful as the trash collection.*

[45] "The anticommodity, which resists manipulation on 'pure' grounds, becomes Mayakovsky's most completely engaged 'finished product'. And the mere fact that it is poetry transforms the trapeze acts of Arp or Éluard into *poésie engagée*." Ibid., 57. For the more elaborate argument for poetry as *Grenzfall* in an age of mass globalization see Enzesnberger's "Meldungen vom lyrischen Betrieb. Drei Metaphrasen," in: *Zickzack: Aufsätze* (Suhrkamp, 1999), 182-185.
[46] "Welt" in Barbara Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (trans. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood), 1217-1224.
[47] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 462.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger

In my thesis, I borrow the term new austerity – taken from a chapter in Michael Hamburger's book of comparative poetics *The Truth of Poetry* – to refer to a ubiquitous poetic turn towards the low-mimetic and towards deliberate figurative poverty. The term – which I discuss at length in chapter 3 – highlights the evolution of a new permutation in the process of poetry as a *Weltsprache*, a moment in the process inducted by Enzensberger's anthology.[48]

The new austerity in Syrian poetry provides a loose category to define the mimetic paring down in a variety of forms running the gamut from epigrammatic conciseness to loquacious verbosity and from lean impersonality to intensely autobiographical gestures. If that which is considered poetic becomes contaminated with either massive fraudulence or disconnect from common life, then retaining poetry as a vehicle of truthful reflection requires sanitizing it. As such, austerity often emerges when historical consciousness encroaches on poetic thought and compels adjustments. When meter, rhyme, and metaphoric or acoustic excess are discredited, other discourses from the proximate lifeworld are more readily absorbed. And in the process, poetry is invigorated by the change of diet: "Of all works," writes Bertolt Brecht, "I prefer / those used and worn."[49] Brecht then proceeds to list everyday things which are palatable because they are "sunk in the use of the many": copper vessels with dents, the wooden handles of forks and knives, old houses "with clumps of grass in the cracks."[50] These worn and torn objects call up the vitality of *Mündlichkeit*, spoken language usage, which turns up in other poems as a conduit to timeless vernacular wisdom sifted and enhanced by the critical intelligence of the

[48] Hamburger is clearly indebted to this anthology in his comparative analyses.
[49] Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 223. Translation is Hamburger's.
[50] Ibid.

written.[51] In al-Maghut's typically mordant version of austerity poetics, poetry stained with usage figures as the blotting paper drying off the blood from Arab everyday life.[52]

As a set of economic guidelines for poetic writing, austerity has multiple functions on the levels of ethics, esthetics, and politics. Hamburger argues that the share of what is perceived as anti-poetic stuff in poetry dramatically rises when in wake of catastrophe all manners of literary varnish are seen as a self-indulgent luxury. Prior to the war, the realistic sensibility was tied to a Marxist ethos of poetry that could speak with punchiness about the gritty business of politics and base social needs. Poets such as Bertolt Brecht, César Vallejo and Pablo Neruda carried *Sprache-waschen* [language-washing, Brecht] or *poesía sin pureza* [poetry without purity, Neruda] to the forefront of poetic practice.[53] George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" may serve as blueprint for what austerity poetics attempts to achieve in the age of mass politics.[54] Yet an alternative lineage would place the New Jersey-born physician William Carlos Williams – a sanguine apolitical imagist – at the center of the poetically austere text. Enzensberger's most substantial contribution to German as a poetry translator lies in his two volumes of selections from César Vallejo and Williams. The high point in the surge of austerity poetics overlaps with the first two decades of the Cold War and appears to grow diffuse after 1968, when radical politics, culture and philosophy are made to re-unite on altered terms. Austerity is of an indistinguishable place of origin. It is neither from the center nor the periphery and may well be seen as generated by a hybrid of the two.

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[51] See Brecht's poem "Die neuen Zeitalter (1943)": *Von den neuen Antennen / kamen die alten Dummheiten. / Die Weisheit / wurde von Mund zu Mund weitergegeben*. [From the old antennas / came the old stupidities. / Wisdom / was passed on from mouth to mouth.] Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956* (ed. John Willet and Ralph Mannheim), 386.
[52] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 73.
[53] Terms presented in Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 188, 221.
[54] Orwell's essay was published just under a year after WW2 ended, a timing bearing out the hypothesis that the austere sensibility receives a thrust forward from the reality of rebuilding Europe. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in: *Horizon* (April 1946) 13:76, 252-265. See also *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (1st ed.), vol. 4, 127-140.

The most representative single volume is Nicanor Parra's 1954 *Poemas y antipoemas*, a formative artistic statement for this trend which showcases the multifunctional value of the anti-poem.[55] In his compelling plain-speaking mode of speech, the Chilean Parra wrote back against the metaphorical excess of the Spanish romantic tradition, the imperial deposit of Chile's colonizers passed down through the conservative education system. He emulated his compatriot Pablo Neruda (who helped Parra get published in Buenos Aires) yet wanted to lower the vatic overtones of Neruda's voice. Parra was enamored with the exact sciences and received a fellowship to study physics at Brown University, where he carefully studied the poetry of Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams. After coming back to Chile and living through Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship, he repurposed his style to write protest poems under the guise of a distinctly Chilean Jesus persona somewhere between a street-prophet and a mad clochard. His poetic ideal as self-presented as "maximum content, minimum of words, economy of language, no metaphors, no literary figures."[56]

Austerity thus functions by constructive negation of over-valued poetic beauty, over-refined cosmopolitan sophistication, and over-used propagandist clichés. At its moral extreme, it could offer a road map out of the dilemma expressed in Adorno's dictum that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.[57] When Marxism re-located from the political battle field to a Stalinist state religion, the antipoem – particularly in the form of confessionalist talk verse –provided a moral backbone to the poet's individual stance. Assertion of individuality in poems, observes Hamburger, "was most vehement where collective pressures have been greatest."[58] It is here that

[55] Nicanor Parra, *Poemas y antipoemas* (Santiago, Chile: Nascimento, 1954).
[56] Parra, *Antipoems New and Selected* (ed. David Unger), x.
[57] Hamburger's most convincing example for this particular use is that of Polish poet Tadeusz Rózewicz discussed in chapter 3. Paul Celan, who also appears to belong in this category, is a slightly different case because his poems impossibly try to continue in the vein of European Romantic-symbolist tradition after the Holocaust. On this topic see Charles Taylor, "Celan and the Recovery of Language", in: *Dilemmas and Connections*, 56-77.
[58] *Truth of Poetry*, 257.

the parallel solutions found by Syrian poetry and by the poetry written, for instance, in the German Democratic Republic and in People's Republic of China become apparent. The imperative of cutting down the poem so as to cut back the losses of poetry is not something new. The austere poets are not an ideological vanguard claiming a clean break from the modernist tradition. "It is certain that in times like these every important poetic work must refract and absorb an enormous irradiation from tradition,"[59] writes Enzensberger, suggesting that only by critically inspecting and purging literary traditions can room be made for more life-materials. Its techniques are pre-figured in those of the first-wave modernists: the mimetic language of Ezra Pound's *Imagist Manifesto*, the stark objectivism of Rilke's *Dinggedichte*, Guillaume Apollinaire's "Zone," all can be taken in different senses as touchstones for the non-purist sensibility magnified by the post-WW2 trends. The turning away from modernist epiphanies towards baser elements of human meaning re-affirms the "negative movement" of modernism and continues its processes of transfiguration of the everyday, only with slightly more translucency and less conviction in the access granted by the fragment to absolute totality.[60]

An apt illustration for the stakes involved in the shift towards mimetic effects is provided by similar turns in modern painting. In the late 1960s, the Jewish-Canadian artist Philip Guston – originally working in the signature style of Abstract Expressionism – decided to turn away from abstract painting turned "pack-instinct"[61] and returned to narrative figuration. "I got sick and tired of that purity," Guston said with reference to the newly consecrated style now associated with American supremacy. "I wanted to tell stories,"[62] he admits. He began composing a series

[59] "The World Language of Modern Poetry," 46.
[60] This sentence re-phrases the claim made by Charles Taylor in his *Sources of the Self*. Taylor likewise adopts Hamburger's category of austere anti-poetry to discuss the prolongation of aesthetic languages of the self into the post-WW2 era. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 483-485.
[61] Joanna Weber, *Philip Guston: A New Alphabet, A Late Transition*, 3. The phrase refers to Harold Rosenberg's inspired critique of Clement Greenberg's influential formalist theories as symptomatic of the high-brow "Herd of Independent Minds (*Commentary*, January 1948, vol. 6, 244-252)."
[62] Ibid., 4-5. According to Weber, many versions of this statement exist. See n. 6 in her "Philip Guston and Søren Kierkegaard," *A New Alphabet*, 24.

of representational miniature paintings in dense, tangible color textures whose pinkish hues resemble those of the human skin. In this way, Guston sought to refurnish his visual vocabulary of expression and re-humanize the art. Iconic images from American media and popular culture – the KKK hooded figure, the cigar – figured alongside objects of everyday usage – cups, shoes, lightbulbs, garbage cans – with a socialist representational effect. By their complex interrelations, the groupings formed by this "new alphabet" charged the humdrum subject matter with fresh meanings and lifted the trite media icons from their shallow impersonality.[63] "What I'm getting at," said Guston in an interview with art critic Harold Rosenberg, "is that I find more and more that what I like has a feeling of poetry and is the expression which is of a time and a place and region. It is saturated with particularity."[64] This bumpy formulation is itself a blow to the polish and purity of the formalist ideology of Abstract Expressionism.

While Guston had recuperated painting traditions of grotesque lyricism (such as that of Francisco Goya) to depict the grime of contemporary American life "inside out" as it were, drawing a poetic tradition nearer to vernacular is a task inseparable from exposure to foreign poetries. The eighth principle in Hu Shi's 1917 manifesto for the reform of Chinese literary language proposes not to avoid "vulgar diction" and connects this inclusivity of diction with the "simple and ordinary" styles found in Chinese translations from Buddhist scriptures.[65] In the 1950s, the so-called "translation style" described by Chinese poet Bei Dao[66] gave access to literary modernism otherwise suppressed in original works written under the aegis of Chinese official culture.[67] Similar processes occurred with the rise to legitimacy of the prose poem in

[63] Ibid., 14-15.
[64] Rosenberg and Guston, "On Cave Art, Church Art, Ethnic Art, and Art," *ArtNews*, December 1974.
[65]Hu borrowed this principle from Ezra Pound's "A Few Don'ts from an Imagist," while Pound himself translated his slogan "Make it New" from Confucius. For an English translation of Hu's manifesto, published in the Chinese literary magazine *New Youth* a year after Hu returned to China from Columbia University in New York, see *Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2nd ed.), vol. F, 47-55.
[66] "Translation Style: A Quiet Revolution," in: *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture* (Aarhus University Press, 1993), 60-64.
[67] On this phenomenon see Jacob Edmond, *A Common Strangeness* (Fordham University Press, 2012), 19-20, 101-102.

Arabic. They happen either through wide literacy in a foreign literature or by means of literalizing strategies of translation sensitive more to the originals than to the inviolabilities of the host language. There is thus an inbuilt translatability to the anti-poetic tradition in terms of both an individual poem's genesis and its capacity to become "world literature," i.e., travel light across language borders. Many of the poems I translate over the course of the thesis seductively lend themselves to English translation. This fact becomes important when these corpuses travel from third- and second-world language originals to first-world languages accustomed to the devices of modern poetry. They then tend to be treated as if modern poetry in, say, English – whose language positively opens possibilities for the languages of modern poetry translations – has rested in its final form and need not be carried further.[68] Modern Arabic poetry can often be received on terms of its qualities of arabesque poeticity or otherwise as poetry of witness or political emergency. Both categories obfuscate its absorption of translations and re-fashioning of the modernist tradition in the first place, and hence, blurs its belonging to an evolving corpus of modern world poetry.

The literary scholar Clare Cavanagh polemically argues against a fashion of theoretical thinking that considers lyric poetry as complicit in constructing bourgeois self-propriety and thus perpetuating the capitalist-imperialist world order. Her eloquent work on lyric poetry in Russia and Poland shows that when historical forces dramatically enhance the fragility of individuals and put the public function of poetry on a dangerous precipice, poets seize distance from their vatic legislative powers and protect zones of "humdrum humanity" prone to be obliterated by impersonal catastrophe.[69] This task is performed, among other things, by translating and

[68] Owen's analogy between international poetry and the shopping mall food court suggests precisely that, i.e., that international recognition is where poets find their final resting place. No chef will take inspiration from the cuisine of the food court, whereas for poetry it is often the case that 20th century metropolitan poets turn to poetry transaltions for creative regeneration. See "Stepping Forward and Back," 535-537.
[69] Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics* (Yale, 2000). For the polemical discussion see introduction, 1-19.

assimilating methods of poetic introspection and grasping of particulars sharpened in the West. Czesław Miłosz's poetry of witness is not just an outcome of a Polish sensitivity to history, Cavanagh argues, clarifying the quizzical statement from Miłosz's *The Witness of Poetry*: "the true home of the Polish poet is History."[70] Miłosz had been a diligent student of Anglo-American poetry, both romantic and modernist. As he was fleeing Nazi fire, he ran through a potato field holding his most prized poetic manual: the Faber and Faber edition of T.S. Eliot's *Collected Poems*.[71] This neither indicates the existence of an "ideology of modernism" nor suggests that Miłosz is derivative of Eliot. But it does indicate a personal need to learn from precedents how to use lyric poetry in constructing a historically informed point of view, both individuated and impersonal. Justin Quinn formulates a similar argument about the problematic American reception of Czech poet Miroslav Holub via A. Alvarez's series of Penguin Modern European Poets.[72]

Even though this thesis explores the function of poetry as a stalwart companion in dire times, it does so with the awareness of the suspicious moral pathos attached to it, a sentimentality that has played a key role in the reception of Polish poetry in the Anglo-American context. When comparing the poetic coteries of the Polish 1968'ers and Syrian *shafawiyya* stark differences stand out in terms of material resources between second- and third-world poetries. For example, Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh embraces wholeheartedly the pathos of poetry as a moral witness – writing poetry is human justice, he claims – to the detriment of his own critical stance and poetic

[70] Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 111.
[71] Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry*, 246-250. This section also discusses the problematics of Polish poetry's reception in the Anglo-American Cold War context. From the other side, Cavanagh stresses the impact of English and American poetry as an 'impure' counter-tradition to the highly abstract language of French modernism. Miłosz turns to Anglo-American poetry, writes Cavanagh, "as a creative counterpoise to a poetry determined to feel 'too much' [i.e. Polish Romanticism, D.B.] at the expense of the kind of considered discursiveness he finds at work in the Anglo-American tradition (250)."
[72] Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 98-142. About Holub's tutelage in Anglo-American poetry Quinn writes: "when Holub appears on Alvarez's radar in the early 1960s, he is not exactly exotic […] He had already learned to flourish not only on the border of two lands and languages, but along the Iron Curtain itself, able to pitch his voice so that it could address various constituencies at the same time (130)."

language.[73] This attitude was received as energizing and winsome in the small circles of Syrian prose poets who looked up to Abu ᶜAfsh as a local version of Walt Whitman and Yannis Ritsos. But the high status accorded to him was precisely due to the unavailability in Syria of either Whitman or Ritsos, both of whom were being imitated as constitutive of the "poetics of detail" across the Arab world through the translations of the Iraqi émigré poet Saᶜdi Yusuf.[74] Furthermore, in Poland the poetics of everyday truths as antidote to collectivist ideology found inroads into cultures of dissidence and was eventually celebrated by leading intellectual figures of the Solidarity movement. No such thing happened in Syria until the 2011 uprising.[75] While there might be numerous reasons for this disparity, there are good grounds to assume that Syrian poetry of the everyday was far more isolated and marginalized in the cultural sphere, and hence its obscurity not only for Arabs outside Syria but also for non-specialized Syrians.

Leaving the social uses of poetry aside, I make the claim that there are isomorphic forms of poetic response to collectivist pressures. Here the connotations of dreariness and deprivation evoked by the term "austerity" – bread-lines, existence in monochrome grey, and military tanks in the streets – are much more apt for the realities of Sofia, Warsaw, East Berlin and Damascus (as opposed to Williams' Rutherford, New Jersey or Prévert's re-invigorated Paris). In the Second and Third Worlds, this type of poetry was political by force of circumstance, whereas in the First World it could remain as a moral-aesthetic choice with little political consequences. Different poets and different traditions find different solutions, but there is a widespread tendency to find a middle ground between humanist autonomy and socialist commitment,

[73] Abu ᶜAfsh, "Limadha Naktubu al-Shiᶜra?" [Why We Write Poetry?] In: *Ayyuha al-Zaman al-Dayyiq Ayyuha al-Ard al-Wasiᶜa* (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-ᶜArab, 1978), 5-12.
[74] For this argument see Fakhri Salih, *Shiᶜriyyat al-Tafasil: Athar Ritsus fi al-Shiᶜr al-ᶜArabi al-Muᶜasir* [The Poetics of Detail: Traces of Ritsos in Contemporary Arabic Poetry] (Beirut, 1998).
[75] The prime example for these dynamics is the re-discovery and revival of Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn's poetry. After 2011, Some of the poems deemed relevant were circulated broadly on social media and sprayed as graffiti. This popularity prompted the publication of a new book of his collected poems in a Milan-based Italian press in 2016. See al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal al-Kamila* (al-Mutawassit, 2016). Prior to this, his poetry books were virtually unattainable in Syria.

between distant ironic play and involvement in human affairs, between immediate intelligibility and enigmatic open-endedness. Modern poetry's so-called unintelligibility cannot be entirely compromised if it wants to confront humans with the depths of their self-alienation. "Because modern poetry reminds us of what is self-evident but has been withheld from us," observes Enzensberger, "it has been abused and persecuted whenever naked force has made its appearance in history."[76] By protecting its ability to say things somewhat cryptically, poetry remains a "trace element" constantly challenging the status quo.[77] On the other hand, political control is arguably well-served by a self-referential symbolic system with no bearing on the real. As to traditional poetic beauty, it is often manipulated by state-sponsored media, education systems, and bureaucratic taste to impose a narrow cultural identity. Austerity is intentionally employed to decouple a given language from a defined political community emotionally invested in rich figurative funds. At the outset of his poetic career, Enzensberger wrote with revolt against the natural association between the language in which he writes and Germany, or in his words, *diesem land / dahin mich gebracht haben meine ältern* […] *hier laßt uns hütten bauen / auf diesem arischen schrotthaufen / auf diesem krächzenden parkplatz* [this country / where my parents brought me […] so let us build huts here / in this Arian junkyard / in this croaking parking lot].[78] As this brief quote shows, Enzensberger visibly deviates from German *Rechtschreibung* and by using the lower case for nouns, decapitates the language's written form.

Aside from the lowercase nouns, Enzensberger did not act with much vanguard violence on German grammar. As his career wore on, more and more of the language's resources were

[76] "The World Language of Modern Poetry," 58.
[77] Ibid., 59.
[78] See Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 254. Translation is Hamburger's with slight modifications. Quoted from the eponymous poem of the collection *landessprache* [Country Language, Suhrkamp, 1960]. The second cycle of poems is titled "gedichte für die gedichte nicht lessen [poems for people who don't read poetry]," a common trope of anti-poetry. In this context see also Wislawa Szymborska, "Some Like Poetry (*New Yorker*, October 1996, 156)" and Marianne Moore's classical anti-poetic poem "Poetry" beginning with "I, too, dislike, it."

employed in lucidly ironic poetic stances, taking great pleasure in formal play while retaining the interest in quotidian subject matter. His magnum opus *Der Untergang der Titanic: eine Komödie* [The Sinking of the Titanic: A Comedy, 1978] is arranged in 33 *Gesänge* [Songs] as homage to the formal perfection of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. His figure for austerity poetics is taken, however, from the most mundane sphere of bourgeois metropolitan life:

> *Poetik-Vorlesung*
> Wenn dann am Mittwoch dieser Krawall kommt,
> das klirrende Blech knallt im Gestank,
> die Kübel gegen den Dreckkessel donnern,
> zack! Das frißt and mahlt alles was abfällt
>
> zu Staub! Dieses Gefühl, wenn sie wieder da
> waren! Dieser Neid! Diese Dankbarkeit!
> Diese Leere! Freude und Wohlgefallen!
>
> Dann betrachte ich meinen Tisch, meine Hand,
> keine Asche mehr, keine kartoffelschalen.
>
> Eine bessere Welt für zehn Minuten.
> So vermessen wäre ich auch gern, so nützlich,
> so rücksichtslos hilfreich wie die Müllabfuhr.[79]
>
> *Lecture on Poetics*
> When, on Wednesdays, this racket comes,
> the clanking of metal smashing in the stench,
> the bins thundering against the shitty boilers,
> Bang! It gulps down and grinds whatever is dumped in
>
> to dust! This feeling, when they've been there
> again! What envy! What gratitude!
> What emptiness! Joy and contentment!
>
> Then I examine my table, my hand,
> no more ashes, no potato skins.
>
> A better world for ten minutes.
> If only I could be as presumptuous, as beneficial,
> as recklessly helpful as the trash collection.

Poetik-Vorlesung specifically refers to an academically hosted lecture by a poet, but this poem makes a mockery of both academic views on poetry and poetic ones. It can be construed as an impish take down of Gottfried Benn's famous 1951 lecture on "the problems of the lyric

[79] Enzensberger, *Gedichte 1950-2010*, 63. Translation my own.

poetry," which posited an ideal of poetry as sublimely ineffective, language speaking to itself with no human addressee.[80] For all that has transpired between the First World War and the aftermath of the Second, Enzensberger can no longer tolerate the extreme aestheticism of such approaches. His poetic angels – returning to their original biblical function as plain messengers – can no longer be as numinous as those of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*.[81] The shift from private religions and priestly imagination to the clanking of garbage cans is emblematic of the move towards a new austerity. "No more ashes, no potato skins" marks the parameters of that of which the poem in post-Nazi West Germany is happy to be rid: on the one hand, an overly fine transfiguration of the everyday into absolute realities and, on the other hand, the stock identity markers invoked by sleazy populism. A notable feature of this defiantly non-academic lecture on poetics is its peaceful stance towards the growingly convenient middle-class modern life. The language of this poetics feels comfortable with the aggregate averageness of the modern individual and the modern gear that accompanies his\her life. Or rather, the poem shares in the human aspiration to raech that level of convenience. By marking trash collection – a reiterative door-to-door evacuation of junk – as an aspirational goal, the poem sets itself below the capitalist order rather than above it, running counter to ideologies of redemptive modernism that exalt in dissociation from commodity floods. You know where you are in the world order by whether your trash is collected or not, the poem hints, and it would be hypocritical for poetry to pretend that there is no goodness in easily agreed-upon common goods. On the contrary, the utopian desire to change the world can be realized by images taken from those spheres of commonplace goodness.

[80] Gottfried Benn, *Probleme der Lyrik* (Limes Verlag, 1951). For English extracts see Benn, *Selected Poems and Prose* (trans. David Paisey, 2013). On this lecture see also Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 131-132. T.S. Eliot uses Benn's lecture to formulate the idea of the first voice in his 1953 lecture on the "Three Voices of Poetry."
[81] On ways of interpreting Rilke's angels see helpful remarks in Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 102.

Enticing to translate for its levity and pointedness, this poem also presents particular challenges to the translator. It is actually the most mimetic passage of the poem – the surgical description of the noise created on trash day – that is hardest to capture for all the specific nouns, the acoustic effects, and the uniquely German compounds such as *Dreckkessel*. *Müllabfuhr*, the final noun giving the poem its gusto, would confound any language without the equivalent of an impersonal yet surprisingly evocative euphemism for the providers of this service. Translatability is thus to be taken with a grain of salt, since austerity presents different forms of challenge to translators at every particular nexus of translation.[82] The poem "Two" by Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn is as sparse as the Syrian anti-poem gets. Its effect depends, however, on the Arabic-specific category of the dual – where the number two receives its own paradigms of declension and conjugation – which carries a poetic baggage stretching all the way back to Imru al-Qais's *Muᶜallaqa* with its opening address to the two companions:

Two
they were two
they would walk together
in deserted streets
he smelled like tobacco
she smelled like lemon trees
turning the corner
like two stars
they fell.

they were two
one was singing
the other liked to listen
suddenly he stopped doing this
and she stopped doing that
when the mizmar broke

they were two
she gave him a pen to write
he gave her light shoes to walk in
with his pen, he wrote to her: "goodbye"
with her light shoes, she came to see him off.[83]

[82] In opposition to Stephen Owen's discussion of Bei Dao's poetry as pejoratively "globalized," Edmond shows the particular Chinese valence of Bei's use of the image of the snowflake in the beautiful opening poem of *The August Sleepwalker*, "Hello, Baihua Mountain." Edmond, *Common Strangeness*, 115-116.
[83] Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal al-Kamila*, 261.

Any language without the dual category renders the poem more cumbersome and misses al-Husayn's attempt to charm us with the naivete of the repeated dual endings. Yet the rudimentary plot of the poem is easy to follow in any language, as it performs the diminishing of life into a couple of skeletal humans with meagre belongings: their bodies and clothing, their memories and voices. At every turn of the street, doom threatens. The clinging to this existence in two is not only flimsy but ends up in more pains of separation.

Though the dual leans on the strength of Arabic, the angle at which the poem is pitched with respect to the historical world has been learned from precursors in translation. One of my main hypotheses in chapter 4 is that the poetics of a "pure heart"[84] professed by al-Husayn is premised on imitations of other second-world poets from the Balkans and the Eastern Bloc. Poetic solicitation is a mode learned and mastered through imitation of other poets who have turned political impasse, social injustice, and personal crisis into self-baring lyric expression. Chief among them is the Hungarian poet Attila Józef (1905-1937). "Only he should read my poems", states a 1937 poem by József, "who loves me and knows me well,"[85] on the assumption that this intimate familiarity is possible to achieve through nothing but the poems. Al-Husayn has taken this principle as a major guideline to his oversharing graces: "In one of the corners of my room, I have a shirt, pants, and an unnecessary pair of dancing shoes"; "I cannot manage to sneak into my girlfriend's house to play cards with her on a Saturday night."[86] These are snippets from the poem "Jarthumat al-Nabᶜ" [The Germ in the Stream, 1978] whose ending professes al-Husayn's homely religion of love: "since I possess no coffin, no gravestone and no shroud / I've decided […] to open shop and distribute love to all by means of this poem."[87] Love secures the

[84] After one of József's famous poem-titles "With a Pure Heart." József, *Selected Poems and Texts* (Iowa City: Carcanet Press, 1976), 39.
[85] Trans. John Bátki in Attila József, *Selected Poems and Texts*, 100.
[86] Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal al-Kamila*, 24, 26.
[87] Ibid., 26.

existence of a private sector in this world and, consequently, holds a promise of transcendence from temporality: *mā māta man fī al-zamāni aḥabba* [whoever loves in time doesn't die], as Nizar Qabbbani famously writes.

* * *

My heart is perched on nothing's branch,
Its small body trembles without a sound.

Attila József, "Without Hope"[88]

The desire for the vernacular in Syrian poetry is inflected by translations despite unsuitable conditions to pursue a full-fledged translation movement. This necessitates inquiries into the direct and indirect routes of translation and internal transmission in Syria of the 1970s. The trouble in reconstructing these routes goes back to the same lousy infrastructure that obstructed the *shafawi* poets, in addition to the hyper-marginal status of poetry translations in the literary system, a status dooming them to quick and seemingly terminal oblivion. Internal transmissions from modern Arab poets outside Syria often happened on an interpersonal level: members of the Iraqi contingent who introduced the discoveries of the Kirkuk poetic circle to the young Syrians were physically present in Damascus and Aleppo and published in Syrian official venues. Masri formed personal relationships with the Lebanese poets Unsi al-Hajj and Shawqi Abu Shaqra, both core members of the first-wave modernism. Al-Maghut, Unsi al-Hajj, the Iraqi Kirkuk group – all were adopted as compasses for a home-grown tradition of modern poetry in Arabic and obviated the need to rely on English- and French-language modernisms in translation. In part, this would be the pluralizing and liberating effect of Arab modernism posited in chapter 1, unshackling the poetic sphere from its cultural ties to the former colonizers and the intense center-periphery complexes involved.

[88] József, *Selected Poems and Texts*, 70.

Yet what kind of foreign poetry came into Syria in the 1970s and what were the terms of its reception? This question is dealt with in chapter 4, but for the time being let us say that the impact of foreign poetry was far from *direct*, especially when concerning poetries in more peripheral languages than English, French and Russian. True, the generation in question went abroad to study in countries of the Soviet Bloc – Poland, Hungary, the GDR, and Bulgaria – and writers' delegations from Eastern Europe occasionally dropped in for honorary visits hosted by the Damascus-based Arab Writers Union. Yet poets from Syria rarely specialized in other national literatures and seldom acquired languages in foreign countries. There were high barriers of language and culture raised between the Arab world and, say, Hungary, Poland or Czechoslovakia, as Masri's conversation with Victor shows. Masri's poems from Poland – published recently under the penname Monzerious Masriam with the title *Bulunizat* [Polonaises, 2018] – show no interest in contemporary Polish poetry; most of them are little erotic sketches dedicated to a Polish woman he was dating.[89]

The Eastern Bloc poetry that did make it across was modern but not contemporary. It was written prior to the Cold War by poets who were already dead and canonized by the Stalinist establishment. There is strong textual evidence that Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn, the most distinctively Syrian poet after al-Maghut, borrowed heavily from the Hungarian poet József and the Bulgarian poet Nikola Vaptsarov, both of whom blended hard-nosed realism, Marxist concern for the underclasses, and lyric confessionalism expressed in regulated stanzaic forms. Both died young and were imported to Syria surrounded with an aura of political martyrdom. József suffered from a severe case of schizophrenia and threw himself under the wheels of a freight train. His mental state was worsened by extreme isolation, having fallen out with both the

[89] For a selection from these poems see Misri, *Mazhariyya ʿala Hayʾat Qabdat Yad* [Vase in the Form of a Hand's Grip] (Beirut: Riyad El-Rayyes, 1997), 125-134.

conservative Hungarian regime and the illegal Communist Party. Vaptsarov was a Communist militant sentenced to the firing squad by decree of the Bulgarian pro-Fascists. How did their poems fall to the hands of a deaf and penurious Syrian poet with no reading language but Arabic? Their travel itinerary was similar, and since chapter 4 concentrates on the impact of Vaptsarov's poems in the context of the surprisingly wide reception of Bulgarian literature in Syria, let me briefly retrace the steps of Józef's work in Arabic.

His first poems appeared in a 1968 collection of selected poems from Hungarian issued by Dar al-Katib al-ᶜArabi in Cairo, a governmental publisher subsidiary to the Egyptian Ministry of Culture.[90] Its publication was part of a bilateral agreement between the Hungarian and Egyptian writers' syndicates to introduce translations of proper socialistic works in both Arabic and Hungarian. While the Hungarian side efficiently selected what poets and poems ought to be translated, the Egyptian side was held up by petty disputes and slow bureaucratic wheels and the Hungarian volume of Arabic works never materialized. The Arabic selection was produced as a collaboration between the Hungarian orientalist Sándor Fodor and the poet-translator Fawzi al-ᶜAntil: Fodor was in charge of meaning and context and ᶜAntil in charge of Arabic stylization. In his review of this selection, the literary critic Sabry Hafez is taken aback by the combination of uninspired literalism and outmoded sound in adapting these Hungarian poems to Arabic meter and rhyme.[91] This medley – the worst of both pedantic fidelity and formal orthodoxy – was a common feature of translation from the Eastern Bloc in Syria too. Hafez laments the poor selection, mostly comprised of ideologically shallow poems celebrating the Hungarian people in the same bland patriotic manner. Hafez's expectation is frustrated at this missed opportunity,

[90] *Mukhtarat min al-Shiᶜr al-Majari*. Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-ᶜArabi, 1968. To be found in volume two of al-ᶜAntil's collected works: Fawzi Muhammad al-ᶜAntil, *al-Aᶜmal al-Kamila* (Cairo, 1995).
[91] Hafiz, *al-Majalla* 146 (February 1969), 83-85.

claiming that Hungarian poetry – driven by a sense of collective suffering and historical defeats – should have otherwise been able to speak forcefully to the Arab present, as the Arab world "lives under the heavy yoke of the Zionist nightmare and attempts to resist it."[92] Two hang-ups prevent the cross-cultural conversation from taking place: lack of respect for aesthetic standards in choosing the works and ignorance of modern techniques of translation. As we shall see, this situation is typical of the state-backed constellations of translating activity in al-Assad's Syria.

The second iteration of József's work in Arabic was produced in Beirut in a Dar al-Farabi edition dated to 1978.[93] This iteration reflects the more independent and individualistic publishing industry in Lebanon, as it includes selected poems from József's oeuvre as a modern classic of twentieth century poetry. In Lebanon, the standards for an aesthetically rigorous, modern prose translation were higher. However, the language resources were scanter due to lack of established networks of cooperation with Soviet Bloc intellectuals. The translator goes unnamed and so does the language from which he is translating. It was probably done from the French. József's circulation in the Levant is thus maintained as a modern Hungarian poet in Arabic with the tortuous process of mediation for all intents and purposes erased. It is this edition that was obtained by al-Husayn and placed in his library of modern poetry in translation of Beiruti origin, alongside the superb anthology of twentieth century French poetry edited by Paul Chaoul from which al-Husayn liberally adopts mottos for his own works. Once again, we meet with the bifurcated view of Masri's two Cold War poems: direct communication with a Russian sailor results in mutual misunderstanding and thin universalism, while real "swimming" experience must be gained in the Europeanized outpost of Beirut before becoming usable, or falling to disuse, in Syria. The second-world writer thus arrives in Syria either via official

[92] Ibid., 83.
[93] Yujif Atila, *Qasaʾid Mukhtara*, Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1978.

channels that encumber his voice with politicized agendas or via the cultural metropole of Beirut and French as the colonial language of culture.

The third iteration is a magazine selection from József's poetry translated directly from the Hungarian by Nafiᶜ Muᶜalla. Subtitled "On Freedom", this 30-page selection appeared in the Syrian journal *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* [*Foreign Literature Quarterly*, July 1983] accompanied by a biographical precis of the poet's tragic life. A subsidiary publication to the state-sponsored Arab Writers Union press, *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* was a phenomenon particular to Syria as it was confined to short literary pieces in translation among which the position of translated poetry was paramount. As entire volumes of translated poetry were rare to find, this journal functioned as Syria's main gate of entry into world poetry. As such, it was far short of material and intellectual means equal to the task. Politics squeezed it between the unwritten dictate of perpetuating orthodox truths (and orthodox forms of Arabic poetry) and representing difference. In chapter 4, I discuss the norms of translation pervading this journal, with an emphasis on the latent double bind to appease the demands of the Syrian ideological sphere while faithfully rendering original texts, and especially poems, as sites of individual autonomy and freedom. The main takeaway from inspecting this platform and other circulating translations in Syria is that even when the choice of translation is made out of crude ideological interests and the translation style is either retrograde or woodenly literalistic, enough shine may come through to spark local production. Slowly but surely, there developed in Syria a mildly modern translation style: artless, stolid, pale, yet with more respect for twentieth-century broken experience than the usual prosodic domestications. Further, the value of translations is decided not only between the original and the translator's choices, but also on the level of readership. Among devout poetry readers squeezed narrowly "under a low ceiling," there was a critical thirst for outside voices. And if local

production grows into a new movement, this can propel more translations and better ones, as would have no doubt happened within the Aleppo Forum, had the state not clamped down more ruthlessly on free publishing and cultural associations after the events of 1982.

In Muᶜalla's version, József is dutifully presented as a modernist classic and a leftist world poet on par with Mayakovski, Neruda, Paul Éluard and Nazim Hikmet. A short autobiographical sketch written shortly before his death – a staple in any edition of selected poems – is selectively quoted to present his humble background, but not his disillusion with the Communist Party. That he was a political outcast on all sides, and that his poetic stance of freedom is informed by deep social alienation that defies partisanship is fudged. He is a universal poet with a tragic human fate and his Marxist universalism is on the right political side, claiming freedom on behalf of the oppressed of all nations. Of course, lines like the epigraph taken from "Without Hope" – "my heart is perched on nothing's branch" – are dangerously nihilistic from a Stalinist perspective and suspiciously modernistic and vague. Yet this is for the reader to divine, as the framing does little to place József in an agitated pre-Stalinist phase of modern poetry in Hungary, with all the historical and poetic ramifications of this fact. The genuine and precipitous revolt against all ideological systems implied in József's personal idiom is smoothed over.

When translating "Without Hope," Muᶜalla renders the "nothing" in these lines with *al-ᶜadam*, the existentialist void adapted and re-utilized by Adonis and the first-wave modernists to lend intellectual gravity to their enterprise. This is how a modernist garb is bestowed on the poem. The first four lines from the section "Slowly, Meditatively" uncannily open a dialogue with the desert qasida motif of weeping on the ruins: "In the end you reach a sad / sandy, marshy plain. / you thoughtfully look around / you nod, and stop to hope." But no such hope arises: the speaker gazes haplessly towards the remote stars as he feels enveloped by a cold, petrified

universe. The image of a hopeless dead-end is enriched by this unexpected echo. The sense of cosmic abandonment is amplified in the Arabic by a sense of emptiness leading to no erotic remembrance, no desert journey, no re-integration with a collective. And this echo is given freely by mere virtue of the literal meaning transplanted in a different cultural environment. József is made recognizable for elect readers familiar with Arab modernism, and for the general readership with even minimal knowledge of the Arab poetic tradition. Read with proper historical context, this poem also contains subversive potential, since it challenges the Stalinist prescriptions for a good socialistic heart to be perched on right thinking theory. Though cumbersome and indistinctive, this Arabic version is just good enough for the poem to be intelligible and read against the grain of political impositions. It outsmarts, so I claim, the intention of the translator and the grinding mills of Baathist institutional discourse.

IV *Shafawiyya* as Sediment

Yet it is one thing to challenge Baathist authority with peripheral translations and barely perceptible nuances in this or that poem, and quite another to organize a critical literary "think tank" to promote contemporary literature and literary theory in defiance of the state hegemony of culture. The most self-assured transcendece of Cold War bipolarity in Syria took place in the University of Aleppo, where, to bypass the prohibition on independent magazines, a multi-branching literary salon with many distinguished participants was set up by the literary critics Muhammad Jamal Barut and Fuʾad Mirʿi. This Forum is the focus of chapter 5. In an absurd turn of events, the period of regime brutality and Islamic militancy in Aleppo (1979-1982) opened a small crack for the tenacious Barut to argue for the benefits of permitting a secular-minded, tolerant literary forum to exist on the university campus. From the perspective of Syrian poetry,

the Forum's importance lies in its consolidation of the *shafawi* generation as a home-grown continuation of modern Arabic poetry, establishing "the poetry of the everyday" as a viable mode of writing. It examined the *shafawi* output as a serious alternative to and modification of Adonis' brand of modernism, thus allowing young poets to gain a new sense of orientation in the poetic field and setting off a wave of original work in the prose poem. That veteran critics took the lead was significant since they had some institutional clout as professors or party members. They had amassed books in more propitious times and were able to share insights and reading suggestions with the young Aleppines, who lived in an even more severe book drought. The liveliness of the Forum is in part ascribed to Aleppo's slowly creeping modernization and its distance from the political center in Damascus and the cultural center in Beirut. Though leaving poets unequipped with modern works, this slowness left vast uncharted territories for exploration in the manner of the *shafawi* warmth for the quotidian. I trace the rise of the new realisitic sensibility in the Syrian novel – the one embodied in the works of Nihad Sirees and Khaled Khalifa – to the intellectual energies released in this forum and the after-hours discussions it precipitated.

As a dynamic duo, Barut and Mirᶜi exerted double critical effort to curb the extremities of cultural bipolarity and the ensuing futile literary quarrels between autonomy and social use. Barut engaged in an intelligent polemic with the high-minded modernism theorized and practiced by Adonis, especially in his esteemed journal *Mawaqif*. Adonis was taken on as the most sophisticated rival in a cadre of new Arab literary theorists who have decidedly gravitated towards the metropoles in Paris and New York and their attendant meta-literary categories: structuralism, post-structuralism, and semiotics. Though himself a diligent student of Western thought and letters, Barut disapproved of the servile ways by which the "phenomenology of the

text" was imposed on Arabic literature at the expense of attention to the concrete socio-historical determinants of Arab consciousness. This mode of thinking, he argued, lost connection with the actualities of Arab life. By pillaging Western theory, Arab thinkers let themselves be wolfed down by the concerns of Western theorists in a sad repetition of colonial dynamics of cultural interaction.[94] Mirᶜi, in turn, specialized in Russian literature and literary criticism at Lomonosov Moscow State University. After his return to Aleppo, he tried to rehabilitate pre-Soviet literary thinking as a response to the stern ideological criticism derivative of György Lukács in the best cases and Zhdanovist theories at the worst. Sanguine and kind-hearted, Mirᶜi radiated optimism about the future of Syrian literature, and his personality was a large factor in the Forum's success. He translated a selection of essays by the consumption-afflicted writer Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848) – the founder of socially engaged Russian literary criticism – and in his own work was committed to the level-headed concision of the student primer format. The rudimentary format suited his ethos of democratizing literary study for a non-academic audience and making it both accessible and pleasurable.

The impact of criticism on original literary works at this phase is hard to overstate. I describe in detail one body of transmitted critical texts that seems to have had an especially large impact. This corpus consists of translations of Anglo-American works of literary criticism, some identified strongly with New Criticism and others less obviously so. Many of the items in this high-quality series of translations are traceable to the early 1960s in Beirut and the Franklin Book Program - an American non-profit sponsoring translation from English in print industries of developing countries - that held offices there. Others were produced under the well-endowed

[94] See Barut's "al-Shiᶜriyya al-Bunyawiyya wa-l-Muqarabat al-Bunyawiyya fi al-Fikr al-Naqdi al-Arabi [Structuralist Poetics and Structuralist Approaches in Arab Critical Thinking]," in: *Al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 131 (March, 1982), 40-57. Barut uses the metaphor "hyena-d" for the phenomenon of this subservience, since in Arab lore the hyena charms its prey to give itself up graciously to be eaten.

sponsorship of the High Council of Literature in Syria with the help of Muhyi al-Din Subhi, a senior literary persona in the establishment and admiring translator of Anglo-American literature and criticism. Archibald MacLeish's book *Poetry and Experience* – a series of lectures originally drafted for MacLeish's graduate seminar at Harvard – won a substantive following among Syrian poets in Salma al-Jayyusi's translation that kept circulating for its cherished status. As poetry translations were scant, these critical works were prized for their good value, commonsensical know-how, and the wealth of examples they provided. MacLeish's idea of the poem as a cage of form entrapping phenomena and his stress on meaning bracketed out the arcane crankiness of Pound's aesthetic teachings and made them accessible and attractive for the average American student. Following in Pound's modernist tracks, MacLeish draws heavily on classical Chinese poetry and poetics in translation to establish the poem as a microcosm trafficking between self and world. The idea was simple and compelling. It strengthened the inclination of Aleppo-based poets such as Salih Diab, Husayn Bin Hamza, and Fuʾad Muhammad Fuʾad to desist from the confessional excesses of the *shafawi* poets and rigorously seek microscopic illuminations from the life around and within them. That metaphor, image and affective structures were indexed to a rhetoric of sincerity, an illusion of the historical self speaking directly to the reader, did not go far enough in terms of austerity. In this chapter, I argue that Diab and Bin Hamza purged the Syrian poem further to achieve a warm-toned imagistic objectivity with little recourse to either visionary loftiness or self-absorbed romantic tropes. In the case of Diab, this stark imagistic phase prepared him to compose poetic auto-fictional fragments in a radically bare rhetoric taking example from Raymond Carver's unadorned realism.

The Aleppo Forum was, in Diab's formulation, the last literary lab of modern Syrian poetry. I take Diab to mean that it was the final conjunction of meaningful reading experience in

a poetic tradition with a meaningful aesthetic turn that carried poetry a step farther. The process of modern poetry came to a halt on a collective level but continues to inform the work of individual poets committed to constant self-inspection and change, to "dynamic, integrative identities open to the future," in Diab's words.[95] In the last part of the thesis I take a cursory look at modes of expression after the 2011 uprising and trace lines of continuity with the writing ethos of *shafawiyya* that underscores the function of inscribing personal memory in anticipation of impending disaster. Sana al-Yazigi's extensive online archive – *The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution* – answers that need with accuracy and devotion. Yet the manners by which secular-minded Syrian intellectuals fell in love with the revolution as an idea of civil protest has strongly conditioned the ways by which reality is documented. The longer the war plods on, these documents either diminish against the scale of human tragedy or appear hopelessly idealistic. They also leave untouched vast areas of complex experiences in Syria crisscrossing all sorts of political and religious affinities, projections of revolutions or stability that have nothing to do with that enlightened idea. The greater the theme an artist chooses to address, the greater the likelihood of falling short, and the Syrian tragedy is no different and still has not elapsed into the past to afford calm perspectival distance. I suggest that by merging the categories of writing, creativity and revolution, readers and writers alike may easily lose touch with that reiterative poetic process that thrives on shifting distances and is premised on the immense radiation from tradition, in Enzensberger's words. This is not a condemning judgment, but acknowledges an understandable response under humanitarian duress, clarifying why poetry is indeed not to be taken for granted in times of huge collective ruptures.

[95] See interview with Diab on *ArabLit*: "Belonging to Human Time: A Syrian Contribution to Arab Poetics." May 16, 2018. https://arablit.org/2018/05/16/saleh-diab-on-crafting-a-bilingual-anthology-of-syrian-poetry/. Last visited March 26, 2019.

I nonetheless chart some of the trajectories of the poets discussed in my thesis with the intention of showing that progressive political ideas rarely dovetail neatly with either creative forces or feelings of empathy with actual afflictions of Syrians of all sects and denominations. All of the *shafawiyya* poets have either been silent on the events, taken explicitly pro-Assad or antirevolutionary stances, or changed their mode of writing to suit the needs of the present. Within the Aleppo Forum group, positions were closer to those of leftist non-violent protest. While members of the 1970s generation stayed put, most of the younger Aleppo poets left Syria and were unencumbered in stance-taking. At any rate, even those who held revolutionary positions found other outlets for their political ideas, or suggestively inserted current events into their work in tactful and measured ways. One figure I deem worthy of attention in the post-uprising reality is that of Munzir Masri, who has tenaciously held the center of Syrian poetry and the imaginary of the Syrian collective with as little prejudice and political fervor as is humanly possible. Masri has published prolifically since 2011 in two capacities. In his editorial writing for *Huna Sawtak*, a Dutch media outlet for Arab audiences, the everyday realities of war-time Latakia are discerned with redeeming humor and turned into tragicomic existential parables. Here Masri has cast himself in the role (pre-figured in Emile Habibi's grave epitath)[96] of *al-baqi*, the *Überlebender* or left-over survivor, the one who has embraced the fate of remaining in his place of birth no matter what hardships come. The ironic distance combined with the decision of tying his fate to that of the remaining Syrians informs a powerful stance of wide toleration coupled with specific critiques with respect to manners of discourse and behavior in an otherwise lamentable and absurd collective state.

[96] Habibi ordered for his grave epithet to be *bāqin fī ḥayfā* [I Remain in Haifa] in defiance of both the Jewish state's aggressions and the Arab Palestinian intellectuals who had fled for greater comfort in exile.

In his capacity as poetic producer, Masri has dramatically enhanced the volume of his published work since 2011. Some of the works were stored for long in his private archive, others brutally censored by the state in times of political troubles. This reflects the general outpouring of personal voices from Syria which the 2011 uprising released. The breaking of inhibitions has been conducive to all sorts of expressive projects, both politically hard-edged and gently introspective, and Masri's poems largely fall in the latter category. One noteworthy contribution in this respect is the collection *Munzir Masri and His Associates* (2011), a mosaic of modern Syrian poetry comprising dozens of collaborative poems. Each poem is made of lines picked out by Masri from his friends' poetry collections, his own reading notes on the margins, and his subjective musings on both lines and reading notes. Along with the well-cared-for third volume of the *Anthology of Syrian Poetry* (2008) edited by Masri, this book aims to bear testament to the lasting value of modern Syrian poetry. Masri aims to offset the tendencies of his fellow Syrian poets, who are, by his own testimony, "mad for writing poetry," but are not as intent on reading it. *Raḥm bi-lā raḥma* [a womb with no mercy] is the pun he makes on the poetry scene in Syria, whose agents like to create but not necessarily to understand others and empathize with them. "It is inconceivable," Masri continues, "how Syrian poets are born in those rates of fertility from fear, despair, hope, and joy; from the will to fight against emptiness; and, above all, from love, from love more than anything else in the world these poets are born, as if poetry returns with them to its first origins as a language of love."[97]

There are salient forms of continuity between the culture of Syrian literary salons, the Aleppo Forum, and the social forms of organization for freedom and rights. The Aleppo Literary Forum that gathered in the early 1980s in the name of literary autonomy already took on a more

[97] *Mundhir Misri wa-Shurakah*, 15.

political coloring. From its beginnings to the present, Syrian culture favored loose forms of collective organization to express its dissent and creative freedoms that easily shifted into lowkey social activism. Relying on stores of collective intelligence, these group formations afforded spaces for individual inventiveness while protecting individuals with semi-anonymity. As of the year 2000, as soon as the political thaw of the Baath set in, as Hafiz al-Assad died and was replaced by the Western-educated doctor Bashar, myriad improvised assemblies, cultural and political forums, mushroomed all over Syria as a sign of hope for change. These forums demanded political reform, individual rights, and the laying of foundations for a civil society. Some of the prominent figures behind them were schooled in the conversation cultures of the Aleppo Forum. When the calls for civil society were left unanswered and hopes for reform again dispelled, Syrian writers took to their pens and keyboards once more with the premonition of collective disaster. In their incisive creative work, these writers have left us a testament of social insight and artistic integrity reflecting on what was and what could have been in Syria.

CHAPTER 1: THE PLURALIZING EFFECTS OF ARAB MODERNISM

I The New Hegemony: Setting the Dialectic in Motion

The Arab modernist movement centered around *Shi^{c}r* magazine in Beirut (1957-1964) has been extensively discussed and thickly described. The template they established for the modern Arabic poem is foundational and thus inescapable for any poet entering the poetic field. Though a literary-poetic project at heart, it resonated far beyond the literary realm and attracted fire and interest from various cultural and political standpoints. In his study *al-Hadatha al-$^{\supset}$Ula* [The First Modernism, 1991], Muhammad Jamal Barut presents an authoritative analysis of the sociological formation of the group, their esthetic superstructures and intellectual origins. The study balances a careful reading of the *Shi^{c}r* corpus with an in-depth structural inquiry of the group's distinctive historical consciousness. The core of the argument can be summarized in the following five points:

(1) The movement is the final link in the so-called liberal age of Arab thought and letters directly deriving from Antun Sa^{c}ada's writings on Syrian nationalism as an all-encompassing literary, cultural, and political program. Sa^{c}ada (1904-1949), the founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party,[98] methodically reinvented the non-Arab past of Syria to forge a secular Pan-Syrian identity devoid of ethnic and religious categories. His teachings had especially appealed to the educated minorities in Lebanon and Syria, who found themselves outside the major consensual power-groups of the region (Sunni Muslims and Maronite Christians), now left to battle it out for earthly state power. In the name of geographically-based all-Syrian unity, the

[98] Henceforth SSNP, established as an underground movement in 1932, and making its political debut in 1935.

SSNP fundamentally opposed the local-patriotic (Lebanese) and transnational (Pan Arab) claims to nationhood and saw these identities as subservient to the its cause. The new Syrian identity was set against Levantine parochialism, sought to break ethnic and religious barriers and constitute a modern secular state. Its stigma as a political cult of minority identities, however, inevitably made it marginal, turning its oppositionalism aggressively militant. According to Adel Beshara, the SSNP had the most thought-out secularizing national project of what was then on offer in the Arab intellectual scene, and thus held great appeal for men of letters.[99] Sa^{c}ada was a devoted reader of literature and cultural history. He made literary production seem important, and spoke in a language that resonated with young ambitious writers.[100] This intellectualist component, however, was not translated to political wisdom and perhaps stood in the way of pragmatic calculation: over and over again the party got involved in inauspicious political adventures in Lebanon and Syria and formed (and still forms to this day) unholy alliances with more powerful sects whose core interests by no means overlap with those of the party.

The confection of a non-Arab Syrian Mediterranean identity as a historically credited nation from which both Western and Eastern civilizations spring was the key to *Shi^{c}r*'s recasting of the cultural contact with the West as a search for indigenous origins: "a merging with Western models as a return to one's own roots of civilization, that is to the Mediterranean roots shared by Syria and the West. The *Shi^{c}r* movement thus restores the Western model as a restoration of local roots."[101] Indeed, the *Shi^{c}r* poets claimed to surpass the Euro-American modernist tradition they translated, as their "orientally" spiritual idiom was extraordinarily *outré*, free of the material

[99]On this point, and for a quick summary of the core ideological ingredients of the SSNP, see Adel Beshara, *Lebanon: The Politics of Frustration -the Failed Coup of 1961*, 29-31.
[100] On Sa^{c}ada's appeal as an authoritative reader of literature see the essay by Jan Dayah "Sa^{c}ada wa-Udaba$^{\supset}$ al-Nahda" in Jan Dayah, *Muhammad al-Maghut wa-Subiya al-Hizb al-Qawmi* [Muhammad al-Maghut and the Furnace of the National Party, 2009], 15-36.
[101] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-$^{\supset}$Ula*, 28.

corruption of Western civilization.[102] Barut describes this identity discourse as the submerged social text underlying the categories of esthetic apprehension in the actual texts.[103] The poetic theme of the sea, for instance, enacts a turn away from the "civilization of sand," i.e. the backwardness of Arab culture, to a metaphysical adventure by which the cultural self re-connects with its two authentic complexions: non-Arab Syria and the West.[104] The derivation of the group from the political movement is seen as transformative since it is informed by the cognitive dissonance after the tragic failure of Sa^{c}ada's politics.[105] As a poetic movement, the group produced a vision robust enough to be reckoned with independently of its political origins, as it combined a large set of heterogenous elements with Sa^{c}ada's literary ideologies.

(2) The esthetic ideal-types molded by the Shi^{c}r poets are governed by allegorizations of the relation between the individual artist and social belonging. The relationship figured is of deep-seated enmity between these two poles: on the one hand, the liberal-minded, existentially self-determining elite, and on the other hand "reality," which refers to the crude social matter of common Arab life. This explains the rise of the highly metaphysical *ru$^{\supset}$yā* (vision) as a theory by which the poems are tested and the self-enclosed subjectivities constructed through them. Barut demonstrates that this cultural mindset reaches the most intimate fabrics of the *Shi^{c}r* text with its "forms of esthetic apprehension of the world":

> The esthetic models are a metaphoric manifestation of the dynamics of the timelessly antagonistic, hostile, and conflictual relationship between the cultural elite and real life. […] The *Shi^{c}r* poets believe that it is this polarity between the individual and society which gives literature its creative powers to plumb the depths of being […] But the social, ideological, epistemic and esthetic nature of the polarized struggle between the individual and society becomes with the Shi^{c}r movement a complete and essential contradiction between poetry and reality. In accordance with this, poetry becomes detached from the world of actuality, to discover a whole new other world, moved by its own metaphysical processes. Thus, the movement substituted myth for reality. It withdrew into its deep recesses to seek out the caves of

[102] Ibid., 14-15.
[103] Ibid., 17.
[104] Ibid., 28-29
[105] When Sa^{c}ada's political movement became a threat to the conservative Arab regimes after de-colonization, he was captured, put to trial executed within 48 hours by the Lebanese government. Syria's President Husni al-Za^{c}im tricked Sa^{c}ada into meeting and handed him over to Lebanese authorities. The execution took place on July 8, 1949. See Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*, 63-66.

> the self as a singular being. And this singular self holds an absolute vision within the frame of its complete spiritual, social and moral separation from reality.
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> Poetry is a vision of refusal and protest, and it is of the deepest languages of *kashf*.[106] But poetic *ruʾyā* for the *Shiʿr* movement does not mean that poetry faces the flux of reality; it collapses into the inner, spiritually disintegrated self in its enclosed, secluded world, to discover a different Unknown intuited by vision, whose questions are disentangled in subjective darkness. This clarifies the social, ideological, epistemic and esthetic nature of the polarized struggle between the individual and society –through which the individual transgresses and transcends (*yatakhaṭṭā wa-yatajāwazu*) reality, floating freely above its living flux and his own historicity.[107]

Adonis' most dazzling expression of this mode of esthetic apprehension is the series of open-form *mazāmīr* [psalms] that serve as openings between the sections of his collection *Aghani Mihyar* (1961). These generically fluid pieces are highly revealing of the construction of Mihyar's heretical character. Disguised as apocryphal psalms that originate somewhere in Great Syria, these texts ironically claim the status of "translated" ancient divinations preceding rigid modern divisions between poetry and prose. In fact, they are ironic anti-psalms of evasive claims to self-possession having little to do with either self-humbling praise or supplication (the common psalmic genres). They display the varied catalogue of Mihyar's elusive acts of progression through paradoxes: "I charge and uproot, pass over and belittle. Wherever I pass, waterfalls of another world cascade; wherever I pass, death and impasse. But I will stay, as I am fenced in with myself."[108] The paradox of being simultaneously "in" with a warrior's tenacity and "above it all" with an ironist's disdain well captures the slipperiness of this figure. In another psalm, the speaker boastfully assumes both cosmic grandeur and infinitesimal smallness: "I am alien to you, I'm on the other side. I dwell in lands particular to me, I puff on the skies to see their ashes, in waking and sleep I open a bud to live inside it."[109]

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[106] "Uncovering." A mystical term for discovery of sublime truths comparable to the Greek *apocalypsis* or the Heidegerrian *aletheia*.
[107] Ibid., 64.
[108] Adunis, *Aghani Mihyar* (1961), 42.
[109] Ibid., 135.

(3) The positive side to the contempt for the masses is the belief that as a cultural elite, poets can generate values and systems of thought that repair the broken systems of historical reality. "Poets," writes the critic Khalida Saᶜid, "are revolutionaries in a world full of mummified ideas."[110] The prophetic role of the poet is reiterated in accordance with the modern spirit of the times. The figure of the poet can be that of an outcast, a *poète maudit,* or in the more common form, a dying god of regeneration (Tammuz, Adonis):

> from here the *nukhba* [elite] restored the Tammuzi symbol, framing it within a broader project in which the national-civilizational subject is resurrected, poetically performed by the resurrection of Tammuz. The Tammuzi image of the national elite[111] is realized through this esthetic model, the image of Tammuz whose sacrificial, individual death resurrects a nation. He is the Syrian-national elite itself as poetry.[112]

Adonis' Mihyar presents the consummate realization of this esthetic ideal-type. Mihyar is even emptier than Tammuz in terms of cultural specificity and historical baggage. He is designed as a cosmic figure of heroic self-generating individualism, a combination of the religious heretic, the free-thinking metaphysician, and the Nietzschean nihilist. Barut deals extensively with the poetic use of Tammuzi symbols as a middle ground between esthetics and ideology and considers it as a productive turning point for Arab poetics for its ability to probe Arab collective unconscious.[113]

This collective unconscious is mainly identified with a class of disinherited intellectuals in the new age of the modern Arab state. The retreat to various kinds of inwardness in this context is a tempting way to disengage from the complexities of the sudden shifts of power in a period of crisis and transition, while also feeling connected through ideas of general boundary-crossing culture. It is noticeable, for instance, that Zaki al-Arsuzi, Michel Aflaq, and Constantine

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[110] *Shiᶜr* 19 (Spring 1961), 91.
[111] By this term Barut means the class of well-educated petite bourgeois minoritarian elites that coalesced around Antun Saᶜada in the hope of creating a secular liberationist national movement that would render their sectarian identities irrelevant in a Sunni-Muslim dominated region.
[112] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 93.
[113] Ibid.,15. For an account of Mihyar's as a figure for the modernists' institutionalization of autonomy see Creswell, *Tradition and Transaltion*, 120-122. See also Creswell's explanation for the origins of the Tammuzi school. Ibid., 76-77.

Zurayq – some of the main intellectual figures associated with developing Pan-Arabism as a system of ideas – all gravitated in the 1950s, following decolonization, to various essentializing, culturist discourses of the Arab nation.[114] This came at the expense of negotiating the concrete and crucial questions of the nation within the state, namely, the monopoly of violence in state power, political and legal institutions, minorities and women's rights, political and civic freedoms. Stress was laid instead on concepts of the nation adapted from the high idealism of German philosophy, waxing romantically eloquent on the Arab "national spirit" with its "eternal message," or the genius of the Arabic language as sufficient condition for Arab unity. The implication was that the revolutionary mission was confined to the agents of culture in the nation, i.e., the Europeanized intellectual class, to the exclusion of common Arabs who were the object of this liberationist mission and in dire need of that intellectual work yet were hardly visible in it as actual agents with complex histories. Away from their desks, however, these elites were gradually disinherited from the small domain of power they presided over in the era of national struggle against colonial rule. The effects of isolation are difficult to discern in discursive presentation of ideas, but for literary fictions it is impossible to entirely bypass the historically formed psyche of their creator.

(4) Poetically, the group promoted the idea of the poem as an esthetic totality of structural integrity independent of historical circumstance, and by doing so went against the neo-classicists and romantics of the previous poetic generation. After the failure of Sa^{c}ada's coup and the 1948 debacle, the political prospects of Great Syria crashed. Romantic idealism would no longer do, and the deep sense of crisis and uncertain transition demanded a tough and well-made artistic object. This entailed more than a formal shift, for both forms and contents needed to be decreated

[114] On this see the informative articles of Shams al-Din al-Kaylani in *al-Thaqafa al-^{c}Arabiyya fi al-Qarn al-^{c}Ishrin* (259-282), especially the first pages of his article on al-Arsuzi (268-270) and the introduction to Zurayq's post-independence thinking (274-275).

and reorganized. The limits of poetry came under question. The newly introduced genre of *qasidat al-nathr* [the prose poem] was put in place to construct new models for experience:

> the acceptance of *qasidat al-nathr* on the basis of acceptance of whatever shape the poet's experience prescribes was tied to the formation of a new mode of consciousness with respect to life, world, and things. Not only the notion of the single poem would be re-examined, but poetry as such […]. [This new mode of consciousness] would not view modernity as a form of expression, but as a shape of existence. From here, the embrace of *qasidat al-nathr* was tied to the belief of the *Shi*ᶜ*r* movement's elite in artistic liberty and freedoms of thought in the most extreme.[115]

(5) By common consensus, the movement came up against a blocked horizon by the mid-1960s[116] and its metaphysical idiom was enervated by the sense of disconnect from common Arab concerns. The aggressive ideology of modernism paid the price for its denial of material historicity and was weakened by its overextended reach into civilizational areas. The Tammuzi symbols became an idealistic rhetoric of defeated intellectuals who could not live up to its promise of renewal due to alienation from politics and the masses. *Shi*ᶜ*r*'s senior editor Yusuf al-Khal described this blockage as a collision with "the wall of language," meaning the split between spoken and written Arabic. Barut decisively interprets al-Khal's statements as an admission of withdrawal from the willful negation of historicity. It is a recognition of disillusionment with the magazine's creed:

> The modernist project will eventually come up against its own illusions; its agents plunged into battles which they did not consider their own; they tackled problems which they did not consider their own. In other words, the "free flight" of this project, its "transcendence and transgression" of reality, will crash against the historicity of that very same reality, and against its own contradictions.[117]

Barut's account is a strong one and leaves little room for argument. Yet, there are several points worth stressing. First of all, the struggle to wrest away from romanticism the liberal conception of the poem needed a more noble justification than the poetic one. The lofty civilizational

[115] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 211.
[116] Ibid., 238.
[117] Ibid., 53.

superstructure provided the motivation and productive energy to laboriously test on the ground what the construction of esthetic totalities might require in Arabic. Second, the actual effort of carrying out this transformation was performed through what Robyn Creswell calls a "modernism in translation."[118]

The Beiruti movement, claims Creswell, "distinguished itself by its aesthetic, ideological and institutional coherence and by the fact that it placed the questions of modernism and modernity […] at the heart of its program."[119] The emphasis in Creswell's study falls on the ways in which the movement authorizes itself by an internationalizing project that at the same time stakes a claim to poetic autonomy. Creswell likewise connects this attempt at "worlding" Arabic poetry to Antun Sa^{c}ada's program of re-making Syrian literature as world literature through the potency of Near Eastern myths. The movement tries to measure up to (what was in their minds) the best of world poetry at a time when the prospect of a national avenue to world literature – through collective nation-building – seemed remote or even lost. Creswell, by contrast, studies their modernism comparatively as constituted to a critical degree by a wide repertoire of translational practices that creatively select and reshape materials from Arab literary patrimony and modern foreign poetries. The genre of *qasidat al-nathr* – their institutional stamp, so to speak – is essentially a "translated genre" whose theorizing relies heavily on a book by the French literary critic Suzanne Bernard and whose realizations claim a dignified poetic lineage from Baudelaire to Saint-John Perse and Antonin Artaud.[120] Their acts of translation propose "a bid for de-provincialization,"[121] opening up the text to an admixture of materials that significantly redefines what qualifies as poetry in Arabic. The bid for autonomy is

[118] I have consistently cited from Creswell's 2012 dissertation. In the meantime, the thesis has been made into a book: Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings* (Princeton, 2018).
[119] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 7.
[120] Ibid., 178-179.
[121] Ibid., 179.

understandably accompanied by a willful repression of the high value conferred on political commitment in Arab letters of the time. Creswell also throws light on the ways in which repressed politics re-surface in the texts as "the unruly forces that frequently break through the poems' formal self-sufficiency."[122] In spite of the presumptions to rise above history, the poems are branded with the fire of their historical time. It is very interesting that this connection needs to be so painstakingly salvaged from beyond the veils of their hermeticism.

My analysis in the following chapter will have little to add to these two comprehensive accounts. The thesis, in general, concerns itself with the creative responses deviating from *Shi*^{c}*r*'s visionary idiom. Yet, the pervasiveness of the modernists' afterlife within the genres they helped generate leads me to re-think the sources of their project's strength. After the perfumes of revolt dissipated, the prose poem stood firm as a testament of art. The project's centrifugal force ought to be measured on the scale of local poetic production rather than by the overreaching ambitions to join the ranks of world literature or redeem collective Arab existence with figures of great sacrifice. Barut says as much in a reserved tone before turning to the project's falling prey to its own free-floating illusions.[123] They managed to push the cargo-laden wagon of poetry a few steps farther and that is no minor achievement.

I have come to think of this achievement as enshrining, against the grain of their own theories and poetic tones, a new poetic mainstream that accommodates differences of style and attitude. In itself, this does not necessarily have any great bearing on the entirety of life they aspired to transform, yet it did make a small difference to life around them. By institutionalizing a neutral sphere of poetic vocation with a liberal agenda, they made life a little richer, opening up possibilities to verbal artists of modern sensibility in need of institutional support. Once the life

[122] Ibid., 47.
[123] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-*$^{\jmath}$*Ula,* 52.

of the actual magazine ended, the poems, theories, and translations stood as a standard to be transcended and transgressed, even by the very same poets, and nurtured creativity. Taking the elitist disconnect of their poems at face value, the foundational professionalist aspect nonetheless introduces a real addition to social life. In this respect, one formulation from Creswell's book especially caught my eye:

> Arabic modernism originates and participates in a complex historical situation, one in which the repression of the political – a repression that motivates a number of "returns" – should be seen as one move in broader war of position. The stakes of this war go well beyond the question of autonomy. Instead, they involve the definition of poetry itself, its parameters, protocols, and relation to the collective life of its readers.[124]

To see the modernist movement in terms of a Gramscian "war of position" casts it in the image of a new potential "hegemony" in the original Gramscian sense of the term, which is much less sinister than its popular uses. In Gramsci's theoretical construct, the idea of hegemony, though not fully worked out, seems to be a kind of compromised dominance that must consider diverse interests and tendencies to sustain its equilibrium and will ultimately sacrifice some of its principles to maintain its dominance.[125] Creating a new dominance in the poetic field (which in turn had to be formed in relation to older hegemonies and did not start from scratch), as the *Shi^{c}r* group had done, does not necessarily paralyze it, but in effect pluralizes poetic practice by its centripetal power of attraction. Hegemony in modern Arabic is *haymanah*, and according to classical lexicographers, the verb *haymana* is etymologically related to both *ammana* (to ensure, secure, guarantee) and *āmana* (to believe, give assent [Amen] to). This etymology stems from the Quran, where *mu$^{\supset}$min* and *muhaymin* are juxtaposed as nearly synonymous attributes of God (*al-Hashr*, 23). It nicely reflects the bargain-like nature of

[124] Ibid., 41.
[125] Walzer, *Paradox of Liberation*, 124-125. On this topic see the comprehensive book chapter by Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in: *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, 168-204. Mouffe claims that the idea of hegemony is Gramsci's most important contribution to Marxist theory. In Gramscian language, Shi^{c}r became aware that their own interests must become "universal" and overlap with the interests of other literary groups because they articulate modern Arab consciousness in a more adequate way. See Mouffe, 180-181.

hegemony. Once assent is given, what is ensured is, first and foremost, the continuity of the hegemony itself, though probably changed by what it agrees to incorporate. And yet presumably the deal also guarantees the continuity in difference of those who assent and at least part of what differentiates them. Hegemony, in this understanding, is not entirely assimilative and, if sufficiently challenged, can meet its margins half-way.

In this chapter, I zoom in on three poets, all Syrians, who were in some sense affiliated with the magazine yet did not entirely subscribe to its dominant modes. My major example – the work of Syrian poet Muhammad al-Maghut – I save for the next chapter. The complex process of negotiation and compromise by which poets attached to older or divergent literary values adjust themselves to the new "hegemon" is ultimately a generative process that prompts fresh poetic possibilities to be actualized. With each poet, negotiation and compromise take a different shape, even if, as in one case, the hegemon is rejected wholesale. Once an adjustment is genuinely accomplished, the whole to which the poems relate is changed by the new inclusion. Most of the poets I deal with in my next chapters are not part of the modernist moment of aggressive internationalization yet reaped its benefits in both direct and indirect ways. They either come after the movement had run its course, or have serious scruples about its rejectionist cosmopolitanism. But upon entering into the field of modern poetry in Arabic, they must relate to its modes of transmission, revised canons and poetic protocols. And when they do, the movement is enriched. Arabic modernism would be much poorer had it been only expressed in the ironic refinements and exilic melancholy of Adonis or in the arcane schisms of Unsi al-Hajj.

Probably the most self-possessed poetic mind in the new dominance, Adonis vehemently repudiated his Syrian past. His imprisonment on political grounds seems to have irreversibly

alienated him from Damascus and the values it represented. Adonis' stance had been that of defiant non-commitment to a veritably dogmatic degree:

> Dialogue
>
> Who are you? Who do you choose Mihyar?
> Wherever you went, to God or the Devil,
> One abyss comes, another goes,
> Ant the world is a choice."
>
> - "I'll choose neither,
> Both are walls
> Both shutter my eyes.
> Why would I replace one wall for another
> When my sorrow belongs
> To the one who brings light,
> The sorrow of having known everything."[126]

The question "Who are you," which echoes throughout Adonis' *Aghani Mihyar*, and to which the answer is ceaselessly deferred,[127] is pregnant with social meaning in a place where names immobilize people's identity within a sect, a clan, a *nisba* (family belonging). The refusal to answer directly thus crystallizes the deeply ironic, indeed liberating, defiance of a poetically elusive mind against the backdrop of its milieu. Staying in infinitely possible mutability and refraining from the limits of choice is as deeply apolitical as a poetic statement goes. It expresses a yearning for what Barut describes as a national-bourgeois mentality: amebic multiplication, proliferation by self-rejection, and permanent mobility without the obstructions and responsibility of political power. Mihyar has been described as many things, but he could well be a common middle-class man of self-undermining plurality by self-division. Adonis' fanciful idealistic projection represents a dream of liberalism in an identity-stiff social environment.[128]

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[126] Trans. Khaled Mattawa in *Adonis: Selected Poems* (Yale University Press, 2010), 37.
[127] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 148-149.
[128] Creswell hints at this interpretation and connects it to the maritime figures in the poems: "there is more than a whiff of the Phoenician entrepreneur in Mihyar's restless seafaring, but if he is to be credited as an allegorical figure of the Lebanese bourgeoisie, it must be in an aspirant rather than terminal form." Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 120. My claim is that an "aspirant bourgeois subjectivity" can be detected in the figurative DNA of Mihyar, irrespective of the seafaring theme.

The Syrian poet Muhammad al-Maghut, who performs a half-hearted participation in the magazine's circle and whose poetic experience was consecrated by the movement, was by contrast more organically connected to values of Arab authenticity and social struggle lodged in his Syrian micro-culture. He was not a *nāqil* [translator-transmitter] on the scale of Adonis since he was averse to theorizing and had little command of any language but Arabic. Yet the liberal mission in Beirut afforded him a free space that proved consequential for his poetic growth. The opener of *Sadness in the Moonlight*, al-Maghut's 1959 debut collection, appeals to an anthropomorphized Beirut to embrace the poet as substitute father after mother-Damascus drove him out:

> I think it is from the homeland
> The cloud approaching like messianic eyes
> I think it comes from Damascus
> This unibrowed girl
> The eyes, more limpid
> Than blue flames between ships.
> O Sadness, my long and frizzy sword
> Eight months
> And the sidewalk carrying its fair-skinned child
> Asks about a rose or a prisoner
> About a ship and a cloud from the homeland
> Eight months
> Free words inflame me like the plague
> I have no woman and no creed
> No café and no winter
> Clasp me tightly, Lebanon
> I love you more than tobacco and parks
> More than a soldier with naked thighs
> Lighting up a cigarette between ruins
> Millions of bloody years
> Stand lowly before the shopfronts
> Like sad armies squatting on the ground
> Eight months […][129]

The poem is entitled "The Eagle's Funeral" and imagines displacement in Beirut as wing-clipping, despite the image of the city as a cosmopolitan haven. This suggests that al-Maghut's

[129] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar* [Sadness in the Moonlight, 1959], 9-10.

sources of authority are seen as rooted not in the amorphous international space of modernist poetry but in a particular web of relations for which Damascus is representative. Not that this relationship is not troubled or ambivalent – Damascus figuring as both backward and sensual, beautiful and destructive – and yet it is the central locus of meaning and concern. And while the Beiruti modernists turned away from the Syrian present and went time-traveling to the ancient Canaanite and Phoenician past, or envisioned a future clean slate for Arab civilization, al-Maghut cannot get over the local pain of an eight-month long separation from his beloved Damascus.

Yet Beirut is capacious enough to enable the sadness of separation to be expressed in al-Maghut's peculiar way, which even if not properly modernist, is unconventional and offensive to traditional tastes. Not only is this prose poem tone-deaf to classical meters, but the imagery – especially prominent in simile structures – is by common standards off-putting: the unibrowed girl, the frizzy sword evocative of male genitalia, and the soldier's naked thighs. Even if al-Maghut does not fashion himself as a disciple of Western poetry, all that was entailed in the self-fashioning of the new Beiruti elite was able to accommodate the strangeness for which the beloved *waṭan* spat him out. And, as the next chapter will show, the uneven syntax of his poetic sentence cannot but emerge in relation to the language of poetic translation in Beirut and the newly authorized deviations from meter, rhyme, and tone.

On the rhetorical level, al-Maghut accepts the new freedoms reluctantly, succumbs to them as if before a plague. Yet nowhere else would his chaotic long-form poems be greeted with interest and respect. The image of Syria projected through his poems – mercurial and ferociously back-stabbing – suggests that it was not the place for such poetry to be accepted. The elasticity of the new movement proved much more accommodating and its professional impartiality was felt

as enabling. Although its ideological formation was innately restrictive and to some degree opposed to what al-Maghut's poetry stood for, the *Shiᶜr* movement genuinely welcomed experiments, encouraged difference of individual expression, and believed that the poetic trade at large would benefit from diversity. In an interview, al-Maghut retrospectively speaks of the magazine not in terms of laying solid institutional foundations but as a temporary habitation for wayfarers: "In the fifties we were a bunch of barefoot gypsies […] with poems instead of tents, and Yusuf al-Khal came and built a tent for us."[130]

While surveying the heated polemic between *Shiᶜr* and its twin and archrival, the Pan-Arab *Al-Adab*, Barut mentions in passing that "*Shiᶜr* provided in practice a wide liberal margin, and published for a versatile array of poets with contradictory ideological and political belongings."[131] Even as *Shiᶜr* and *al-Adab* are discussed by Barut as complimentary projects standing on a common base of consciousness expressing the interests of an "existentialist-national petite bourgeois elite,"[132] this remark seems to set *Shiᶜr* apart. In the well-known skirmishes between the rival parties, the *Shiᶜr* poets were charged with assailing the Arabo-Islamic patrimony, with covert loyalty to Anton Saᶜada's heresies, with political treason and collaboration with Western invasions of the Arab world.[133] The tones of this debate, especially from *Al-Adab*'s side, ran high and members of the Shiᶜr group were loath to stoop to that level of churlishness from the bastions of their subtlety. Nonetheless, they defended their project by insisting that their idea of culture could not be reduced to its ethno-religious and political background; their strength resided in their inclusiveness, pluralism and tolerance for divergent

[130] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 49.
[131] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 37.
[132] This clumsy appellation signifies that the *Shiᶜr* intellectuals, like their rivals in *al-Adab*, adopted existentialism as a liberationist humanist dogma to counter the Arab Communists who had their Marxist dogmatic apparatus in place. The virulent political contests were often replayed in altered forms in the raucous literary magazine culture of the Arab 1950s. On the rich intellectual scene debating existentialism in the Arab world see Yoav Di-Capua's *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).
[133] For the details of this argument in brief see Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 56-61 and Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 35-44. I'm relating to the argument as it is described in these two sources.

individual styles and preferences. In a climate of virulent political passions, they would persistently cling to their broad margin of liberalism, claiming to transcend the crudeness of thinly conceived ideologies. Doubtless a defensively elitist escape strategy, this was nevertheless a very powerful response to the massive external pressures to be "political" in various reductive senses of that word.

Al-Maghut's are not the only forms of negotiation and compromise between the worldly modernist ideal and more localized attachments. My goal in this chapter is thus not to shed light on the modernist movement per say but to walk along its margins to assess the reach of its hegemonic power. The main reason for doing so is that by dubbing the movement and its dominant genres the ascendant poetic mainstream, a clearer view is gained of the dilemmas poets face when deciding to assent to, or decline, its dominance. The conditions by which they do so are especially interesting for me, as my focus lies on modern poetry in Syria, where the cultural field is frayed with contenting ideals of moral earnestness, deference before popular sentiment, and the socio-political utility of art. Indeed, by an overstated claim to transcendence and transgression, some of the *Shi*^{c}*r* poets had virtually wished away this problem or did not mind the losses involved in severing the warm connections with their milieu. Those Syrian poets who did acknowledge particular attachments are more qualified to be considered as "organic intellectuals" in the Gramscian sense of standing close to ordinary people of their community, working from within its hegemonic ideas and inching away to give specialized guidance.[134] Importantly, these "connected" poets joined as fellow-travelers or played minor roles. Before coming to the major figure of al-Maghut in the next chapter, I will follow in detail the

[134] On this concept see Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.), *An Anthology of Western Marxism* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 113-119. See also good discussion in Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 90-92.

trajectories of three Syrians listed in order of their relative proximity to the movement's center: Nadhir al-ᶜAzma, Saniya Salih, and Kamal Kheir Beik.

But before I do so, let me pause to clarify why the consolidation of a poetic hegemony or a new mainstream matter. This argument is partly continuous with Dounia Badini's sociological study of the literary institutions of *Shiᶜr*'s modernism in Beirut as the creation of a "*champ littéraire.*"[135] The construction of models for depoliticized poetic engagements, as well as the poetic templates for inward subjectivity, was, as Badini argues, energized by the professionalization of the field.[136] But As Robyn Creswell has pointed out, Badini has little to say about the texts themselves.[137] I set the sociological emphasis aside to highlight the productive tensions that its hegemony introduced into emerging poetic texts that would have otherwise conformed to the older hegemonies or would have been altogether suppressed. I thus look to the margins of the movement for a more down-to-earth assessment of its ability to pluralize poetic production.

The process set in motion by the translations, theories and original works of *Shiᶜr* magazine cannot be shrugged off as an affair of snobby elites, though their patrician disdain for common Arab life is indisputable. What was at stake was developing the cognitive equipment necessary to deal with the complex divisions of modern Arab consciousness. And in the age of popular mobilization, this consciousness was no longer the sole privilege of elites. In this respect, the modernists' self-description of their project is genuine. The Iraqi poet Sargon Boulus counterintuitively asserts that the project was of popular import:

> To accuse the Arabic prose poem of elitism is a gross mistake because it is very much a popular matter. The Arabic prose poem can never be elitist because it wants to

[135] Dounia Badini, *La Revue Shiᶜr: Poésie et la modernité poétique arabe, Beyrouth* (Paris: Sindbad/Actes Sud, 2009).
[136] Badini, *La Revue Shiᶜr*, 90.
[137] See Creswell's review of Badini's book in *JAL* 2013 44(1), 103-107.

> exhaustively discover everything worth finding in Arabic prose and poetry so that it may, in the end, compose *al-qaṣīda al-jāmiᶜa*, the all-inclusive poem. It strives to be the poem of the future because it absorbs all the possible types of poetics, including possibilities that would never have occurred to the prosodic poem. It is the poem of Arab consciousness of modernity.[138]

The adjective *jāmiᶜ* suggests that this poem groups together its readers and writers in ritualistic reverence as in a great mosque and, at the same time, that it is a secular, universal and educational institution as universities are. The prose poem, he says in the same interview, has in actuality prevailed in this war of position, yet its victory is glossed over by the official scribes of Arab poetry criticism. His formulation ties together the hegemonic aspirations of the new poem with its popular appeal. For poetry as an autonomous dynamic process attuned to historical change, the absorptive quality goes well beyond the original ideological mindset with which the Beiruti movement operated. *Shiᶜr* aimed to break the naturalized bonds between poetic *nabra* (tone of voice, accent) and *minbar* (pulpit), between poetry and a kind of collectivist stadium-filling ritual, an Arab-style televangelism. Though they were by no means the first poets to make such attempts, the extremity and consolidated force of their attack is unprecedented. This stands at the heart of their resistance to *ṭarab*,[139] the epitome of authentically Arab esthetic rapture. It is the over-connectedness of this rapture, the utter uncritical receptivity thought to be induced by the *muṭribīn* that they reject for its potential mind-numbing effects.

For these reasons, their "rhetoric of interiority"[140] was stylized as iconoclastic and is paradoxically expressed in the dramatic rather than the lyric mode. The deeper claim folded within this resistance is that the Arab masses make themselves susceptible to the suggestive power of shallow political and pseudo-pious slogans that are modelled on the authority of these

[138] This is quoted from a 1997 interview with Boulus published in the Abu Dhabi-based *al-Ittihad* newspaper. It was collected in a recent volume of interviews: Bulus, *Safartu Mulahiqan Khayalati* (Beirut: al-Jamal, 2016), 139.
[139] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 175.
[140] Creswell adds this term to the distinguishing features of their prose poem. See Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 117, 180 (n. 334).

venerated styles. The attack on classical splendor was envisioned to take on magnified significance in a context where transnational Pan-Arab and Islamic discourses provide the strongest languages of legitimacy. The individual deviation from these styles is the kernel of their liberationist program, a liberation of the mind. What came to replace these collective horizons was a projected global one, an ideal of universal citizenship through literature, yet with little local credentials to its prospects. Indeed, the melancholic undertow of alienated lyric can be interpreted as a byproduct of the resignation from achieving state normalcy.[141] Excluded from belonging to the society of free nations, to a normal state on equal standing with other such states, these poets settle for the future uncertain compensation of poetic adventure that may or may not enlist them in world literature.

The irony is that the heavy construction required to facilitate the realism of Arabic poetry was begun and at least partially performed by this group of allegedly disengaged poets. Without their misplaced zeal for autonomy, the submerged currents of militancy running beneath the surface of esthetic refinement, even the small achievements of their so-called failure would have been precluded. Without the massive influx of foreign poetry in translation, without their criticism and original experiments, poets who wanted to connect would have had to resort to either the parochial local color of colloquial poetry or the strident monotony and anachronistic political performances of the qasida. The modern element in modern Arabic poetry was not just about joining an internationally acclaimed lingua franca of poetry, even if that was the declared purpose of the first wave modernists. Over time, these global horizons spurred more and more interesting local production. It ended up serving various critical functions on local levels whose

[141] see Creswell's reading of the group's "melancholy modernism" as a productive dissatisfaction stemming from a sense of political defeat, contributing to the newness of the poems and driving their manners of archiving of tradition. Ibid., 155, 240, 277-280.

agents were thirsty for new ways of examining, understanding, and criticizing their closest surroundings, the Arab individual and the unlimited web of relations in which he\she is set.

* * *

The social content of poetry is objectively irrefutable because it deals in verbal meanings that cannot be individually determined. Language as medium guarantees that no poetry will ever be fully individualized but, conversely, it will never fully be 'dehumanized', hermetic or non-representational as well. When questions of strict form, meter, and rhyme recede to the background, the distilling of a poetic voice can get increasingly involved in raiding other common discourses, purging them and paring them down. Thus, the question of collaboration with the social, non-poetic references of language is a real one and attitudes genuinely differ here. Some poets wish to retain the silk gloves with which to handle language – striving for various forms of "absolute" poetry – while others try to get their hands dirty with low-mimetic materials and make poetic use of common corrupted words: clichés, the vernacular, referential qualities of everyday objects. But for this scaling-down towards the low-mimetic to happen, poetic language must first come under question, dismantled and re-assembled in the first place. This task was performed with artful determination by Adonis, Yusuf al-Khal, and Unsi al-Hajj. It ultimately allowed the fruitful polarization between empirical and poetic selves to engender new forms of expression. Muhammad al-Maghut dramatizes this inner quarrel as generative for his moral grappling with the function of poetry under extreme social and political duress:

> I'm boisterous, my dear silky man
> A prisoner with no lifeboat and no star,
> Lonely and with dim-witted eyes
> But I'm sad, because my poems all sound alike,
> In that wounded tune that doesn't change
> I want to flutter around, to soar high
> Like a darkly frowning prince
> Who crushes fields and humanity.[142]

[142] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 38.

Whoever this poetic 'I' may be, he is imagined to be situated in a field of pressing forces that attempt to repress his wish to speak poetically. The first such force is an internal one, an aesthetic conscience referred to as the silky man, representing the tradition of publicly sanctioned poetic speech in Arabic. The sources of this silkiness hark back to the qasida with its typical decorative manners and characteristic moods, most notably the elegy. Yet, the silky man as al-Maghut's anti-self is applied to a broader category than poetic style. It possesses a literary as well as non-literary reality: the fluffy rhetoric covering up life lived as if in prison, the false cosmopolitanism, ideological as well as poetical, that takes no account of the actualities of the local present. These forces are not external to him because of his identity as a writer; they mire him in fierce inner struggles of self-expression. The ideal of the Arab poet forces upon him an unrealizable wish to become a princely sovereign that flutters above these debasing struggles, but all he comes up with is a monotonous, noisy expression of sadness, an undignified one in comparison to the paradigmatic "weeping on the ruins," since it is not followed by heroic deeds or an elevated courtly status.

Every poet may have an inner creative and sensual Leopold Bloom who may be the better guide to esthetics and morality than the Stephen Dedaluses of refined artistic sensibility. To be in tune with that common element is to be in some sense attuned to historical flux. And this historical consciousness may add dimensions to the poem. For the sake of simplicity, this tension is posited as a binary (empirical-poetic) and a hierarchy (upper-lower), but true poetic engagement knows neither binaries nor hierarchies: the empirical self is as potentially multiple as the various social roles in a given society, and the artistic self is as potentially versatile as the available repertoire of literary and non-literary genres and forms in the languages it knows. The poem, we may imagine, draws an energetically concentrated circle (or any other geometric form

at its disposal) around a segment in which some of these multiple lines of identity crisscross and intersect. Which lines, what falls in the center, and how the circle is drawn is partially determined by contingencies. But by engaging thus, the poem may also generate a new and compelling model for identity that transcends these contingencies, an identity made of the old social materials otherwise arranged.

It is the basic assumption of Michael Hamburger's theory of modern poetry that these poles exist within each and every modern poet worth their salt. Poetic selves that are esthetically concerned with nothing but perfection grow stilted and boring. The introduction of tension between the empirical and poetic selves, he claims, sets in motion the historical dialectical process of modern poetry. Sustaining this tension guarantees its perpetual modernity in ever-changing reiterations: "every modern poet worth reading contains an anti-poet, just as every anti-poet worth reading contains a Romantic-Symbolist poet. The wider and more strongly charged the field of tension between them, the greater a poet's potentialities of achievement and progression."[143] Since the time of Baudelaire, he elsewhere maintains, "every movement towards pure, absolute autotelic or hermetic art arose from a quarrel with 'things as they are', from a polar tension, such as Baudelaire's, between the world of 'spleen' and 'ideal' […] from Baudelaire onwards, modern poetry has vacillated between collaboration with the *Zeitgeist* and defiance of it. Collaboration meant 'low mimesis' and irony, the realism […] of Baudelaire himself in lines like *Eldorado banal de tous le vieux garçons* [trite Eldorado of every old bachelor's dreams]."[144]

The pole of a secular estheticist priesthood in Arabic poetry did not come to full articulation until *Shi*^{c}*r*'s reform. The constant concern with "the person" or "man" is an esthetic

[143] Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 278.
[144] Ibid., 265.

concern that generates the reality of esthetically-minded dignity in detachment.[145] And the revolt in the name of earthly reality and "connectedness" soon followed. The process of modern poetry was thus under way. Whatever arguments al-Maghut and others might have had with the rest of the *Shi^{c}r* poets, they owe the tension implicit in collaboration with the Zeitgeist to the large-scale project of transmission, translation and original composition.

How was this task carried out? Before the advent of the modernist movement, much of the language-stuff that made the modern standard modern – language of newspapers and radio broadcasts with Europeanized simplified syntax, novelistic prose and imports from colloquial dialects and foreign languages – was still barred from the sanctified domain of poetry. This applies to diction and figurative language, sentence structure, and rhythm. Like the political and ideological movements of their time, the *Shi^{c}r* poets thought big: drawing momentum from the formal innovations of Iraqi poets in the late 40s, they launched a massive effort against poetic *fakhāma* (splendor, stateliness), purging and simplifying poetic lexicons to establish new ways of expression. Kamal Kheir Beik describes this project in great detail, addressing many facets of their innovation and giving especial attention to the question of structure, rhythm and meter. He defines the move towards simplification as a set of techniques developed to draw poetic language nearer to non-literary, prosaic, or foreignized terrains of *fusha*, literary Arabic. These categories are thus grouped by Kheir Beik under three headings,[146] which I will name the three T's: *tarjama* (translation), *tanthīr* (prosification), and *ta^{c}mīm* (vernacularization).

In terms of lexicon, dead archaic words, words that rung of high rhetoric or romantic floweriness, were dispensed with. In a range of close synonyms, the simpler alternative was

[145] On the intellectual origins of the magazine's heroic conception of the person see: Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 77-96. In locating these sources in ideas taken over from Christian Humanism, Creswell says that for Yusuf al-Khal "the poet achieves greatness not by extinguishing his personality but by identifying it solely with the activity of literary creation, an activity he undertakes in "a place apart" from all other activities (90)."

[146] Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 162-169.

usually preferred. It was for the first time possible for a poet to opt for a standard cliché or a base profanity. New or semi-new coinages came in: through circulation in newspapers and other prose usages, Arabized forms of foreign words and new foreign words altogether in transliteration were admitted. Neglected words in the classical dictionaries were restored because of their preservation in dialect. Certain abstract words were suddenly charged with metaphysical, existentialist content. Though the classical foot still loomed large for some of the magazine's practitioners, poetic sentence structures were deeply affected by the new culture of translation and the theories of the prose poem legitimizing non-metric, non-rhyming poems. At times, colloquial forms of expression found their way into the poems. Barut argues that this purged idiom was embedded in patterns of semantic obscurity whose overall tone reflects a social attitude: an aversion to categories of ordinary experience.[147] Three facets of the Shiᶜr texts may be used as examples for this attitude: sentence structure, imagery and norms of translation.

Sentence structure: Kheir Beik notes that the main tension in the texts produced by the *Shiᶜr* group is between the radical simplification of poetic language and its ennobling rarefaction through different modes of obscurity. Though different poets display hybrid realizations of this tension, the strong political, social and esthetic idea of a new start, a creative "generation" (*tawlīd*) *ex nihilo*, gave rise, among some of them, to a schismatic idiom of violation – not only against moral codes and traditions – but against the structures of the Arabic language itself. The antagonism between complicated individuals and their backward society thus finds its correlation in setting the single word against the phrase and the sentence.[148] The predominance of the single word is the departure point for new stanzaic structures that will liberate it from the arbitrary rule of the syntactic wholeness of the classical metric line and subordinate it the organic whole of the

[147] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 215-216.
[148] Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 132-133.

poem: the single word is complemented by the one, unified poem, and by extension, the one unlimited subject. This enhances the effectivity of using words that injure the proprieties of classical decorum. In addition, new formal structures were developed to facilitate charging concepts with new existential meanings imported from Western thought: *al-ᶜabath* (absurd), *al-farāgh* (nothingness), *al-ḍiyāʾ* (lostness) and more. These words were rarely set, however, in concrete circumstances and were intended to be understood in abstract networks of self-reference outside ordinary relations.

Under the influence of Surrealist and Dadaist experimental strategies, the rules of Arabic grammar came under attack, most notably in the work of the Lebanese poet Unsi al-Hajj (1937-2014). In less extreme cases, the main casualty of the new idiom in *Shiᶜr* magazine was the verb. Kheir Beik conducts a numerical comparison between neo-classical poems and those of the *Shiᶜr* poets and finds that the number of verbs is overwhelmingly lower in the latter. In Adonis' "al-Jurh [The Wound]," for example, one single verb is repeated twice over the course of the first ten-line segment of the poem composed of thirty-four words.[149] The short nominal sentence (*jumla ismiyya*), which began to come to prominence with the Iraqi *tafᶜīla* poets of the late 1940s, becomes the signifying marker of the new movement. Its prevalence leads to further expressive possibilities such as the partial sentence, where an incomplete sentence segment is governed by a remote verb, or the "chaotic sentence" (*jumla fawḍawiyya*) which combines fragments of sentences. This latter aspect was subject to the harsh critique of Nazik al-Malaʾika, who considered these truncated syntactic forms as an injury to the rule of the Arab ear.[150] To this we must add typographic elements such as the use of unstandardized and at times mystifying forms of punctuation and the appearance of sets of dots to indicate ellipses. In sum, these

[149] Ibid., 157.
[150] Al-Malaʾika, *Qadaya al-Shiᶜr al-Muᶜasir*, 291.

features signal that the poem aspires to develop a private idiom within literary language accessible solely to pundits of sufficient erudition. The qualities and purposes of these private languages differ and diverge – Adonis' language, for instance, suggests a relation to ineffable transcendence that justifies the cryptic inwardness of his references – but, on the whole, they share a belittling prejudice for their environment.

Imagery: As for the style of imagery, it is serious-minded, explicitly metaphorical and highly intellectualized. Kheir Beik points to the intricate webs of images as the main locus of difficulty separating these poets from their audience.[151] But perhaps 'image' is the wrong term; 'figure', with its connotation of a lean and clean mathematical abstraction, is more apt. Robyn Creswell describes Adonis' project in *Mihyar* as a dynamic sequence of tropical disfigurations of both Western mythical figures and figures form Arab classical tradition.[152] For a branch of international modernism (which they aspire to be), the stock of concrete images in the *Shi*^{c}*r* corpus is surprisingly low. For the sake of this argument, I propose a schematic distinction between image and metaphor: an image is a verbal construct that wishes to erase its verbality and become a window, a frame. It aims to be transparent and precise and is addressed to primal sensors – the visual memories clinging to the retina of the eye. A metaphor, in the primary sense of the *OED*, is a verbal construct conscious of its verbality and therefore belongs to a higher level of intellectual processing. Since metaphor involves transference between two analogous semantic fields, its dual structure is itself suggestive of linguistic and logical binaries. Metaphors may come off as cerebral especially when they yoke together extremely remote things to *disfigure* logical categories: they thus draw attention away from the figure to the arbitrariness of signifiers and the processes of signification. An effective image, on the other hand, transports

[151] Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 189.
[152] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 150-151.

signifieds, contents and meanings. Kheir Beik proposes that the abundant use made of metaphoric *inziyāḥ* (displacement, far-fetched metaphors) among the *Shiᶜr* poets be evaluated against the other polar end of the scale: the longstanding classical codes of conventional metaphors, familiar collocations, and common similes. If true, this point reflects the lonely predicament of these poets: the rejection of both the common relations of their contemporary audience and the imperial deposit of a widely cherished tradition.[153]

To interpret Adonis' far-fetched metaphoric opacities is to come up against the limits of interpretation. The poem "al-Faragh [Nothingness]," written immediately after Adonis' traumatic prison experience, opens thus: "the ruins of nothingness on my forehead / extend space and pour out earth / infuse darkness in my steps / and expand as a mirage in my eyes."[154] The sign on the forehead signifies a stigma, a mark of shame and accursedness. The speaker thus belongs to Cain's progeny, to outlaws and renegades. Yet he derives a broadening visionary power and a sense of pride and exultation from this curse. Mirage, ruins, funerary pouring of earth all suggest the social wasteland which, though left behind, informs his vision. But what if we insist on interpreting the allegorical figure "ruins of nothingness"? It seems to evade calling by name what is suggested by the poem's autograph: "Damascus, 1954." Barut names these esoteric figures "esthetically vague generalizations," euphemistic, artsy substitutes for saying 'my prison experience', or more broadly, 'modern Syria'. Adonis posits the figure of the intellectual who is everything these detestable ruins are not: absolute, infinity, "revolution" in that same poem.

Translation: The massive influx of poetry translations in *Shiᶜr* is agreed upon to be a lasting significant contribution to the literary field. Though translations from foreign poetries

[153] The rejection of classical tradition was not sweeping among all members. There was no unified front on this issue and Keir Beik distinguishes between poets indifferent to the *turāth* (Yusuf al-Khal) and others who want to save a cherished part of it (Adonis). See *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 78-84.

[154] According to Kheir Beik, this poem reflects a transition point in Adonis' early career from metric to non-metric form, combining strictly regulated lines with *tafᶜīla*. It first appeared in *al-Binaʾ* newspaper affiliated with the SSNP on July 8, 1959. Ibid., 354.

were common before *Shiᶜr*, the magazine greatly enlarged the corpus of translated poetry, and changed the strategies and norms of literary translation into Arabic. Until then, the strong ideal of the purity of Arabic dictated a culture of mostly affected Arabizations of foreign texts.[155] The iconoclastic tendencies in *Shᶜir* against this ideology brought about more literalizing approximations of syntax, form, and diction. This was one of the main channels through which new Arabic poetic idioms gained legitimacy. Yet the change in translation paradigms naturally creates a change in their blind-spots as well.

As a case study, I propose examining a selection of translations from Yeats' poetry in issue no. 11 of *Shiᶜr* (Summer 1959). These eighteen poems, alongside translations from Rimbaud, are presented as the centerpiece of the issue with the reservation that they are "incomplete attempts."[156] The collaborating translators – the Syrian poet-translator Fuʾad Rifqa and the Lebanese professor Naᶜim Nuᶜayma – offer an eclectic mix of standard fixtures from Yeats' oeuvre and short poems from his early periods of romance and Celticism.[157] The value of literal fidelity that guides them is limited to aspects of syntax and lexical items. This fidelity is at times comically overemphasized. In one textual instance from "Sailing to Byzantium" – *O Sages [..] come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre* – the translators choose to retain the Latin alphabet and the difficult English formulation of "perne in a gyre," thus rewriting Yeats in a Levantinian hybridized line, half Arabic, half English.[158] A reader with mildly good English and unfamiliar with Yeats' cosmic theories would still be at a loss to make sense of this image.[159]

[155] Ibid., 164.
[156] *Shiᶜr* 11 (Summer 1959), 5.
[157] Ibid., 58-78
[158] Ibid., 62
[159] For a parallel sensibility of translation see Creswell's discussion of Al-Khal's translation of Pound's first Canto in which the Latin is retained verbatim. Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 19.

Adaptive reconstruction of poetic form between literatures is notoriously difficult and the translators cannot be blamed for relinquishing formal compensation. But there is likely an ideological bias operating against such compensations, namely, *Shiᶜr*'s loyalty to an ideal of an absolutely liberated prose poem as a vehicle of modernism resisting external regulation. One need only flip to the next item in issue no. 11 of *Shiᶜr* – Adonis' manifesto on the nature of modern poetry[160] – to understand the ideas submerged within these versions. Yeats was a consummate formal artist, yet nothing of his formalism is suggested in the Arabic versions. The translators' choices, in fact, portray Yeats as a generic world-poet commenting on universal themes, and downplay his Irish background and the later phases of his career where he is pulled towards "colloquial uncertainty."[161] In the afterword to the translations, Yeats is interestingly described as progressing from Romanticism through mythology to mysticism (*taṣawwuf*), presumably alluding to his cosmic system in *A Vision*.[162] From this perspective, Yeats' poetic career culminates in self-orientalization, a flippant thesis corresponding to that of the magazine's pundits that the philosophical and literary achievements of the West are, essentially, of oriental, Mediterranean origin. The reconstruction of Yeats as a metaphysical Sufi poet reaches the innermost fabric of his Arabic renderings, as seen in the translation of the short poem "Deep Sworn Vow":

> Others because you did not keep
> That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
> Yet always when I look death in the face,
> When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
> Or when I grow excited with wine,
> Suddenly I meet your face.[163]

[160] *Shiᶜr* 11, 79-90
[161] Frank Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, 106.
[162] Ibid., 77
[163] Yeats, *The Poems*, 154.

The addressee in Yeats' original is Maud Gonne and, by metaphoric extension, the Irish nation she represents. Arabic is more gender-sensitive in pronouns than English, and the translators determine the gender of the addressee to be masculine.[164] This might be a simple mistake, or an accommodation to conventions of Arabic poems and popular songs addressed to men from women's perspective. If taken as a serious meditative poem, however, the shift in gender gives it a certain metaphysical inflection (God? The Ineffable?). "The heights of sleep" become *majāhil aḷ-fanāʾ* (the unknown regions of self-obliteration), a stately phrase with obvious Sufi connotations. Yeats is no longer profanely excited but experiences a dervish-like intoxicating self-oblivion (*ghayyaba* is the verb denoting the influence of wine).

The *Shiᶜr* elite's illusion of rising above the contingencies of their own historical situation – the real time of what Adonis in one poem calls "the age of flies" in their countries–[165] thus breeds blindness to historical and national specificities of other poems and poets from other poetries. Their mode of knowledge is consciously averse to realism and historical specificity: "from now I know to change periods / to mix up the ages / I know to re-create them / as a poem, a revolution, a dream," thus proclaims Mihyar. In their utopic idea of a universal idiom of modern poetry, everyone is made to fly freely, with no strings attached.

II Nadhir al-ᶜAzma's Syrian Catholicity

The Syrian poet, dramatist, and literary critic Nadhir al-ᶜAzma (b. 1930) was among the nucleus founders of *Shiᶜr* magazine, or at least so he says. According to al-ᶜAzma, the Lebanese poet

[164] *Shiᶜr* 11, 61.
[165] From the poem "Wahduhu al-Yaʾsu": "Goodbye / age of flies in my country / I will never again live under skies raining locusts and sands." Adunis, *Awraq fi al-Rih*, 161.

Khalil Hawi discussed with him the idea of a poetry magazine in the summer of 1957,[166] and soon after he was approached by Yusuf al-Khal. Al-ᶜAzma claims to have been the personal link between Yusuf al-Khal and Adonis, when the latter fled to Beirut after his release from al-Mezzeh prison. He also claims to have introduced al-Khal to Muhammad al-Maghut in his apartment in Brummana.[167] Though al-ᶜAzma likely exaggerates his role in hindsight or is deceived by the vagaries of memory, he was in fact a staple contributor in the magazine's first year, and a frequent one in its first four years, appearing in eleven of the first twenty issues.

Al-ᶜAzma's claim to fame rests on a poem titled "Ten Candles," which, by his own testimony again, modernized the principles of *tadwīr* and invented a form of *qaṣīda mudawwara*.[168] *Tadwīr* has been variously described by scholars of Arabic prosody, and there is a debate both about what it actually means and how old the phenomenon is. The classic definition sees it as synonymous with *idmāj* and *taḍmīn*, both designated as kinds of enjambments or poetic licenses to ignore the caesura between hemistichs. The term can thus mean a cutting-across of a single word's syllables from one *shaṭr* [half-verse] to the next and split by the middle stop. This kind of *tadwīr* happens often in classical poetry, and as such it is discussed by Nazik al-Malaʾika in her landmark book of criticism *Qadaya al-Shiᶜr al-Muᶜasir* [Problems in Contemporary Poetry, 1962]. She forbids poets practicing the modernized *tafᶜīla*

[166] Al-ᶜAzma, *Ana wa-l-Hadatha wa-Majallat Shiᶜr* [Modernism, *Shiᶜr* Magazine, and Myself] (Beirut: Dar Nilsun, 2011), 55. Al-ᶜAzma must have meant the summer of 1956. By 1957 the magazine was up and running and had three issues with al-ᶜAzma was among the participants. All throughout the book, al-ᶜAzma oddly dates its pre-publication beginnings to 1957. Either he misremembers or bends the truth to suit his claim to founder status. He divides the stages in the development of the magazine to the foundational stage (1957-1959) and the consolidation stage (1960-1964), where most of the members associated with it were actively contributing. This periodization is based mainly on the change of guard between poets like him and Khalil Hawi, who were to some degree Arab nationalists, and more radical experimentalists with no strong national agenda like Unsi al-Hajj and Shawqi Abu Shaqra. I am hesitant to determine whether this division holds true.

[167] "the Shiᶜr group was established in the summer of 1957 after a series of get-togethers between Yusuf al-Khal, Nadhir al-ᶜAzma and Khalil Hawi. Then came Adonis and I informed him of the magazine's project, and personally took him to al-Khal's house and introduced them. After this founding stage, Muhammad al-Maghut came to my house in Brummana and I introduced him to the movement." Ibid., 63.

[168] *Ana wa-l-Hadatha wa-Majallat Shiᶜr*, 76. Al-ᶜAzma also cites a scribbled note in Lebanese dialect (of which he produces an image) addressed to him by al-Khal and Adonis: "Yusuf and I came tonight especially to give you this short message: (1) 'Ten Candles' is the most beautiful poem you ever wrote in your life; (2) It is one of the most beautiful, most modernist poems among the beautiful modernist poems in Arabic; […] we waited for you. Come see us and we will give you a kiss for this lovely poem. Greetings, Adonis, Yusuf; P.S. You should have given us in *Shiᶜr* that poem, and not that cockamamie poem which…." Al-ᶜAzma, 79-80.

poem from using this device. Once the half-verse was established as the base-unit for the new poetic form – her semi-modernized genre of *shiᶜr ḥurr*[169] – it is no longer necessary, she claims.[170] In the poetic forms al-Malʾaika prescriptively lays out, *tadwīr* came to mean a splitting of the syllables in the base *tafᶜīla* between two lines, likewise a practice that her stern prosodic theory frowns upon. Al-ᶜAzma's "Ten Candles" seems to employ *tadwīr* in this sense:

> I was a boy
> Lifting up a dream like thorns with my palms
> Thorns drunk with my blood.
> I run barefoot on rocks
> My rags torn by the neighborhood cypress
> And bird nests that used to sing
> Sing no more.
>
> The hand of the cypress, out of solitude and sadness
> Tore up my face, my chest, and my shirt;
> O why did the startled beat of the birdsong rescue it?
> O how I remember my mother
> The day my little sister died
> Ten candles that would sing
> Another cypress now
> Saved by death from the birdsong of yearning.[171]

The poem seizes on the raw autobiographical material of Al-ᶜAzma's younger sister's death, transmuting it into an inclusive vision of peaceful intermixture in Damascus of the pre-independence years. The Tammuzi symbolism of death and resurrection is employed in a subtle personalized way, as the boy retrieves a sense of meaning to life by being given a dagger by an old sheikh. The Majdalanian dagger-handle is carved with a *shahāda*, the Muslim profession of faith, inscribed in beautiful Arabic calligraphy. The boy is struck by the thought that this precious beauty outweighs the thorny existence of hunger and infant mortality. Al-ᶜAzma presents a syncretistic world rooted in childhood experience and combining symbols from Mediterranean classical antiquity (the cypress as symbol of mourning), Islam (the *shahāda*), and

[169] Refered to interchangeably as the *tafᶜīla* poem.
[170] Al-Malaʾika, *Qadaya*, 157-160.
[171] Al-ᶜAzma, *Atfal fi al-Manfa* (1961), 8-9.

Christianity (the thorns, blood and candles). This world stands at the heart of his Tammuzi allegory of national revival, an allegory played out in concrete terms of his actual sister's death, and how her life is prematurely transformed into a living presence perpetually renewed in memory.[172]

The milestones in Nadhir al-ᶜAzma's biography bear striking similarities to Adonis and al-Maghut. Like them, he became a member of the SSNP in his youth, and like them was blacklisted and driven out of Syria to Lebanon after the 1955 attempt on ᶜAdnan al-Malki's life. His stay in Lebanon became precarious after the SSNP got embroiled in a failed coup attempt in 1961. But while al-Maghut, who was staying illegally in Lebanon, was forced to return to Syria and serve a second term in jail, al-ᶜAzma went to study abroad. He enrolled in a Master's program of literary studies at Portland State University and was to stay in the US for 15 years. After completing a PhD in comparative literature at the University of Indiana, he went back to teach in Portland. Deeply attached to Syria and to Arab cultural life, al-ᶜAzma moved closer to home after Hafiz al-Assad relaxed the political ban on SSNP members. For an intellectual with a dubious political past, repatriation was practically impossible. He thus first took a job at the University of Rabat and then worked in the University of Riyad for 18 years, visiting Damascus periodically.[173]

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[172] According to Al-ᶜAzma (*Ana wa-l-Hadatha*, 75-76), this poem was translated to English by George Tarabishi and sent in a bundle of translated poems to the editorial of the American *Poetry* magazine alongside poems by al-Khal, Adonis, and others. By his account, it was voted the best one and chosen to get published. I was not able to verify the reliability of this account or find the published poem. One curiosity is that al-ᶜAzma refers to American poet Robert Lowell as the addressee of this bundle and claims that Lowell was very impressed with the poem, whereas Lowell never served as editor-in-chief of the magazine. Interestingly, Lowell has a reference to ten candles in one of the versions of "Waking Early Sunday Morning" (from Lowell's *Near the Ocean*):
No, put old clothes on, and explore
the corners of the woodshed for
its dregs and dreck: tools with no handle,
ten candle-ends not worth a candle,
old lumber banished from the Temple,
damned by Paul's precept and example,
cast from the kingdom, banned in Israel,
the wordless sign, the tinkling cymbal. (Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 384)

[173] For biographical information see Syrian television program *Marafiʾ al-Dhakira* hosted by Talib Omran. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t6BQyYKcyQ Last visited August 27, 2018.

What sets al-ᶜAzma apart from the other members of *Shiᶜr* is that he does not belong to any of the religious minority groups of which the magazine's elite was composed. On the contrary, his family credentials were of the very high stock of the Sunni landed mercantile class of Damascus, and his great uncle Yusuf al-ᶜAzma (1883-1920), Minister of War in Syria's first Arab government, was a prominent national hero. Yusuf al-ᶜAzma laid the foundations for the Syrian army and led a company of soldiers in the Battle of Maysalun (July 1920) against the French colonial army, where he died by machine-gun fire.

Nadhir al-ᶜAzma's cultural orientation was strongly situated in the pre-state *dimashq al-shaᶜbiyya*, the common neighborhoods of Damascus on Mount Qasyun, and he was raised on stories of national pride running in the family. He attended the renowned Jawdat al-Hashimi high school in the late 1940s and was elected to join a youth theater group led by illustrious Syrian writers affiliated with the ascendant Pan-Arabism of the Baath party, among them the nationalist and literary thinker Mutaᶜ al-Safadi (1929-2016). In the early 1950s, when he came to the University of Damascus, he fell under the spell of Saᶜada's books for their broad civilizational vision. At that time, he also switched from writing drama to poetry. His early poems describe the old neighborhoods of Damascus with a sense of warm nostalgia. Syria and his proud Arab upbringing were never negated in the absolute manner by which the Alawite Adonis disowned Syria.

In *Modernism, Shiᶜr Magazine, and Myself* (a 2011 collection of interviews and short essays), al-ᶜAzma revisits the modernist moment to reevaluate its strengths and reassert his place in it. His central claim is that the movement's forces coalesced on the basis of *tanawwuᶜ* and *tafāᶜul*, plural-mindedness and creative interaction. Although as a group their poetics shared several salient traits, the spirit of *ibdāᶜ* (loosely translatable as 'romantic creativity') exceeded

any individual articulation of it by Adonis, al-Khal, or Khalida Sa^{c}id.[174] *Shi^{c}r* transformed Arabic poetry from a *jawhar,* a fixed essence, to a womb, *raḥm*, willing to receive and nourish the open process of multiple births and rebirths, and engage in a true dialectic of old and new.[175] The magazine is thus viewed in retrospect in a favorable light of inclusivity. It is viewed positively not solely for the newness of its poetic theories, the formal innovations, the translations and the construction of inwardness. These facets all play their part in an overall framework set up to establish creative freedom [*ḥurriyat al-ibda^{c}*] in the positive sense of "freedom to" rather than "freedom from." *Shi^{c}r* thus allowed poets of different sensibilities to pursue self-determination and variously oriented careers under some form of regulation and in constitutive dialogue rather than by absolute independence:

> Each of these [members] came with his own experiences and his own psychological and artistic make-up. The intermixtures of these personalities bore some strange and wonderful fruit that deepened and supported the new features […] *Shi^{c}r* came and consolidated the modernity of Arabic poetry. It spoke out clearly about the necessity to establish modernity on the grounds of creative freedom. Each of us had freedom to choose the model that best expresses his own mode of creativity, and each of us had his own belongings in their *ibda^{c}* even though our stances with respect to the *turāth* were not uniform – as some of us rejected it wholesale while others took inspiration from it, absorbed it, processed it, or conjured it as a point of departure. That was my position: *turāth* does not enter into the moment of creation but is present as sediments in the creative writer's personality.[176]

This conciliatory account is by no means an ultimate authoritative one. Yet, at a commonsensical level, al-^{c}Azma's account should also be incorporated into our understanding of the movement. It is not at odds with the fact of the new poetic hegemony; on the contrary, its submerged undercurrents reenforce the power of attraction held by the new liberal ideals. It demonstrates how the hegemonic ideas tapped into the self-understanding of practicing poets and

[174] Al-^{c}Azma, *Ana wa-l-Hadatha*, 64-65.
[175] Ibid., 47, 127-128. A representative statement by al-^{c}Azma: "there is no unified form for a poem, because the poem is a womb impregnated and begetting in the context of a historical process influenced by existential and civilizational contingency […] creativity [*ibdā^{c}*] is founded on unity and diversity, and if you rule out diversity, you harm the unity of this creation. If you reject another's freedom, you reject your own […] In every age there is the old and new in organic, dialectical interaction. Our *turāth* [cultural patrimony] is in a continuous state of creation, and creativity is *turāth* conceived in dream, and there is no creativity without *turāth* and no *turāth* without creativity."
[176] Ibid., 167.

encouraged them to realize whatever poetic freedom they thought they had. Al-ᶜAzma's catholicity initially stems from a position of marginality in relation to the more acclaimed members of the magazine. Naturally, he wants to present the movement as a collaborative enterprise of interaction and diversity so as to guarantee the inclusion of his own name in the records as a poet of singular experience as well as part of the visionary mainstream. He appears to be a sort of highly adaptable literary Zelig, a thermochromic poetic creature whose poem-coloring changes according to the mood and temperature of the times. In the early fifties he wrote poetic dramas with a Pan-Arab flavor; by the late fifties he switched to Tammuzi symbolism under the influence of *Shiᶜr* and Saᶜada's theories. In the United States, he assumed a professorial guise, adopted language of comparative literary criticism and fashioned himself as a two-way (Arabic-English, English-Arabic) translator. He even served as president of the American Oriental Society. During his stay in Morocco, he delved into Andalusian history and art and composed a historical play by the name of *The Andalusian Sisyphus* (1975). In the seventies, with his prospective homecoming, he often published poems and essays in the Syrian *al-Maᶜrifa* magazine, the central cultural organ of the Ministry of Culture, where he balanced literary political stances for the Palestinian cause with the methods of disinterested critical inquiry he picked up in American universities.

This description is not meant to cast him in a laughable light, for al-ᶜAzma, as I will immediately try to show, is more than just a derivative poet. Sensing where the winds blow and adjusting accordingly is, in addition to a strategy of survival, a remarkable talent. Moreover, this catholicity itself can be seen as indexed to a meta-discourse of an inclusive Syrian identity propounded by Saᶜada and his followers. When justifying his decision to head the American Oriental Society in spite of its orientalist reputation, al-ᶜAzma states that he felt at ease among

orientalists precisely because of his conviction that Western culture was his own, and that the Syrian people of seven-thousand years are at the root of all universalist conceptions of humanity.[177] His changes of identity are thus predicated on the cultural horizon opened by imagining Syria as the encyclopedic ocean of human civilization. The conciliatory attitude relaxes some of the antagonistic tension of which Barut speaks. The other side of his catholicity is to be attributed to al-ᶜAzma's formative experience of belonging in a hegemonic group in Syria and the confidence that accompanies this status compared with the embattled minority consciousness of his fellow *Shiᶜr* poets. The vision projected by him is that of a soft hegemonic center absorbing and enabling different individual styles. He was not out to revolutionize poetic language, but to engage in modest demands for reform. He somewhat boastfully claims to transition unproblematically between the three major molds of Arabic poetry since *Shiᶜr*: the classical ᶜ*amūdī* [column-shaped] form, the semi-modernized *tafᶜīla*, and the modern *qasidat al-nathr*.[178]

His catholicity is also attested in the poems he composed for the magazine and were later collected in a volume printed by Dar Majallat Shiᶜr, the magazine's publishing house. In reviewing a later volume of his, Muhyi al-Din al-Subhi notes that al-ᶜAzma's localized imagination sets him apart from the cerebral abstractness of other Tammuzi poets. While still employing the mythic symbols, he gives them a folkloristic twist, and effectively re-writes oral songs and stories in crystallized modernist language.[179] "Evening in the Village," the first poem in his 1959 collection *al-Lahm wa-l-Sanabil* [*Meat and Ears of Wheat*, 1959], presents an artful depiction of scenes from village life and is a kind of literary exercise in imitating rustic naiveté:

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[177]For this statement see al-ᶜAzma's interview for the Syrian television program *Marafiʾ al-Dhakira* hosted by Talib Omran. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t6BQyYKcyQ Last visited August 27, 2018.
[178] Al-ᶜAzma, *Ana wa-l-Hadatha*, 94.
[179] Muhyi al-Din al-Subhi, "Atfal fi al-Manfa li-Nadhir al-ᶜAzma," *Shiᶜr* 19 (July 1961), 112-113.

"Evening / A cloud moves across the horizon / a dole of doves / behind the mounds / and a song like aged wine […] / there in the vineyards / in the shack of beauty."[180] The idyllic motifs of rural life then follow in procession: the shepherd whistling his herd back to the village is offset by the honk of a car and the ring of the mailman's bike bells; a young woman twisting her spindle contrasted with young men twisting their mustaches. One strophe constructs a lovely vignette moving from performative outdoor storytelling to the faint secretive whispers of women's chambers:

> evening
> and out by the rocks
> stories go around
> two farmers behind a donkey
> carrying baskets of grapes
> an old sheikh
> making holes in the reed
> to create from it *ṭarab*
> to make a *nay*
> and populate an evening concert
> the air is filled with the fragrance of tea
> and behind the ironed linen
> women sigh
> reveal their secret loves
> and murmur about their regrets.[181]

We are taken along with the baskets and donkey, accompanying these two women farmers from the vines back to the village. We pass by the storytellers, then by the sheikh making the *nay*, until the smell of tea indicates our arrival at the women's chambers, where we join to listen in, however abstractly, on their secret conversations. And this procession is ordered in sweet-sounding rhymes and the relaxed ease of the *mutaqārib* metric foot. The destitution and backwardness of Syrian peasants – though only vaguely marked as Syrian here – can be read between the lines of the poem but are not underscored. The separation of men and women in their traditional roles is taken at face value, and the harshness of life with no running water and

[180] Al-ᶜAzma, *al-Lahm wa-l-Sanabil*, 7.
[181] Ibid., 9-10.

electricity is suggested but not directly treated. Only at the end there seems to enter a theme of social critique through the image of a poor old woman praying to be healed in a Sufi shrine. Modern medical care is not yet available.

There is nothing particularly modernistic about this vignette, and indeed this *taf*ᶜ*īla* poem is dated to 1952. The term *ibdā*ᶜ is applied in the poem to the making of the flute and is thus compatible with, and conducive to *ṭarab*, the pleasures associated with the impact of traditional Arab music and song. It is this connection between creativity and traditional pleasures that the *Shi*ᶜ*r* poets will want to sever. Even after joining the modernist group, al-ᶜAzma, by contrast, did not forgo this inclusive conception of *ibdā*ᶜ, whose margins are wide enough for both the nay and the prose poem. There is, however, a noticeable shift in his poems from the late fifties when he was writing under *Shi*ᶜ*r*'s centripetal force. Al-ᶜAzma alludes to this shift as a transition from warm sentimental lyricism to cosmic lyricism.[182] His major poem "Meat and Ears of Wheat" – first published in issue no. 3 of *Shi*ᶜ*r* (June 1957) – appears in the book version as part of a cycle of seven *anāshīd* [hymns] titled *Qasidat al-Insan* [Poem of Mankind]. Creswell has thoroughly exposed the ideological underpinnings of the concept of "man" or the "person" in the *Shi*ᶜ*r* corpus. What I contend is that al-ᶜAzma's image of man, though gravitating towards the group's center in its cosmic and trans-historical aspects, has not entirely shed its particular determinations as noted in the warm sentimentality of "Evening in the Village." And yet, it is indebted to the newly opened cultural horizons not solely in adjusting to its dominant poetic modes and ideas, but also in the value conferred upon engagement with foreign poetries. My claim about "Meat and Ears of Wheat" and the cycle as a whole is that even though its universalism is indebted to Saᶜada's theories and the Tammuzi symbolic methods developed by

[182] Al-ᶜAzma, *Ana wa-l-Hadatha*, 92.

Shiᶜr, it is also greatly determined by unrepressed attachments to an imagined Syrian nation, and by specific choices of affiliation with foreign poetry, and particularly the proto-modernist visionary example of William Blake.

The poem's title (after which the 1959 collection is named) is highly suggestive of the eucharistic symbols of flesh and bread, a sub-species of the Tammuzi system of signification for renewal and regeneration. Yet, the non-symbolic meaning of meat and wheat as providing physical nourishment is not entirely transcended. So much is implied by the countryside references to shepherds and farmers whose sustenance depends on cattle and crops. In both its spiritual and earthly aspects, the title ironically points to a lack, to a reality of bones and barrenness, and has thus left pastoral plenty behind. This fact makes it suspicious as an accommodation to an affected modernistic fad of alienated modern life. The poem begins with a catalogue of nouns expressing this sense of alienation as an inwardly felt reality. By its ostensible derivativeness, it showcases *Shiᶜr*'s repertoire of stock existentialist terms and represents the predilection for the brief nominal sentence:

> *al-waḥdatu al-farāghu*
> *wa-l-dammu al-saqīᶜu*
> *wa-l-rukūdu al-saʾmu al-jāmidu*
> *yajrī fī ᶜurūqī*
> *wa-l-yabāsu!*
>
> solitude – a void
> blood – frost
> stagnation – inert lassitude
> run through my veins
> and dryness![183]

The clutter of nouns weighs on the first-person verb as the immovable world weighs on the individual will for dynamism and change. The exclamatory utterances of distress are only

[183] Al-ᶜAzma, "al-Lahm wa-l-Sanabil," *Shiᶜr* 3 (June 1957), 47.

ambiguously governed by the verb; it appears that they have acquired an independent "thingness" that obstructs the flow of life and the agent's ability to act. The cry is directed against a world that repulses change and is, in turn, repulsed by it: "a world confining me, drying me up […] its cages […] want to obstruct life in me, obstruct renewal / obstruct love and revolt / don't I have a will to move?"[184]These inhibiting forces are imagined as inhabiting everything from the courtrooms through the city streets to crops and meat. The meat and wheat thus invoke not so much the Eucharist, but the Biblical Joseph story and Pharaoh's visionary dreams of cows and grain predicting plenty and then famine in Egypt (Genesis 41).

The question on which the originality of the poem rides is whether the speaker is, along the Tammuzi lines, an allegorical instrument through which a nation is resurrected, or, alternatively, a single human prophet crying out against the extent of crisis with no immediate ramifications on the collective. Though there is a potential overlap between these two terms in any fictional construct of subjectivity, the terms on which the individual is universalized matter a great deal. The version in *Shi*^{c}*r* magazine concludes with a cry of battle against this petrified world, now figuring as a self-enclosed orb:

> In your name, you whose house in this blue dome enslaves me
> You, the circling sphere, you the hand rotating it
> My hand, my hand will tear it down![185]

The speaker position himself as model for human dignity in revolt, especially when this segment is incorporated in the larger frame of a cycle called "Poem of Mankind." In this sense, it follows to the letter the principles outlined for poetry in Yusuf al-Khal's foundational lecture for the Céncale Libanais in early 1957, and especially principle no. 6: "Man is the first and last subject of poetry."[186] And yet in this instance the heroic individual is not quite as abstract as

[184] Ibid., 49.
[185] Ibid., 50.
[186] On this Cénacle lecture and the formative principles see Creswell, *Tradition and Transaltion*, 98-106.

Shiᶜr's other figures of heroic modernist. In Adonis' poem "Nothingness" destruction is liberating and opens infinite possibilities. It puts a spring in the poet's step and expands his vision. The premise for al-ᶜAzma's poem, by contrast, is that the abstract void is mechanical, enslaving and paralyzing. This slight nuance has consequences for the concrete language in which revolt is couched. Adonis' Mihyar is elevated to an ironic point beyond struggle from which his anti-Psalms depart. Adonis' psalms are beyond prayer and supplication, as they reflect a subjective consciousness already put through spiritual agony and raised to godly free-floating. Not only is al-ᶜAzma's heroic individual in crisis still in the midst of struggle, but his language of revolt is culturally specific through and through. The first line of the last three is transparently spoken in colloquial Arabic. It is not the only instance in the poem.[187] By bringing the lowest possible register into the climactic moment of dignity in revolt, al-ᶜAzma signals that particularities in the formation of this "man" should not be transcended.

The choice of wording in the penultimate line is even more interesting. The address to the orbiting celestial sphere (*falak)* is repeated three times in the poem and stakes a claim to "cosmic lyricism." It imagines a single yet humanized and corporeal god who lives in his worldly house – "blue dome" – and whose hand turns the spheres. It protests in this god's name against him, claiming that he has abstracted himself away from human concern. The hand that will break this cold dehumanized order counteracts the indifferent hand of the god who has forgotten his sources of power in the warm human body. But it does so by stressing the commonality between the human and the divine forms. *Dāra ᶜalayhi al-falaka* is a classical Arabic proverb meaning to

[187] This element in al-ᶜAzma's heterogenous style did not escape the scrutiny of Nazik al-Malaʾika. She uses the colloquial lines from this poem as an example for the outrageous violations of *Shiᶜr* against the Arabic language and the Arab nation as a whole, castigating the poetry critics who pass over these violations in silence and virtually calling them to arms. See al-Malaʾika, *Qadaya*, 291-292. Kheir Beik sees al-ᶜAzma's habit of compounding address, relative pronoun and verb (*ya-l-yuwazziᶜ al-hāyata* [you who dispense life]) as part of *Shiᶜr*'s attack on verb forms. Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 156 (n. 19).

grind something to dust, as with a millstone. The hand of protest breaking this grinding circuit demands the renewal of warm bonds between the human and the non-human – language, society, nature, the unconscious – through imagination, or *ibdāᶜ*. It opposes with particularity those great mounds whose vague generalizations oppress creative thought and action.

The ideas funneled through this poem were sparked by al-ᶜAzma's discovery of William Blake's writings in the mid-1950s. The circling of the stars and the grinding mill are common images in Blake's work for the scientifically-minded world associated with the theories of Newton and Locke, a world devoid of imagination. The blue sky's dome alludes to the dwelling place of the law-giving sky-god Noboddady, representing official Church law and automatic obedience to it.[188] It is against the false impersonality of this god that Blake proposes the identification of God with personified human imagination. The overall framework of the cycle "Poem of Mankind" might have also been conceived with inspiration from Blake's expansive epic prophecies. It reads like an episodic vision in seven fragments corresponding to the seven days of creation and laying out a history of the contrapuntal development of man and civilization. It takes the Hebrew Bible, Gnostic systems, the Quran, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* as literary-mythic substrata. "Meat and Ears of Wheat" is situated as the fifth *nashīd*, canto or fragment-hymn. The first *nashīd* – also published independently in *Shiᶜr* – adopts the perspective of a monstrous "primordial matter" like the Babylonian water-goddess Tiamat whose residue remains in the Hebrew *tehom* (abyss) in the second verse of the Bible. In al-ᶜAzma's version, the goddess of chaos says: "*anā al-sadīm al-ᶜadamī / hal tunkirunī yā ādamī?"* (I am the nihilistic haze. / will you deny me, son of man?).[189] The sixth hymn, "Man

[188] See authoritative analysis of Northrop Frye in *Fearful Symmetry*, 63-64.
[189] Al-ᶜAzma, *al-Lahm wa-l-Sanabil*, 58. The second *nashīd* presents God's creation of man and His scruples about breathing life into inanimate clay. The third *nashīd* presents Satan, who in the Quran is a fallen angel who refused to bow down to man. Al-ᶜAzma's presentation of Satan is midway between a castaway worthy of empathy and a psychological-allegorical complex of temptation, guilt, and sin. The fourth *nashīd* introduces the "great spindle," an image resembling the sphere and the orb, and designating the cyclic wheels of necessity that revolve to no

and Time," races through a story of human civilization with emphasis on geographic Syria. It is rehearsed by an allegorical character of Time, possibly the Sphinx. The spirit of civilized life emerges from the cave to manifest itself in Sumer, travels through Phoenicia and Ancient Greece, and arrives at the twentieth century. The seventh *nashīd* is spoken by a self-described "man of the times," referring to the horrors of the nuclear age and the state of anxiety it imposes, and ending, as the Tammuzi structure prescribes, on an optimistic note of a renewal of faith:

> Woe to my voice […]
> Its heart is stormed
> By revolutions of faith and love
> Whose meaning carries my people.
> On my shoulder the sun of the West
> And sun of the east!
> Because I speak the word of truth
> About our world and about man
> It suffices me that, in this dark time,
> I lit the candles of faith!

Like the beginning strophe of "Meat and Ears of Wheat," this ending gives away the ideological underpinnings of the cosmic vision, and its indebtedness to a set of locally expounded ideas traceable to Antun Saᶜada's theory of culture: the existence of an Ur-Syrian people tied to a cultural revolution and the transcendence of the East-West binary. The statement is so direct, in fact, that it verges on artlessness. And yet there is noticeably no bloodshed, no human sacrifice of the isolated intellectual for the sake of collective redemption. What al-ᶜAzma's prophet of truth does is as simple as lighting a candle of faith, a revolution of the heart which would hopefully spark other hearts. This non-militant form of action has strong religious overtones suggesting Christian immortality of the individual soul, but I think it should be considered as part of al-ᶜAzma's personal symbolic system signifying the counterpoint between

purpose and spin insoluble riddles and against which the order of civilization protects. It is from here that the sphinx figure in the sixth hymn derives.

continuity and change. In the poem "Ten Candles," for instance, the candles mundanely figure for the tender age of his sister at the time of her death: "O, how I remember my mother / the day my little sister died / and how the grave swallowed / ten candles that would sing / another cypress (of course) / redeemed by death from the bird-songs of yearning."[190] The haunting loss still rings in his ears at the end of the poem, and the candles are the visual counterpart to these birdsongs, a persistent image for the death of his sister that needs to be reshaped by the imagination over and over again. The candles of faith are thus predicated on cultural memory and a totality of tradition, custom and ritual, as much as they are indebted to tropes of renewal and a fresh start.

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* might well have provided the general inspiration for al-ᶜAzma's representations of pastoral village life: the piper's pipe in Blake's "Introduction" is refashioned in the form of the old sheikh's oriental *nāy*. This inspiration would not fall out of line with the *Shiᶜr* program. On the contrary, the combination of theorizing the "human" as an imaginative whole alongside reclaiming canonical foreign poets as indigenous is a faithful reiteration of the project's aims: "to place *al-insān* at the vortex of external and internal translation with the aim of joining the ranks of world literature: this is the program of *Shiᶜr in nuce*," writes Creswell.[191] It is only the sources for al-ᶜAzma's conception of *al-insān* that differ but not the method of self-legitimation through translation.

Yet this is a meaningful difference. In his 2004 Arabic translation of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, al-ᶜAzma states that the discovery of his interest in Blake coincided with his relocation to Beirut in the mid-1950s. It was then that al-ᶜAzma began working on translations from Blake's short lyrics. Blake is discovered as a proto-modernist whose influence

[190] Al-ᶜAzma, *Atfal fi al-Manfa*, 7-8.
[191] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 105.

extended across the Irish Sea to Yeats and across the Atlantic to Allen Ginsberg.[192] In other words, he is a perpetually modern poet and his multiple border crossings serve as proof that he can be a translatable model for contemporary Arabic poetry as well.[193]

Sometime between 1959 and 1960, al-ᶜAzma gave a lecture in *Shiᶜr*'s famous *khamīs* (Thursday literary salon) about Blake's personality and poetry. He then returned to Blake's work when he was teaching in the United States, placing the Arabic translations in an academic book about the elements of foreign poetry in Khalil Gibran's poems.[194] This point is central since al-ᶜAzma treats Blake through the Gibrani lineage as part of an indigenous literary tradition. The 2004 edition is thus an end-point in a process of dialogue with Blake's poetry that lasted nearly fifty years. It is framed as a book of general interest in translation with Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* as an elaborate case-study. To match the double nature of innocence and experience, al-ᶜAzma produces a double translation of the full cycle, one version in pre-modernist "innocence," i.e., imitations or "transpositions" in *khabab* and *mutadārik* meters, and another version informed by modernist "experience," namely, literal prose translations more faithful to the poems' semantics. Al-ᶜAzma takes pride especially in the creative translations through which Blake speaks directly to the Arab ear, and claims to have invented an Arabic body of text in the "language of *ḍād*" to go with the original's spirit: "Did I present William Blake to the reader?", he rhetorically asks to make a heavy-handed pun,

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[192] Al-ᶜAzma only mentions Ginsberg by name for his well-known vision of the English poet but Yeats is surely implied by stressing Blake's continuous impact. See Al-ᶜAzma, *Al-Masa wa-Izmil al-Tarjama: Tarjama Shiᶜriyya ᶜArabiya Kamila li-Aghani al-Barāᵓa wa-l-Tajruba li-Wiliyam Blayk: Tajruba Ibdaᶜiyya fi Fadāᵓ al-Tarjama* [The Diamond and the Chisel of Translation: Full Arabic Poetic Translation of William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience: A Creative Experiment in the Field of Translation]. Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa, 2004,42-43. The book includes a general introduction to the problems of translation, an attempt to render several fragments from Arab medieval poetry in English as exemplifying the problems, and four individual pieces on Blake and the translator's experience with his poems. From the foreword to this book I relate the biographical information of his relation to Blake and the chronology of his translation work.

[193] In 1977, al-ᶜAzma published an article in the Syrian *al-Maᶜrifa* magazine on the modern elements in Blake's poetry and included some of his translations. See al-ᶜAzma, "ᶜAnasir al-Hadatha fi Shiᶜr William Blake [The Modern Elements in the Poetry of William Blake]," *al-Maᶜrifa* 183 (May 1977), 76-88.

[194] Al-ᶜAzma, *Jubran Khalil Jubran fi Dawᵓ al-Muᵓaththirat al-Ajnabiya: Dirasa Muqarana* [Gibran Khalil Gibran in Light of Foreign Influences, 1987]. The section on Blake and Jubran appeared independently in *al-Maᶜrifa* 205-206 (April 1979), 83-104.

> or is the reader reading [poems] by William al-ᶜAzma in the language of Nadhir Blake? Language transcends its alighting place as does [Blake's] poetic experience. Names intermix, self and other become two faces of the one truth of man.[195]

The reconciliation of opposites by which a higher transcendent unity is reached is one of the key elements in al-ᶜAzma's interpretation of Blake's poetry. "Without contraries is no progression," reads one of the aphoristic sayings in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell". Al-ᶜAzma focuses particularly on the contraries between the child and the adult (innocence and experience), good and bad (heaven and hell), nature and culture, and body and mind. Along similar lines by which Yeats is reshaped, Blake is largely seen as a mystic and a visionary who, with an oppositional stance against Newton's "Satanic mills," developed a personal mythology or a symbolic system as a higher mode of knowledge.[196] At the same time, al-ᶜAzma notes that this system was, against the nature of impersonal systems, radically humanized and guided by an imaginative, anti-dogmatic understanding of man as measure to all things: "to Generalize is to be an Idiot; to Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit."[197]

That the *Songs* are translated twice casts him – William al-ᶜAzma and Nadhir Blake – in the image of the all-inclusive reconciler of opposites: between East and West, romanticism and modernism, *tafᶜīla* and prose poem, religion and secularism, cultural particularity and cosmopolitanism. Al-ᶜAzma thus weighs in with Blake on an internal discourse of modernity that seems to him governed by polarity and schism. In presenting Blake for the Arab reader, al-ᶜAzma's approach is benevolently universalizing. He finds analogies between "The Little Boy Found" and the Prophet's saying that we are all "children of God." He reads the "The Little Black Boy" as a poem about a "cosmic child transcending skin-color and social mores to reach

[195] Al-ᶜAzma, *Al-Masa wa-Izmil al-Tarjama*, 64.
[196] Ibid., 46-47.
[197] Ibid., 48. Al-ᶜAzma actually quotes another aphorism in the same spirit as this one that I was not able to locate: "The man who believes in one golden rule is an idiot made of gold."

one human fraternity expressing the worth of one maker."[198] Though both interpretations are based in the texts and attend to the religious undertones, they dull the ironic edge of experience mixed with innocence. Blake is constantly referred to as the invertor of imaginary childhood as the source of humanism. The return to the child's *fiṭra* (innate nature, usually with reference to inborn Islamic faith), says al-ᶜAzma, is a return to roots and to God. But this is a problematic interpretive move: Blake's peculiar god is very remotely assimilable in translation to the orthodox God who goes by Allah.

One of the losses in conceiving Blake as an earnest unifier lies in reading his poems as religiously somber and single-voiced. Al-ᶜAzma's interpretive explication of "The Lamb" misses out on the fact that the child's innocence with respect to the lamb results in mimicry of what he had just learned from the priest: "Little Lamb who made thee / dost thou know who made thee?" The only reason the child knows the answer is that he went to Sunday school, and the knowledge imparted by the priest is used to exert power over the poor silent lamb. The child's innocence here mirrors the idiocy of pig-headed adults. On the practical level of translation and interpretation, this approach is just as prone to iron out differences. For a self-declared experiment in poetic translation, the prose translation and "creative" imitations read too much alike. Some of the interpretive choices made for both versions are more crucial than the choice of meter and the cosmetic changes of lexicon and word-order. In both versions of "the Sick Rose" the second sentence after "O Rose thou art sick" – which cuts across the rest of the seven lines – is rendered as a question rather than a statement of fact. This is a much more radical rewriting of the original than any of the alterations between the two Arabic versions.

[198] Ibid. 52.

To conclude this point, al-ᶜAzma closely follows and reiterates the *Shiᶜr* program in his embrace of Syrian universalism and in the forms of contact with foreign poetry. What sets him apart is the folkloristic twist to his mythic symbols, and the attitude of catholicity towards modernity and tradition. The major deviation is in viewing the modernist moment not as a schismatic break with the past but as a potential for larger inclusiveness. Al-ᶜAzma's prophet of truth is a figure of both continuity and change: he speaks colloquial Ararbic and knows well his Quran, he is human more than godly, and his life is not sacrificed on the altar of modernity. Yet even this slight deviation from the mainstream is sanctioned by methods enshrined in the new institutions. Al-ᶜAzma's turn to Blake as a great welder of contraries and a beacon for imaginative holism suggests that even within the ranks of *Shiᶜr* there was a war of position between different poetic individualities, and that the terms by which "man" was universalized in theory and in practice vastly differed among sensibilities. As a critic, al-ᶜAzma's voice was silent in actual time, and his position is reconstructed in retrospect. Yet this silence re-enforces the impression that a temporary hegemony was set in place to protect the common interests of diversity and interaction. This hegemony both fostered independent growth and silenced critical differences so that its "servants" could bring their sensibilities into mutual friction and start a process of cross-pollination. Yet when the project eventually grew enervated, the irreducible differences broke out.

III Saniya Salih: A Quest for Autonomy within Autonomy

On the periphery of the modernist circle, there existed those who sensed the allure of the new poetic language and yet also sensed that the free-floating idiom cannot do justice to the complexity of their experience. The Syrian poet Saniya Salih (1935-1985) is one such figure who

chose the experience of motherhood – the most particularistic attachment conceivable – as a major poetic theme. This choice co-exists with a fascination for the high artistry and recondite symbolic structures introduced by the modernists. Salih is said to have taken avid interest in Adonis' translation from Saint-John Perse's *Amers*[199] and alludes to poems by the Comte de Lautréamont and Arthur Rimbaud, translations of which appeared in *Shi*ᶜ*r* magazine.[200] What are the terms on which female immanence is negotiated with the male-dominated metaphysical adventures proposed by the magazine's hegemonic figures?

The first wave of Arab modernism is a predominantly masculine affair. As such, it reflects to some extent the patriarchal social order which the Arab revolutionary age not only failed to do away with, but perhaps re-enforced. The poetic language of Tawfiq Sayigh (1923-1971) is drenched in male obsessions with women and sex. Adonis' heralds of revolution in poetry are endlessly fluid except when it comes to gender, where they share in the manly rhetoric of Arab political revolutionaries. The personas in *Aghani Mihyar* may be nothing but linguistic figurations, yet are all declined in the masculine form, and Adonis' metaphoric piercings of the unknown betray a sublimated heroism of the phallic imagination. Al-Maghut's protest poetry is also dominated by tropes of masculine desire, though his puncturing of public rhetoric regresses from sexual relations to kindred. The attempt to connect to social issues of poverty and hunger passes imaginatively through a hungry infant's impatience to receive the nipple, still interchangeable with adult sexual fantasies. In his poem "The Killing," the political effects of fear are taken to the primal level of castration and emasculation terrors.

[199] *Shi*ᶜ*r* 4 (October 1957), 38-89. For this claim, made by Khalida Saᶜid, see what follows.
[200] For Lautréamont see *Shi*ᶜ*r* 10 (April 1959), 74-86. For Rimbaud see *Shi*ᶜ*r* 11 (June 1959), 32-57. Both were translated by the Lebanese poet Shawqi Abu Shaqra.

Saniya Salih was literally related to the powerful figures of the modernist movement, not all of them male. She married Muhammad al-Maghut and was the sister-in-law of Adonis. Khalida Sa^{c}id, her sister and Adonis' wife, is arguably the most articulate critical voice speaking for the esthetic of the modernist visionary poem. The sisters were born to a modest Alawite family in the town of Misyaf on the rural periphery of Hama. Their mother, Fatima Sharif, contracted a severe ear infection which left her permanently deaf, and Saniya, the youngest daughter of the two, was thus deprived of her most significant interlocutor. According to her sister, this condition had discouraged Saniya from speaking except when she needed something essential. After strenuous family complications including divorce, Fatima died when Saniya was still in early childhood, and Saniya had internalized the mother's imago by becoming a girl, then a woman, of few words. Her long intervals of silence were of "those who had seen and have yet to find words for what they had seen."[201] She started speaking late and internalized a dark mass of pain that would finds its correlative in dense dreamy writing.

In school, Saniya excelled in writing and wrote her first poems on the margins of her elementary school notebooks. In 1957, she entered the Junior College for Women in Ra$^{\supset}$s Beirut. She joined the *Shi^{c}r*'s literary circles yet remained guarded from its culture wars by thick veils of moroseness. She did however participate in its Thursday salons, and published her debut poems in the magazine in 1958. In the early 1960s she returned to Syria not for political reasons, but to help out her financially struggling family. She enrolled in the University of Damascus to study English literature, where she met Muhammad al-Maghut in 1963. When, over the course of the 1960s, he was politically persecuted for his writings and went into hiding, she was his sole connection to the outside world for months on end. She would deliver him food, coffee,

[201] References to the poems and most of the critical pieces come from the volume of Salih's collected work. The sister's personal testimony is brought in the introduction. See Saniya Salih, *al-A^{c}mal al-Kamila* (Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa, 2006), 6.

cigarettes, newspapers and books and cut his hair. He maintained the rituals of an indomitable urbanized Bedouin within the confines of his hideout. Careless about books and reading, al-Maghut would childishly leave all the print items in negligent disarray, stained with coffee.[202] She was certainly the more attentive reader of the two. Khalil Suwaylih comments on her situation with bitterness: "what sort of tragically Greek fates had brought a rough-necked warrior like Muhammad al-Maghut to the rescue of this drowning slender poet?"[203]

Suwaylih was not the only one to lament the repercussions for her poetic career of willing subservience to the whims of a self-centered buffoonish poet. In the same issue of *al-Akhbar*'s literary supplement, there is an exquisitely personal homage essay to Salih by the Egyptian poet Iman Mersal (1966-). Mersal recounts her futile search for Salih's poetry collections in Cairo bookstores. Browsing through the poetry section of al-Madbuli, she finds the book-covers of Mahmoud Darwish, Adonis, and Muhammad al-Maghut prominently displayed. To her question about Saniya Salih, the shopkeeper reacts with an unknowing shrug of the shoulder and leads her up to the warren on the second floor, where forgotten books of poetry end up. After the warren also fails her, Mersal resorts to her imagination to commemorate Salih:

> Pausing to clean my hands and clothes with wetwipes I imagine that this same table, laden with books and dust, is a dining table. There is the corpulent Muhammad Al-Maghut, the Bedouin poet who refused to read philosophy and wrote for the simple and the poor—or so he likes to see himself. The wall behind him is covered in the portraits that artists have painted and drawn of him. Across the table sits the philosopher poet himself, Adonis, wrecker of the conventional and familiar, destroyer of the language of Qureish—or so he likes to see himself—delicately wielding knife and fork in demonstrative respect to good table manners, while the critic Khalida Saeed perches regally beside him. There are others there, less stellar, and I would have loved to describe them all, but the room is cramped and hot and stifling. By the door, which should have led to the kitchen, sits Saniya Salih. I don't know how she likes to see herself. I have no portrait of her to show. The limit of what I can imagine, from what I've read of her and her work, is simply that she was a major poet. That she was a victim. That she deserved many readers and much critical engagement. But what is most commonly known about her is that she was a wife (the tireless, devoted wife of

[202] For a concise summary of their hardships see Salih, *al-Aʿmal*, 436-437.
[203] See Suwaylih's article "Chalk Woman" in *Al-Akhbar* literary supplement dedicated to Salih's work. *Al-Akhbar*, August 15, 2015 http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/240013 last visited November 20, 2017.

> the man at the head of the table) and a sister (to the critic Khalida Saeed) and then a mother to two girls who maybe sleep in the room next door.[204]

Nonetheless, it is hard to dismiss her dedication to al-Maghut as mere unconscious victimhood. Her attachment to him seems to have been genuine and reciprocal, magnified by the vengeful alliance of both against the prevailing state in Syria, and sustained by the way-out into poetry they both chose.[205] Her other rescue rope was her two daughters, Sham and Sulafa, both of whom figure prominently in the poems of her last two collections, most notably in the section titled "A Million Women Are Your Mother." "A mother's voice unparalleled in Arabic poetry to this day," determines Mersal. In the frequent repetitions of the address *ya bnati* [my daughter], one hears the relish with which Salih also channels the voice of her own mother. That tragic presence is enacted in the "nonetheless" that recalls the origins of her fellow ancestral women's collective suffering:

> My daughter,
> I was one alone and am now divided
> and divide myself still
> Till I created a people of which you are the myth;
> You're descended from countrywomen
> Who muffle the scream of child birth
> And cast their fetuses in copper water basins
> As hunger beats its drum in their insides
> And poverty strips them to the bone.
> But I have, nonetheless, given you light with arduous desire.[206]

Salih attests that motherhood had introduced a new horizon into her life.[207] It broke through the psychological dam built around the absence of her own mother and helped her re-discover poetry. This should be understood in more ways than one: first, it facilitated expressive fluency and stopped her fearful treading around the mother tongue. There are no explicit dialect usages, but the hesitant tongue grows in self-confidence: poetic language is suddenly made more

[204] *Al-Akhbar*, August 15, 2015. Translation provided by Robin Moger in: https://qisasukhra.wordpress.com/2017/07/22/iman-mersal-on-saniya-salih/. Last visited March 26, 2019.
[205] Salih, *al-Aʿmal*, 437.
[206] Mersal (trans. Moger), in https://qisasukhra.wordpress.com/2017/07/22/iman-mersal-on-saniya-salih/. Last visited March 26, 2019.
[207] Salih, *al-Aʿmal*, 486.

direct, the imagination more assertive, and the substance more socially and politically engaged. Second, it re-kindled her enjoyment of reading poetry, and she brings more literary references into her work. The poem cited above – "You Leave the Walls of the Body" – opens with an epigraph from Hölderlin and is dedicated to her daughters. The dedication is followed by two excerpted lines from "Wie wenn am Feiertage," a poem said to be Hölderlin's first attempt at an imitation of a Pindaric hymn: "because Semele desired / to see the face of God, His light-beam fell on her house and she, the godly one, gave birth to the fruit of the storm."[208] The translated reference to Semele, the priestess of Zeus and mother of Dionysus, casts her in the mold of a Sufi woman devotee like the projected image of the poet-priestess Salih.

The immediate proximity between the most intimately biographical reference and the high visionary branch of authority is typical for the method by which modernist transcendence is negotiated with female immanence. The reconstruction of a mythical ancestry of women is enabled by the foreign transmission and the shared cultural essences it uncovers: a realm of fulfilled spiritual desire equated with a realm of hieratic art both broadly visionary and cavernous with respect to the social world. Putting these references together collapses the walls between them. The daughters' existence is understood by means of the "womb of creativity" and Semele's theophany translated into the most intimate fibers of private experience. In the poem, dream visions lift up the entire family from corrupted existence towards a higher sphere where her daughters can re-unite with their grandmother, the "dense tree."[209] "Thousands of illusionary

[208] Translation is done from the Arabic. Hölderlin's original: "So fiel, wie Dichter sagen, da sie sichtbar / Den Gott zu sehen begehrte / sein Blitz auf Semeles Haus / und die göttlichgetroffene gebahr, / Die Frucht des Gewitters, den Heiligen Bacchus." *Selected Poems and Fragments*, 172. Hölderlin's "as poets say" is omitted to prevent the suggestion that the story is just a fictive myth repeated by poets. For reasons of religious discretion, the reference to Bacchus is omitted, especially given that "der Gott" – in this case Zeus – is translated as Allah. For the same reasons, the violent lightning (*Blitz*) is substituted by the benevolent ray of light. This change is consistently followed by the omission of *getroffene* – struck – leaving only *göttlich*, godly. The sexual connotation of Zeus' lightning penetrating Semele's house is thus obscured.

[209] See three strophes in *al-Aʿmal*, 256-258. "the world turns, coercively reducing our lives […] set me on fire, daughter, renew me, […] prolong your stay in the womb of time" says the mother to the daughter; "earth rises up with us, advancing towards dream […], carrying my children to the emerald." There is something chilling in this desperate cry for the daughter to return to the womb – identified with the unreality of dream – rather than create her separate existence.

years run through me," the speaker declares, indirectly capitalizing on the fiction of a lonstanding Syrian civilization. The epigraph mediated through Hölderlin's imitation of Pindar, and referring to the mythological story of Semele, converges with this fictional history and vindicates the pedigree. This convergence of the actual family and the family of visionary poets turns up in the finale of the poem:

> Don't despair, follow me
> In the heart of the unknown jungles
> The jungles of Rimbaud and Lautréamont
> There are splendid things made for us,
> In the heart of the jungles
> A tree for dreams
> Won't you follow me[210]

The reference to Rimbaud and Lautréamont serves a function similar to the epigraph: it affirms the power of the unrestrained imagination to re-create the world in defiance of social mores.[211] Baudelaire's "forest of symbols" is magnified with these two poets into a jungle. But Rimbaud is a polysemic reference, since in the family lore an oft-repeated story goes that when Muhammad al-Maghut, the girls' father, first read his poems before the members of the Thursday salon, everyone thought that the poems recited were translations of Rimbaud.[212] With that in mind, Lautréamont as counterpart to Rimbaud is Saniya herself, and the alternative reality created by the French visionaries is re-incarnated within the closest confines of the Syrian family. The imaginary tree of dreams, a version of the Edenic Tree of Life, is likewise rooted in family lore, since Saniya's mother Fatima Sharif is imagined in the form of a dense tree. Mersal astutely describes Salih's terror of weaning, a paralyzing fear of separation that runs through her

[210] Salih, *al-Aʿmal,* 263.
[211] See Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 9.
[212] Saniya repeats this story herself in a preface introducing her husband's work. See Salih, *al-Aʿmal*, 437.

work and especially the last two collections.[213] This tallies with the aspiration to re-discover in the most occult visionary poems the reality of her family as organically interconnected.

Saniya herself was no translator, and did not re-write Hölderlin, Rimbaud, or Lautréamont as al-ᶜAzma re-wrote Blake. But she was a dedicated decipherer of occult signs. In her only critical essay on poetry, Salih envisions the process of poetry as analogous to organic birth, a series of frictions and copulations between wedded opposites. The mind and the phenomenal world, for instance, engender a fusion in the poet's bodily receptacle, or her metaphorical womb.[214] There are also acts of fertilization between the imaginations of poets and readers:

> poetry happens only in the interpenetration of two depths, two imaginations, two dreams charged with human sensation, however contradictory or harmonious: the imagination of the poet and that of the reader. In this process of fertilization, a temporal embryo is conceived, carrying the particularities of both poet and reader. This embryo is the fundamental step in the continuous poetic dynamism in pursuit of the dream that recedes into the innermost depth, stretching until the First Human.[215]

The myth created by and for her daughter is seen as that readerly convergence of depths leading beyond the suffering ancestors all the way back to Eve in the garden, before women were condemned to the pains of child labor. This utopian situation is paradoxically anchored in Salih's mothering, a paradigm for all other processes of conception, gestation, birth. The paradox is likewise felt in the collision between the sanctity of motherhood in traditional Arab culture with the new modernistic poetic language and its own sanctities of autonomous art.[216]

The emphasis on the reader's creativity is not very common in the theoretical statements of the male members of Shiᶜr, who saw themselves as self-originating creative artists. A good

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[213] Mirsal, *Kayfa Taltaʾimu*, 24. Mersal's book on motherhood from which this is quoted was recently published in English: *How to Mend: On Motherhood and Its Ghosts* (Kayfa Ta, 2018).
[214] Salih, *al-Aᶜmal*, 229.
[215] Ibid., 227-228.
[216] Mersal writes: "[Salih's preoccupation with her identity] cannot escape its cultural contexts laden with conflicting authorities: the sanctity of motherhood on the one hand and the clash of modern Arabic poetry with the violence of external reality on the other hand." Mirsal, *Kayfa Taltaʾimu*, 26.

example of this tendency towards self-serving art is Salah ᶜAbd al-Sabur's interpretation of Aristotelean *catharsis* as applying to the artist rather than the spectator\reader.[217] It is telling that the metaphors for this levelling dimension of reciprocity between reader and poet are drawn from feminine immanence. This immanence would produce a different kind of poetic transcendence than the male one. Mersal portrays Salih at an oblique angle to the male modernists of her time. Mersal draws a useful distinction between the early, middle and later stages of Salih's work, but also tries to describe what constitutes the impact of Salih's voice which cuts across her four collections:

> When I imagine the voice of Saniya Salih, a voice I have never known, I hear a low and muffled *adeed*, a whispered song of mourning which slips through to me amid the din of revolutionaries' rabble-rousing slogans, of warriors intent on victory, of those broken by defeat angrily denouncing state, dictator and society, and a wasted, diseased language, of dreamers who want to change reality, demolishing its institutions even as they establish a new world just like the one they seek to change. Saniya Salih's voice does not capture the listener's ear because it represents a poetic movement with forebears, founders and imitators, nor because it is gifted a silence in which to be heard. It is because it is an individual voice, unique amid poetic ostentation, able to survive with its distinctive tone and pierce you, though hemmed round by prophets, heroes, martyrs and leaders.[218]

This voice, Mersal claims, responds defiantly to a social situation which forbids the kind of participation or connection it yearns for. It does so by committing to figurative monasticism to avoid the easier solutions to women's dilemmas: deference and repression of desires, or wallowing in sentimental fantasy. Theodor Adorno's subtle dialectic in defining the social function of lyric poetry is helpful in this instance: the lyric's social protest consists in the distance it takes from the entire social world, understood here as a male world that re-constitutes itself after every so-called revolution. By seizing distance, it "becomes the measure of what is

[217] On this interpretation of Aristotelean catharsis see Reuben Snir's interesting chapter: "'I Saw my God in the Eye of My Heart': Mysticism, Poetry and the Creative Process in Modern Secular Arabic Culture," in: Avi Elkayam and Shlomy Mualem (eds.), *Kabala, Mysticism and Poetry* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015), 371-41.
[218] Translation provided by Robin Moger in: https://qisasukhra.wordpress.com/2017/07/22/iman-mersal-on-saniya-salih/ Last visited March 26, 2019.

false and bad," i.e., maliciously naturalized in this world: the militarism of ideological poetry, the cultural pretensions of *Shi*ᶜ*r*, and even the embattled anger of her husband.

If indeed Salih's voice is distinguished from her contemporaries by her lack of poetic ostentation, where from stems its authority? As poetic material, the experiential aspect is a byproduct of the inert dark mass informed by her orphaned childhood. When her poetry latches on to this mass, it is transformed into a vision of something much broader than private pain. It mobilizes a cracked, immobilized world carried in women's minds and visualized in terms of their bodies. Her world, says Saᶜid, is made of "scenes of wreckage, constructed in contraries, injured beauty, great meanings shattered and trampled on, in things both fantastic and ephemeral. In this, she connects her pains to the historical situation of women's pains, constructs the tremendous spectacle of the female body in its sites of struggle, vicissitudes and wonders."[219]

Yet womanhood is an insufficient condition for engendering the poetic voice Mersal speaks of, with its clarity and depth of insight into human grief. Both Mersal and Saᶜid address the claim to universality implicit within Salih's lyric, a claim which brings up the questions of poetic language and poetic world. Mersal states that what is provoking about Salih's poetry is the "mysterious zones" that she failed to realize poetically precisely because of her earthly contingencies as a woman, a wife, mother, and sister working a tedious office job. Part of the pleasure Mersal takes in the "wildness of imagination and limpidity" of her best poems is reading them alongside the many awkward or half-baked ones, serving as a reminder to the severe constraints she faced in life. As a fellow woman poet of a later poetic generation less enthralled by collective dreams, Mersal suggests that her own poems set out to explore the very same areas of women's everyday drudgery that Salih skipped over as unfit for verse. For Mersal,

[219] Salih, *al-Aᶜmal*, 17.

then, Salih's vision is less interesting as a timeless universal expression of poetic truths. This aspect of visionary universality is in fact the most time-bound, since it is formed by a dated conception of poetry belonging to the modernist *Shi^{c}r* school. The more interesting dialogue is historically constituted, a two-sided exchange between Salih's poetic experience and her experiences as a woman. This exchange results in a feminine multiverse grounded in an individual perspective.

Sa^{c}id, in turn, argues that Salih's poetry has the visionary texture, i.e., belongs to the universalizing theory of poetry developed by the *Shi^{c}r* group. Salih, in fact, acknowledges that the encounter with Adonis' translation from Saint-John Perse's "Étroits sont les vaisseaux" (the ninth and final section of *Amers*) had shocked her into writing seriously.[220] She wrote privately and first showed a poem to her sister only after a *Shi^{c}r* gathering they had attended together, suggesting that the climate of experimentalism liberated her.[221] In a late interview, she notes that her poems' obscurity is meant to cause bewilderment and stir an active response rather than give pleasure, along the lines of the modernist program.[222] Perse's poems, and his maritime epics in particular, were a central axis on which Arab modernism pivoted, and are written into many of Adonis' original poems from the late fifties.[223] For the male poets of *Shi^{c}r*, the sea is both an exilic space of adventure and a "space of origins, of cities, alphabets, and civilization"[224] associated with the mercantile spirit of ancient Phoenicia. Though adopting the latter emphasis on origins, Salih also alters its meanings. The origins discovered by means of the sea trope have to do with the historically prolonged suffering of women's repressed desires. The mythic primeval past thus dwells at the heart of female immanence. What must have baffled Salih and

[220] Salih, *al-A^{c}mal*, 10.
[221] Ibid., 11.
[222] Ibid., 486.
[223] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 131-132
[224] Ibid., 23-24

prompted her into expression was the laudatory affirmation of corporeal female sexuality combined with the air of numinosity around Perse's poetic language. This combination appears in passages such as this one, spoken from an archetypal woman's perspective:

> You are here, my love, and I have no place save in you. The source of my being I will raise towards you and to you will I open my woman's night, clearer than your man's night; and in me the grandeur of loving will perhaps teach you the grace of being loved. License then for the body's play! Offering, Offering, and favour of being! For you night opens a woman; her body, her havens, her shore; and her primeval night, where all memory lies. May love make of her its lair![225]

The fusion between classical impersonality and exorbitant fleshliness empowered Sailh to come forward as a woman writer with a claim to writerly enthronement. The amorphous space of the sea is no longer a conduit to world literature but an open signifier for the unbounded womanly bodies engulfing her existence, and in which she must navigate her "vessel." The suggestion that she is the Lautréamont to her husband's Rimbaud is founded on the premise that her poetry stems from pain of oceanic depth and expanse, a claim made legible through the conceit fleshed out in the first canto of the *Maldoror*: "Old ocean, you are the symbol of identity: always equal unto yourself […] Old ocean, your physical magnitude is only discernible if one can imagine the energy needed to beget your entire mass [...] Old ocean, men […] have not yet managed to measure your dizzying unfathomed depths."[226] Parts from this canto were translated to Arabic for *Shiᶜr* magazine by the Lebanese poet Shawqi Abu Shaqra.[227] Though Abu Shaqra translates identity [*identité*] as unity [*waḥda*] and men [*les hommes*] as *bashar* [non-gendered "humanity"], Salih's work, perhaps inadvertently, re-emphasizes the shades of the French original: the ocean as a symbolic "receptacle" for identity which may also symbolize an

[225] Trans. Wallace Fowlie in St.-John Perse, *Collected Poems*, 461. Adonis tellingly translates "*La nuit t'ouvre une femme*" as "night reveals to you [*yakshifu*] a woman," which both mellows down the sexuality and shifts it towards Sufi *bāṭinī* meanings of *kahsf*. The phrase "plus claire," "clearer" in the English version, is rendered as *akthar ḍiyāᵓan*, more luminous, which again raises it up a notch in terms of Sufi Neo-platonic connotations.
[226] Trans. Alexis Lykiard in Lautréamont, *Maldoror* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1994), 38-39.
[227] *Shiᶜr* 10 (April 1959), 74-86.

unconfined difference beyond men's ordinary understanding. In a poem dedicated to her daughter Sham, Salih envisions herself as an ocean of historical sorrow from the depths of which her daughter emerges as a pearl. She writes:

> Pearl
> you slept inside me for whole ages,
> listened to guts clamour,
> roar of blood.
> So long I hid you, for so long
> until history might end its sorrow
> until the great warriors end their wars and
> the torturers flay their last victim,
> until an age of light comes in
> and one of us comes out from the other.[228]

Salih's first collection *al-Zaman al-Dayyiq* [The Narrow Age] is steeped in Perse's elemental, non-specific language of desire as translated by Adonis. Some lines inserted between quotes read as if taken directly from his translation, even though they are purely imitative. A prominent example is the poem "Sarir al-Nahr" [River Bed], a clear allusion to the refrain of Perse's long section: "*ḍayyiqatun hiyya al-marākibu, ḍayyiqatun hiyya sarīruna* [*narrow are the vessels, narrow our bed*]," in Adonis' translation.[229] In this poem, Salih includes an address in quotation marks that begins "*ayyuhā al-aḥibbāʾu al-rāḥilūna / ilā al-marāfiʾi al-khaffiyyati* [*O lovers departing / towards invisible ports*]," which is nearly identical to some of Perse's forms of address in the Arabic and capitalizes on his imagery of the female body as a vast sea with many ports. In general, any time quotation marks are used in Salih's 1964 collection, the transmitted voice sounds very much like the Arabic Perse, though the wording never quite matches any particular phrase in the fifty-page-long translated poem. The poems are thus engaged in deep dialogue with *Shiʿr*'s modernism in translation.

[228] Salih, *al-Aʿmal*, 136. Trans. Robin Moger.
[229] *Shiʿr* 4, 38.

The poems collected in this volume were composed in her mid-twenties and are thus concerned with female sexuality rather than motherhood. "The Sky's Body," the title of Salih's debut poem, indicates as much. In 1961, this poem won first place in a literary prize awarded by *al-Nahar* literary section administered by Lebanese poet Unsi al-Hajj. It is still considered by second-wave modernists such as ᶜAbbas Baydun to be a rarely visited peak of Arab modernism. It begins thus: "The sky's body is darkened and sad / so let the night be the journey's end. / Illumination is illusory and transient / the wings of silence more sensitive."[230] From the cracked sky's body at night's last hour, the dawn of a female counter-universe is waiting to break but is suppressed almost at the very moment of inception, dismissed as illusory and retreats back to the silent womb. Bodily desire, the swelling ocean, is registered only as a reflection in the black sky, pierced by undiscernible wings of silence. *Iḍāʾa* [illumination] derives from the clarity of Perse's feminine night, translated by Adonis as *ḍiyāʾ*. *Akthar ḥassāsiyatan* (more sensitive) is a direct borrowing from Adonis' wording.[231] The retentive apocalypse halting the night's end corresponds with the aubade motif running through "Étroits…". Yet the erotic jubilation of its antecedent is nowhere to be found. The voice cannot be mingled with the sea,[232] the "flesh more sensitive than the eye's tissues" is replaced with sensitive wings of silence. The argument of the poem advances through apophatic sayings about a voiceless poetic voice, an alienated internal space torn away from bodily sensation. The vessels are stranded, the lips mystified. The voice is then thrown back upon its protective enigmatic powers and turns to the muse of the sibylline Cassandra to enhance its truth-claims. The Sybil also serves as a figure of potency in Perse's

[230] Salih, *al-Aᶜmal*, 31.
[231] *Shiᶜr* 4, 49. "*makhmūrun makhmūrun jiddan al-qalbu al-malakī […] wa-l-jasadu aktharu ḥassāsiyyatan minhu fī ghadan al-ᶜayni*." In the original French: "Ivre, très ivre, cœur royal! […] Et la chair plus sensible qu'aux tuniques de l'œil."
[232] Perse, 473. Part 4:1 in the long poem. *Shiᶜr* 4, 50.

poem yet plays a more minor role there.[233] In Salih's gloomy world of thwarted sexual desire and cloistered dreams, the role of the dark prophetess and her sacred rites is magnified.

What Salih takes from Perse is the possibility of finding exile in language, but the shape of her exile is otherwise determined because of gender difference and because of cultural and national specificities. As Sa^{c}id beautifully writes about her sister, Salih charges her poems with immense tension between a "broken-down world" and the "unruly imagination," ceaselessly deferring their convergence into a vision of exaltation. The irreparable fractures of that world lead her to re-shape Perse's advocation of limitless metaphysical adventure and point to the material and cultural privilege that underlies this spirit of adventure. The fusion of the masculine "universal" and feminine "particularity" is suggested by another of Sa^{c}id's observant remarks: "all things glimmer in dream waters that put the world on a swing flung between the fantastically piercing and the tragically marginalized."[234] *Shi^{c}r*'s claim of introducing a universally-oriented liberating idiom attuned to the "spirit of the age" is vindicated and upended at once. Its universality is rejected as being an exclusively male version of "cutting-edge" avant-garde, yet a total rejection of the new order would mean either complete poetic silence or incomprehensibility. Though Salih thematizes the temptations of this silence, she nonetheless moves towards the poetic center from her own dilemmas of female immanence. And that difference in transcendence is the ultimate justification for *Shi^{c}r*'s cultural project, setting in motion the process of pluralizing poetic experience.

[233] This single reference to the Sybil comes in a meaningful part addressed to a woman "high in flood" and equating sea and dream: "And you, singing and stammering on your thorny bank, Sybil open on her rock like the Eryhtrean virgin – great hydra of force and tenderness who disgorges her god – you will again frequent the truth of the dream: that other sea, most vast and nearby, that no one teaches or names." Trans. Fowlie in Perse, 481. See also *Shi^{c}r* 4, 55.
[234] Salih, *al-A^{c}mal*, 16.

IV Kamal Kheir Beik: Critic, Poet, Freedom-Fighter

After al-ᶜAzma and Salih, the poetry of Kamal Kheir Beik (1935-1980) is situated at a third remove from the modernist center. The militant expressive model espoused in his early career contrasts especially starkly with Salih's idiom. For Kheir Beik, the collectivist *ᶜamūdī* poem had a viable political function. Though his life-trajectory shares many features with those of Adonis, al-Maghut, and al-ᶜAzma, he decided to remain politically active in the ranks of the SSNP in spite of recognizing the strong consistency of the *Shiᶜr* project. The divergence in his personal and artistic choices makes tangible what actual political involvement could mean for aspiring poets in days of a feverish nationalistic age, and what the *Shiᶜr* poets, understandably, sought to seize distance from. The anomaly in Kheir Beik's trajectory is that alongside his political activism, he continued to write serious poetry and to conduct productive literary research. After his failed attempt to merge politics and poetry in the 1950s, he maintained these two spheres at an almost complete bifurcation from one another. The unengaged lyric poetry that he wrote towards the end of his career was kept private. It was posthumously published by his friends and informed by an idea of the poem as affording companionship in a time of overwhelming defeat in the cultural and political arenas. In the high time of *Shiᶜr* magazine around 1960, Kheir Beik defended his choice to opt for the form of militant qasidas with two claims: one was educational and underscored its efficacy in promoting social change; the other was pluralistic and pointed to the growing popularity of the prose poem as a threat to the diversity of the poetic eco-system. Both of these claims are premised on a clear comprehension of the profound change in poetic taste *Shiᶜr* was about to carry out. Kheir Beik understands both the major weaknesses of esthetic detachment and its dangerous capacity to disseminate. After

placing himself in permanent exile in the 1970s, Kheir Beik wrote a poem that re-interprets the concept of poetic adventure propagated by *Shiᶜr*:

> **Adventure**
> I pierce the skin of an ill world
> Enter into the germ of things
> I wed serenity to noise
> And am re-born in the lowest dregs.[235]

The minimalism of this poem reduces the scale of the imagined adventures of modern poetry: no longer visionary flights into the unknown, but a quick needle prick; not otherworldly *kahsf* and seafaring but the real and brutal political world as an international system in which Arabs rank at the bottommost of the hierarchy. Re-birth is no longer a mythic act of renewal but a personal retreat from myth to start again from a lower place. The well-measured *tafᶜīla* renounces the modernist faith of dismantling poetic conventions for the sake of reclaiming the West, thus denying itself the spoils of translation. The projected global map is not a literary one, but a global system of schemes and malice and the shadow network of political renegades needling their way to unsettle the loathsome open societies of the West.

Kheir Beik was born in Qirdaha, a small town in northwestern Syria on the Alawite coastal mountains.[236] The Kheir Beik clan were members of the Kalbiya confederation of Alawite tribes which included the Assad family. The "Beik" in their family name designates a historical family belonging to Ottoman *bakawat*, notability. President Hafiz al-Assad, also born in Qirdaha, was five years Kamal's senior. The families were connected by marriage, as one of Rifᶜat al-Assad's daughters (Hafiz's niece) married a Kheir Beik. In time, as Syria would be coming under the rule of the Alawite officers and then the House of Assad, many of Qirdaha's townsmen and the tribal powers supporting them would become Baathist devotees and high-

[235] Khayr Bik, *Wadaᶜan Ayyuha al-Shiᶜr* [Farewell, Poetry, 1982], 48.
[236] For a précis of the biography see Diab, *Poésie syrienne contemporaine*, 147. Sanaᵓ al-Khuri's article for *al-Akhbar* mentioned later is also an excellent source (n. 247).

ranking army officers held in the president's confidence. Muhammad Nassif Kheir Beik (born in Hama countryside), for example, served as deputy vice-president for security affairs, took charge of the Syrian-Iranian military alliance, and was considered one of the regime's "black boxes" having been exposed to its darkest secrets. After the 2011 uprising, he was blacklisted and sanctioned by the EU for "violence against the civilian population"[237] and died in 2015 from prostate cancer.[238] As late as the 21st century, Qirdaha remained a stronghold of al-Assad loyalists, a symbol of the family's monopolized power, not unlike Saddam Hussein's Tikrit in its day. Many of the so-called *shabiha*, the fearsome pro-government vandals, are said to be recruited there.[239]

Like Adonis, Kheir Beik deeply wanted to leave his origins in the Alawite heartland behind. Party membership, along with the intellectual passport of a writer, was his way out. Like both Adonis and al-Maghut, he joined the SSNP. Like them, he had to flee Syria for Beirut in 1955 after the assassination of ᶜAdnan al-Malki and was possibly jailed beforehand. Though present in Beirut in *Shiᶜr*'s heyday and personally close to the group, he was not an active contributor to the magazine,[240] maintaining instead his passion for political activism. He remained an active SSNP member, dividing his time between Beirut and Koura, a picturesque region on the northern Lebanese coast between the Mediterranean and the mountain range, where the wealth of olive trees on the plain may be seen from atop lush foothills. It was also a major hotbed for SSNP partisans in Lebanon, as it was populated mostly by Greek Orthodox Christians, one of the party's most valuable constituencies. There Kamal met his first wife, a

[237] See EU COUNCIL DECISION 2013/255/CFSP of 31 May 2013 concerning restrictive measures against Syria. Open resource in: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:02013D0255-20161117 Last visited March 26, 2019.
[238] For a comprehensive account of Kheir Beik's life and role in al-Assad's regime see: http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/who-was-mohammad-nasif-kheirbek-by-mohammad-d/ last visited November 18, 2017
[239] See Mona Mahmood, "Bashar al-Assad's hometown defiant amid threat of rebel and US-led attacks," *The Guardian*, 17 September, 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/17/assad-hometown-qerdaha-defiant-attacks last visited November 18, 2017.
[240] Aside from one mediocre Tammuzi poem titled "Al-Aᶜma [The Blind Man]," *Shiᶜr* 7-8 (June 1958), 33-35.

Greek Orthodox whose marriage to an Alawite was not well looked upon. He became a teacher in the Bishmizzine High School, a Christian school serving the Greek Orthodox community of the local villages. His first published volume of poetry *Al-Burkan* [The Volcano, 1960] is subtitled *qaṣāʾid qawmiyya* [nationalistic poems], nationalistic meaning Pan-Syrian. It testifies to his intense love for his adoptive Lebanese home, but also to an ideological mission of radicalizing the young. The volume's dedication reads: "to those whose spirits have not yet awakened – the heat of the volcano!"

Interestingly, Kheir Beik's chosen pen-name for this book is Cadmus, capturing his self-conceived double role as poet-prince, founder of Thebes and inventor of the Phoenician alphabet, a sword (or gun) in one hand, a pen in the other. The name also suggests Kamal's attempt to assimilate into the Lebanese surroundings, Cadmus being part of the Phoenician pantheon appropriated by local-patriots of Lebanese Phoenicianism. In renaming himself to transcend his Alawite origins, Kheir Beik may figure as Adonis' more overtly political double. Ali Ahmad Said Esber changed his Islamic sounding name to that of the pagan Near Eastern god of perpetual renewal, symbolizing a stance of defiant ethereality. Kheir Beik, conversely, had redefined himself not as a god but as a heroic figure of both political and belletristic foundational might. Even after he dropped his mythological name, Kheir Beik did not return to his family name, and in his second volume he appeared as Kamal Muhammad. To withdraw entirely from political struggles was out of the question for him but so was becoming a "political poet" commenting on trivialities of news coverage or phrasing slogans for some vaguely conceived *shaᶜb* (people). At this early stage, his political poetry is simply a minor instrument in an overall toolkit for political agitation along partisan lines. *Al-Burkan*'s idiom is thus by necessity *ᶜamūdī* –i.e., metrically regulated and rhyming – but it is strongly situated in a place and addresses a

concrete audience. The landscapes and people of Koura are constantly invoked, and the symbols are adjusted to his students' familiarity with the Christian Bible. This conservative stylistic choice was made consciously, with full awareness of its modernist Beiruti surroundings. But it was not made entirely unapologetically, as the preface shows:

> It is my conviction that a poet not present in the midst of his present-day public is a non-existent poet. The return to composing *ᶜamūdī* poetry is thus a very natural phenomenon. The presence of *ᶜamūdī* poetry and its existence as model are matters of necessity because they serve the interest of diversity. Societies that are not diverse are limited and of no value. Or maybe it is simply that the self will be more present and dynamic in this model than in any other. Classical poetry possesses its own unique and valid esthetic standards, as does poetry committed [*multazim*] to individual existence and existential personalism… etc. In any case, we cannot discount the esthetic importance of any genre of poetry.
>
> Kamal[241]

This passage was added to the 1989 edition of *al-Burkan* and is attributed to "Kamal" rather than "Cadmus". It comes to replace a laudatory preface in the first 1960 edition hailing "Cadmus" as a revolutionary poet of high merit arousing widespread enthusiasm for the causes of the party. Kamal's face is moderate. He invokes diversity rather than the usual defense-line of Arab authenticity, speaking in the language of a similar liberal agenda to that of the modernists. *Shiᶜr*'s idiom of "personalist" poetry, though legitimate, and maybe valuable, is seen as rising towards absolute hegemonic dominance, a threat to its poetic eco-system. The point of critique against the "commitment" to individualist poetry is that the personalism of the modernists is in fact highly impersonal, de-humanizing the Arab poetic subject and nullifying its dynamism and potency by detachment from his cultural specificities. As an antidote to this, the return to the classical idiom is seen as "natural." The contradiction in this claim is that it is precisely the move towards autonomy instigated by *Shiᶜr* that opened up the possibility of composing prosodic poetry as a matter of choice rather than a matter of course.

[241] Khayr Bik, *al-Burkan* [The Volcano, 1989], 6.

This natural, as if unproblematic, return to the classical involves a stringent subservience of both poetry and poet which runs counter to the democratic ideal of increasing diversity of expression. The poems in *al-Burkan* provide an interesting case study not for poetry critics but for historians of a political movement. In the late 1950s, the SSNP were deeply involved in Lebanon's tense ethnic and religious conflicts. The party set up the most effectively organized and trained militias. Its armed volunteer-groups bore much of the brunt in suppressing the Nasserist rebels in 1958, and its members were willing to take on difficult and perilous tasks. They fought well and with great determination on multiple fronts.[242] It is to this hardline military discipline and stern ideological commitment that Kheir Beik's early poems attest. Cadmus is a poet in uniform, a bard-cum-general marching forward troops in line:

> To the aggressors, traitors of my nation / thieves of my honor and my generosities
> Those who sow discord between me and my loved ones / who tore my flesh and the flesh of my little ones
> With stone, with flood, with death, / with my earthquakes, my thunder, my fire
> I will drive away their fangs from my land / and remove the garment of shame from my people
> They disfigured my past… but in my future / a sun will scatter the dark of its traces
> If my right hand is cut off, my left / will hurry to resume to the epic battle
> I will keep lighting the flame of my poems for the struggle / and direct my roaring current through the coal of blazing fire
> On the people's cross I will raise my front / my body will not mind the harshness of the nail.[243]

Al-Burkan has more uplifting sides both poetically and ideologically, such as the love poems to Kamal's wife and the advancing of ideas of women's liberation (part of the secular SSNP's national liberation program). Yet, the underlying conviction is that the revolutionary political battle needs to be won first, before individual men and women get their due, and must be won by force. The emotional stridency seems to be harnessed first and foremost to the causes of the SSNP militias, represented by the logo of the red hurricane [*al-zawbaᶜa al-ḥamrāᵓ*]. The *zawbaᶜa* is an ancient Mesopotamian symbol appropriated by Antun Saᶜada for his party and

[242] For an excellent analysis of the SSNP's military prowess in Lebanon during the 1958 Crisis and with specific refence to Koura see Adel Beshara, *Lebanon*, 43-44.
[243] Khayr Bik, *al-Burkan* (1960), 86-87.

associated in the collective imagination of the 1930-1940s with the swastika. The curves of its four-sided star design make it an uncannily dynamic emblem, a hybrid of the cross, the crescent, and a ninja star. It was repeatedly adopted by the various iterations of the militarized wings of the SSNP, from its early 1930s militias enlisted to fight in Palestine to the one recently emerging in the Syrian Civil War, fighting on the side of Bashar al-Assad and allied with Hezbollah (though not necessarily fully aligned with the interests of both) under the name Nusur al-Zawbaᶜa [Eagles of the Whirlwind].[244]

This kind of fomenting rhetoric and the actions following from it got the party into trouble in Lebanon. After they had gradually resurfaced during the 1950s following Saᶜada's execution, the party sided with president Camille Chamoun and the Lebanese government against the Nasserist opposition in the Crisis of 1958 and soon was legalized again. However, they suddenly fell afoul of Chamoun's successor Fouad Chehab, then drifted into a hostile anti-government stance and eventually joined a group of disaffected military officers in a failed coup attempt in 1961. This led to a renewed ban on the party's political activity, and Kheir Beik found himself banished from Lebanon.

After that, Kheir Beik's uncommon integrity led him to conclude that it was no longer possible to hold the "two watermelons" – literature and politics in Emile Habibi's wonderful colloquial quip[245] – in one hand. He did not relinquish political activism, yet now began keeping his watermelons apart. He took to exile in Paris, re-married and enlisted in a PhD program at the Sorbonne. The politics of the SSNP took a sharp turn in the 1960s towards the extreme Arab left, stirred after the June 1967 defeat into fervent dedication to the Palestinian cause. In Paris, Kheir

[244] Nour Shama, "The Eagles of the Whirlwind" in: *Foreign Policy*, 28 March 2016. https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/28/the-eagles-of-the-whirlwind/ Last visited November 18, 2017
[245] Emile Habibi, *Saraya Bint al-Ghul* (London: Riyad El-Rayyes: 1992), 8.

Beik began taking part in, and perhaps organizing, clandestine cells of Arab student activists avidly devoted to the Palestinian cause. These cells would later be subsumed under The Black September Organization, a loose international network of Arab guerilla Fedayeen named after King Hussein's September 1970 crackdown on Palestinians in Jordan. The group managed to pull off several significant operations: they assassinated the Jordanian prime minister Wasfi al-Tal outside a Cairo hotel, and most notoriously, killed 11 Israeli athletes in the Munich Summer Olympics of 1972. The extent of Kheir Beik's involvement in these operations is unknown, yet, according to recently uncovered material, he is reported to be one of the architects of the assassination of the Israeli diplomat Colonel Joe Alon, a former fighter-pilot who served as Assistant Air Attaché in Washington, DC. Alon was fatally shot in July 1973 outside his house in Chevy Chase, Maryland, as he got out of his car, returning from a party with his wife. The FBI never managed to crack the case and closed investigations in 1978, but a Cairo radio broadcast announced the same day of the murder that the job was a payback for the killing of a Black September leader by Israel. The *New York Times* journalist Adam Goldman has recently re-opened the case by uncovering his correspondence with Illich Ramirez Sanchez, also known as Carlos the Jackal, a world-renowned Venezuelan terrorist and Muslim convert who is currently serving life sentence in France. According to Sanchez, the job was performed by two American hit men, Vietnam veterans, who entered the country for the operation and left immediately after it. The two used to frequent a Paris bookstore owned by a Palestinian, and when they expressed sympathy with the Palestinian plight, the owner referred them to Kheir Beik. Kheir Beik met them in a café in the Latin Quarter, and when asked what they could do to aid the Palestinian cause, he pointed to Joe Alon as a fit target for a hit.[246]

[246] Adam Goldman, "I Wrote to Carlos the Jackal, and an Israeli's Assassination Case Was Revived," in: *New York Times*, January 8, 2017 https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/08/us/politics/carlos-the-jackal-yosef-alon-assassination-israel.html?_r=0 last visited November 18, 2017

In addition, Sanchez reports that Kheir Beik had helped him plan a raid on the Vienna headquarters of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries in 1975. So, in lieu of being embroiled in the ruthless local party politics of the Arab Levant, Kheir Beik placed himself as a major node on the stateless global map of canny guerilla operationists. That he was trusted by many reputable international insurgents is no coincidence: all who knew him speak of a humble, affable, quick-witted and charming man.[247] His attire changed from the formal suit in his committed days as an Arab militia bard to the loosely hanging buttoned shirt of a third-world revolutionary dandy; he grew his hair to cascade on the back of his neck, and his mustache appeared more Latino than Arab.

All the while Kheir Beik was also putting together his French dissertation on the modernist movement in Arabic poetry, a consummately non-radical, patiently argued critical synthesis of their achievement. The thesis was first published as a book in French under the title *Le Mouvement Moderniste de la poésie arabe contemporaine* (1978), then translated into Arabic (1982) and dedicated this time to the "grandeur of poetry, in all times." It is still a highly regarded and much-cited reference work. He started it at the Sorbonne under the mentorship of Jacques Berque, but later transferred to Switzerland, where his work was overseen by Simon Jargy, a professor of Oriental ethnomusicology at the University of Geneva. This encounter had a great impact on the thesis, since Jargy encouraged him to go deeper into the rhythmic structures of *Shiʿr*'s poetic output. And so, while the first third of the thesis is devoted to the "socio-cultural" framework of Arab modernism, the rest provides a meticulous philological analysis of its literary structures from the level of the individual poem to stanza, sentence structure, word,

[247] See Sanaʾ al-Khuri's article in remembrance of Kamal in *Al-Akhbar*'s literary supplement. *Al-Akhbar* November 5, 2010: http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/36752 last visited November 20, 2017.

and phoneme, all in an attempt to determine how far the group had actually departed from the conventions of *ᶜarūḍ,* classical prosody, to establish their self-governed poetic rhythms and genres. Situated as a kind of insider-outsider witness to the movement, Kheir Beik is both steadily objective and appreciative towards their project. His structural approach is charitable as it evaluates their corpus by what they set out to achieve.

The premise is articulated along the lines of the formative statements of Adonis in his 1960 manifesto for the prose-poem: the "modernity" of the movement does not consist solely in the revolutionary impulse to destroy the old, but rather in the dialectic between creation and de-creation. The constructive aspect is folded into the task of creating a poem as a "total work of art" premised on the idea of a maximally integrated subjective experience projecting onto distinct 'worlds'. The individual poem's unity models a possible unity of individual experience; its freedom is conceived as positive, governed, that is, by a sense of order and structure whose realization differs from poet to poet: "finally, the poem took its departure point from the idea of a unique experience, leaving behind 'heedless similitude' to become a free, interrelated entity, a model, that is, recognized as singular by the extent to which it is free in order and shaping."[248] It is self-conscious with respect to the smallest units of language, and its patterns are therefore dense, and reflexively self-referential. And indeed, Kheir Beik regards Adonis's work as the culmination of multilayered, complexly interlocked construction. The close examination of the rhythmic developments Adonis introduces allows Kheir Beik to do away with the mystical fluff and romantic esotericism of the visionary theory. In a sense, he rescues the pluralizing ethos inherent in *Shiᶜr*'s endeavor: the diversity of subtly constructed poetic experiences as a potential for non-poetic diversity of individual experience. Underneath the intellectualist coating, their

[248] Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 352.

struggle is seen as continuous with the earthly struggles of their age, revealing a deep anxiety about the Arab present and a corrosive apprehensiveness about a future with little to none collectively shared horizons. In his capacity as literary critic, we thus find Kheir Beik in the guise of a "freedom fighter" again, but in a totally different sense: not an underground guerilla but a tough-minded, Kantian sort of liberal.

As could be expected in such a precipitous life, Kheir Beik met a violent, premature death. In November 1980, he visited an SSNP comrade in Beirut as the city was in the grip of civil war. The friend – Bashir ʿUbayd – was member of the party's high council and also the reigning president of the Lebanese Vegetable Trade Union. At noontime on November 5, as ʿUbayd was taking a turn with his car in downtown Beirut, he did not give right of way and collided with a driver who turned out to be Munir Fatha, a member of the Murabitun militia, an independent Nasserist faction that this time fought on the Palestinian side together with the SSNP. The drivers engaged in an abusive verbal exchange after which weapons were drawn and bullets shot. Fatha was killed and rumor spread that ʿUbayd was responsible for the killing. As several of Fatha's family members were also militia men, the Nasserist "movement" was rallied to battle, while the SSNP headquarters desperately tried to prevent the anticipated retaliation. Kheir Beik was a guest in ʿUbayd's home located on the fourth floor of an apartment building on Saqyet al-Janzir street in West Beirut, about three kilometers south of AUB. An hour and a half later, ʿUbayd's building was surrounded by Murabitun fighters who fired machine gun ammunition and RPG missiles at the flat. The residents – ʿUbayd, Kheir Beik, and ʿUbayd's niece Nahiya Bajani – eventually surrendered before the attackers, and, according to the autopsy report, were shot dead from close range. For hours later and into the night, the streets of Raʾs Beirut were overtaken by armed guerilla warfare between the sides. In Kheir Beik's funeral

service, the eulogizers recognized the cruel irony of his death by an accidental skirmish in an internecine conflict rather than by the hand of the Zionists who had made several attempts on his life.[249]

His own poetic career was almost entirely sideswiped by these occupations. Nonetheless, despite abstaining from publication between 1965 and his death in 1980, he had not stopped writing. Three of his friends, among them Adonis, collected the poems he wrote in exile (scribbled for the most part on the back of Gitanes cigarette boxes) and arranged them in three elegant volumes printed by an unnamed Beiruti publishing house in a special typeface and with evocative illustrations by Arab artists.[250] A volume of his collected poems including all five books was finally published in 2013 with a preface by Khalida Sa^{c}id.[251] His late output, and thus most of his published work, is nothing like the violent ideological rhetoric of *al-Burkan*. His change of setting led to a complete change of poetic modes: as of his arrival in Europe, Kheir Beik espoused a kind of minimalist lyric form with soft elegiac tones of remembrance and self-questioning, a whispered conversation with his unmoored self as situated in an alien Parisian environment. The need to overcome the displacement in exile is doubled by the need to overcome the self-alienation involved in radical political activism. Commenting on the South African poet Breyten Breytenbach's reflections on underground politics, Michael Walzer remarks that "clandestinity in politics is oddly similar to detachment in social criticism […] the

[249] *Al-Nahar* November 6, 1980. The conflict made the front pages of *al-Nahar* and continued to provide big headlines for several days because of the high profiles of the victims. The shooting was situated in the vicinity of AUB and the upscale commercial streets in al-Hamra area, where gunfire was less frequent. After 24 hours, peace was restored and monitored by the Arab Deterrent Forces, originally a pan-Arab peacekeeping force established in 1976 in response to the Lebanese civil war. The Arab Forces gradually became purely Syrian as the civil war continued. They were the harbingers of Syrian occupation in Lebanon. In Syrian official newspapers, the incident was not reported except in small items and only after peace was restored by the Deterrent Forces. For eulogies see *al-Nahar* November 10, 1980.

[250] Though the quality of Adonis' work as a poet and cultural thinker has constantly been questioned and contested by Arab poets, his selfless regard for the interest of the trade is unanimously admired. He was a relentless promoter of fellow poets' work, writing prefaces, encouraging publication, publishing on others' behalf, and helping to find venues for publishing. Indeed, when seen thus, the whole enterprise of *Shi^{c}r* magazine falls under favorable light of generosity towards the arduous labor of fellow poets who had no other platform to showcase their life's work.

[251] Khayr Bik, *al-A^{c}mal al-Shi^{c}riyya al-Kamila* (Beirut: 2014).

purity of thinking, heightened political consciousness, rigorous discipline, and intense loyalty of the band of secret militants. Like exile, clandestinity liberates the dedicated few from their parochial connections."[252] Breyetenbach, who had experienced the life of clandestine cells first-hand, named them "colonies of grave dwellers," thinking that their frame of mind, so bent in upon its own unqualified truths, was corruptive and entirely unsuccessful as a political program. Kheir Beik, in contrast to Breytenbach, had tied his marginality in exile to a universal cause through clandestine activity, and his lyric minimalism may be read as attempts to embody this displaced voice from its living grave.

Critics who discuss the poems tend to read them alongside the life story to understand their tensile quality. The awareness of the separate spheres of activity and their mutual projection gives heightened attention to their terse wording and fraught energy. They become a vehicle of meditation on ephemerality and transience, universal lyric themes but with a particular personal resonance, since Kheir Beik was truly and by choice living on the brink of death: "death is present in his tropes and symbols as a horizon that makes life more than life," says Khalida Sa^{c}id, "it stored meanings of birth and renewal like those he learned from his native myths."[253] The realization of the relative unimportance of the poem and the poet, when compared to his other realm of action, paradoxically generates a newly found expressive power: a consciously pared down and self-effacing lyric form. As in "Adventure," its suggestive meagerness begs to be read by what it conceals.

His first posthumous volume was given the title "Farewell, Poetry" (1982). The poem from which this phrase is taken progresses dialectically from a valediction of one kind of poetry

[252] Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 214.
[253] See Sa^{c}id's moving homage essay in the literary supplement of *al-Hayat*, July 15, 2013. http://www.alhayat.com/Details/532538 last visited November 19, 2017. This essay served as preface to his recently published collected works.

– silky, travelling in closed-off mazes of symbols and pleasant gardens of the body – to an affirmative greeting of some other kind of poetry – austere, monastically devoted to hard-won truth and beauty, a stalwart companion in the "hell of burning wakefulness." The latter metaphor might be translatable to the projected world from a radical activist's perspective: a demonic, restive age of hard facts and brutal certainties:

> Dear poetry, farewell
> Our journey between the groves of words
> And the gardens of the body
> Is over.
> In our depths there is a sleeping wound
> It's time to awaken it
> It's time for it to awaken us
> From the cradles of timelessness
> We are of the generations of sleep
> We are the people of brilliant [*mushriqa*] words
> And lustful eyes.
>
> The catacombs in which we dwell
> The catacombs that dwell in us
> It's time to destroy them
> It's time to record them
> In the book of memories
> As a witness who has passed and died.
>
> Dear poetry, farewell
> The time of silky words has ended
> The era of peace
> Between my wound and the bandage
> Between my head and the pillow
> Has ended.
> We enter a barbaric age
> Flinging the ancient skull of poetry
> Into the ruins of research institutes,
> Cafes, amusement parks, clubs, temples,
> And the houses of dreamy poets
> It is an age of truth
> An age of certitude
> Poetry that strays from it all will go astray.
>
> Dear poetry, farewell
> Our estrangement in the hollows of hermetic symbols
> Is over.
> Let us leave behind to the winds,
> To ages past or to-come
> Our poems of mourning,
> Our collections of boredom
> Let us tear to pieces
> The flag of our old sorrows

And our passports.

Dear poetry, farewell
Our journey is over
And the face of the road behind us erased
We enter the history of fire,
The hell of burning wakefulness
Where the letter is a weapon,
A dagger or a bomb.

Hello to you, dear poetry
Poetry, my honest friend,
Our journey begins.[254]

Ayyuhā al-shiᶜru salāman: a stark formulation that encapsulates a greeting, a prayer, and a plea. The multiple meanings of the noun *salām* in the accusative are all evoked and impossible to render precisely: "hello, poetry"; "rest in peace, poetry"; "poetry, please give peace." A mythical resuscitation of poetry is enacted, transforming the poem from silky detachment (and also parochial over-involvement in violent struggles) into an uncomely "friend" in times of extreme need. It is asked to hold words at rest where they are otherwise constantly agitated and to become of practical use for self-reflection, to set its peacefulness against the warring words of the "barbaric age." A consciousness is posited which reveals an anti-self at odds with the political self who chooses a life inflicting wounds in compliance with a deterministic imperative imposed from above.

It is this intimate yet distant self-examining quality of poetry – with respect to the life-choices of an historically situated person – that turns it into an amicable vehicle for apprehending fragility, affording both the dignity in detachment and self-clarification. Politics, which is now a way of life rather than a subject for poetic performance, is no longer a "natural" course of action in life as in poetry but a path insisted on out of personal freedom, and poetry is there to illuminate and interpret the subjective residues of this life-project and to see the combatant off in

[254] Khayr Bik, *Wadaᶜan*, 61-65.

case of the likely premature death. More mundanely, it fills up the dead hours of the uprooted, homesick man, who is busy with his political cause only at decisive yet brief intervals.

The rhythms and imagery in "Farewell" try to serve as midwife for delivering this austere poetry from the wreckage of the old. There is an air of chastened informality in these poems, a preference for sparseness and conventional tropes in place of the verbiage of his former idiom. Great care is taken with formal matters and yet the level of vocabulary is relatively plain and the tone conversational. In their brevity of appearance on the page (less so in their overall effect), the poems resemble imagistic exercises. The predominantly short lines (7-10 syllables, with exceptions) are provided with a steady metrical frame out of which they sometimes modulate. As Husayn bin Hamza observes, Kheir Beik's late poetry is still haunted by echoes of the *tafᶜīla*, the classical foot.[255] In "Farewell" the dominant foot is the *fāᶜilātun* of *al-raml*, a favorite of the Iraqi school of *shiᶜr ḥurr*.[256] The rhyming scheme is wonderfully variable and well-tended to, leaving no orphaned end-line except for the refrain "farewell, poetry" opening each stanza. The resources of the language are economically employed in various subtle internal and morphological rhymes, such as the list of nouns – all in the same plural form – enumerating the depressing places where poetry is cast dead – *maᶜāhid, maqāhi, malāhi, nawādi, maᶜābid*. The poetry that is now dead either denied its connection to the ordinary utopias and apocalypses or over-identified with them. It thus failed to perform its realistic, critical task.

The poem is taciturn about the nature of this poetry except by what is communicated through its tightly strung form. Indeed, Saᶜid commends Kheir Beik's ability, countering the intensities of his high-strung life, to tighten his rhythms and images to their tautest.[257] Some

[255] Bin Hamza's short article in *al-Akhbar* literary supplement (November 5, 2010) helps make sense of Kheir Beik's prosodic constructs. See http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/36754 last visited November 20, 2017.
[256] Shmuel Moreh, *Modern Arabic Poetry: 1800-1970*, 117-120.
[257] Saᶜid, *al-Hayat* July 15, 2013. See: http://www.alhayat.com/article/445258/ Last visited September 7, 2018.

poems try to seize the tense relationship between the split parts of his self in one compressed image or an imagistic frame of reference taken from the stock images of exilic life such as suitcases and long lonely silences:

> **Sleep**
> I sleep in the day's suitcase
> My things and I
> I lie dormant waiting
> For the locomotive of evening.[258]

Or:

> **Prayer - 2**
> For the last time
> I ask that my wakefulness
> Touch a small word.[259]

In contrast to imagistic objectivity, these poems are indexed to a biographical lyric speaker. The darkened side of day is the side of inner reality, things touched through small words in contrast to the big intangible words driving political action, the demonic unreality of waking life:

> We darken to light up
> In a mirror hall
> In the screen of white fluency,
>
> We darken like letters
> Between fields of virgin leaves
> To be read, with our shadows
> Illuminating corners
> In a time of thickening darkness.[260]

In this state of darkness, when the redacted self eclipses the others, recollections of the frightful upheaval involved in this life come back in small trivial moments, a friend knocking on the door of his old house, saying that "a strange storm is breaking off branches." Certain poems address a 'you' whose return is always estranging, his own changing self probably, a re-discovery of a heart buried underneath the emotional dramas of the volcano: "I called it a desert,

[258] Khayr Bik, *Wadaʿan*, 13.
[259] Ibid., 29.
[260] Ibid., 19.

a forlorn city / I called it a broken flask / in the house of terror / in a wrinkle of puzzlement and loss [*tīh*] / then I discovered in it / all of a sudden – my heart."[261] Kamal's chosen political destiny, as it is here reflected, condemns him to long stretches of boredom. A café in the Latin Quarter, perhaps the same one in which he suggested the hit, makes an appearance in the book as the sad setting for passing empty time, punctuated mostly by the intervals of the chain-smoker's cigarettes:

> **Sadness**
> From a café in the Latin Quarter
> These words rise
> Like the smoke of my dying-out cigarettes
> Like broken-down armies;
>
> From a café in the Latin Quarter
> Where my ashes sit in a chair
> Wearing human form
> Scattered between the walls
> Falling into the hollow of the café
> Inside the invisible hollow of the café
>
> Where the world between my letters
> Is a limping pyramid, where the Latin Quarter
> Around me is like hills of rats
> Piercing my sadness like a knife.
> […][262]

The reliance on Near Eastern myth is here thoroughly personalized and non-heroic. Ashes of cigarettes, continuous with the scattered state of their smoker dissolving into his chair, figure as a quotidian version of renewal myths, but with no prospect of restoration except on a small scale: words that slowly rise, not military marches. The grandeur of mass collective efforts – war and civilization – has fallen into a state of disrepair: the armies broken, the pyramids limping. These words are addressed to a concrete beloved, one that is *here*, rather than the allegorical one standing for the nation: "your eyes, here, like rain / huddling close between my

[261] Ibid., 39.
[262] Ibid., 9.

lines / dancing between my wounds / like a red cross in the forests." The red cross may be construed as an interesting transformation of what the Red Hurricane signified: not a collective rallying call, but a private cry for nursing warmth, a recognition of vulnerability. The emotional content of this address is enhanced through its intertextual resonance: its precedent is Badr Shakir al-Sayyab's "Song of Rain," opening with the memorable motto *ᶜaynayki ghabātā nakhīlin* [your eyes are two palm groves]. This allusion, as well as the more general one to al-Maghut's café fantasies and urban sadness, establishes a sense of companionship with these tortured poets, and reconnects with their expressiveness as a model for poetic truth.

However, the subjective drops in which a measure of peace and "small freedom" are sought after, as one poem suggests, are so distilled as to leave out much of the recognizable world. Their current Parisian surroundings are experienced as abhorrent ("hills of rats" is just one of many unflattening projections of Paris and Europe in general) and the *waṭan* is clouded in the far-gone past, recalled only from the permanent scars it left, or by the death of his loved ones, but without a distinct face. So, at a time when Kheir Beik's poetry opened up to other, more introspective forms of engagement, he, at least as poet, could imagine belonging to no other feasible collective than the order of writing, of poetry and language, a belonging only partially satisfying: "I am nothing but a poet / occupying the surface of the word / passing by in the parade of poets / my language is nothing but a couple of darkened words / and veins which have no more blood."[263] The dried-up veins are presumably those that would flow from connection to a language community and the saucy vernacular.

This detachment would be the end point of a long journey determined by the polemic with the esthetic detachment of *Shiᶜr* magazine. The antagonism to *Shiᶜr*'s openness to

[263] Khayr Bik, *Daftar al-Ghiyab* [Absence Notebook, 1987], 17.

translation and prose language fashioned Kheir Beik's poetic choices, and led him to a different dead end. But were it not for the Shiᶜr hegemony and its esthetic pole, Kheir Beik's *tafᶜīla* could have been lodged more confidently in conventional lines and meters, and his poems would have lost their tensile strength, which in a comparative perspective, are not that dissimilar to some of Adonis' short lyrics from *Mihyar*.

Muhammad al-Maghut, my next figure, deserves a full chapter unto himself. Through his dialectic tensions with the hegemonic Beiruti center, and with little immediate recourse to *Shiᶜr*'s strategies of translation, al-Maghut in his own anarchic way started to move towards a vernacularizing poetics that opened the door for the *shafawi* poets of the 1970s.

CHAPTER 2: FROM SOCIALIST TO SOCIAL REALISM: MUHAMMAD AL-MAGHUT'S RHETORIC OF SINCERITY

I Al-Maghut's Fields of Struggle

Introduction

While the *Shi^{c}r* poets were busy undermining the old cultural ideologies and forging a new hegemonic superstructure, their high knowledge in Western arts set them far apart from their ordinary surroundings. On Gramscian terms, the degree of their organic connectedness to a social group on behalf of which they function is quite low. The Syrian poet Muhammad al-Maghut, by contrast, fashions himself more decisively as an organic intellectual in touch with common elemental feeling by refusing to uphold advanced theories about social or artistic organization. But the title "intellectual" seems slightly overblown to describe the critical activity undertaken in al-Maghut's poetry.

In a snide remark on his fellow poets' sense of self-importance, al-Maghut writes: "those who absorbed the concerns and fantasies of the generation in truth and faithfulness were not the poets and political organizations, but the bars, prisons, and places of exile."[264] For al-Maghut, poetry *was* an affair of people and places, and despite affording a kind of ameliorated place of esthetic exile, its ends were ultimately non-literary. The magical idea that the mute walls of places of privacy absorbed the dreams of his generation gives non-poetic impetus to his poetry. His poems are not after adventures in the unknown; they will form a place of gathering for the broken hearts which his heartless motherland shamed into silence:

> The goddess of poetry
> Stabs my heart with a knife

[264] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab Kana wa-Akhawatuha* (2002), 64. This book, from which I quote amply, transcribes a series of interviews conducted by Khalil Suwaylih with al-Maghut over an unspecified period of time. Al-Maghut, as is well known, was averse to public attention and refused to discuss his art with journalists. Suwaylih's interviews are thus a treasure trove of information about how he conceived his project. Since al-Maghut's distinctive poetics had not evolved much over the course of his career, most of what he says in the last decade of his life seems to me to apply to his earlier volumes as well.

When I think I am singing poems to an unknown girl,
To a voiceless motherland
That eats and sleeps with everyone.[265]

Al-Maghut venerates this goddess of poetry with marked slackness. The poetic outcome appears ad-hoc and ephemeral, determined by syntactic tics and a personal mythology. It takes delight in disorder and chance discovery. It relates to ideologies but is non-ideological, relates to modern Arab life but does not conceptualize "modernity," attempts to relieve the burden of real time and also become a document of its time. It is so open-ended as to appear all middle, an imitation of a process begun and terminated at random. In its bricolage-like method of assembling the unselected, it reaches down to the earthly lower levels of existence previously ignored in poetry: the Arab city, or the insatiable appetites of the body. The discontinuities of theme and imagery are predicated on a model of a jumpy, conversational rhythmic continuum. The quality of images does not comply with the condensation and subtle distancing of objective-correlatives; they are cartoonish, child-like doodles that favor spontaneity over autonomy. There is a deliberate naiveté in al-Maghut's confessional mode, but also a self-mocking tendency that mirrors to the writing self its unreality, opening it up to multiplicity of potentialities.

The serious literary purpose undercutting the apparent un-seriousness is creating an idiom of public poetry that, while speaking loudly, includes the multiplicity of private inner life, and is by extension open to historical flux. This kind of poetic social (not *socialist*) realism will be my main object of interest in studying Muhammad al-Maghut's poetry. One of the challenges in discussing this poetry is that it proves resistant to theoretical frameworks and formal criticism. "I'm a person who writes as he lives and lives as he writes. A war might not stir a word in me, but a popular tune from a street window or some human's cough at the end of the street sets off

[265] Trans. John Asfour. See Asfour, "Adonis and Muhammad Al-Maghut: Two Voices in a Burning Land," in: *JAL* 20:1 (1989), 29. For full article see pp. 20-30.

in my depths what all the bloody wars cannot explode."[266] Al-Maghut wants his art not to be measured by a poetic standard but by the way it relates to a reality of bloody wars and muted voices: the trigger of the tune is predicated in this sense on the wars in the background. In the same interview, he defines poets as "the daily blotting paper drying off the thousands of bloody pages in our everyday lives" and poetry as "the historical speaker in the name of dumb childhood."[267]

The lacuna in extensive scholarship about al-Maghut's poetry[268] is at least partly his own fault, since he has committed himself to creative anarchy. Unlike Adonis, he stubbornly resisted serious reflection on issues of form and language; his poetry is defiantly non-academic and was thus fairly neglected by scholars of an academically theorizing disposition. His peculiar greatness eludes description. In discussing it, one resorts to nebulous unpopular categories such as sincerity, real life, expression, sentiment, wisdom. I adopt these categories with some wariness and try to introduce some order and sense into an otherwise bafflingly untidy poetics.

Al-Maghut enjoyed the freedoms of Beirut and its literary culture but systematically presented himself as the odd one out: while everyone in *Shiʿr*'s Thursday salon were busying themselves with Pound's and Eliot's theories of modernism, al-Maghut would sit silently pouting and wait for the time to approach the buffet, so he would have it.[269] After moving away from the group, al-Maghut castigates them for digging underground tunnels to destabilize Arab history instead of showing up to the real historical battle field: the ongoing, everyday struggles of Arabs

[266] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 87.
[267] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 73.
[268] Three extensive monographs in Arabic have appeared in the last five years, but in English al-Maghut is still represented as a minor poet at best. There are two selections of his poems in English and several articles, the most helpful of which is by John Asfour, who discusses his poetry side-by-side with Adonis.
[269] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 54.

around them. Their illusory enemy, says al-Maghut, is the unfounded fiction of an Arab illiterate riffraff, and they measure their poetry's success by the extent to which this riffraff rejects it.[270]

Al-Maghut obviously exaggerates in the interest of caricature. It is axiomatic for him that the new free-verse movement in Arabic poetry realizes a need to break free from the "verbal dictatorship" of the classical line and stand face to face with historical experience in all its messiness.[271] Arabic poetry had been too long subjected to the "haughtiness and stringency" of the qasida and the new free-verse forms can humble it, make it "flexible and able to absorb contemporary experience in all its plenty and complexity."[272] He describes this phase as resembling "an act of dismembering all the loose ends and redundancies that hinder the outburst of experience as it takes its clear, singular shape."[273]

Yet al-Maghut is also correct to insist that his free-verse poem is not a conscious effort to import an international style but a manner of grappling with existential questions of how to be human and free under a particular set of constrictions. Like Kheir Beik, he detects an insincere admiration of Western poets that is prone to draw readers away from domestic problems and home-grown literary traditions.[274] Al-Maghut's struggle was waged on multiple fronts: speaking of *Shiᶜr* he would highlight his commonplace honesty, but addressing Nizar Qabbani's poems, he would highlight his modernity and the awkward intensity of his poetic language. He would criticize the work of Lebanese poet Khalil Hawi (Hawi had also broken with *Shiᶜr* for their lack of Arab sentiment) for being encased in a shell of myth and not seeing modern urban life. His

[270] These remarks are quoted by Subhi al-Hadidi in his article "Wasit al-Nathr, Adaʾ al-Shaᶜir, Jadal al-Qasida [The Medium of Prose, the Performance of the Poet, The Dialectic of the Poem]," in: *Al-Karmil* 88-89 (July 2006), 22-23. According to al-Hadidi, al-Maghut's article is titled "Nukhbat Majallat Shiᶜr [The *Shiᶜr* Magazine Elite]" and was originally published in *al-Anwar*. Al-Hadidi's reference to the re-publication in *al-Adab* did not turn up any results.
[271] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 55.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid.
[274] David Damrosch point out this phenomenon, typical of literary dynamics in post-colonial literatures. see Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (2nd edition), 136.

radically unsystematic thought ended up falling back on his own aggrandized and confected personality of an angry protest poet. Yet the function served by this struggle is to find a middle-way – embattled and limited as it may be – between the esthetic and amoral detachment of Adonis and the moralizing yet esthetically conservative lyric of Qabbani. This poetic third way is carried out through what I call a "rhetoric of sincerity" fashioned in opposition to *Shi^{c}r*'s "rhetoric of interiority," on the one hand, and to Syrian rhetoric of commitment on the other hand. The poem "Dry River" from *Sadness in the Moonlight* may serve as an introduction to al-Maghut's fields of struggle:

The Dry River
I'm boisterous, you silky Man
A prisoner with no lifeboat and no star,
Lonely and with an imbecile's eyes
But I'm sad, because my poems all sound alike,
In that wounded tune that doesn't change
I want to flutter around, to soar high
Like a darkly frowning prince
Who crushes fields and humanity.

My homeland! You bell hanging in my mouth,
You Bedouin with disheveled hair,
This mouth that makes poetry and other delights
Must eat, my dear motherland
These thin white fingers
must tinker,
weave ropes of bread and rain.

No stars in sight
The red vagrant word is my bedrock, my fields
I wanted to write something
About imperialism and *flânerie*
About my country marching backwards like the wind
While memories and baggy clothes fall
From her blue eyes;
But I can't -
My heart is as cold as a Northern breath on the café front,
Where the lowly ghost of Tolstoy
Stands before me like a dangling noose,
That decrepit old man folded like a dollar bill
In the depths of Russia.
I can't write when Damascus
Deliciously lies in my notebook like naked thighs.

My desert of song, gather the fire of cities

And the lament of steam ships
Night has come, prolonged like a ship of ink
And I'm still stranded in the lowest part of town
As if I came from another country
And in my room, full of cheap actor-posters and cigarette butts
I dream of heroism, and blood, and the crowd's roar
And I cry… warmly, like no woman ever cried
My dear heart… sink
On the deck of a ship preparing to sail
My hand reaches for the dagger handle
And my eyes hover like a beautiful bird over the sea. [275]

Clearly, this poem is about the poet and the poem he is writing, or rather, about his constrictions and frustrations. The poet is imagined to be situated in a field of pressing forces that attempt to repress his wish to speak poetically. The first such force is an internal one, an aesthetic conscience referred to as the "silky man," representing the tradition of publicly sanctioned poetic speech in Arabic. The sources of this silkiness hark back to the qasida with its typical decorative manners and characteristic moods, most notably the elegy. Yet, the silky man as al-Maghut's anti-self is applied to a broader category than poetic style. It possesses a literary as well as non-literary reality: the fluffy rhetoric covering up life lived as if in prison, the false cosmopolitanism, ideological as well as poetical, that takes no account of the actualities of the local present. These forces are not external to him because of his identity as a writer; they mire him in fierce inner struggles of self-expression. The ideal of the Arab poet forces upon him an unrealizable wish to become a princely sovereign that flutters above these debasing struggles, but all he comes up with is a monotonous, noisy expression of sadness, an undignified one in comparison to the paradigmatic "weeping on the ruins," since it is not followed by heroic deeds or an elevated courtly status.

[275] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 38-40.

The second force weighing down his poetic aspiration is, as we have seen, the *waṭan*. This charged word suggests a geographic category of identity, the boundaries of which may stretch from a native village to an entire country or region. It suggests a native sentiment, a place with the natural and cultural elements of which one feels intimate and at home. "How sweet, how lovely / the eyes of women in Bab Touma" famously exclaims one of al-Maghut's poems in *Sadness in the Moonlight*.[276] This exclamation would be utterly banal, were it not for the designation of place, one of the gates to the old city of Damascus. In "Dry River," the sense of place is present in the title, as that river is none other than the Damascene Barada, visible from al-Maghut's usual spot in Abu Shafiq café: "the Barada river is my friend, and he is like an old silent poet. I'm like Barada, when it dries up, I dry up, and when it gushes, I gush."[277] The *waṭan* stands for the oppressive social and political circumstances the poem faces: starvation, wild chaos, and censorship (the bell hanging in the mouth is metaphoric for a sounding alarm, internal or external, going off whenever the poem oversteps the boundaries of authority). Inserting the reality of the emaciated body into the poem at this point admits that the fate of poetry is tied to the historical contingencies of its place of belonging. It is not fed sufficiently by its transnational Pan-Arab functions and is starved to death by disconnect from the prohibited-to-touch local materials. The real Damascus, voluptuous and inviting, a Bedouin with disheveled hair created in the poet's image, remains seductively stowed away in a private notebook, papered over by official Pan-Arab ideology and ideologically skewed literary representations.

Political discourse is the third force weighing down poetic language, as it dictates a culture of impersonal political engagement at odds with the modern idiom of *flânerie* that al-Maghut encounters in his tattered, coffee-stained Arabic copy of Baudelaire's poems. This

[276] Ibid., 15.
[277] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 101-102.

formulation implies yet another dilemma in which the poet is embroiled: whether to cultivate the sterile utopia of art in a time of dire crisis or to plunge headlong into the political passions of the day. The speaker seems to have failed both and for good reason. The anti-imperialistic slogans to which he wants to pay deference took a malign historical turn when Gamal Abdel Nasser, their main propagator, practically colonized Syria under the United Arab Republic (1958-1961), ordering Syrian parties to disband, installing a brutal strongman in the Ministry of Interior, and enforcing top-down economic reforms with disastrous consequences.[278] This was merely one instance of many in which Pan-Arab ideas actively sabotaged the sovereignty of the young Arab nation-states, which despite the so-called 'artificiality' of their borders, embarked on their individual yet interconnected historical processes. Nasserism was not only the strongest popular translation of a political idea (Pan-Arabism); it afforded an emotionally loaded language of legitimacy for any claim made on behalf of the common Arab good and enfolded a style of rhetoric (parallelistic and hyperbolic), an intonation (thundering and virile), behavioral gestures and external appearance (the groomed moustache, the suites). Al-Maghut, as we shall see, satirizes the social realities inspired by these styles, parodying the parallelistic gravity and deriding the hyperboles. He does so by giving a personal slant to these habitual tropes, offering his own defunct version of botched parallelisms and risibly inflated hyperboles. Anything public rhetoric presents as erect, solid, and proudly masculine, his reflex is to effeminize, to present as flaccid and crumbled. His comic bathos enters the vast gap between bombastic words and the world they conceal, and thus claims to absorb the real life found in-between. The reality of the crushed yet beloved *waṭan* is asserted half-heartedly by the poet who dreams the common dream of being the crushing Arab conqueror. All he does, though, is impotently observe how so-called

[278] Hazim Saghiya, *al-Baʿth al-Suri*, 29-34.

progressive nationalistic ideas carry the country backwards into a modernity that has no gains and all manner of losses in memory and dignity.

Perhaps writing about these themes – the evils of foreign rule, personal freedom, his backsliding country – would cut down the losses. But even this satisfying fiction is beyond his reach. The material conditions are ripe for neither urban Bohemia nor epic novelistic representations. Baudelaire's dandyism is only awkwardly transplanted in the Damascene present, and al-Maghut holds on to the scraps at his disposal: the strolling café man and his idle male fantasies. The sharp edge of Baudelaire's art is sadly lost as there is little clout of the bourgeois tastes of a reading public to offend. Nor is it possible to import the realistic mode of the broad-canvas Tolstoyan novel. As we shall see, all that is imagined to be massively shipped from Russia to modern Syria is bolshevized means of social control, hence the dangling noose. The spirits of Baudelaire and Tolstoy abstractly hang over al-Maghut as looming literary personalities: the one in his squalid lifestyle and pleasure in sin and defiance, the other in his feigned rusticity, anti-elitist and anti-literary attitudes. The literary achievements of canonical modern classics are thus a fourth paralyzing factor.

The logical conclusion proceeding from this presentation is to stay silent, and indeed, that is what the poem's title suggests: the dry river symbolizes the lack of expressive fluency and the lack of life following therefrom. One reading of the poem would thus describe it as a psychological emplotment of a failure known well in advance. But the poet did not fall silent after this poem nor did he kill himself as he vainly promises in other poems as well. Nay, even his suicide threats are clownish parodies of martyrdom, after which he continues to dramatize his failed struggle to represent Damascus. The inference from this would be that we are dealing with a kind of "rhetoric of sincerity," a literary ploy that constructs a personally accented

representation of an unrepresentable irreducible historical world. When al-Maghut falls back on his defeated self, in his dilapidated room surrounded by garish posters and cigarette butts, it is a triumph for the poet as a non-silky man, for an ordinary truth wrested out of the lower order that goes unnoticed or unrealized and is blatantly put into words. The dream of a resonant crowd's roar is thrown back upon its own pathetic smallness.

"Dry River" enacts the dialectic with *Shiᶜr*'s modernistic refinement as an inner quarrel, the kinds of quarrels W.B. Yeats thought distinguish poetry from rhetoric. What sets al-Maghut apart from the magazine's pundits is that he negotiates their modernistic idiom with a set of particularistic values embedded in his native Syrian environment, the same environment Adonis has so vehemently rejected. Values of sincerity, cultural authenticity (*aṣāla* and *turāth*), sentiment and concern for the plight of common people are all held in high esteem in a cultural climate known for its deep-seated conservatism.[279] These widely shared values were tempting for creative authors as a source of popular appeal yet were becoming risky to handle.

The Writers Collective and Syrian Socialist Realism

Al-Maghut was regarded by later generations of Syrian poets as an "esthetic conscience [*wijdān fannī*]," an interesting phrase connoting both his poetic achievement and moral import.[280] The first part of this term, as I have tried to show, relates to his affinity and disputes with the *Shiᶜr* poets. The conscientious part has to do, I will now claim, with the Syrianness of this experience. There are two levels to this moral involvement: for one, it is conscientious in its tendency towards immersion in his native environment at the expense of "airport culture" as al-

[279] For a good presentation of the Syrian discourse of sincerity, sentiment and authenticity see introduction to Jonathan Shannon's *Among Jasmine Trees*, 6-10.
[280] Barut, *al-Shiᶜr Yaktubu Ismah*, 90.

Maghut once called it.[281] Second, it intervenes in a Syrian literary field that, following from its internalization of Soviet literary culture, puts a heavy burden on literati to engage with problems of common people at the expense of formal considerations pegged as reactionary bourgeois.

The crudeness of al-Maghut's forms and language respond to the imponderable contingencies of Arab life, but also to the artsy sublimations of these contingencies in *Shi*^{c}*r*'s dominant visionary idiom. His opting for a personal voice, on the other hand, stakes a claim against other types of more overtly ideological engagements, which erase personality or harness it to an ideology of romanticized working-class experience. The discourse of Syrian literary culture held in high esteem the noble duties of commitment yet confined the dutiful task of authors to a set of ideologically correct ideas in some combination of collectivist socialism and Arab nationalism. This is borne out with the emergence of the Syrian novel whose rise occurs virtually side by side with post-1947 independence. Its hegemonic form in Syria of the 1950s was socialist realism.

But hegemonic is too bombastic a word. A modest crop of about 27 novels were published by Syrian authors over the course of the 1950s. "The golden era and spirit of socialist realism," writes the critic Hanna ^{c}Abbud about the 1950s in a slight overstatement of the case.[282] Syrian socialist realism was by and large a product of Rabitat al-Kuttab al-Suriyyin, the Syrian Writers Collective. The Collective, established in 1951 by Shawqi al-Baghdadi and Hasib al-Kiyali, was charged with energizing and giving direction to the incipient attempts at literary prose fiction in Syria. According to its founders, a central aim of the Collective is to cope with the relative paucity of native Syrian intellectuals in comparison to other Arab states.[283] Eight

[281] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 57.
[282] Firat, *Post-67 Discourse and the Syrian Novel*, 52. I reconstruct the emergence of Syrian Socialist Realism by relying on Alexa Firat's doctoral dissertation parts of which are also published in article form. See Alexa Firat, "Cultural Battles on the Literary Field," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 18(2), May 2015, 153-176.
[283] Firat, *Post-67 Discourse*, 37.

members attended the 1951 inaugural meeting and by 1954 the Collective had amassed around 30 members from various Syrian cities, and published over 20 books (short stories, poetry, translations, literary and sociological studies).[284] On the cover of their publications, the authors' names would come attached, in smaller print as it were, to the formula "From the Syrian Writers Collective"[285] Their signature publication was an anthology of short stories by Syrian authors entitled *Darb ila al-Qimma* [Path to the Summit, 1952] which opened with a manifesto published earlier in the cultural weekly *al-Nuqqad* [The Critics].[286]

This title suggests the Collective's progressive politics and its vision of the novel as subservient to the needs of society. Though socialist realism had not been on the agenda from the start, it gradually became the umbrella under which these writers gathered, vowing allegiance to the working classes and positing class struggle as the only valid departure point for representing reality. Syrian socialist realism had no explicit formula for writing novels. It was an amalgamation of lofty ideas and sentiments about the serious role of literature in representing the underclasses of Syrian society, most of whom still living in rural areas. These ideas made up a loose program, hardly an ideology, and therefore relied on precedents from the Russian litreature in translation, and on the resourcefulness of the up-and-coming Syrian novelists themselves, the most influential of whom was Hanna Minah.

Minah really came from a working-class background. His family settled in the coastal city of Latakia homeless and poor after its displacement from Alexandretta in the wake of the 1939 referendum that consigned it to Turkey and was followed by the Turkish army's violent takeover of the city. The father was reduced to working as an itinerant share-cropper under the

[284] Ibid., 38.
[285] Ibid., 39.
[286] This key journal in Damascus of the early 1950s is, to my regret, unavailable in university libraries, so I have had to rely on second-hand reports of what was published there. It was the main venue for al-Maghut's early poetry before *Shiʿr* and *Al-Adab*.

feudal system. To help his family eke out a living, Hanna worked several menial jobs in early childhood: assistant barber, silkworm cultivator, stevedore and a paperboy brushing with French mandate authorities for distributing a newspaper by the name of "Voice of the People." Minah completed no more than elementary school and was entirely self-educated. In 1948, he moved to Damascus, became a journalist and published his first short stories.

With the help of the Collective, Minah published *al-Masabih al-Zurq* [Blue Lights, 1954], his first novel (out of over 40 publications), and the first solid artistic statement of Syrian socialist realism.[287] The premise of the story is the life and times of a local Latakiyan butcher who heroically leads a revolt against French colonists. Upon its publication, critics immediately drew the comparison with the Cairene novels of Naguib Mahfouz.[288] Egyptians would no doubt chuckle at this comparison and diagnose Minah with a severe case of heavy-handedness [*thuql al-damm*]. Minah's gifts were a combination of right timing, considerable talent, and, unlike the Odyssean dissembling of Mahfouz's objectivity, a ponderous kind of honesty and deliberate unsophistication. "Hanna Minah's world," says the Syrian critic Nabil Sulayman, "is of tremendous simplicity, complex easiness and a vast space of questions."[289] The gaps within the vastness of these questions were at first filled with a lot of sloganeering and hindered the novelistic delight in small ingenuities of chance invention.

As a general comment, coming into the novel with a Soviet-informed bias against its bourgeois artistry is probably not the best recipe for producing a novelistic masterpiece. Yet through his guilelessness, Minah had found a voice and a welcoming audience. In the service of socialist optimism, his literary heroes were mostly painted in positive colors and claimed to

[287] Firat, *Post-67 Discourse*, 40.
[288] Ibid., 147
[289] Sulayman, "Tarsimat al-ᶜAlam al-Riwaᵓi li-Hanna Minah [A Sketch of Hanna Mihah's Noveisitic Universe]," in Barut and Bilqaziz (eds.), *al-Thaqafa al-ᶜArabiyya fi al-Qarn al-ᶜIshrin*, 944. For full article see pp. 938-944.

derive from life, extensions of their creator. They were all male and often given ample room to speak in first- or second-person narration with little trace of irony. These men came from the lower classes and were still somehow made of the stuff of legends: experienced seafarers or resistance fighters, manly and resilient, adventurous figures with interesting love affairs, who had suffered through hardship and came out ruggedly victorious.[290] The realities of the urban bourgeoisie and current Damascene city-life were programmatically ignored. The plots were historically distanced to the pre-state, more black-and-white clarity, of national struggle or turned to the great theme of the sea, a curious focus for an ideology allegedly tied to the fates of underprivileged peasants. Social hardships were portrayed with an unabashed agenda and usually pointed a blaming finger at French mandate colonists as well the urbanite elites of the *ancien régime*.

According to Nihad Sirees, the combination between strong ideological leanings and concentration on countryside simplicity incapacitated the Syrian novel in its early stages. It fostered an uncritical deafness to literary language and resulted in stale, dictionary-derived rhetoric that captured very little of actual historical life.[291] Shawqi al-Baghdadi admits belatedly (in an interview from 2005) that the stentorian overtures about adopting socialist realism as a literary model resulted in nothing more than a derivative brand of "revolutionary romanticism."[292] In her discussion of Minah's work, the Lebanese critic Yumna al-ᶜId seems to think that he came into his own in his autobiographical trilogy, in which "he rooted novelistic discourse in a local source of authority and opened autobiography to horizons beyond it."[293] The implication is that he has been writing about himself all along.

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[290] Sulayman, "Tarsimat al-ᶜAlam al-Riwaʾi," 938-940.
[291] See Sirees' essay on the history of the Syrian novel: "Al-Riwaya al-Suriyya [The Syrian Novel]" on Sirees' website: https://nihadsirees.com/2012-07-02-08-08-28/55-2012-07-03-12-34-55.html. Last visited October 20, 2017.
[292] Firat, *Post-67 Discourse*, 116 (n.242).
[293] Al-ᶜId, *Fann al-Riwaya al-ᶜArabiyya* [The Art of the Arabic Novel, 1998], 75.

Minah's reputation as the leading social-realist author resulted at least partly from the fact that, owing to his first-hand experience of economic deprivation and lack of European schooling, his hands were clean of both imperialism and urban elitist corruption. His reputation as a mainstream storyteller was boosted by a personally based ethic of honesty and trustworthiness. The putative simplicity and authenticity were the critical standard by which his work had often been evaluated, demoting to lesser importance the question of forms and styles of narration, which were, in the beginning at least, professedly unremarkable. He was the ideal writer for the Collective because his humble origins were the "correct" ones to have. This humbleness was strongly emphasized in critical discussions: "he lived the story and knew every character individually," one fellow critic in the Collective writes, "Hanna Minah lives and practices the Syrian experience," writes another; "Minah is a simple and good person – not coming from the school of pure art – someone describing simple people who may not always be good due to the conditions they live."[294] Despite the aura of an ordinary working man's consciousness, there was in Minah an ambitious enterpriser who was talented enough to lay the foundations for a local version of the ultimate bourgeois invention – the novel.

That this rustic simplicity is associated with authentic Syrian experience and contrasted with the (urban?) puerility of art for art's sake should give us pause. By means of declaring its lofty social function, Syrian socialist realism was orienting itself in the Arab literary sphere. The Collective tries to establish what Alexa Firat, following Pierre Bourdieu, defines as a cultural field, and a specifically national Syrian one at that. Socialist realism was intended to be the *Syrian* contribution to the emergent Arabic novel, a genre, unlike poetry, modern by default and thus more easily susceptible to Arabization and social utility without too much ado with respect

[294] Firat, 40, 147.

to the Arabo-Islamic patrimony. [The novel] "will be the *diwan* [the literary record] of Arabs in the 21st century,"[295] Minah triumphantly declares in the notes on his novelistic career, claiming for prose the saying most representative of the collective spokesman-ship status that poetry had traditionally held.

The Syrianness of socialist realism is to be seen in rivalry not with *Shi*ᶜ*r*'s aestheticism but with other Arab forms of literary commitment to politics.[296] The Lebanese journal *al-Adab*, directed by Suhayl Idris, developed a concept of *engagement* influenced by Jean Paul Sartre's ideas, which had a far more individualistic emphasis. The dominant formal enactment of this concept, adjusted to the space of a literary magazine, was the short story. From its Mediterranean outpost, *Al-Adab*, like its rival *Shi*ᶜ*r*, had Parisian cultural horizons. It transmitted an Arabized version of French existentialism not only as a philosophy of human liberty, but also as a vibrant Parisian scene with "jazz, sex, and wild dancing," fun and abandonment to caprice.[297] These were the ordinary personal and political freedoms denied to Arab individuals entangled in their communal webs at home, and thus resonated more resolutely than Sartre's intricate philosophy of being in the Arab take on existentialism.

There was thus a competitive field of ideas about engaged literature. In resistance to this rampant individualism, the Syrian brand of the novel would reflect and capitalize on the collective significance of real-life struggles of Syrian workers and peasantry. The overall seriousness of ideological tone differentiates Syrian socialist realism from the Egyptian model of

[295] Ibid., 145.
[296] On the war of position among the various promoters of committed literature, a diverse array of Marxists and existentialists, see Di Capua, *No Exit*, 91-100. Di Capua singles out the forgotten Syrian critic from Damascus Shahada Khuri as an early pioneer of socialist realism in Syria whose concept of realism was forged in opposition to that of the existentialists' *iltizam*. While existentialist ideology allows for too much hedonism, true socialist realism, per Khuri, is a "fighting" literature. Another central figure here is that of the Shiᶜi Iraqi intellectual Husayn Muruwwa who wrote the preface to *Fi al-Thaqafa al-Misriyya*. Muruwwa attended several international events of Soviet writers and came back invigorated with Zhdanovist literary ideas and a sense of Third World solidarity.
[297] See Yoav Di-Capua, "Arab Existentialism: An Invisible Chapter in the Intellectual History of Decolonization," in: *The American Historical Review* 117:4 (2012), 1061-1091.

realism represented by Mahfouz, whose early Cairene novels are marked not only by a genuine immersion in the classic phase of bourgeois 19th century upper-case Realism but also by a very Egyptian kind of worldliness and *khiffat al-damm*. Mahfouz's realism is thus more ironically inclusive and non-heroic and uses crafty techniques to smuggle the sauciness of Egyptian vernacular culture into Arab literary eloquence. The Syrian socialist novel by comparison appears straight-laced both formally and in terms of language registers.

The autonomy of the nationally defined cultural field is established via processes of translation and adaptation of foreign models. In the domain of the novel, the Syrian cultural field distinguished itself with a rhetoric of noble social and political awareness-raising tasks and a formal conservatism resistant at first to individual experimentation.[298] This model was consecrated, clearly enough, through the Soviet example. The Damascene weekly *al-Nuqqad*, with which the Collective was affiliated, translated Russian literature and took upon itself to spread Soviet culture in Syria in place of the previous orientation towards colonial France.[299] This was a symptom of the beginning of the Cold War era and the tightening bonds between Syria and the USSR. That Russian-Soviet culture was seen as both progressive and anti-Western was a major factor in its reception and authoritative legitimization of a budding cultural practice. Yet, since knowledge of Russian language was uncommon, the process of domesticating Soviet culture in Syria passed via second-hand translation. Translations from Russian prose initiated in the early fifties by the important Dar al-Yaqaza press in Damascus, for instance, were undertaken through the indirect mediation of English and French. The prolific translator Sami Droubi, also a senior Baath party member and distinguished Syrian diplomat, produced via French translations of voluminous Russian classics among which were Tolstoy's novels referenced by al-Maghut.

[298] Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel*, 97-98.
[299] Firat, *Post-67 Discourse*, 36 (n.81).

Later on, Mir Publishers, the major Soviet publishing house dealing in foreign literatures and translation,[300] would open a Damascene branch (sometimes the place of publication in its Arabic titles is designated as Moscow) under the name of Dar al-Taqaddum. This is the same publishing house known in the Anglo-American world as Progress Publishers, established in 1931 to print and distribute English-language books with a Marxist-Leninist orientation. Dar al-Taqaddum was active in Syria for over four decades and published a hefty sum of translations from Russian literature, Marxist political and economic thought, and various other texts.[301] Presumably, Mir employed a professional bilingual staff that translated from the Russian original. In addition to publishing previously untranslated works of Russian literature, Mir also re-translated classics that were previously mediated through other languages.

In the late 1950s, Syrian socialist realism would also draw inspiration from an important critical work of Marxist literary analysis produced in Egypt and published in Beirut, *Fi al-Thaqafa al-Misriyya* [On Egyptian Culture, 1955], which gave critics the vocabulary to discuss Arabic fiction in terms of class struggle.[302] This work drew heavily on Mahfouz's novels, and according to later critical assessment,[303] confined them to a systematic ideological world-view which they did not necessarily espouse. Yet not unlike the *Shi*ᶜ*r* moment of self-legitimation in poetry, the reliability of the transmission process was relatively unimportant compared with the importance of establishing the autonomous field.

[300] G.P.M. Walker, *Soviet Book Publishing Policy*, 119.
[301] A random list of works I found on the library catalogue, published between the 1950s and 1974: the constitution of the USSR in Arabic, a history of the Communist Party, a work by a Russian philologist on Arabic manuscripts, a collection of essays on the reactionary essence of Zionism, an intellectual history of major trends in mandate period Syrian and Lebanese thought, and a survey of economic growth in the third world. The literary translations are not accounted for in the catalogue and I found the literary titles through a quick on-line search. Within the Soviet Union, most of Mir's output in Russian is confined to translations of technical, scientific tutorial literature and science fiction. Anything other than that would have to pass through mazes of bureaucratic vetting systems to prevent Western influence (ibid.).
[302] For the centrality of this treatise in Arab intellectual debates in the 1950s see Di Capua, *No Exit*, 83-85.
[303] Sasson Somekh, *Mahatsit Ha-Yom*, 39-40.

The development of the Syrian novel in all its rough and tumble details is beyond the scope of this study and Alexa Firat's thesis gives a good account of its major outlines. It seems clear however that translations and imported models for engagement catalyzed local literary production which both fell short of, and went beyond, its purported goals. The idealistic ethos of social engineering through literature eventually fell to disuse, yet with the appearance of home-grown prose writers, most notably Hanna Minah, an incipient literary tradition was established and the Syrian novel as an art form was given its initial shape, to be repeatedly re-shaped by a historical process connected to its times.[304] The Syrian novel eventually outgrew its collectivist beginnings. Minah's ideologically based simplicity was only the first step in what came to enable the novelistic mode of individual social protest, critical straightforwardness and Orwellian social satire that we encounter in Sirees' fiction. At the same time, we must not forget that there were other Syrian prose writers outside these syndicates who were both socially engaged and experimental, though by no means conventional realists. The politically independent mind of novelist Hani al-Raheb provides an illustrative case. Another example is that of the Zakariyya Tamir, al-Maghut's close associate in non-partisan yet lacerating social critique.

A Language of Prosified Reality

In many respects, al-Maghut's poetry was far ahead of the Syrian novel in its fusion of esthetic intensity of attention to language and realistic social concern with the lives of everyday Syrians. Adonis symbolized new-fangled modernism developed through maximal negation of Syria and propounded a high theory of philosophical poeticity; Nizar Qabbani, the most popularly acclaimed Syrian poet, dealt with materials from ordinary life while sticking to the old

[304] Faysal Darraj, "Al-Waqiʿiyya bayna al-Naqd wa-l-ʾIdiyulujiya," in: Barut and Bilqaziz (eds.), *al-Thaqafa al-ʿArabiyya fi al-Qarn al-ʿIshrin*, 805. For full aticle see 804-812.

forms of *ṭarab* and a repertoire of ready-to-hand formal devices that enabled him to respond quickly to current events. Throughout all his acerbic critiques of the Arab world after 1967, Qabbani never quite shook off the romance of Nasserism and retained his Pan-Arab sensibilities. Arabs in his mind were "quintessentially poetic being[s]," and the belonging in the dominion of poetry, the embodiment of *turāth* gave the undifferentiated Arab 'we' "our identity, our passport, our blood-type."[305] This sense of cultural identity is invoked by Qabbani to argue for an autonomy of a poetic-prophetic public discourse – irrational, impulsive, compared to an angry woman and a pouncing wolf – to rail against injustice, both within and without Arab countries, in the name of the Arab people. "Poetry is a comet," Qabbani states, and its prerogative of dealing with "highly combustible material" is set in opposition to the deliberative "24-hour workshop" of the novelist, whose careful intellectual process nullifies the emotional intensities of his public.[306] Tellingly enough, this claim for autonomy was subordinated to an argument Qabbani had entered with Naguib Mahfouz on the proper response to the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo peace process, in opposition to which poetry would be more equipped to sound an urgent alarm. When Arabs meet their authentic self through poetry, Qabbani implies, they would surely come to recognize that their pride is compromised by this peace agreement.[307] There is then a peculiar slippage between literary and political categories which deeply undermines poetry's autonomy.

Combustibility and immediacy no doubt color the experience of al-Maghut's poems as well, strengthening Qabbani's case for a poetic response to crisis. However, the intensity and urgency are also reflected in the bumpiness of the poem's language. This aspect is alien to Qabbani's silk-smooth popular lyric and would frustrate comfortable notions of Arabs as a

[305] Cited in Fouad Ajami, *Dream Palace of the Arabs*, 249.
[306] Ibid., 250.
[307] The argument between Mahfouz and Qabbani is described concisely in Ajami's *Dream Palace*, 249-250.

"nation of poets." Al-Maghut thus lays claim to an authenticity which draws on other sources. The crucial difference is in picturing an Arab subject that is not only "poetic" but has serious non-poetic historical engagements and needs alongside the poetic ones: "This mouth that makes poetry and other delights / must eat, my dear homeland." These historical needs are verbalized as part of the inner strife with the silky self and add a modern, moral and social dimension to the language of the poem. Everywhere in Syrian society Qabbani is avidly read, al-Maghut says, aside from prisons. The reason is that Qabbani "stands on the other side of the river," i.e., brushed-up civilian life, and is as far from these realities as "a comb is from a knife and a starched shirt from a shirt soiled in blood. To these places Nizar did not yet reach."[308]

On the other hand, the modern Arab poet's predicament of being wedded to combustibility is also felt as an inner limitation, a major obstacle before a clear-headed lyrical realism. Al-Maghut's "irrationality" is not exulted as in *Shiᶜr*'s poetic visions nor is it relished as in Qabbani's conception; it is a subnormal, "animalistic" state forced upon him. This animalism sheds light for him on the whole corpus of deceptively sound and robust classical poetry in Arabic: "ancient poetry is only half-poetry. Its other half is vulgar demagoguery."[309] The *shaṭr* (half-verse) with which modern poetry complements ancient poetry exposes the latter's latent savagery, the utter revulsion a modern poet feels towards its obsequiousness towards patrons and the association formed thereby with fawning parliaments applauding a despot.[310] The painful constriction is most apparent in the problematic affiliation with the classic realism of Tolstoy and the inability to garner the accumulated experience – both life-experience and literary mastery –

[308] Cited in Dayah, *Muḥammad al-Maghut*, 39.
[309] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 59.
[310] Ibid., 60. See also the poem "Baᶜda Laʾyin [After Much Toil]" by the Iraqi poet Sargon Boulus, where he goes to great pains to make sense of difficult verses by Abu Tammam. This effort pleases him in discovering Abu Tammam's finesse and terseness until he confronts the context of its production: "Your sympathy for the Sultan disgusts me," he writes. Boulus's poem thus suggests a more complete integration of Abu Tammam's esthetic prowess and his political "vulgarity" from a historically situated perspective (Bulus, *ᶜAzama Ukhra li-Kalb al-Qabila*, 21-26). Boulus has another poem titled "A Half-Verse by Abu Tammam" in which the modern poem complements the classical in a comparable way (Ibid., 133-134).

to come anywhere near the wealth of material Tolstoy amassed in his novels. An artist possessing the wealth and continuity of cultural patrimony, the material and spiritual resources, the slow patience of attention and the habits of learning to engage with mild subtleties of form, may aspire to compose a meticulously well-wrought poem or a broad-canvas novel. An Arab poet, however, losing his/her bearings in a disoriented moral environment, awakening from centuries of perceived *inḥiṭāṭ* [decline] and colonial rule to a pervasive state of defeat, a confused and violently politicized time;writing when the rich fund of poetic tradition has run out and become an "immortal carcass" (al-Maghut's phrase); when traditional frameworks are hampering personal freedoms and neither a viable modern state nor a sense of national cohesion is there to replace them – an Arab poet can do little more than reflect on, and make sense of these agonizing contingencies and the strong emotional attitudes towards them. These would be the implicit axioms of al-Maghut's poetry and his persona is suited to this picture of reality: a cantankerous autodidact; a cranky, intractable, self-ironizing anti-hero who has no time for niceties of phrase and must hurriedly spit out his feelings. It is this realism that informs the poems' "sprawling, conversational rhythm[s]" and its "informality of structure, the loquacious and intimate style […], the lightning changes in subject, tone and emotional impact."[311]

a. Urbanity

Al-Maghut is singled out by Jamal Barut, alongside the Lebanese poet Shawqi Abu Shaqra, as a major proponent of an esthetics of prosified reality.[312] Barut defines this approach as receptive to the low-mimetic, the previously neglected ordinary nothings of the quotidian. Abu Shaqra's *Water for the Family Horse* (1961) sets these partialities in short narrations of autobiographical memory effacing his subjective 'I'. Al-Maghut's idiom, on the other hand,

[311] Asfour, "Adonis and Muhammad al-Maghut," 26-27.
[312] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 224-235

absorbs the trivial objects of the everyday into a highly subjective, urbanized lyricism. Damascus – "the pink wagon of captives"[313] – is present in her intimate hiding-places, shifting between foreground and background, magnified through the sensibility of his countryside origins. At times, she is viewed compassionately through a "veil of jasmine" so as not to expose all her flaws.[314] Other times she is seen through an ambivalent consciousness of the angry and sarcastic petit-bourgeois[315] who vacillates between the demand for a minimum of civic normality and the despair of the prospect of ever realizing it. Barut gives a concise summary of al-Maghut's qualities as an urban poet of the small detail as seen in his long homage poem to Damascus:[316]

> Even though it is true that [al-Maghut] is a poet from the countryside, whose every word is a "white goose," he is predominantly an urban poet in the deep sense of the term. His feet are strongly planted, like teeth in gums, in the pavements of Damascus. Like a lord in his mansion, he surveys her sidewalks every morning, kicking a pebble down her streets. The semantic *environs* of Damascus in "Prince of Rain, Margin of Dust" include: the sad grandma in her patched sheets and grey sideburns, who had perhaps lost her rosary and is absorbed in chewing pickles; the small, over-populated neighborhoods and cemetery ghosts; camel meat and reddened hands from the schoolmaster's ruler; needles of antediluvian crones and poached eggs; bread folded in a schoolbag; bicycles leaning on walls and fingerprints smeared on knees and table-legs; […] communal water taps in the neighborhood square; sabra fruit vendors and bolts on ancient doors. These semantic surroundings come to life in the text not through the hegemonic power of the referential linguistic function but, fundamentally, through the affective linguistic function bound up with the lyric I.[317]

Since al-Maghut had no livelihood but independent writing, and his apartments were in a sorry state of disarray, he did most of this writing in Damascene cafés. There would be a morning café and one for the afternoons. In his early career, his time was divided between al-Atwal and café Havana, the latter being a meeting spot in the 1940s and 1950s for literati and intellectuals. From the 1970s, it was mornings in Abu Shafiq and afternoons in the lobby of al-Sham hotel. Abu Shafiq was especially dear to him since it was strategically located on the

[313] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 30.
[314] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 110.
[315] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 231.
[316] "Amir min al-Matar, Hashiya min al-Ghubar [A Prince of Rain, A Margin of Dust]," in al-Maghut, *al-Aʿmal*, 174-182.
[317] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 229.

Barada river bank and had a large window from which he could take stock of passersby. The café was five kilometers away from his flat, and so afforded him a morning stroll. The poems, it is claimed, retain pictures from these daily walks and traces of the tables, trees, and the 'ancient' wooden benches of Abu Shafiq (before they were replaced with cement).[318]

The urbanity of this "untutored rustic" remains half-fulfilled: he cannot really find the excitements nor the waste of a huge metropolis. The urban *realia* connote more antiquated, tactile forms of social bonds and commercial exchange threatened with extinction. In fact, the entire scope of objects and scenes registered in this urban environment could have easily been taken from semi-modernized small towns and neighborhoods. Mapping out the semantic fields of denotative nouns in *Sadness in the Moonlight*, one finds that only about a quarter of them represent this kind of modern urbanity. A second quarter consists of the standard clichés of lyric poetry – birds, flowers, sun, clouds, stars – figures of the kind amply found in Gibran's romantic prose poems. A third quarter consists of body parts and changing emotional states, reminding us of the poet's presence as an excitable body and impressionable mind. The last quarter belongs to both modern and pre-modern social and cultural realms: silk worms, strings, perfumes, earrings, pillows, combs, markets (trade and commerce); swords, horses, ships, daggers, riders (war); papyri, paper, pen, ink (writing); church, bells, cross (religion). These latter categories suggest the continuities between the Mediterranean world of the late medieval period– the thriving commerce, the crusades – through the millet system of the Ottoman period to contemporary Damascus. Even if some of the objects have failed to maintain their use in modern times, their absence is felt in cultural memory. The experience of modernity in the poems thus contains the slow tapering-off of yesterday into today.

[318] For the café itinerary see al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 101-102.

b. Prose and Translation

Al-Maghut's language is situated within *Shiᶜr*'s collective poetic project yet stands differently with respect to the three interconnected T's. While indirectly indebted to translation language and only vaguely influenced by prose, the emphasis in his poetry falls on the third category: vernacularization. It is safe to assume that had al-Maghut been reading widely and thoroughly, language of translations would have left a strong mark on his writing, since he mastered no other language but Arabic. But the poems do not reflect processes of sustained reflective reading. Nonetheless, there is an undeniable indebtedness to the new sentence structures enabled by *Shiᶜr*'s literalizing strategies of translation. I've referred to what Kheir Beik calls the "chaotic sentence" introduced through translation from Surrealist and Dadaist poets. Al-Maghut's deviations from classical grammar are not as extreme as those of Unsi al-Hajj in this respect. Yet he would not pass Nazik al-Malaʾika's bar for correct and elegant Arabic style. Al-Malaʾika had in fact specifically targeted al-Maghut's *Sadness in the Moonlight* as part of her attack on the new free-verse movement and the language of translation, which she regards as nothing but corrupted prose.[319] One reason for this is the frequent use of zeugmas or syllepses. This rhetorical device, literally "yoking together," has multiple forms and species but, in general, it is a grammatical linkage by which multiple parts of speech are subordinated to one part, as in a case where a single verb takes together several subjects, direct, or indirect objects, often with different levels of meaning. If used well, effects of surprising, witty inconsistencies are created: "golden lads and Girles all must / like chimney sweepers come to dust" is the textbook example. Though not innately incorrect, this device lends itself to bending of grammatical and logical rules and may invert fossilized metaphors in playful ways.

[319] Al-Malaʾika, *Qadaya*, 183-184. al-Malaʾika chooses this collection and Saᶜid's appraisal of it as the object for her opening attack on *Shiᶜr*, making a special point of citing al-Maghut's poem without line-breaks because she considers it beneath poetry.

Al-Malaʾika saw this as an irksome foreign importation to Arabic poetry because it led to omission of verbs and subsequent dwindling of the rich stores of Arabic vocabulary.[320] Where once poets had to find a different verb for every subject and every direct object, they can now – in the new modern poetic economy – slack off and use one verb for all.[321] Al-Maghut's collection overflows with examples: "Night came in the middle of May / like a sudden stab in the heart / like a sick man laid out on the operating table"[322]; "I'm enamored with laziness / with multiple women on the same bed."[323] Al-Malaʾika would demand to add another verb before the second simile and the second indirect object; subordinating the two prepositional phrases to the same verb or participle without a conjunction particle (*waw al-ʿaṭf*) is maybe borderline correct, but painfully inelegant. Glossing over basic rules of conjunction and traditional sentence structure for the sake of poetic flow and affect is a common feature of *Sadness in the Moonlight*: "And I am still licking the frosted blood on my upper-lip / salty it was, from my eyes flows / from my mother's eyes flows."[324] Redundancies, unusual change of syntactic position, lack of proper conjunction – these mild deviations from proper decorum were enabled, among other things, by the new improprieties legitimized by translation. As will soon be discussed, they also contribute to the effect of orality in these poems, imitating the way people speak in repetitions, inversions and half-sentences.

As to prose, a separation of the literary from the non-literary is in order. While al-Maghut draws abundantly from the latter, i.e., from the stock of newspaper jargon and forms of public rhetoric, he virtually ignores the former – i.e. the contemporaneous style of prose fiction. This

[320] This complaint is expressed in al-Malaʾika's critique of an Arabic translation of a poem by Jacques Prévert, where the omission of verbs is seen as a serious stylistic flaw. See al-Malaʾika, *Qadaya*, 128-130.
[321] See discussion of Shawqi Abu Shaqra in Khayr Bik, *Harkat al-Hadatha*, 164-165.
[322] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 75.
[323] Ibid., 77.
[324] Ibid., 77-78.

can be explained by the fact that the Syrian novel in the fifties reflected the paradoxes of its ideological age and was thus both hieratic and parochial. The socialist realist novelists produced odd hybrids of ornate prose addressing social realities restricted to the mostly illiterate countryside. The mixtures of class, sect and language registers in the Syrian city were left out of their representations and the over-stylization as if compensated for the thinness of subject matter.[325] Not until later did Syria find novelistic voices akin to Naguib Mahfuz who mediated between the local dialects and official language and gave complex representations of the social and denominational stratification in its major cities.

As noted by Subhi Hadidi, the only prose writer with whom al-Maghut has close affinities is Zakariya Tamir (1931-).[326] Born to a lower middle-class family in the Damascene neighborhood of al-Bakhsa, Tamir had also witnessed political violence as a formative experience of growing up in mid-century Syria. His neighborhood was situated near Marjeh Square, where public executions mandated by the state were performed until 1965.[327] As a boy, he would join the crowds of onlookers who came to watch them at dawn and then return home to have breakfast and coffee and discuss the offender's crimes. For him, the memories of these sights and conversations were ingrained as the "primary, unadorned facts about human reality."[328] Tamir introduced a form of very short stories in translucent language shaped as bleak fables with unsettling messages of social critique. The element of hellish fantasy in these short narratives precludes them from being regarded as realistic prose; yet their claim on the real is encapsulated in Tamir's belief that "Arab reality is much more brutal than any of my

[325] See Sirees, "al-Riwaya al-Suriyya."
[326] Hadidi, "Wasit al-Nathr, Adaʾ al-Shaʿir, Jadal al-Qasida," in: *Al-Karmil* 88-89 (July 2006), 31-32.
[327] The last offender to be executed there in 1965 was the famous Israeli spy Elli Cohen.
[328] Quoted from the foreword to Alon Fragman's Hebrew selection from Tamir's stories. See Zakariyya Tamir, *Namer me-Niyar* [Paper Tiger] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012),14.

stories."[329]They share a host of themes, motifs, and stylistic features with the experiences represented in Mahgut's lyric form. Both are concerned with individual expression and modes of expressing truth-to-power in a language of common sense stained with the grime of social evils. Both protest the normalization of violence, and the pathetic role-changes between bestialized oppressor and tame oppressed. Their work can be fruitfully read side by side: the poet's 'I' so present in al-Maghut's work is effaced in Tamir's surreally objective accounts, whose narrative element is radically chopped up in al-Maghut's lyricism. Tamir's tales often come close to condensed poems in prose and can be considered as patient parabolic elaborations of al-Maghut's similes. The work of both claims to fall in some middle point on the continuum between prose and poetry.

One telling correspondence can be discerned between al-Maghut's poem "The Dry River" and Tamir's short tale "Why Did the River Turn Silent?" which appears in a collection of tales for children by that name.[330] As we have seen, the title of al-Maghut's poem uses the image of a river to fold together lack of fluent expression with lack of vitality. In Tamir's tale, persecution leads not to botched expression but to permanent muteness. The river is taken to be symbolic of the untainted kingdom of children and their innocent bond with nature, speaking freely to them as they come to bathe in it and distributing its waters indiscriminately to all living organisms. This ecological co-existence is broken when it is forcefully appropriated by a swordsman who demands pay for its goods and executes a songbird that drank from its waters to demonstrate his intentions. Ultimately, the usurper is banished by those who love children and nature, but, even then, the river refuses to speak freely again. The complexity of this lack of happy ending gives credit to Tamir's young readers and treats them as mature thinkers.

[329] Ibid., 175.
[330]Tamir, *Limadha Sakata al-Nahr?* (Wizarat al-Thaqafa, 1973), 7-9.

As Alon Fragman has noted, Tamir was writing at a time when children's literature was still very marginal in the literary system and not yet considered proper literature.[331] On the one hand, traditions of oral storytelling for children were still strong within the private sphere; on the other hand, the expansion of the education system under the Baath did not move into fast gear until the mid-1960s. Fragman suggests that the value of children in mid-century Syria was chiefly recognized as projected adults, that is, only insofar as they are blank slates to be shaped entirely by the newly ideologized education system. Thus, texts written for children were of nothing but pedagogical, didactic value, addressing not the needs of children but those of socialized adults. Until the mid 1970s, the Arab Writers Union in Damascus denied children's literature the genuine status of literature[332] and the only bibliographical guide to children's literature in Arabic contains only 11 titles published before 1979.[333] Tamir was a pioneer of imbuing writing for children with high esthetic values. His most resonant parable for social oppression in Syria – "Tigers on the Tenth Day" (1978) – has its precedent, according to Fragman, in an earlier children's story from *Why Did the River Turn Silent?* about a horse irreversibly losing its freedom of roaming in the desert after it is captured and tamed. [334]
The importance of this claim to our purposes is in showing that al-Maghut's prosified lyric has links with the simplicities and complexities of high-quality prose writing for children rather than the gravity of socialist realistic novels. His fiction connects to the truth-telling expressivity of a child's voice as protest against a reality that robs children of childhood. About Adonis, al-Maghut complains that he has always tried to be "a teacher in the East and a student in the

[331] Alon Fragman, "Ktivat Zakariyya Tamir li-Yeladim [Zakariyya Tamir's Writing for Children]," *Dor le-Dor* 2010 (26), 350. For full article see 347-370.
[332] Ibid., 351.
[333] On this see Sabeur Mdallel, "Translating Children's Literature in the Arab World," in *Meta* 48 (1-2) 2003, 298-306. Mdallel cites numbers based on *Al-Dalil al-Biblioghrafi li-Kitab al-Tifl al-ʿArabi* [Bibliographical Guide to Children's Books] issued in three volumes (1990, 1995, 1999) in Sharjah and edited by F.A. al-Hajji.
[334] Tamir, *Limadha Sakata*, 44-46. See also Fragman, 360-361.

West"[335] and al-Maghut wants to topple this hierarchy, to learn from his close environment as well as admonish. This is part of a larger self-affiliation with the marginalized: "if there is hope for this nation, it will come from the marginalized, not from the representatives of the elites and the higher ranks of society. Though one political point must be clarified: by marginal I mean the citizen that stays in the shadow, not marginal in the philosophical sense."[336]

c. Vernacularization

What do I mean by referring to al-Maghut's poetry as vernacularizing? An interesting fact to begin with is that vernacular poetry, though marginal in the literary systems of all Arab countries in the 1950s, was hyper-marginal in Syria. Both Egypt and Lebanon had by that time produced a number of widely acclaimed dialect poets.[337] Perhaps due to its obliging status as the "throbbing heart of Arabness," Syria had no colloquial, local-patriotic voice on a comparable scale. In contrast to the multi-ethnic Lebanon, however, the dizzying plurality of local differences in Syria was severely repressed under the streamlining forces of official Pan-Arab ideology. And since these divisions manifest themselves in socio-linguistic differences, the development of a dominant colloquial idiom of poetry was encumbered.

Al-Maghut opts for a partially vernacularized idiom within the modern standard. The reasons for this choice may be construed in terms of seeking an audience: he has the general Arab audience in mind but also his native Syrian audience with its Pan-Arab sentiments, pre-inclined to appreciate poetry almost solely in *fusha*. The better explanation is political: al-Maghut resists the language ideology of a stable diglossic division of functions between high and low variety of Arabic and the political ideals which construct it as such. Writing in colloquial

[335] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 70.
[336] Ibid., 93.
[337] For a partial list see Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 91 (n. 93).

would mark him as an outsider to the ideal of a single language for a single culture and re-enforce the high-low binary. In both Lebanon and Egypt, colloquial poetry had mostly had a pronounced populist agenda with high rhetorical tones detrimental to independent lyricism. Al-Maghut, by contrast, wants to operate from within as a critical agent and expand the informal uses of formal language.[338] In this context, al-Maghut tells a story of poetic origins from his family lore: when his father was stopped at a government check point near Tartus, instead of an ID card, he successfully presented the officer with an electric bill.[339] The analogy with poetry is that like his father disguising wit with crudeness, he crosses the line into literature by passing off an unofficial document as valid "documentation."

In genre and tone, the poems bespeak a strong affinity not with Levantine folksongs but with *adab sākhir*, a brand of Arab satirical literature with a long history in which distinctions between high and low are playfully inverted. Phillipe Jacquemond describes it as a genre of "uncertain status, somewhere between fiction and non-fiction, journalism and literature, and writing and orality."[340] This is immediately apparent in the caricaturist element in al-Maghut's images: the political cartoon has historically been relegated to the lower humor sections of the newspaper, and its colloquial freedom strictly confined to this domain. This aspect would be the decisive link between al-Maghut and the carnivalized world that Mikhail Bakhtin ascribes to Rabelais, the deep laughter that "builds its own world in opposition to the official world […] its own state versus the official state,"[341] and its own militia versus internal police, one might add.

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[338] Kheir Beik points out that the number of explicit remarks from the *Shiʿr* poets regarding the use of dialect in poetry, and the whole question of diglossia, is surprisingly low. Yusuf al-Khal is the exception. Al-Khal wrote an essay on a collection of *ʿāmiyya* poetry and famously lamented the gap between the language of thought and speech and that of written poetry. He also tried to conceptualize a category of an in-between *dārija*. Adonis, who at one time supported al-Khal's position, eventually took a sharp turn towards the finesse of classical Arabic and, judging by how he writes now, has maintained this position to this very day. Kheir Beik interprets this as a sign of perpetual hesitation on their part regarding Arab common languages. See Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 84-91.
[339] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 69.
[340] Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 155. See also the helpful chapter by Eva Marie Håland: Håland, "Adab Sākhir (Satirical Literature) and The Use of Egyptian Vernacular," in: *The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World* (Leiden, 2017), 145-162.
[341] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 88.

Yet while Bakhtin confines the liberating force of grotesque realism to the polyphonic, parodic discourse of the novel, al-Maghut takes hold of the lyric, and at a later stage drama,[342] to mock and subvert political stasis. Bakhtin has written off lyric poetry as "monologic," interiorized speech, or "private craftsmanship" that seals itself off from social forces. While Bakhtin's account may partially hold for the visionary theory held by the major *Shiᶜr* poets, it misses the mark with al-Maghut, whose lyric externalizes the poetic gesture, draws attention to the politically inflicted wounds on the body, and vocalizes social anger.[343]

Discussing al-Maghut's "vernacularity," Barut frames it in a broader category of inscribed "orality" (*oralité*), a term borrowed from the Jewish-French Bible translator, literary thinker and translation theorist Henri Meschonnic. Meschonnic's semiotic approach tries to extract orality from the oral-written dualism and posit it as an esthetic (and moral-ontological) quality of both writing and speech: "In the sign, oral is opposed to the written; in the continuum, orality is of the subject we hear."[344] Orality thus refers not to the "spoken" but to the movement of *signifiance* created in the play between rhythm, sound and sense. It is the subtle animating taste of everyday discourse, thinking, and texts sensed through the verbal gestures; it is the accent of deviation, the "body-in-language" or the substratum catalyzing communication: "What I mean by that [i.e. the subject of a poem, D.B] is the maximum subjectivization of a system of discourse, by which orality is no longer sound. The subject is what we hear. The subject is what is being shaped, transformed. A specificity and historicity invented."[345]In the next chapter, we

[342] Masᶜud Hamdan has explored the "carnivalesque sense of the world" in al-Maghut's later dramatic writing, and especially in the context of his cooperation with the famous Syrian comedian Durayd Lahham in popular satirical plays such as *Kaʾsak Ya Watan*. "By polyphonic means," writes Hamdan, "these performances shed light upon the shadowy life of ordinary people and express the colorful popular spirit far removed from formal culture and its moral and political leaders (138)." See Hamdan, "The Carnivalesque Satires of Muhammad al-Maghut and Durayd Lahham," in: *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 18(2) (Spring 2004), 137-148.
[343] For an astute critique of Bakhtin's writing-off of the reactionary "bourgeois individualism" of lyric poetry, and a heavier critique of the uses and abuses of Bakhtin in post-structuralist theoretical discourse, see Claire Cavanagh's *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics*, 11-15. She approaches it by showing the discrepancy between Bakhtin's claims and the kinds of lyric engagement in post-WW2 Polish poetry.
[344] Meschonnic, *Ethics and Politics of Translating*, 68.
[345] Ibid., 98.

will see how this term is re-tooled to approach the Syrian prose poets of the 1970s who were understood as al-Maghut's literary progeny.

For Barut, al-Maghut's orality is most felt in his performative hyperboles and sarcastic inversions of meaning, since both aspects call attention to unscripted personal inflections reminiscent of ordinary speech.[346] Contrary to other hyperboles licensed by the poetic profession, al-Maghut's hyperbolic metaphors, says Barut, rarely lose touch with their source of authority in the quotidian and basely sensual. His poem "The Canned Gypsy" provides a compelling example. The hyperboles are marked in italics:

> Without looking at my wristwatch
> Or my pocket journal
> I know the appointed hours of my screams.
> As I roam along the road
> Shaking one stranger's hand and bidding farewell to another
> I stealthily look towards the high balconies
> The places my teeth and nails will reach
> In the coming revolution.
> Yes, I have not starved in vain.
> I have not rambled randomly or self-indulgently.
> *"No ear of grain in human history*
> *is without a speck of my saliva"*
> […]
> my blood dances the Waltz
> and my bones wail like Karbala
> but *there is no power in this world*
> that would force me to love what I don't love
> and hate what I don't hate
> as long as there are
> tobacco, matches, and streets.[347]

"Until *all* the batons of the police and protesters escape from grips"; "until *all* the prison bars and suspects' files of the world are gathered…" Totalizing exaggerations of this kind are the stuff of children's conversations, yet al-Maghut brings them into the poem to record the moment's excitabilities and the sense of unbounded social crisis requiring unbounded social protest. Barut adds:

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[346] Barut, *al-Ḥadatha al-ʾUla*, 233.
[347] Al-Maghut, *al-Aʿmal*, 162, 164.

> This indignation is at the same time an ideological expression fundamentally related in its social, psychological and cultural make-up to al-Maghut's generation, a generation constituted by the dire need for change yet also by impetuousness, short-breath and narrow horizons. Therefore, to the extent that al-Maghut loves his country, he equally wishes to replace it; to the extent that he awaits the revolutionary storm of the nation's people, he equally prays God for their annihilation; to the extent that he loves Damascus in all its minute details, its people and objects, he equally hopes for her to be banished and whipped.[348]

The poetically potent impotence provides the central driving force of Maghutian realism. It makes for the satirical hyperboles, the cartoonish images, the boorish humor, and the various other kinds of *adab sākhir* (satire) which are usually reserved for the lower registers. Another of its major traits is what I previously referred to as "rhetoric of sincerity," a term borrowed from the literary critic Menachem Brinker. Brinker uses this term to interpret the works of the Hebrew novelist Y.H. Brenner, the man of letters as "man of truth" par excellence, whose "theater of sincerity" includes a variety of props "to display the story as non-story, a 'voice from life', a totality recognized by readers as play. This would be the mask of sincerity with which the author chooses to appear as actor on the literary stage."[349] This game is playful and serious at once since its "acting" allows the author to express a world-view which goes beyond literary conventions. The devices listed under Brenner's props are: autobiographical allusion, an impression of choppy utterance to convey shortness of breath, the self-presentation of the text as inspired by non-literary documents (diary, letter, "found" notebooks) and most importantly, an emphasis on deviation of characters, events, and stylistic qualities from formulas of established literary masterpieces, genres, types and turns of speech.[350] The text thus strips itself of the formal attributes most characteristically literary to approximate the irreducibility of lived experience.

Al-Maghut's ethos in this respect is stated openly: "I am always interested in partialities," he says, "because it is these little partial things that make up the big issues […] the writer ought

[348] Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 234.
[349] Brinker, *ʿAd ha-Simta ha-Tveryanit*, 17. Translated from the original Hebrew.
[350] Ibid., 14-15.

to go down to the gutters, down to the poor neighborhoods […] my material can be as simple as a discarded love letter I find on the street."[351] Al-Maghut's artful sincerity has a large-scale formal expression and a small-scale rhythmic-syntactic expression: in form, modes of diary and letter writing as well as autobiographic references are included to frame the warm tones of intimacy sought after in the poems. On the more minute scale of syntax and image construction, al-Maghut avails himself of frequent syllepses – a device imported to modern Arabic poetry through translations – alongside quasi-parallelisic structures to produce effects of off-kilter arrangement and bumpy textures. Additionally, many images taken from mundane spheres of ordinary experience are set in dissonant proximity to festive, stately dictionary items. The relation of these minutiae of syntax, rhythm and meaning to the props of sincerity passes through their pulverization of common hegemonic forms of non-literary rhetoric: the public speech, the pamphlet, the ornate academic essay or ideological treatise. By fracturing the smoothness of these molds, al-Maghut signals that he deviates from their falsifying papering-over of historical life. These formal and structural features then allow him to admit previously underrepresented aspects of Arab historical experience. Al-Maghut constructs a psychologically over-determiinied Arab type whose composite nature and incidental arrangement deviate from familiar types and is imponderably haphazard and complex. As such, it is inaccessible to ideology and neat logical categories.

II Poetic Realism in "The Killing" (1958)

Biographical Background: The Furnace from Salamiya

[351] Cited in Barut, *al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 225.

With al-Maghut social matter passes through images of hunger: the salivating mouth, the gnawing teeth. Hunger is associated with childhood and is often viewed as the greatest social and poetic potential in the Arab world: "Our hunger is yet tender in age," al-Maghut aphoristically writes with both alarm and delight.[352] Political matter passes through the shivering and bent down bodies coerced by a collective state of fear. The representation of states of fear, in turn, belong to al-Maghut's adult life. This understanding of the social and political reality of Syria, and the rest of the Arab world, would consistently be viewed in analogy to the misery and mystery of his childhood upbringing in Salamiya. His poetic strategies can be seen to overlap with his life-strategies of survival. He arms himself with an individualized trinity as a mode of life and art: childhood (*ṭufūla*), sadness (*ḥuzn*) and wandering (*tasharrud*).[353] This triad multiplies in myriad poetic figures yet is most succinctly summarized in his self-mythologizing as a man of "rags, tobacco, and streets."[354]

Al-Maghut's poetic world is thus rooted in the animating memory of the pictures of childhood in Salamiya and the values embedded in them. This un-idealized childhood serves as the moral standard by which to evaluate oppressive realities around him. The traces of Salamiya are suggested in his poetry as the record for indelible hardships kept alive as benchmark test for false revolutionary ideologies in life and poetry. He neither heroizes the overcoming of these hardships nor esthetically exploits their harshness, as a socialist realist would do, yet he does reach back to immovable ideals located in his native town: tenaciousness , gallantry and verve (*shahāma*), a disposition for vivid imagination and remembrance of detail predicated on great

[352] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 110.
[353] Compare to Joyce's trinity of strategies as placed in Stephen Deadalus' mouth: "I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use -- silence, exile, and cunning." Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1992), 268.
[354] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Daw al-Qamar*, 37.

pains, an asperity of manner and close familiarity with affliction, solidarity with the poor and hatred for demeaning poverty, a capacity for both violent passions and refined expression. "Were it not for poetry, life would be nothing but toil and suffering," is the proverbial saying attributed to the *salamiyyun*.

The sources for al-Maghut's conception of art are at least partially rooted in his hometown and in the refractions of the outside world within this locality. These sources are oral and hard to track but are possibly traceable to a personal friendship he developed with an obscure Salami poet by the name of Sulayman ᶜAwwad (1922-1984).[355] The claim has been made that al-Maghut's induction into poetry was made under the tutelage of this little-known poet,[356] who embodied the values of countryside innocence and simplicity of manner. Yet ᶜAwwad was by no means an illiterate "natural" poet. He went to the Tartus branch of the French-Arab Laïque institute, and later enrolled in a Jesuit school in Homs and the Jesuit University in Beirut, where he studied political science. ᶜAwwad wrote straightforward prose poetry, unrhymed, non-metric, yet, like al-Maghut, with line break and stanza division. These were romantic prose poems of pre-modernist sensibility closer to what used to go by the name of *shiᶜr manthūr*. Published with the subtitle *qaṣāᵓid nathriyya* [prosaic poems], these poems are still infused with Gibrani sentimental moods and express concerns for the poverty and hunger in the Syrian countryside. Al-Maghut recounts that he grew fond of ᶜAwwad's recitations from his Arabized versions of Rimbaud.[357]

[355] Material on ᶜAwwad is scarce aside from brief entries in *Tattimat al-Udabaᵓ* and *al-Muᶜjam al-Adabi*. I drew most of the information from an article in the Syrian daily *Tishrin*: http://archive.tishreen.news.sy/tishreen/public/read/39977 Last visited November 18, 2017.
[356] Mazin Akram Sulayman, "Manjam Sulayman ᶜAwwad al-Dhahbi, [Sulayman ᶜAwwad's Goldmine]," in: *Al-ᶜArabi al-Jadid* cultural supplement, November 13, 2017. see https://www.alaraby.co.uk/diffah/opinions/2017/11/13/ Last visited September 9, 2018. This article argues that ᶜAwwad's own poems are creatively informed by themes and symbols from Rimbaud, and that this influence passed down to al-Maghut.
[357] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 69.

The town of Salamiya is located in the eastern countryside of Hama and had long been a frontier settlement on the edge of the Syrian desert, where main routes from the steppe (Palmyra) and Iraq joined.[358] In the early Abbasid period, an important branch of the Hashimids – descendants of the Prophet's family – settled down there and under Abbasid rule the town became a flourishing commercial center. In the early 9th century ᶜAbdallah bin Muhammad bin Ismaᶜil, the great grandson of Jaᶜfar al-Sadiq (700/702-765 CE) and one of the hidden Ismaili Imams, fled there and had a sumptuous palace built for himself. He established Salamiya as the Ismaili headquarters from which the *dāᶜīs* –propagators of Ismaili *daᶜwa* (doctrine) – were dispatched across the empire. The first and second Fatimid Caliphs – Al-Mahdi and Al-Qaᵓim bi-Amr Allah – were born there in 873 and 893 respectively. That is the reason Salamiya earned the nickname "Cairo's Mother." The doctrinal changes introduced by ᶜUbayd Allah (Al-Mahdi) were also the cause for the split among the Ismailis in Salamiya, a schism which resulted in the violent takeover of the town in 903 by the Qarmatians, who massacred its inhabitants and destroyed ᶜUbayd Allah's palace. The medieval poet al-Mutanabbi (the "would-be-prophet," d. 965), the very paradigm for the exquisite and tumultuous Arab poet, developed his rebelliousness in the climate of Shiite political dissidence of the Qarmatian guerillas and is thus claimed as a local hero. In 933, after leading his own revolt under the flag of qarmati-like ideas (a revolt which landed him little but his famous nickname), he was imprisoned five kilometers away from Salamiya, and later incidentally mentioned the town in one of the innumerable raids depicted in his boastful qasidas. The reference is ironically clouded in desert dust: "Stretching itself in swiftness, she [the horse] swept by Salamiya / so clouded in dust that [the army] would not have recognized her, were it not for the flag."[359] The town had apparently lied deserted for centuries

[358] Daftari and Kramers, "Salamiyya," *EI2*.
[359] *Sharh al-ᶜUkbari*, vol. 1, 441.

until in 1849 the Ottoman Sultan issued a firman allowing the Ismaili population to repatriate. Renewed immigration made Salamiya a chiefly agrarian settlement inhabited by the largest concentration of Ismailis in the Arab world, living side-by-side with Sunnis, Twelver Shiites, and Alawites. Faithful to its legacy of revolt, the town was one of the first after Dar^{c}a to rise in grassroot protests against the regime in 2011, with women and girls in the forefront.[360] Since then, the regime has tried to establish an equation of terror in Salamiya, employing a secret 'mafia' that kidnaps and attacks resistant civilians.[361] Additionally, the town has been repeatedly targeted by ISIS and the Salafist Jabhat al-Nusra.

This mostly agrarian region suffered from severe economic ruin during World War II and the political instability following Syrian independence did little to improve the lives of the peasants. Al-Maghut's father had fatefully fallen from being a small merchant owning a convenience store to an impoverished tenant farmer on a daily struggle to survive. Al-Maghut's poetic representations of his "street smarts" thus have a genuine autobiographical background: he was driven out into the street in an early age to hunt for amusement and sustenance. In an interesting biography of his brother, ^{c}Isa al-Maghut describes the plight of poverty into which the family had fallen: extreme cold in winter, perennial hunger and sickness, and occasional infant death.[362] While ^{c}Isa was complacent about this condition, Muhammad had loathed poverty and would fight to save his dignity by stashing a few coins in his pockets. Al-Maghut portrays his hometown with dark humor and amused sympathy for its lowly existence:

> In the early thirties, Salamiya was not yet a real town, but a brave little remote village, staring at her own filth and smoke and red-eyes as a she-horse stares at her bells. As for its history dotted with great battles, they all remained in the *mukhtar*'s pocket. What I remember is that death was, at any moment, a natural, necessary and expected thing in that village. That's the reason the village children were unruly like little insects and

[360] see: http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2014/05/the-women-of-Salamiya-turn-houses-into-protest-squares/ last visited March 26, 2019.
[361] see: http://drsc-sy.org/en/the-conflict-in-the-town-of-Salamiya-a-model-for-the-formation-of-mafias-in-syria/ last visited March 26, 2019.
[362] ^{c}Isa Al-Maghut, *Muhammad al-Maghut: Rasa'il al-Ju^{c} wa-l-Khawf* [Muhammad al-Maghut: Letters of Hunger and Fear] (Damascus: al-Mada, 2009), 9-32. This personal account of Muhmmad al-Maghut's life also includes some of his correspondence and photographs.

> adult men did not refrain from whipping their trees when fruit did not grow in time. In general, Salamiya was a spot of oil in the nation's water. Successive regimes seriously thought about chopping her up like a snake, stuffing her – together with all her pesky middle-aged men, obstreperous boys and filthy cemeteries – inside a bag and tossing it straight to hell.[363]

Al-Maghut thought Salamiya deserved more than the one meager line in al-Mutanabbi's qasida and wanted to capture the essence of the town's personality in a poem written in the late sixties:

> Salamiya the tear shed by the Romans
> On the first prisoner who unshackled himself with his teeth
> And died yearning for her.
> Salamiya the little girl who stumbled on the edge of Europe
> While fiddling with her Fatimid earrings
> And golden hair
> But, alas, stayed crying on her knees ever since,
> Her doll in the sea
> Her fingers in the desert.[364]

Caught in a no man's land between passing imperial eras, between the countryside, the desert, and the city, Salamiya was emblematic of failed adjustment and stilted growth, a misfit stubbornly clinging to her old ways, defeat the source of her charm. This obdurate resistance to the hygiene of social well-being, at once pathetic and endearing, is also a self-portrait.

After completing middle school in Salamiya, al-Maghut was admitted to an agricultural high school in Damascus. School let him down and he left to find a job. He ended up spending, on and off, approximately four years in the Syrian capital, with a daily job, a small rented flat, and enough spare time to roam around, visit the cinema, and mingle with literati in its cafes. It is against the backdrop of his cramped little room near Bab Touma that the eyes of women in the open street look so beautiful and sweet. Al-Maghut wrote back home bragging to his brother that he is writing productively and living "a poetic life in this noisy, crowded city full of everything."[365] It is probably then that he came across Antun Sa^{c}ada's romantic ideas about

[363] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 29.
[364] Cited in al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 32.
[365] ^{c}Isa al-Maghut, *Rasa'il,* 104.

Greater Syria. Before being enlisted in the army, he had returned to Salamiya and become a member of the SSNP. This had presumably occurred at about the same time as Saʿada's public execution in Lebanon in July 1949. Al-Maghut claims that he joined the party with absolutely no conviction in its causes:

> Back then, there were two rival parties in Salamiya: the Baath and the Syrian National Party. On my way to join one of them, I found out that one is remote from my neighborhood and its headquarters without a heating furnace. Because my limbs were frozen solid from the cold, I chose the other one with no hesitation: it was close to home and had heating. And in all honesty, until now I have not read a single page from its statement of principles, and as soon as the cold wave was over, I stopped at once attending meetings and participating in its activities […][366]

His brother ʿIsa recalls a slightly different story. Lying next to his brother in their childhood bedroom, he would listen to Muhammad make infatuated statements in support of Antun Saʿada's Great Syria.[367] The history of al-Maghut's early magazine publications gives strong evidence to the contrary of this entertaining story, indicating that he was seriously affiliated with the SSNP. Jan Dayah recounts that, when asked about his first published poems, al-Maghut conveniently forgot about the multiple occasions in which his poems appeared in SSNP publications: the Lebanese journals *al-Zawabiʿ* and *al-Nahda* as well as the Syrian *al-Jil al-Jadid* and *al-Jundi*.[368] He had no problem admitting that he published frequently in the Pan Arab *Al-Adab*, where he signed nationalistically optimistic poems with the interesting autograph "Muhammad al-Maghut, Salamiya, Syria."[369] Apparently, the poems for journals with SSNP agenda especially embarrassed him or made him fearful. Dayah shows that many of them show enthusiasm for conventional SSNP ideas such as solidarity with Palestine and celebration of the Lebanese coast as a site of national mythic significance.[370] These themes, however, were just

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[366] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab,* 37.
[367] ʿIsa Al-Maghut, *Rasaʾil*, 35.
[368] Dayah, *Muḥammad al-Maghut wa-Subya al-Hizb al-Qawmi*, 37-38. These magazines were all affiliated in some way or other with Pan-Syrian ideology.
[369] Ibid., 42.
[370] Ibid., 44-50.

themes. As opposed to his *Shi*ᶜ*r* friends, al-Maghut kept up his guard against explicit pro-party statements and against full immersion in the literary ideology that went along with Saᶜada's authority and its assimilation into poetic language.[371] In response to a critique by the Tammuzi Lebanese poet Khalil Hawi, who had found al-Maghut's *nathriyyāt* (prosaics) distasteful, al-Maghut argued that Hawi is deaf to modern life and his myth-making sensibility outdated.[372]

At any rate, the question of his conviction's authenticity surely did not matter to the security apparatus of ᶜAbd al-Hamid al-Sarraj. In April 1955, ᶜAdnan al-Malki – a prominent Syrian military officer and politician – was assassinated and the blame fell on the SSNP. An all-out crackdown on party members ensued. Both al-Maghut and Adonis were arrested in that wave of persecution and placed in neighboring cells. They were brought to Mezzeh prison, a site situated on a hill overlooking Damascus and designated for political prisoners since the French mandate. Al-Maghut spent nine months in jail between April 1955 and January 1956. His experience there provided him with reserves of fear and humiliation that would serve as a permanent propelling force for expression:

> In prison, all the beautiful things collapsed in front of me, all the pleasantries of life; nothing remained but terror and fright. I was amazed by the brutality and terror, the cruel pressures on my weak self; I was not at that time prepared mentally or physically for the humiliation and contempt that befell me. Early imprisonment came in the prime of wakeful youth, and instead of looking at the skies, I saw the boot of ᶜAbd al-Hamid Sarraj. Yes, I saw my future in the image of the policeman's boot […] The interesting thing is that having failed to complete my education, I learned a lot from prison, from the Arab whip in the hands of the jailer. Prison and the whip had been my first teachers, and the university of eternal torture from which I graduated tormented, fearful for all time.[373]

Al-Maghut vowed to continue writing as a form of individual protest: as long as the conditions which impelled him to write in the first place – i.e., political oppression and social injustice – exist, he will not drop his pen.[374] But there were also collective needs that exceeded

[371] Ibid., 50
[372] Ibid., 52-53
[373] Al-Maghuṭ, *Ightisab*, 38-39.
[374] Ibid., 50.

al-Maghut's private self: "I think the Arab human throughout the centuries resembles a fisherman out at sea, looking for his portion of food, his dignity and freedom. He has net, sail, and compass, yet he is blind! In everything I write […] I try to protect him with my palm and notebook from the elements and lead him to a safe shore."[375]Al-Maghut's interpretation of the Arab present draws him to imagine humiliation, fear, and hunger as eternal traits of Arab history: "From the beginning of creation till today, nothing with the Arabs is firm but conquest and subdual."[376]

As a case study for my inquiry into al-Maghut's forms of poetic realism, or "rhetoric of sincerity," I chose to analyze "al-Qatl" [The Killing] the lengthiest piece of his early work. This uneven poem, written in Mezzeh prison, is also the poem with which he was initiated into the *Shi*^{c}*r* group and thus legitimated him as belonging to the clique of modernist poets.

"The Killing": Form and Content

Structurally considered, "The Killing" is an unwieldy and chaotic piece of writing whose unifying principles are obscure: a total of over 300 lines divided into 16 strophes of extremely unequal length. Two slightly different versions of it were printed: the first in *Shi*^{c}*r*[377] and the second in the first edition of *Sadness in the Moonlight* (1959). The differences are minor except for the time and place added in the autograph of the journal version: Beirut, March 2, 1958. The place and date slightly change the meaning of the poem, since it is no longer anchored in the Syrian prison experience but made to depict a universalized Arab condition of distress under the

[375] Ibid., 93.
[376] Ibid., 108. These two meanings are contained in the ambiguity of the word *qahr*, both victory and subjection.
[377] *Shi*^{c}*r* 6 (April 1958), 36-48.

shadow of the 1958 Crisis in Lebanon. This indicates the accommodation to the hegemonic center discussed in the previous chapter.

Al-Maghut claims not to have known he was composing poetry while writing "al-Qatl." He wrote it on the backs of Bafra brand cigarette boxes and paid little heed to the usual concerns of composition.[378] But the long piece which he kept on writing must have struck him as valuable because he smuggled it out of jail in his underwear.[379] As to the question of form, the haphazardness of the stanza length may be said to reflect the scarcity of material resources in the jail cell. Since the cigarettes which provided him with writing sheets were an expensive commodity in jail, fitting the words onto the small scraps of paper at his disposal must have been an exercise in geometry of handwriting. Even if the printed version is not entirely faithful to the manuscript arrangement, retaining a sense of ordered chaos suggests that we understand the poem as an exercise in liberty under extreme constraints and poverty of means. With its informality, it signals that we take it as an informal truth resisting spurious official truths.

Second, the prison experience confounds conventional categories of temporal perception. Al-Maghut describes it as an excruciating loss of the normal markers of days, weeks and months; passing time becomes a series of emptied-out moments the unfolding of which is tantalizingly slow. In the long poem under view, ten of the sixteen irregular stanzas open with a noun, verb, image or phrase that connote the daily cycles or a change of state related to them: waking up, falling asleep, turning off (light), eyelid, rising (sun). Al-Maghut's fiction relates to this tortured reality by presenting itself as a series of disjointed diary entries with no possible fixed date, desperately clinging to the diurnal. The poem itself is thus an attempt to kill that shapeless continuous present. The consolations of religion and ideology – a 'hereafter' or a sense of heroic

[378] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 47-48.
[379] Ibid.

martyrdom – are absent in this world. The intervals are as if separated by long tracts of forgetfulness; they refrain from neatly arranging themselves in relation to each other. The prospect of the coarseness of death gives the segments a semblance of being all middle, a loose chain of agonized moments deprived of the comforting meanings bestowed by an anticipated end. The first stanza rings heroic:

> Press your stony foot on my heart, my lord
> The crime beats against the cage-door
> And fear sings like a curlew
> Here she is – the tyrant's carriage carried by the wind
> Here we are – we advance
> Like a sword penetrating the skull.[380]

The first-person plural "we" (prisoners but generalizable to Syrians, Arabs, all of the earth's downtrodden) are not marching combatively but are pulled along by the tyrant like a row of prisoners. The skull does not suggest the tyrant attacked, but the reluctance to be carried forward, the sword's power bullying the prisoners into obedience. One is reminded of coerced pro-regime rallies rather than a march of protest. Though the lines ring heroic, a heroic mode of rhetoric is used only to be deflated.

The carriage is a synecdoche for a train on its way back from a war-zone: "an enormous, long train / like a river of Africans." It is a grim circus train, at once nightmarish and carnivalesque, whose arrival is anticipated by "prostitutes and high-heeled women / perfuming their hair," and its cargo consists of coffins, fingernails, worms, fleas and germs: "transferring in its tail an entire marketplace[381] / of filth and baggy clothes / that filth flooding jail-cells / and miserable mosques in the north." Since the tyrant's train is on a permanent roadshow, its "goods" are transported from north to south and back across the East, meant inclusively as the Cold War Eastern Bloc:

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[380] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 65.
[381] Marketplace here connotes the adjective *sūqī* in Arabic, "of the marketplace," which means plebeian and vulgar.

and in the much-used coffins
in the brothels and execution yards
they load a cargo of shiny nails to the East
and in the plains of Ukraine
wheat and worms spring up
where corpses are thrown to the landfills
the yearning of train-wheels towards the East grew stronger
that aged groom, breathless and roaring with joy
beating his tail – like an alligator – on the face of Asia.

They would prepare blood-red handkerchiefs for her
In the places of torture
and a thick fan of skinned flesh in Siberia
many poets
crave ink in Siberia.

In *Shi*^{c}*r*'s geographic imagination, reconnecting to the region's ancient heritage would hasten their arrival to the front of the line on the global literary map. In al-Maghut's interpretation, the modern Levant is imagined as part of contemporary Asia, and specifically with respect to a modern style of government – both in the private and public spheres – encapsulated in the images of the boot and the whip. The phonic similarity between Siberia and Syria is meant to evoke the objective harshness of both places and deflate the wishful thinking of a romanticized *Sham*. The goods are not those of ancient Phoenician merchants but of the modern import-export economy of bolshevism and mass violent death. The lines about poets craving ink in Siberia can be construed as alluding to the Stalinist purges whose gigantic scope was revealed by Khrushchev in February 1956, just about the time "The Killing" was composed. The references to the Ukraine and Siberia read as a lampoon on the Arab intellectuals' affected enchantment with these remote frosty regions and the brutal power structures unifying them under Soviet rule.[382] Al-Maghut's poetic geography is in fact grounded in historical developments. Following the perceived failure of the West-inspired Baghdad Pact of 1955, and especially after the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956, the Soviet Union became increasingly involved in

[382] Di Capua relates how Husayn Muruwwa's travelogue to Russia "glows with admiration for Moscow's sheer size, beauty and authority." Standing awestruck in front of the Kremlin, Muruwwa writes that its gates "welcome delegations of Soviet writers from the golden wheat fields of Ukraine to the barren ice fields of Siberia." *No Exit*, 94-95. Al-Maghut's lines appear like a direct parody of this admiring language.

the affairs of Syria and diplomatic relations tightened. Between 1955-1958, as the pan-Arab Baath party increased their national power, the Soviet Union offered massive military and economic assistance.[383]

Yet, the grim circus train is not a bland stereotype of eastern despotism. It seems particularly apt as an image of Middle Eastern politics and has a distinctly Arab flavor. The tyrant figures as an elderly groom, the local dignitary taking a young bride against her will. This character figures prominently in Arabic fiction as the pinnacle of oppressive rule on the local level of the village and the family and continues to exist even in representations of urban middle class environments.[384]Like metaphors of shepherds and herds, nuptial contracts are an ancient trope for relationships of authority between suzerain and vassal (Hosea 1-2). In addition, the image of the alligator crushing Asia with its tail has roots in Arab folklore, where *tamāsīḥ* (alligators) are portrayed as numbskull thugs, lazy and cruel.[385] The alligator is thus a cartoonish permutation of the Leviathan of state, which in the Modern Levant is both personalized and animalized.

Documenting the effects of brutality in Mezzeh prison thus entails reimagining the *quality* of its distinct forms as different from other experiences of brutality elsewhere. Violence happens here at close quarters, performed *ʿan kathab* with hands and low-tech tools that require proximity between perpetrator and victim. The addresses to the *sayyid* (the master or the interrogator) are dramatized as affable conversations:

> Where were you the day of incident?
> I was chasing a woman down the street, Sir
> Tall, dark-skinned with a perfectly shaped behind [*mudamlaja*]
> I'm the only who passes in the street without being greeted
> Leave me alone, I don't know anything

[383] Saghiya, *al-Baʿth al-Suri*, 27. See also Hinnebusch's suggestion that the rise of the Baathist Pan-Arabism and the toppling of the old oligarchy was precipitated by relations of Syrian communist radicalism with the Soviet Union. Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 41-42.
[384] See for instance the character of Sheikh Kamal in Nihad Sirees' TV screenplay *Khan al-Harir* [Silk Market] or the two local thugs Abu al-Rus and Abu al-Kif in Muhammad Abu Maʿtuq's *Bab al-Maqam* [Gate of the Shrine].
[385] "Al-Hikaya al-Shaʿbiyya Takunu aw la Takunu [The Folkstory: To Be or Not To Be]," in *al-Thaqafa al-Shaʿbiyya* 23, April 2008, 63.

Release me, Sir, my dad died two days ago
My memory is weak, and my nerves are like nails.[386]

This is not an encounter with a faceless establishment: the rhetorical maneuvers to reach the heart of the addressee assume personhood. The relationship between prisoner and jailer is interpreted along the lines of intimacy between an animal and its human owner and potential abuser and slaughterer. The next passage is worth quoting in length:

And a thick layer of grieving lament
rolls between bodies stuck together like sand
Despairing of the putrid calls from crude lips
Nauseating
Where eyes and legs rub together
And continuous moaning in sewers
Crude lips and callous men
Descended from heaps of violence and depravity
To lick the water of life off our faces
We were men with neither honor nor possessions
Barbaric herds bleating reluctantly through tragedies
That's how crude lips speak, Layla
You don't know them
You haven't met their strong, base odor
I will tell you about it in simplicity, honesty and leisure
But wait
Don't betray me, perfumes of my miserable heart!
The ink burns, and marks of shame throb on the skin.

My room between the mountains is extinguished
The herd rises on its hind legs
And the scattered papers await their nightingale
We clump together towards the washstand
Like tree-trunks we must be
Cows staring at their hoofs until the whip sounds
We walk as if sleeping
Dozing off on the floor-tiles covered in spit and used handkerchiefs
Until we lie again on our aching stomachs, beaten with barbed wire
And sip tasteless tea in accursed silence
As the fair-skinned fly of existence passes by
Flaps on the edge of our throat
We were a magnificent treasure
Copious springs of fat and loathing
Quarrelling in bathrooms
Embracing like lovers.[387]

[386] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 77.
[387] Ibid., 69-70.

The trope of the body is set as a counter-truth to ideological representations of the harmonious body-politic: the Arab nation, the Syrian homeland. The massive body of the "we" in this passage is grotesquely literalized, evoking the nausea that comes from intense proximity to the bodies of other inmates – sleeping, drinking, washing, and shitting together – and to those of the jailers. These images are diametrically opposed to Jeremy Bentham's famous image of the *panoptikon*, the paradigm for modern forms of incarceration and social control. Power does not take hold through invisible mechanisms of closed-circuit surveillance. Nor does it speak through intercom systems. It is palpable as humanly deformed and cruel, communicating through the ancient machinery of hands, feet and mouths. The jailers are dissected into synecdoches of crude lips seen up-close and boots pressing directly on the heart. The prisoners, in a powerful image, are close enough to feel the jailers' tongue lick the life from their face. The dualism of prisoner-jailer is made to dissolve: they all form one human mass glued together in a dystopic way, full of silenced hatred. The image of the extinguished room between the mountains translates the angst of lost individuality amidst this human clutter. In the poem "When the Words Burn," the Arabs are addressed, in context of the mass demand for art about Palestine, as being like "mountains of flour and lust."[388] The image likening the first-person plural to a "magnificent treasure / copious springs of fat and loathing" couches this feeling, once again, in an idiom of popular stories: the hidden treasures of adventure stories in the manner of *Alf Layla* and tropes of desert poetry (the *manāhil*, a festive word for watering hole). An almost metaphysical sense of degradation and enslavement without the dignity of fight are the contingencies the poet is compelled to shape: "We were men with neither honor nor possessions / barbaric herds bleating reluctantly through

[388] Ibid., 18.

tragedies." The allusions to burning ink and the scattered papers awaiting their nightingale echo the cry of helplessness in giving shape to Damascus of the notebooks.

Considering the poem's unfinished form, al-Maghut is only partially this nightingale of melodious song. The address to Layla – the archetypal beloved but also his actual sister – provides another justification for his informality, the adequacy of the free-wheeling form to the overwhelming subject matter. Forms of address abound in *Sadness in the Moonlight* and an unusually large amount convey pleas, complaints, and sympathy to concrete family members – al-Maghut's mother, father and sister. The uses of address are manifold and may change between poems, poets and poetries, but, in al-Maghut's case, it is an obvious way to perform intimacy, and break the fiction of the overheard lyric. It thus leverages the loathsome intimacy of the jail-cell and turns it into a weapon of critique vindicating al-Maghut's own poetic truths.

Layla's figure moves across several of the collection's poems and is never professedly avowed as al-Maghut's sister. The name is so archetypal for the poet's beloved in Islamic *ghazaliyyāt* that it borders on kitsch, and al-Maghut both draws on its popularity and gives it his own inflection. The beloved's name resonates with a return to the perceived innocence of childhood and the threatened ethos it represents: resilience, appreciation of nature and life's simple joys, self-reliance, honesty, generosity:

> Our house, that resided on the face of the river
> Where afternoon twilight and red lilies
> Fell from its ramshackle roof,
> Our house – you abandoned it Layla,
> And left my short childhood
> To welt in empty roads
> Like a cloud of roses and dust[389]
>
> I'm a countryside bird
> The words I have are white geese
> And song is my garden of green pistachio
> And they hate me, Layla
> My only sin

[389] Ibid., 29.

Is that I write sweet poems
About nights and flowers
And from my feather rise flames of wine
And laments of childhood
They want me
To abandon you – you and the night and your lip
Ripe like a fig[390]

That al-Maghut names "a discarded love letter" as a possible source of inspiration is not coincidental. The long poem presents itself as more than a personal journal: it is both a love letter and a letter of indictment to the beloved and, by extension, to the homeland and the nation. The love letter is addressed to an image of the *waṭan* concretized through Layla and the personal baggage this figure carries: his native village and immediate family. The indictment is against the manners by which this so-called *waṭan* now fulfils its role. The sisterly aspect of Layla confers on the poem a semblance of open confession concerned with civil fraternity and devoid of the sublimations of sexual love. The letter form, or patchwork of letters, gives credence to the poem's personal tone and ostensibly liberates it from formal constraints. Al-Maghut's actual letters to his brother Isa often rise to heights of embellished phrases, whereas the poems are deliberately rough on the edges. The biographical material in *Sadness in the Moonlight* is made un-sentimental. It particularizes the sentiment towards his family members to very minute details:

I stand barefoot and shy in front of the mirror
Examining my face and fingers
Like a wretched, ashen eagle
And dream of my parents and siblings
The color of their eyes, their clothes and their socks.[391]

"The Killing": Imagery

That aged groom, breathless and roaring with joy
Beating his tail – like an alligator – on the face of Asia.

[390] Ibid., 58-59.
[391] Ibid., 45.

Al-Maghut's poetic language is still drenched in Gibran-like romantic figures. This base layer is however overlaid with additional layers that range from cartoonish to realistic and often create dissonant blends. It is this sense of dissonant contrast that is regarded as the novelty of his image-making. The cultured self modelled by mainstream *Shiʿr* poets takes its prophetic self-appointment extremely seriously. Though spawning numberless mythologies about himself through the poems, al-Maghut is equally dexterous in deflating them. This is noticeable, on a general level, in the kind of anti-hero his poetry proposes. Jon Asfour draws a fine sketch of this character, the superfluous rambler:

> Al-Maghut […] establishes a playful anti-hero as spokesman for his poems, the antithesis of the poet-prophet. Unusual in modern Arabic poetry, this roguish speaker compromises the figure of the poet who, with relatively few exceptions since Abu Nuwas and al-Hutayʾa, has retained a sober view of his artistic mission, little disturbed by self-directed irony. […] no ivory-tower alter-ego, but a denizen of the streets, an artist of uncommon and incorrigibly low tastes who is guilty of a panoply of misdemeanours, and is an able witness to those of his neighbors. Equally vociferous in refusing to sublimate his desires or to accept starvation and destruction as a way of life, he is a rebel in quite another vein than, for instance, Adonis's Mihyar the Damascene.[392]

The only thing to add is that this denizen of streets is, at the same time, a misshapen agglutination of various deep-seated Eastern literary types: the Bedouin, the chivalrous warrior, the vagabond poet, the love-sick lunatic, the shy villager, the lamenting widow. The caricature created in this mix is an exaggerated portrait of the average modern Arab whose diseases this poetry diagnoses and wishes to cure.

To fill the gap of al-Maghut's anti-theoretical inclinations, Asfour compares the theory implied in his work to the "realistic approach" articulated in William Carlos Williams' definition of the poetic task in *Paterson*:

> to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me ... to write about the people close about me ... to the whites of their eyes, to their very smells.

[392] Asfour, "Adonis and Muhammad al-Maghut," 21.

> That is the poet's business. Not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal.[393]

Though al-Maghut was by no means an imagist in the manner of Williams, he developed, in the chaotic manner of the *bricoleur*, gestures of image-making that, According to Kheir Beik, accumulatively constitute a decisive, qualitative turn in the history of modern Arabic poetry.[394] These images rarely stand alone as objective correlatives and are often embedded in larger syntactic and figurative structures, such as similes and modal propositions. As a paradigmatic example, we may take the image serving as motto from "The Killing": "the aged groom, breathless and roaring with joy / beating his tail – like an alligator – on the face of Asia." It forms an elegant chain of figures enhancing the mother-image of the tyrant and his circus train. The vicious old groom playfully assumes the figure of the alligator and the alligator's tail reconnects with the tail-wagon of the train. Asia – also a feminine name – is humanized as the abused young bride. Shallow on a surface level, it nonetheless assumes a depth-structure. Arab stock characters thus provide one pool of familiar things from which al-Maghut's imagery draws; folklore another.[395] The latter area is associated with the realm of the mother, with bits of fantastic stories of heroic exploits and opulence recited orally and inspiring dreams of grandeur: "in my childhood / I used to dream of a galabieh with golden stripes / and an Arab horse carrying me to plunder vines and stony hills."[396]

Al-Maghut's fondness for similes expressed through *kāf al-tashbīh* is part and parcel of

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[393] Ibid.

394 Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 194.

[395] Khalida Saʿid notes the substrata of *khurrāfiyyāt* (fantastic Arab folktales) underlying some of al-Maghut's imagery. Al-Maghut's images, in her opinion, are lacking in comparison to other styles of imagery (presumably that of Adonis, her husband) that plumb the depths of language to retrieve the pearls of poetic truth. Holding a romantic yardstick to the poems, she claims that the loose association of images weakens the possible impact of a unified, organic whole. This article was first published as a review of *Sadness in the Moonlight* under the pseudonym Khuzama Sabri and then re-appeared in her collection of essays *al-Bahth ʿan al-Judhur* (1960). See Khuzama Sabri, "Huzn fi Dawʾ al-qamar li-Muhammad al-Maghut," *Shiʿr* 11 (June 1959), 94-100. Another prominent poet-critic, the Palestinian Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, perceives the technique as resembling the cinematic montage, thereby consolidating al-Maghut (who is documented as often going to the cinema) as a proper modernist. See Hadidi, "Wasit al-Nathr," 19-20. This divergence of opinion reflects the difficulty of mainstream *Shiʿr* poets to come to terms with al-Maghut's unorthodoxy.

[396] Al-Maghuṭ, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 34.

his rhetoric of sincerity. Metaphoric displacement effaces the contingencies of the empirical self and breeds myths of self-created unity; the simile and the changing moods of an excitable speaker expose the seams of *poesis* and uncover the makeshift arrangements of the self. Such likenesses as are found in interpreting reality through similes are entertained with skeptic disbelief; they are recognized as provisional, temporary and stopgap just like their maker. Here are several examples:

1) Childhood follows me like a ghost
   like an unbraided whore[397]

2) I wish I could grab this earth by its skin
   And toss it out the window like a she-cat[398]

3) Death will carry me in his pristine eyes
   And toss me like a cigarette butt over the sea[399]

4) The sea to our side is as desolate as a schoolyard[400]

5) Millions of bloody years
   Stand lowly in front of the bars
   Like sad armies squatting on their heels[401]

6) The alley winding like a rope of slaves[402]

7) I long to be a green willow near a church
   Or a golden cross on the chest of a virgin
   Frying fish for her lover as he returns home
   And in her beautiful eyes
   Flutter two violet doves[403]

The vignette in (7) is especially appealing in its un-seriousness: the self-contradiction (virgin/lover), the platitude (beautiful eyes), the hyperboles of "I long," and, most of all, the warmth and originality of the image of the woman frying fish with violet doves in her eyes. These images present a variety of uneven combinations between the commonplace and the

[397] Ibid., 47.
[398] Cited in Barut, *Al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 234.
[399] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 64.
[400] Cited in Barut, *Al-Hadatha al-ʾUla*, 233.
[401] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Dawʾ al-Qamar*, 10.
[402] Ibid., 23
[403] Ibid., 15

displaced, the happily fortuitous and the darkly strange. Though subjectively colored, they are not meant to mystify, but to point beyond themselves and lead back to a point of beginning and return in the extra-literary real.

Addressing the mixed style of al-Maghut's imagery, Kheir Beik discerns a type of *nashāz* [dissonance] between linguistic registers in many of the figures al-Maghut yokes together. These asymmetries may fall in any mood from nonsensical through dark to oddly specific: "From the depths of sleep I awake / to think of the knee of that voluptuous woman I saw the other day."[404] The psalmist's *De Profundis* solemnity is coupled with a little fetishistic street fantasy. And he continues: "[I awake] to alcohol addiction and versification." This last line is a real mishmash of high and low, since the phrase for versification – *qarḍ al-shi*^{c}*r* – is an archaic idiom in Arabic for decorous poetry composition. It is used here in a playfully inverted sense: al-Maghut is obviously *not* composing metered, rhyming columns. Yet, within his poetic world – a world full of symbols of hunger and the equipment of the mouth – this irony accentuates the lexical meaning of the verb *qaraḍa* as gnawing, nibbling on something. The dead metaphor is brought back to life: he snacks on poetry while consuming excessive amounts of alcohol. In fact, al-Maghut's flexible middle idiom allows him to include not an insignificant amount of esoteric, archaizing words that would send his readers to their dictionaries. The secret of doing this without reverting to *fakhāma* [pomposity] is fidelity to the principle of impure admixtures.

"The Killing": Defamiliarizing Parallelism

The modern poem, as has often been noted, seeks to transition from the closed-off time of metrically regulated music into the expressive, irregular rhythms of human time. Kasimir

[404] Ibid., 29.

Edschmid assigns poetic rhythm the task of conveying a spiritual reality, an all-encompassing *Weltgefühl*. Instead of the balanced subtleties of harmonic musical sound, rhythmic expression can carry the blunt, quick and dissonant elements of human experience, and especially the ruckus of the city.[405]

Before we move along to a discussion of al-Maghut's rhythms, it is crucial to stress that modern Arabic poetry of his time had a hard time carrying through this transformation. In 1964, the Egyptian literary scholar Muhammad al-Nuwayhi published a polemical book in which he presented an accentual-syllabic theory of Arabic poetry. Following T.S. Eliot's dictum that "the music of poetry must be a music latent in the common speech of its time,"[406] al-Nuwayhi ascribes the newness of modern Arabic poetry not to its deviations from Khalilian meter, but to its adoption of colloquial intonations. But the theory was proven to have severe flaws. For one thing, tones and sounds were apparently not so easily imported and exported. It seems obvious today that *fusha* and the various *ᶜamiyya* dialects developed historically by mutual yet unequal exchanges and that the latter are not simply corruptions of the former as is thought by ideologues of the Arabic language.[407] Yet, on the most fundamental linguistic level of sound and rhythm, there is an actual difference of quality, not of degree, between the two systems. Since poetry calls for attention to every syllable and has little room for phonic ambiguity, the wide chasm between colloquial and classical poetic idioms was especially difficult to bridge. Most of the modern poets discussed in al-Nuwayhi's book withdrew from the struggle altogether and counted on the elasticity of the semi-Europeanized modern standard.[408] Adonis' important innovations in the field of rhythm and structure owe almost nothing to colloquial intonations. Kheir Beik claims

[405] See summary of Edscmid's programmatic essay on Expressionism in Benjamin Harshav's *Three Thousand Years*, 96.
[406] Eliot, "The Music of Poetry", in: *On Poetry and Poets*, 24.
[407] Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 316.
[408] The one exception is the Syrian poet Nadhir al-ᶜAzma discussed in the previous chapter.

that al-Nuwayhi fails to appreciate the complex relationship between the dialects and literary language in a cultural field where the power-balance is clearly tilted towards the latter. What often happened when poets experimented with free rhythms, ostensibly divorced from the old quantitative meters, is that they shortchanged their mother-tongues, using colloquial pronunciations of words to *restore* metric harmony along the classical lines.[409]Kheir Beik suggests that the double bind of poets to the language in which they think and speak on the one hand, and to that in which they write, on the other hand, be understood as a situation of blockage:

> the overall stance of contemporary poets, the vast majority of whom call for maximum approximation to the spoken language, leads us to speculate that many chaotic accidents and rhythmic anomalies in modern works are a result of this linguistic-phonic dead-end [*maʾzaq*], when the lack of a proper way-out forces their "folkloristic rhythmic interventions" into collision with the impenetrable wall of classical language. [..] Maurice Grammont says in this respect: 'there is but one acceptable measure in weighing syllables: to rely, as much as one can, on the diction of living speech.' In any case, we have every reason to believe that contemporary Arab poets instinctively cling to this principle in their rhythmic structures, but being hindered by the absence of natural and complete avenues of communication between living diction and written diction, they are often compelled to pledge themselves to constant "indeterminacy" and obscurity.[410]

This raises the level of critique from al-Nuwayhi's theory to poetic practice. Vernacularizing poets, who should have responded to the impact of a tense force field between spoken and written Arabic, overlooked the problem, and while believing they were imitating vernacular rhythms were, by strong forces of inertia, perpetuating the classical sound. Even in cases of self-proclaimed free rhythm, the venerated rigidity of the classical mold is cunningly able to assimilate unfamiliar elements to long-established sound patterns rather than realize latent potentials of common speech, as Eliot recommends.

Al-Maghut is described as the exception to this rule, the one who miraculously found a way out.[411] But Kheir Beik has surprisingly little to say about what makes his arrangements so

[409] See discussion of Shawqi Abu Shaqra's poems, in which the only way to avoid the metric discrepancies is to read the line with colloquial pronunciation. Khayr Bik, *Harakat al-Hadatha*, 322-325.
[410] Ibid., 319.
[411] Ibid., 296-298.

rhythmically impactful. I will not offer solutions to this question, but rather point to a possible direction of investigation by examining the habits of his poetic thought (hence rhythm) against the backdrop of his ideological age. We have already noted how al-Maghut's hyperboles straddle the literary and the commonplace since they represent an "oral" feature of both. These intentional exaggerations are not so much mimicking common speech as they are at once enacting and satirizing a style of public, oratorical prose.

If we accept that Nasserism "set the tone" of the age, we also accept the connection of language and politics implied in this metaphor. Nasser's speeches upon the third anniversary of the U.A.R show in full the range of his inflated rhetoric: boastful exaggerations, empty celebratory gestures, conspiracy theories and a narrow repertoire of themes in repetition: dignity, unity, liberty set against war-mongering foreign powers, imperial agents, and Zionism.[412] Al-Maghut found the lower gut emotions stirred by Nasser's rhetoric worthy of poetic treatment. His sagging anti-hero is the antitype of the potent charismatic leader and all that he stands for: virility, dignity, unity, liberty; his incongruously specific images form the antitype of the vague generalizations and false smoothness propagated by Pan-Arab rhetoric. We find a satirizing echo to Nasserist discourse in the lines previously cited:

> but there is no power in this world
> that would force me to love what I don't love
> and hate what I don't hate
> as long as there are
> tobacco, matches, and streets.

Contrast to Nasser's 1956 speech:

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[412] For English translation of some speeches see: Nasser, *Speeches* (1961). A nice example comes from a 1957 speech Nasser held in Damascus before the U.A.R had tarnished his legacy in Syria:
ḥāwala al-istiᶜmaru an yafriqa bayna āmali baladin wāḥid ... wa-ḥāwala an yuqīma siyāsatan mabniyya ᶜalā al-ḥaqd wa-l-baghḍāᵓ wa-ḥāwala al-istiᶜmaru fī miṣr an yufsida mā bayna miṣr wa-bayna al-sūdān [...] fa-baᶜda an iḫtalla misr wa-iḫtalla al-sūdān arāda [...] wa-lākinnanā nashᶜuru al-yawma bi-ᵓanna hādhihi al-siyāsata qad inhārat wa-ᵓanna al-maḥabbata qad intaṣarat wa-ᵓanna al-waḥdata qad intaṣarat wa-ᵓanna al-taᵓākhī wa-l-taḍāmun huwwa sabīluna wa-huwwa silaḥuna min ajli al-ḥurriyyati wa-min ajli al-ᶜizzati wa-min ajli al-intiṣār.
The key point here is that there is almost no clause or prepositional phrase that does not receive its heroic counterpart, especially when it comes to key emotive words – imperialism, occupation, victory, freedom, solidarity, and pride – which must resonate. Even when two direct objects or subjects relate to the same verb, Nasser will repeat the verb. This makes the ideas expressed feel static and extremely repetitive, but at the same time the rhythm is pleasing to the ear. See Jamal ᶜAbd al-Nasir, *Al-Istiᶜmar: min Aqwal al-Raᵓis Jamal ᶜAbd al-Nasir* (1964), 38.

> Arab nationalism (*al-qawmiyya al-ᶜarabiyya*) is not embodied by one individual or by a group of individuals. It stops neither with Gamal Abdel Nasser nor with the people who work with him. It is tucked away in the hearts of millions of Arabs who each carry a spark from the flame of nationalism. It is an irresistible current *and there is no power in the world that could destroy it as long as it continues to guard its self-confidence*.[413]

Al-Maghut's practice suggests that euphemistic words in bad political writing should be understood in the opposite meaning to their primary sense: Pan-Arabism is embodied in one charismatic individual (Nasser himself), Pan-Arab nationalism is a dead form of relation (like the dead metaphors he uses), and excessive self-confidence was indeed the cause for its downfall. Intentionally inverting meanings, as al-Maghut is shown to have done, is the ironically appropriate response to these verbal swindles.[414]

* * *

My house I built of silver, my mansion of gold

an ancient Canaanite poet[415]

I will discuss one aspect of al-Maghut's poems to show that there is a quasi-rhythmic equivalent to these deflationary devices. In a nutshell, this equivalent is parallelistic, and I will need to introduce the concept of parallelism in some detail. The crux of the hypothesis is that al-Maghut models his tone of speech on parallelistic rhetorical styles common in Arabic oratory yet defamiliarizes them and deviates from them.

The notion of parallelism, which I borrow from Bible scholarship, has attracted heavy scholarly attention and debate since it was first introduced by the influential work of Robert Lowth in 1753. I cannot possibly survey the topic comprehensively, but James Kugel's study on the idea of biblical poetry has helped clear up the various muddles surrounding it. First, it is

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[413] Cited from an on-line Nasserist website: http://www.alfikralarabi.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=6122 Last visited September 9, 2018.
[414] For the premise of this analysis see George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in: *Collected Essays* (1968), vol. 4, 127-140. "When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer," states Orwell and then proceeds to analyze the process by which bad habits of English style and bad habits of political thought rub off on one another.
[415] Cited in James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 395.

worth clarifying that parallelism as understood by modern Bible scholars doesn't start with the Hebrew Bible. The excavation in Ra$^{\text{ʾ}}$s Shamra and the cache of Ugaritic texts it unraveled has led scholars to trace the continuities between what was defined as biblical poetry and earlier forms of elevated expression in the Ancient Near East. The same basic system of adjoining clauses that governed the Psalms was found to characterize Ugaritic prosody, only that in Ugaritic poetry there were usually three clauses or more.

Kugel uses the term with caution since by its very name it had often been misleading. First, he sets down the schematic ideal form of what came to be called parallelism: [A] ___/ [B]___//, where one slash represents a short break and two slashes a periodic close. Stated verbally, this is a short sentence form made up of two (or more) brief clauses separated by a slight pause and "establish[ing], through syntax, morphology, and meaning a feeling of correspondence between the two parts."[416] Contrary to its name, however, the parallelistic line does not usually intend to parallel these clauses, that is, formulate equivalent, symmetric variations on the same idea for the sake of good style. It is better understood as something approximate to a mode of cognition, a general mold for a rhetorical style with many different realizations. It functions as an emphatic "seconding sequence" – A, what's more, B –in which B *follows* and is *subjoined* to A and thus continues, heightens it, or carries it further. B not only restates A, but may sharpen, particularize, and differentiate its statement. Even if our Canaanite poet refers to the same house in both clauses, the clauses do not repeat the same thing but intensify the statement as a whole: he built his mansion out of *both* gold and silver, or out of gold and *not* silver.[417] Parallelism is thus a form of thinking that operates with relations of subordination and cause-effect, where B provides the "click" that integrates the sentence as a

[416] James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 3.
[417] Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 395.

semantic whole. Whether the sentence is binary or ternary, whether it is symmetrically pleasing or lopsided, is beside the point.

This structure is governed by neither rhyme nor by fixed metric regularity, though many attempts have been made to impose them on it. It is rather a paradigmatic elementary structure for shaping elevated speech realized in various degrees to communicate meanings: the closer the correspondence between the two parts, the more solemnly formal becomes the idea expressed. It is far from being consistently and systematically employed because the symmetry of the parallel itself was not the point.[418] That it defies the prose-poetry duality may also serve as an indication for its multiple and diverse uses:

> […] for this two-part form, A+B, was as much a habit of mind as a formal prescription. And it was on everyone's lips, commoners' and kings'; rumors and facts, cures, rules of conduct, rules of thumb, things one heard and things one might make up spontaneous – all were framed in parallelisms. Indeed, this is the first thing to be grasped about parallelism: it was an extraordinarily versatile and popular form of expression, one that almost anyone could use almost anywhere.[419]

Al-Maghut's lines do not scan well along the lines of the classical foot. Nor are they a teasing departure from classical prosody, as are those of the taut stanzaic structures in Adonis' *Mihyar*. The typical Maghutian line is, however, relatively stable phonically and syntactically. The syllabic count of a line in *Sadness in the Moonlight* ranges between 7-12, equally distributed more or less between long and short syllables. The pauses at a line's end typically correspond to where a caesura or an end-stop would be. That is, the line breaks do not greatly deviate from the imagined flow of natural speech. Some are short periodic sentences that continue with a repeated preposition to the next lines. Others present clearly demarcated clauses. These units can often be grouped in semantic and syntactic clusters of twos and threes across two or three lines. It is doubtful whether such an organized lack of organization may qualify as free rhythm, where

[418] Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 53
[419] Ibid., 3.

stable metric blocks underlay rhythmic variability. Parallelism, as an untended, elastic yet structured form of expression, may partially explain the inconsistencies of what seems to be patterned speech without imposing on it a false regularity. That this catch-all structure is shared between common speech, oratorical prose, and non-metric, unrhymed poetry brings it in line with my general direction of inquiry. The motivation behind choosing this low-tech device is that it is straightforward and easy to use; one needn't bother about the conventional intricacies of composition.

Let us examine the beginning of the eighth strophe of "The Killing."Following Kugel's schematic form, I will mark the structure as follows: a single slash represents a short pause and the double slash a final closure, while the letters divide the integrated semantic units:

(a) The nights are long / and the winter like embers //
(b) One day /
One defeat to a gaunt, pathetic people //
(c) I feel my pointed beard /
And dream of the smell of the earth / and of house roofs /
Of an adolescent girl for my tongue to lick //
(d) The sky is blue /
And the bronze hand feels the tin of the heart //
(e) The crude lips divide the bloody names /
As I lie on the back of my head. //
(f) No one visits me… //
(g) I ramble on like a widow /
About the war, / about pornography and self-denial; /
About the groomed guard staring at my bare feet. //
(h) I stood behind these walls, Layla /
Now I rise and fall as if sitting on a spring //
(i) My heart is dense with fog /
And the smell of dead children //[420]

In (a) there are two words in each verset and the unified theme – a frozen night – broken in two for a "seconding" emphasis: the nights are both long *and* cold (embers perhaps stressing the lack of heating). (b) develops surprisingly by tying the word "one" through talk of a diary entry to a parody of boastful political speeches (one Arab people, victory for the nation). (c) is a

[420] Al-Maghut, *Huzn fi Daw' al-Qamar*, 71.

four-membered sentence unified by what an unshaven prisoner yearns for. In a crescendo fashion, it concretely imagines the way home and enacts progression from outdoors through house roof to bedroom. (d) is connected through color (blue-bronze) and subjoins external (indifferent sky) to internal (numb, tin heart). In segments (f) and (g) there is even a vertical parallelism at work: (f) is an orphan verset accompanied by no pair (hence the ellipsis after "no one visits me") and (g) is the resulting lonely jabbering which, in mimicking talk, extends to a four-part unit. (h) contrasts past to present, restful peace outside jailhouse to restless motion inside. (i) is a common case of al-Maghut's parallelistic "replacements" where the first clause presents a trite phrase only to be overturned and given a darker hue in the second.

The main difference between these examples and the Biblical parallelisms is that syntactical subordination is often explicit here (hence the significance of the zeugmas discussed above) whereas in the Biblical verses it is either not in place or implicit and must be drawn out. Nevertheless, this asymmetrical organizing method, with its tendencies to replace, repeat, omit, overturn and particularize based on adjoining pairs, threesomes or foursomes, has a strong parallelistic impact. The symmetry is intentionally mangled. This is visible also in the incongruously joined pairs within the versets: "pornography and self-denial"; [crushing] "fields and humanity"; [copious springs of] "fat and loathing"; [the color of] "their eyes, their clothes and their socks"; [I walk among] "beasts and smashed teeth." The transitions between two items in conjunction, between two versets, and between the integrated units themselves, are often squeakily awkward, but a sequencing logic between every two or three units is the surest sign of a minimal order.

The antecedent for these deviant parallelisms is the embellished styles of political demagoguery. In his days with the SSNP, Kamal Kheir Beik wrote partisan prosodic poetry that offers a wealth of these structures:

> I will drive away their fangs from my land / and remove the garment of shame from my people
> They disfigured my past… but in my future / a sun will scatter the dark of its traces
> If my right hand is cut off, my left / will hurry to resume to the epic battle
> I will keep lighting the flame of my poems for the struggle / and direct my roaring current through the coal of blazing fire
> On the people's cross I will raise my front / my body will not mind the harshness of the nail

The structure of this rhetoric bleeds into more dispassionate modes of writing in prose. Here is a sample from the preface to Kheir Beik's collection *al-Burkan* [The Volcano, 1960]. The author is ᶜAbdallah al-Qubrusi:

> Kamal Kheir Beik or Cadmus is of the children of the National Socialist Movement [SSNP]. He believed in the movement and fought for its victory and bore with it all manners of pain, suffering, and deprivation. Ever since coming to self-awareness, he went along with it; in its bright days and dark days, in its creative struggle against the reactionary powers conspiring against it from its inception, in its fronts of patience and impatience. From the horror of pain, from the splendor of battle, from the innermost core of social and national life, he drew inspiration for his poems.[421]

In sync with the heroic theme of this preface – Kheir Beik as both a loyal partisan fighter and a truthful poet – the cadence of these sentences is heroic, and this heroism finds its stylistic elevation in gushing groupings of twos and threes marked by shiny similarities of verb and noun forms: "believed in the movement and fought for its victory" [the two verbs follow same pattern of the 3rd form], "in the bright days and the dark days" [black and white are in the same plural pattern], "in patience and impatience" [word repetition], "from the horror of pain and the splendor of battle" [horror and splendor are nearly homomorphic]. The more expansive third members seem to offset complete monotony after elevation has been established. By poetically

[421] Khayr Bik, *al-Burkan* (1960), 9.

stalling the progress of ideas in the sentence, these symmetries balloon the static truths they wish to convey.

These forms of expression have been a longstanding feature of Arabic oratory and other genres of elevated prose. A.F.L. Beeston has drawn useful analogies between parallelism in the early Arabic *khuṭba* [oratorical speech] and that of the ancient traditions of Near Eastern poetries in Hebrew, Egyptian, Akkadian and Ugaritic.[422] It is not in strictly regulated poetry but in the *khuṭba*, Beeston claims, that we find continuity with the literary molds of the Ancient Near East, to which the division of roles between prose and poetry is alien. The orations of the Prophet and the first Caliphs, as recorded in early historical writings, are regulated by neither rhyme nor meter, yet are carefully arranged in chiasmic sentences with two balanced members.[423] The complex patternings of these speeches represent a high point of excellence in Arabic rhetoric and the styles that developed out of them "became practically *de riguer* for all subsequent prose writing down to […] the present age whenever the author wishes to raise his writing to the level of solemn or elevated diction."[424] These habits of thought and writing crop up to this day in prefaces and literary analyses where the psychological content calls for a measure of emotional involvement. Nasser's speeches are chock-full of them.

There are signs that al-Maghut held in esteem the high achievements of Arabic oratory, and particularly certain Quranic passages which he pored over from a young age,[425] yet he was incensed by the abuse of Arabic's true beauty and elevation in the mouths of the *dajjālūn*, the preachers and hack poets.[426] With his intentionally lopsided construction, al-Maghut seeks to rescue them from petrification by introducing some form of dynamism into their static

[422] Beeston, "Parallelism in Arabic Prose," in; *JAL* 5:1 (1974), 134-145.
[423] Ibid., 136.
[424] Ibid., 141.
[425] Al-Maghut, *Ightisab*, 68.
[426] Ibid., 108.

phraseology. Since the saggy parallelism is only a single element in the overall rhythmic effect, this hypothesis cannot afford a comprehensive reconstruction of the impact of al-Maghut's rhythms. But if my thesis is correct, it would be ironic that this "primitivist" poet, in his disorganized search for fast-to-use poetic tools, accidently stumbled on the fortunes of Ancient Near Eastern literary roots in the Syrian coast, while all the modernists around him were still following the mythic methods set up by the contrived Syrian past of Antun Saᶜada and his literary ideologies.

Perhaps the strongest self-contradiction in al-Maghut's oeuvre is that the manners modelled on forms of public speech insist at the same time on their notebook intimacy. This contradiction may be ascribed to the unusual restrictions in a situation thwarting the street demagogue's freedom of peddling his theatricalities of candor and moral truth. The poet-prophet as a *qarmati* soldier of civil life remains, like the lovely Damascus, an imaginary being realized on paper. This is why the poetic 'I' resorts to dark humor. Had he had the *waṭan* in the name of which to speak, he might have become the national Syrian poet, but this *waṭan* seems to brand its natives, as Adonis wrote in "al-Faragh," with nothing but a Cain's mark of disgrace.

The generation of poets that will inherit his achievement as a moral and esthetic example will try to do away with these last residues of prophetic loudness and self-election vindicated through al-Maghut's "uncivil" eloquence. Al-Maghut was a major literary prophet who required a scroll onto himself. The poets of the 1970s will join in collective effort of writing. Breaking away from molds of public rhetoric and the choppy utterances imitating them, they try to place themselves in miniaturist narratives and adjoin their threadbare poems to the selfsame scroll so as to survive in collective memory, as the minor literary prophets of the Bible had originally been compiled and retained in tradition.

CHAPTER 3: SHAFAWIYYA, COTERIE POETICS, AND THE NEW AUSTERITY

I What is *Shafawiyya*?

In the late 1970s, this chapter will argue, a new poetic style emerged in Syria. This style reflected a Syrian way of life and tried to reshape and expand the standard idioms of the Arabic prose poem. The agents of its delivery were a group of young poets who formed a low-key literary movement based in an increasingly diverse cultural hub in Damascus. Their sources were both local and global. Muhammad al-Maghut's poetry opened a path to connect to historical life and the low-mimetic aspects of Arab urbanity. *Shi^{c}r*'s theories and translations set for them a precedent, a high standard of esthetic totality by which a modernist poem in Arabic can measure up to its equals in world poetry. Yet by the late 1970s, the *Shi^{c}r* moment was half-forgotten in Syria. Al-Maghut's poetic idiom, on its part, had ossified into knee-jerk writing habits and his writing energies shifted to drama and satirical essays. Given the breakdown of communication lines with the modernist past in Beirut, these Syrian poets reinvented the Arabic prose poem under the altered conditions of pervasive state control of culture. Their movement is interchangeably known as *shafawiyya* (orality), the New Sensibility, or the Poetry of the Everyday.

Towards a Poetics of the Everyday in Syria

Since he works with his voice, a poet's lips are the tool of his trade.
Nadezhda Mandelstam[427]

The beginnings of a literary movement are hard to pinpoint, especially when it lacks institutional infrastructure. One possible beginning can be located in a 1978 article written by the

[427] Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope* (1970), 186.

Syrian critic Muhammad Jamal Barut in the Iraqi literary magazine *al-Afaq*.[428] An expanded version of this article introduces in detail the notion of *shafawiyya* and for the first time delineated the existence of a new literary phenomenon in Syria in terms of artistic principles. It was later included as a chapter in Barut's 1981 study *Poetry Writes Its Name*,[429] where an authoritative account of the movement's poetics is set forth. It tells the history of the prose poem in Syria with an argument of a three-stage development: from Aleppine combination of Surrealism, Freudianism and Neo-Sufism in the late 1940s through the visionary idiom and high modernism of *Shi^{c}r* in the late 1950s, and finally arriving at the Syrian *shafawi* poem of the late 1970s.[430] Its epilogue reads as more than mere critical appreciation. Barut triumphantly puts this movement on the map of the present scene:

> The unique particularity of the generation of the 1970s lies in turning to the *shafawi* poem. In this also lies its poetic contribution. This generation formed an experience that comes close to a poetic movement. And this movement has now asserted its presence through both a creative process and a critical one. The creative process makes poetry newly present. The critical process follows this presence, derives its tools from it and projects its own horizons. The generation of the 1970s, in all its artistic offerings, is still in need of some local flavor, but at the same time, it has not yet outgrown its experimental phase and its ardent search for new forms of expression.
>
> This in itself [that their experimental phase is yet under way] reveals the vast potential which this generation aspires to fulfil. These poets are not merely poets but *new* poets carrying with proper dignity their belonging to the trends of modern Arabic poetry.[431]

This movement is defined as a critical moment of transition in the Syrian development of the modern prose poem towards a realistic esthetic of "prosified reality." Al-Maghut's work was central to them because it opened up an entire field of reference in the immediate present of Damascene city-streets. It translated common references into a warm and stylistically distinct

[428] I was not able to obtain the original article in *al-Afaq* mentioned in Masri's introduction to *The Anthology of Syrian Poerty*. Misri, *Antulujiya al-Shi^{c}r al-Suri,* vol. 3, 30. An expanded version was published in 1980 in the Iraqi journal *al-Tali^{c}a al-Adabiyya*. See Muhammad Jamal Barut, "al-Qasida al-Shafawiyya fi Suriya," *al-Tali^{c}a al-Adabiyya* (January 1980), no. 1, 35-48.
[429] Barut, *al-Shi^{c}r Yaktubu Ismah*. Damascus, 1981. In a televised interview, Barut says that the evocative book-title was suggested to him by the poet Bandar ^{c}Abd al-Hamid as a hint that poetry must now be written as *qasidat al-nathr* to perform its self-legislating tasks.
[430] This does not contradict Barut's later study of *Shi^{c}r* magazine as "the first modernism," since the Syrian *shafawiyya* was a local phenomenon on the margins of the literary world, whereas *Sh^{c}ir* had an enormous universally pan-Arab impact and thus earned its precedence as the "first modernism."
[431] Ibid., 128.

poetic sentence with tense energy. The *shafawi* poets discover al-Maghut as a poetic horizon, appropriate and reshape his poetics and create him as a poetic precursor.

Barut's 1980 article and the book that came out of it were followed by a series of articles published over a period of six years in the leading Syrian magazines – *al-Maᶜrifa* and *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* – that profoundly rethink the legacy of Arab modernism and its critics. This critical project, as we shall see in chapter 5, is complexly situated between the two Cold War masters of autonomy and ideology and tries to serve both. On the one hand, Barut liberates the field from the overly formalistic discourse of Arab structuralism and argues for a continuity of poetic consciousness with other forms of social and political consciousness. On the other hand, he regards poetry as a self-reflexive verbal art with its own traditions and professional standards determined not only by Arab *turāth*, but also by a transnational space of modern poetry. This can be seen in a touchstone article for the mainstream literary journal *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* on the four great sensibilities in the Syrian poetry of the 1970s.[432] There Barut rechristens the *shafawi* sensibility as the "new" sensibility in Syrian poetry and alludes to it by the alternative name "poetry of the everyday." He situates it in a struggle with three contending sensibilities. The "propagandist" sensibility imaginatively reconnects with pre-*Shiᶜr khaṭāba* to establish an idiom of political poetry both decorous and of populist appeal. In post-1967 Syria, this sensibility was primarily attached to the theme of the Palestinian cause. The experimental sensibility, by contrast, went further in direction of post-modern open-ended "textuality" and is embodied in the increasingly Parisian work of Adonis from the 1970s onwards. This category partly overlaps with the mythopoeic sensibility exemplified in the works of Mahmud al-Sayyid – in particular his genre-breaking *Damascus Monad* (1978) – and Kurdish poet Salim Barakat, both of whom

[432] Barut, "al-Hassasiyyat al-Kubra fi Shiᶜr al-Sabᶜinat [The Major Sensibilities in the Poetry of the 1970s]," in: *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 138-139 (1982), 41-55.

took Adonisian high-minded *écriture* to new heights of recondite symbolism. The poetics of *shafawiyya*, claims Barut, is analogous to the rise of French *Nouveau Realisme* in post-WW2 art and letters and its ideal of creatively recycling what already exists in the world. The poems stand in oppositional continuity to the *Shiᶜr* moment and are written as if in ignorance of its esthetic ideologies. Barut illustrates the anti-prophetic turn by envisioning the sixties' visionaries seated on top of a mast facing the sea, as opposed to the seventies' urban ethnographers who stay on street-level and explore the sidewalk with binoculars.[433]

In *Poetry Writes Its Name*, a neat scheme is proposed to distinguish between the visionary poem of *Shiᶜr* magazine and the *shafawi* poem. The fundamental difference is that whereas the visionary poem operates in language as a semiotic system of interrelated signs (*al-lugha*), the *shafawi* poem builds on charging words in their everyday unreflective usage with poetic tension (*al-kalām*). From this basic difference proceed several categories. The visionary poem (VP) is cosmic in scope, whereas the *shafawi* poem (SP) inspects the small realm of individuals; VP explores the invisible whereas SP lifts the tangible from triviality; VP is polyphonic whereas the SP is single-voiced; VP constructs intricate networks of images while SP is unilinear and follows one discreet line at a time; VP is predominantly in the dramatic mode, while SP in the lyric; VP aspires for indivisible totality of vision, whereas SP leans towards the inevitable partialities of historical experience.[434]

The adjective *shafawi* caught on as a common name for the group. In English, we may refer to this subgenre as the *oral* poem (though it has nothing to do with pre-modern orality), the *speech* poem (though its language lies very far from sermons and *khiṭāb*), or the *spoken* poem (no relation to Spoken Word poetry). Salih Diab translates it into French as *poème de la*

[433]Ibid., 42.
[434] Barut, *al-Shiᶜr Yaktubu Ismah*, 95-97.

parole.[435] In his later critical pronouncements, Barut speaks of it as *al-qasida al-yawmiyya* [Poem of the Everyday], which brings it closer to a broader critical discourse of *Shiᶜriyyat al-tafāṣīl* [The Poetics of Detail] associated with the reception of Yannis Ritsos in the work of second-wave modern Arab poets.[436] The latter terminological shift reflects a realization that while *shafawiyya* per se is a Syrian phenomenon, many parallel developments of poetry moving towards historically lived experience can be found among Arab poets in other Arab countries and in exile. I choose to stick with the Arabic term in transliteration throughout the chapter.

Shafawī is synonymous with *shafahī*, meaning labial (from *shafa*, lip, or *shafā*, rim, edge). The semantic field of this stem-root strongly evokes oral communication in its binary relation to the written. *Shafahī* is oral in the sense of dialogue, argument, or conversation, and the dialogic character differentiates it both from the garbled mix of voices in the Adonisian brand of the visionary poem, and from the ravenous monologist catalogues in al-Maghut's. The change of emphasis can be seen anatomically: the organ associated with the poem is no longer the cerebral eye as an extension of the metaphysical structures of the mind, but the lips, the rim of the oral apparatus, whose sematic production is by nature situated in social presence. From the eye's processed data comes the concept; from the lip come a scream, a smile and a kiss, but also spit and juicy curses. The lips externalize and vocalize; the eye observes, objectifies, interiorizes. Here we have a mimetic reconstruction in *fusha* of a kind of tangential 'talk', impromptu and vividly roundabout. For the sake of clarity, *shafawiyya* plays with registers of literary Arabic as the consensual vehicle of Arab creativity and is thus equally removed from (1) the oral as the carefully composed oratorical in declamatory poetry, and from (2) any form of Syrian dialect.

[435] Diab, *Poésie syrienne contemporaine*, 14.
[436] See Barut, "Tayyarani fi al-Shiᶜr al-Suri al-Hadith [Two Currents in Modern Syrian Poetry]." This is an Arabic translation of a French transcription of a lecture Barut gave at the EHESS in Paris which was published 2009 in *Le Monde diplomatique*. The original could not be retrieved. The Arabic version is to be found on-line: http://www.terezia.com/section.php?id=2020. Last visited March 26, 2019. For *Shiᶜriyyat al-Tafasil*, as it is called, see Fakhri Salih's helpful contribution *Shiᶜriyyat al-Tafasil: Athar Ritsus fi al-Shiᶜr al-ᶜArabi al-Muᶜasir* (Beirut, 1998).

The speech imitated must be that of an intellectually capable and articulate linguistic agent, and this group is by no means restricted to cultural elites.

In 1990, the Lebanese poet-critic ᶜAbbas Baydun reviewed for the London-based *al-Naqid* magazine three collections by members of the group. He names them *al-sulāla al-māghūṭiyya*, the Maghutian lineage, and claims, as does Barut, that they sprang from under the cloth of al-Maghut's garments.[437] A poet-critic entrusted with the legacy of *qasidat al-nathr*, Baydun is chiefly concerned with the present and future of this institution and thus takes a formalistic line. As opposed to Barut's socio-cultural approach, attention is turned to the making of these poems as works of art out of a professional concern with their finesse, the mark of integrity for Baydun's trade. Read in this way, they fall short of what a good poem should be: terse, muscular, unified, structurally cohesive. Baydun speaks with a sense of seniority as the experienced sage of the prose poem, and takes out his red pen to correct the sophomoric Syrians. "A pawnshop of trivialities," he calls this corpus, low-voice mutterings and infant sounds as opposed to the confident clarity of true poetic voices: "the modern poem turns here into a quasi-gabble, a mumbling of modern poetry."[438] The poems are diffuse, prolix and grumbling; rhythms are boring and lackluster, a random sequence of jumbles; the narrative patterns indicate formal shabbiness and lack of architectonic thought. The last volume Baydun reviews is of especially little stylistic polish: "at first sight a swell of words, its flow and abundance reveal no economy whatsoever. No sculpting, no embellishment, no strong craft. Speech in its utter digressiveness and collapse…"[439] This book referred to – ᶜAbd al-Latif Khattab's *Scepter of an Eastern Prince* (1990) – will be discussed at the close of chapter 5.

[437] ᶜAbbas Baydun, "al-Sulala al-Maghutiyya: Qiraᵓa fi Shiᶜr Suri Hadith," *al-Naqid* 30 (December 1990), 30-38.
[438] Ibid., 35.
[439] Ibid., 36.

Among al-Maghut's descendants Baydun numbers the following names: Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh (1946-), Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn (1954-1982), early Nuri al-Jarrah (1956-), and Hukm al-Baba (1961-). The list, he admits, is not exhaustive since there is an uncertain number of even more minor, and by implication interchangeable, Syrian poets writing in a similarly understated vein. Baydun's random selection hints that the collectivist character of their enterprise merits only perfunctory attention to the poets as individuals. Baydun chooses to highlight individual poems and collections by three poets – Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid (1946-), Nizar Sallum (1956-) and ᶜAbd al-Latif Khattab (1959-2006) – different from the ones mentioned at first. His essay is subtitled *qirāᵓa fi shiᶜr sūrī ḥadīth* ["reading in *some* modern Syrian poetry"] with indefinite noun [poetry] and modifiers [Syrian, modern], suggesting both his disinterest as a reviewer and the fuzziness of his subject matter. For the sake of comparison, in Barut's chapter from *Poetry Writes Its Name* the poets selected as representative of the new sensibility are "The Gallant Four," as Masri jokingly calls them: Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh, Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid, ᶜAdil Mahmud (1946-), and Masri himself (1949-). Barut's account is the more authoritative, since he is the insider, and his grouping is also reflected in later anthologies.[440] The omission of both Masri and Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn (who is only mentioned in passing) is a gross oversight. For the upcoming discussion Barut's grouping will be followed (plus al-Husayn of whom it was too early to be cognizant at the time of writing), and the cut-off point for the poetry collections marked at 1983. This effectively means that the corpus of *shafawiyya* under examination will be restricted to eleven volumes of poetry: four by Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn (equal to his entire

[440] See Salih Diab's bi-lingual *Poésie syrienne contemporaine* (2018) and his Arabic anthology *Nawaris Sawdaᵓ* [Black Seagulls, 2007].

oeuvre), two by Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh, two by Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid, two by ᶜAdil Mahmud, and one by Munzir Masri.[441]

In the foreword to his 2006 anthology of Syrian poetry from the 1970s, the poet Munzir Masri offers an insider's account of the movement. He tries to correct both Barut's over-emphasis on "orality" and Baydun's lack of specified attention to indivual poets. Masri remarks that as he assembled the material for the volume, the difficulty of attaining important books made him realize that the life span of these poets in cultural memory was unbelievably short. The reason for this is that they had no place to inscribe their legacy. The space of publication and visibility in Syria was entirely occupied by the poets of the 1960s – Muhammad ᶜUmran, ᶜAli Kanᶜan, and Mamduh ᶜUdwan[442] – whose signature style fused the radical Pan-Arab socialist politics of the Syrian 1960s with a conservative rewriting of the symbolistic tradition as found in the poems of the Lebanese Khalil Hawi and Adonis. The genuine poetic contribution of these figures is debatable but their symbiosis with the Baathist authorities ensured them institutional clout until well into the 1980s.[443] This despite the fact that their subject matter was virtually exhausted by the shock of the 1967 loss and had never quite recovered and renewed itself. Most of the poets who started writing *qasidat nathr* in Syria at that time were inducted into that tradition and had to shake it off while watching from the sidelines and waiting for the formidable old-timers to make room.

The major factor in the making of his generation, claims Masri, is that they were the first modern Syrian poets to embrace *qasidat al-nathr*, produce it in quantities and quality, and feel at

[441] The volume-titles are: Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal al-Kamila* (2016); Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh, *Ayyuha al-Zaman al-Dayyiq Ayyatuha al-Ard al-Wasiᶜa* (1978) and *Bayn Halakayn* (1982); ᶜAdil Mahmud, *Qimsan Zarqaᵓ lil-Juthath al-Fakhira* (1978) and *Muswaddat ᶜan al-ᶜAlam* (1983); Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid, *Ihtifalat* (1978) and *Mughamarat al-Asabiᶜ wa-l-ᶜUyun* (1981); Mundhir Misri, *Bashar wa-Tawarikh wa-Amkina* (1979)
[442] For an interesting study of the poetry of the 1960s see Hanna ᶜAbbud, *al-Nahl al-Barri wa-l-ᶜAsl al-Murr* [Land Bees and Bitter Honey] (Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa, 1982).
[443] See Misri, *Antulujiya al-Shiᶜr al-Suri*, vol. 3, 17-19.

home in it *as Syrians*.[444] This feature makes for an admittedly loose classification, since the very fact of embracing *qasidat al-nathr* means greater differentiation between individual poets and less coherence as a movement. But it allows Masri to include in his critical picture many poets who were considered by neither Barut nor Baydun. The influential woman poet Da^{c}d Haddad, for example, belongs in this generation yet falls outside the bounds of *shafawiyya*. Masri has questioned the common use of this term for placing a misleading label on a much too variegated practice. The slide from "orality" to poetics of everyday is unwarranted as soon as it collapses poetry into non-poetic imitative categories and obscures its autonomous philosophical and artistic qualities. A poem, for him, is a true witness of its time by craftily stealing something from the teeth of chaotic historical time and ordering it. Like anything else, the "everyday" as a defining rubric for poetry can have a mythic hold on poets' imagination, restrict poetic practice, and secretly censor works that seemingly have no bearing on categories of commonly lived experience. Even though his own poetry had avidly drawn the poem to mix with everyday materials, Masri consistently argues that the impulse to do so came from the poem's inner calling and not from externalities of life. Poets must not forget that a poem is a "meticulous recording of lies," as he writes.[445] In a poem dedicated to Tawfiq Sayigh – a pioneer of Arabic free-verse and one of its more cryptic practitioners – Masri defends the Arabic prose poem in the following way:

> But where is the poetry in all this?
> speech lacking music
> lacking meanings and thought
> \
> where are the well-chosen words
> where the innovative images
> where is the feeling
> where is the sense
> \

[444]Ibid., 36.
[445] Misri, *Al-Shay laysa bati*$^{\supset}$*an* [Tea Is Not Slow, 2004], 80.

where is poetry then?
where there is no language and no symbol
no truth, no imagination
\
It is by definition
this, what you examine closely
and yet cannot see…[446]

The humorous tone is aimed to relieve the weight of the questions about what poetry is, treat *qasidat al-nathr* as a *fait accompli* and open it up to potentials from beyond what is characteristically poetic. There is no escape here from both a moderate metaphysics of meaning and a clinging to the art of poetry as an elusive open process known by negation. Indeed, Masri would go on to elaborate his understanding of poetic language not as verbal sculpting but as an instrument for meaning: "you write a poem / as a metal hand / would grab / a bleeding liver."[447] This instrumentalist understanding of poetry was an attractive maneuver in an environment where the beautiful sounds of Arabic poetry, or the pretentious modernist symbols for that matter, are uncritically relished for their own sake.[448] Masri reminds Syrian poets that poetry first has to make sense in a commonplace way, but even when it does, it can retain a sense of mystery and claim complex discoveries.

The objection to Barut's term *shafawiyya* is mostly to the way in which it was codified, reified and passed on.[449] Masri agrees that the discovery of Muhammad al-Maghut's poems precipitated the poetic turn and further specifies that, since the modern poetry produced in the late 1950s and early 1960 was in large measure inaccessible to poets in Syria, this discovery was embodied in al-Maghut's third collection *Joy Is Not My Profession* (1970). Masri also points out that the increasingly self-enclosed literary sphere in Syria created opportunities for poetry to be

[446] Misri, *Dakin* [Dark, 2014], 70.
[447] Ibid., 56.
[448] For a parallel maneuver taken by Miroslav Holub in the Czech "poetry of the everyday" see Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 115-117.
[449] For a highly critical reexamination of the term see Muhammad ʿAlaʾ al-Din ʿAbd al-Mawla, *Wahm al-Hadatha: Mafhumat Qasidat al-Nathr Namudhajan* [The Illusion of Modernity: The Concepts of the Prose Poem as a Model]," 193-215.

impacted exponentially by the few available books and poets. The narrow circulation of works created a sense of coziness and common familiarity with al-Maghut. It fostered a fraternal feeling between the poets who viewed him as a father figure and began drawing on one another's work. In this respect, the *shafawi* label is not a misnomer since it intimates the socio-political context from which the poems emerge: the clandestine underground gang wary of public exposure, the intimate interpersonal spaces and narrow circulation "by word of mouth," the poverty of means for maintaining the continuities of civilized life which writing makes possible. But Masri would not entertain the moral pathos of a poetry of witness in so-called adverse conditions. For him, the question is framed as the universal question of secular modern art: how to turn poetry "from the past to the present, from similar to different, from fixed to dynamic, from general to particular, from slogan to content, from false claims to the real, from pulpit to dinner table […], from eternal to the everyday, from the sacred to the human."[450] Whether *shafawi* is the right qualifier with which to describe this enterprise is an academic concern.

Yet Barut's and Baydun's critical insights are sound in many instances. Baydun, for example, intuitively treats these poets as a collective group operating in a minor mode of writing, minor, that is, in the narrow sense in which the twelve Biblical prophets are said to be minor: their writings were not long enough to merit a separate scroll so they were assembled and read together: "a poetic lineage continuously proceeding from one another, building on top of one another, sharing a path and a structure […] in what seems to approximate the composition of one single joint poem. In this trend, we may see clear harbingers of a Syrian style and a Syrian poem."[451] When Baydun takes Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid to task for the political content and

[450] Misri, *Antulujiya al-Shiᶜr al-Suri*, vol. 3, 32-33.
[451] Baydun, "Al-Sulala," 30.

flattened-out "plainness" of his poems, he nonetheless reveals himself as an astute reader. ᶜAbd al-Hamid relinquishes the role of the poet-prophet, writes Baydun, in search of truths

> that need no seekers, that lie somewhere in the range of spontaneous impulse and its kin, freely given to all, widespread in the most neglected and plebeian areas, yet because of their excessive ordinariness and lowly station, maybe because of their sheer naturalness, remain discarded and unknown, unnoticed except by those blessed with a sound heart, good intuition, and a well-disposed nature, the qualities bestowed, according to the poets of this lineage, on each and all […] Therefore, their poems ceaselessly praise the human example of those who continue to stand by the origins of life and its primary truths.[452]

Taken out of its context, this statement reads as a generous appreciation of the *shafawi* esthetic. It is right on the mark with respect to ᶜAbd al-Hamid's investments in the warm teleology of the simple word and the positive combination of light-heartedness, credulity, and docility which Masri finds in his poems.[453] Baydun nevertheless omits to explain two things. One is the background of a politics of necessity, i.e., a situation of urgency calling for maximum cooperation between poets, where individuality is curtailed by collectivisn and language is manipulated by political jingoism. The human crisis in Syria – as encountered in al-Maghut's poems – requires understanding the passionate pursuit of a common-denominator humanism as part of the internal field of the poem. Fundamental imperceptible truths increase in value in direct proportion to the degree by which they are debased by growing domination of state over discourse and proliferation of official lies destructive to the collective fabric. ᶜAbd al-Hamid's lightness may well be construed as a response to the weighty and overwhelmingly bleak fusion between poetry and politics that dominated the Syrian scene ever since the 1967 defeat. More on this to come. Second, the articulation of these primary truths has an irrevocable Arab-Syrian flavor to it. "Plain sense" is made culturally intelligible by invoking the staple images of Syrian self-perception: inner courtyards with a smell of jasmine, fruit orchards and lush foliage

[452] Ibid., 32.
[453] See Masri's short biographical intro in *Antulujiya al-Shiᶜr al-Suri*, 221-222.

cultivated by the gardening peasants in the Ghouta plains and the fertile Hawran volcanic plateau; hardship, suffering and ephemeral joys of common workers – be they urban underworked roamers, or landless overworked peasants; the fierce love of freedom and self-reliance of the montane peoples.

Raised in a Bedouin settlement on the outskirts of Deir al-Zor in the Syrian east, Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid is exceptionally restrained in terms of the poem's economy. This sparseness lends to some of his poems a programmatic meta-poetic quality that can be taken to justify Barut's use of the term *shafawiyya*. Bandar's poems are short and airy and knowingly open themselves to be criticized as facile. His domain is the surface of prosaic popular sentiment and he wishes to dryly set it in a textual environment punctuated by long tracts of silence. The opener of his collection *Ihtifalat* [*Celebrations*, 1978] takes up labial transgression as its direct theme:

> **Flowers**
> What happened in the end
> Is that I came to hate flowers
> There is a personal enmity
> Between me and the jasmine
> Since the end of last year
> It has been witnessing
> My two lips committing crimes.[454]

Usually representing the soft power of poetic imagination, flowers are now metaphoric substitutes for the flowery language of poetry appropriated by, and complicit in political domination. The crimes committed by the lips in the presence of jasmine loveliness are in this case celebrated as liberating, defying the obligation to perform lip service. But these oral transgressions against traditional authenticity remain outside the bounds of the poem. The poem remains discrete and reflexive with respect to them, suggesting the power of the spoken word by

[454] ᶜAbd al-Hamid, *Ihtifalat*, 9.

its spontaneous intractability. To restore the word to its surface power and innocence is the intention implied. "We pick our words from our everyday lives," writes ᶜAbd al-Hamid in the programmatic poem "Words," "like birds collecting scattered grains / from the corners of the fields."[455] The picked grain is transplanted and transformed, replanted by the sea to become broad-canopied trees that shade from blazing heat. But the ultimate reason for replanting the seeds is the concern for the trees and not the planters: "we pluck words and plant them / so that we don't die easily / since our pre-mature death / will cause trees to die of thirst."[456] The return to an elementary lyric mode establishes commensurability between nature and language, portraying expressive language as nourishing, sheltering, as vital as water. Just as photosynthesis is required for oxygen, language in its sheer otherness is required for human vitality. In the font of the printed edition, the *rāʾ* in *zahr*, the poem's title, is so concave as to resemble a *dāl*, creating an ambiguity between *zahr* and *zuhd*, flowers and asceticism. The tension between these two items is suggestive of the central dialectic tension of this poem between the love of the poetic art and a fundamental dislike for its opulence and fraudulence as a dominant factor in Arab authenticity. ᶜAbd al-Hamid's unadorned reticence as a poet thrives on this hesitancy. "Flowers" quietly suggests that the deformed political order has contaminated the collective order of language, and that the poem's labial utterance provides an anti-florid check on that contamination. The opening poem in *Mughamarat al-Asabiᶜ wa-l-ᶜUyun* [Adventures of the Fingers and the Eyes, 1981] shows a different aspect of the power of an uttered word:

> **Word**
> Like fire on the lip
> A word
> I will not utter even once
> Will fall gently, letter by letter

[455] Ibid., 16. Interestingly, this image corresponds to legal commands in the Torah to leave a tenth of the crops in the corner of the field for the community's poor people. In Hebrew the phrase *peʾat ha-sade* (corner of the field, the most marginal segment of it) also means "mouth of the field."
[456] Ibid.

Like soft grains
In an hourglass
Because it is stern and beautiful
Because it is a word
Like fire on the lip.[457]

The word is once again associated with vice, as "hellfire" is a secondary meaning of *nār*. This time, however, it is not criminally uttered but lingers passionately on the lip before falling into the gentle curves of the Arabic letters. The verb *irtamā* in the original suggests a fall into a mother's lap, an intimation that *fusha* is kindled with the warmness of a mother tongue. The word's stern beauty comes from the qualities that Baydun notes in ᶜAbd al-Hamid's plainness: its naturalness, the fact that it is self-identical, that it simply means what it means and yet inexplicable, an essence unrealizable except by the accidents of metaphor and simile, or by painting it as graphemes. A word is thus a kind of inexhaustible semantic monad, a sublime tautology. The poem enacts this tautological structure by ending as it began. Utterance leans on the curves of script and then returns to the sensual O-shaped mouth. The causal relationship is circular rather than hierarchical, and both are unfinished, indeed unfinishable, processes. The oral and the written do not figure as polar binaries but as a mutually constitutive duo, emanations from the one word that point beyond themselves. The merely imagined externalization of a word lends it reviving power against the nefariously symbolic language of public rhetoric. It is discovered to be no arbitrary, falsifying sign: a *kalima* (word) may have its own *kamāl* (perfection, well-formedness), an indestructible telos toward which it strives like flowers, birds, and trees, and like individuals, cooperating in nature's patterns or in the society of other words.

"A=A: what a splendid theme for poetry!" declares Osip Mandelstam in the Acmeist manifesto.[458] The Acmeist confidence in the splendid surface of the word, compared to the trust

[457] ᶜAbd al-Hamid, *Mughamarat*, 7.
[458] for a good translation and introduction to Mandelstam's manifesto see: Clarence Brown, "Mandelshtam's Acmeist Manifesto," in: *The Russian Review* 24, no. 1 (1965): 46–51. On Mandelshtam's idiosyncratic composition methods see the section titled "Moving Lips" in Nadezhda

bricklayers put in their materials, is bound up with its physical mass, the reason why Mandelstam finds a model in medieval stonemason artistry and Gothic architecture. This confidence is thus keyed to orality, as is also shown in Mandelstam's methods of precise oral composition and in the survival of his work as an "oral tradition" circulating clandestinely among friends. The context of oppression surrounding Mandelstam's faith in the tautological word hardly needs emphasizing.

* * *

Barut's article for *al-Afaq* was the first appearance of the term and the phenomenon in meta-literary discourse, but certainly the poetics preceded its explications. In terms of the *shafawi* poem, I think that its inception can be dated to the weeks and months immediately following the October war of 1973. I will shortly describe the changes brought on by that war and the stabilization of the Assadist regime in its wake, changes which began to impact every aspect of life in Syria, including the cultural sphere. Given that the poems published in several collections between 1978-1982 – the high point of *shafawiyya* – had to be conceived, brooded over and executed, that the poets had to go through the usual travails of small journal publications before arriving at the publishing house and had to be minimally recognized by the institution – if all this is taken into consideration, a period of at least five years prior required for gestation, birth and imperceptible development seems to be a reasonable conjecture.

Masri's poems can thus serve as a benchmark test for when *shafawiyya* as an independent poetic mode emerged. By his own modest account, Masri turned into "what others may consider a poet" in the October War of 1973, serving as a low-rank private sitting bored in an isolated

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Mandesltam, *Hope Against Hope* (1970), 184-189. Clarence Brown defines Madelstam as "an aural poet." "He heard his lines," writes Brown, "and took them down, having wrested them from silence, from what he could not, at first, hear." Brown, *Mandelstam* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 175.

post on a god-forsaken mound.[459] Poetry was his second choice, as he had planned on becoming a visual artist. Masri's debut in print occurs in December of that very same year in *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* magazine.[460]He debuts with several short poems from the cycle "Travels of an Anemone Flower" whose full version appeared in *People, Dates and Places* (1979). The poems are written as a fictional postwar diary with dates as titles. These poems reevaluate the mythic significance of the anemone flower as a symbol for political martyrdom, Tammuzi deliverance from the ashes through culture, and the Palestinian disaster all at once.[461] In the August 1977 issue of *al-Maᶜrifa* magazine, Masri appears with a more substantial journal contribution, a long poem titled "Khamsat Maqatiᶜ [Five Sections]."[462]What is interesting for my current argument is that even though the date of publication is marked as August 1977, Masri dedicates the poem to the spring of 1974 and "to the memory of countless years passing." Whatever exact date they were formed in the mind or noted down, the poems mark a process that was set in motion sometime in proximity to the 1973 war. The seemingly unremarkable title is noteworthy for the secondary meaning of *maqātiᶜ* as syllables, suggesting a more meticulous poetic ear. The poem is divided in five numbered, untitled sections, the first of which already dramatically diverges from the

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[459] Quoted in Taysir Khalaf, "Hina Witman wa-Ritsus wa-Rimbo wa-Niruda Yatanazzahuna fi al-Salihiya wa-Yartaduna Maqha al-Qindil [When Whitman, Ritsos, Rimbaud, and Neruda stroll through Salihiya and Pay a Visit to al-Qindil Café]," in: *al-Hayat* June 8, 1998. http://www.alhayat.com/article/1893198. Last visited March 26, 2019.

[460] *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 3:6,7,8 (October, November, December, 1973), 81-82.

[461] The poems are chronologically arranged starting from October 16 to December 26, 1973. As flora name meaning "the pieces of Nuᶜman," anemone in Arabic has poetic loads. *Shaqāʾiq* is the plural form of *shaqīqa*, a slice cut-off, or, according to Lane's Arabic dictionary, a "rugged tract of sand between two elongated tracts of sand, producing good herbage." In the imagination of poets, the flower is often associated with the red of blood and a woman's blush and functions as a mythic symbol for revival and rejuvenation, the transformation of violence (blood spilled on the ground) into natural beauty. It is said that "pieces of Nuᶜman" refers to the spring ritual revival-myth of Adonis: after Adonis was hacked to pieces by a wild boar, his blood mixed with the tears of Venus and the mixture engendered the flower. Adonis' Babylonian predecessor as divinity of fertility and vegetation, Tammuz, was referred to with the Phoenician epithet "Neᶜaman." The flower is thus also an enduring historical signifier of locality. It is most commonly found in the Levant (*bilad al-Sham*), was incorporated in modern Palestinian national mythology, and adopted as the State of Israel's national flower.
Masri's cycle was conceived against the bloody backdrop of the October war and its effect on the common Syrian soldier. The bloody pieces of Nuᶜman are metaphoric for the painful residues left in the interconnected water-system, so to speak, of Syrian collective consciousness. According to the lexical authority of *Lisan al-Arab*, the plural form of the name denotes both plural and singular - *wāḥiduhu wa-jamᶜuhu sawāʾun* - and it is this conflation of singular and plural that counts for the inspection of mind and memory. The brisk journeys of the anemone travel through time and consciousness rather than space, and this temporal dimension forms Masri's center of attention as it connects to the "river of life": "this is how the river of life drives its course in you / this is how you grow in depth / this is how the river's current carries your insides and heart / this is how you grow in dimension." (*Al-Majmuᶜat al-Arbaᶜ*, 169) The mindset is that of a survivor whose interior-life has been re-shuffled and confused. The entry from October 28 reads: "He entered a war and came out sound. / but things / are not as simple as that/ fire went with him to bed / and enfolded his dreams / in smoke." *Al-Majmuᶜat al-Arbaᶜ*, 13.

[462] *Al-Maᶜrifa* 186, (August 1977), 105-109.

highroad of contemporary Syrian poetry published in *al-Maᶜrifa* in both theme and tone. Its remarkability lies in its treatment of personal memory as a potential-filled field of exploration, and in its sentence cadence. Let us take a look at the first section of "Five Sections" to test this claim:

> If you ignore the cheap Xeroxed magazine
> and the Japanese microphone and the box of tissue –
> those things that poetry doesn't like to mix with –
> what remains on my desk would be
> a rusty ashtray I never use
> and a tall, cylinder-shaped aluminum container
> which at one time was full of effervescent salts
> or dry milk powder
> and at present houses
> a big and jumbled bunch
> of red,
> blue,
> and lilac flowers
> with no scent.
> Just like
> The jumble of my current memories.
> Just like it![463]

Masri's poems are written as little exercises of a cogito living in human time, changing or not changing accordingly by small measures, and deriving happiness from what cannot be changed. This poem can be taken as a fine model for the granular sensibility that came to be called "the poetics of detail" in the Arab prose poem at large. It makes a point out of conscious inclusion of previously spurned life materials (what poetry "doesn't like to mix with") and transforming them into a poetic conceit on a major theme (memory and self). There is a rhythmic generosity to Masri's sentence and how it is played off against the line, infusing each trivial detail with meaning. That the microphone is Japanese suggests the new reality of Syria as a net importer in poetry as well as commerce; the unused ashtray suggests that it's for guests and that Masri is an atypical Arab poet in that he doesn't smoke; the content in the container is specified

[463] *Al-Maᶜrifa* 186 (August 1977), 105-106.

to indicate the meagre existence out of which the poem springs: smelling salts for heartburn for lack of medicine and milk powder for lack of food. The contrast of flowers marks the festive occasion of the poem, yet the whole complex of poetry composed in a state of deprivation is encapsulated in this list of desk objects which preceded the flowers. The exclamatory redundancy *tamāman*, *tamāman* [entirely, entirely], which segues into the key simile of the poem, gives a colloquial accentuation to the whole.

Masri's sentence structure is complex and nuanced by contrast to ᶜAbd al-Hamid's laconicism and to al-Maghut whose every semantic gesture was brief and spasmodic and connected to the next by asymmetrical parallels. The rest of the Maghutian lineage enlarged the scope of al-Maghut's habits of thinking by frequently employing anaphoras and repeating syntactical structures to create a sense of abundant flow and widen the sympathies of the lyric. Though usefully simplifying, the unending grammatical listing in one poem after another tends with time to sound like a broken record. This strictly syntactical reason is why Masri should be singled out, in my opinion, as a constantly maturing voice. His preferred sentence type can be defined as *jumla jārifa*:[464] a cumulative and cogitating kind of sentence, slowly fleshing out through subordinate clauses, paratactic addition, adjectival specification, and phatic interjections. This sentence type is ideal for the slow taking-stock of memory work. It is the antitype of the characters encapsulated in what Masri calls the "*sajᶜi* personality," i.e., the human type speaking in *sajᶜ*, the highly parallelistic style of rhymed prose often employed in the Quran and parodied by al-Maghut.[465] In this sense, even though Masri's poems do not read like a Maghutian derivation, they are still indebted to al-Maghut's undoing of parallelistic decorum.

[464] A drag-along, sweeping sentence, suggestive of strong water currents that carry with them everything that comes in their path. Another Arab poet who practices this type of sentence with a comparable degree of inclusiveness and acumen is the Iraqi Sargon Boulus.
[465] Misri, "Al-Bunya al-Sajᶜiyya li-l-Shakhsiyya al-ᶜArabiyya [The Sajᶜi Structure of the Arab Personality]," *al-Safir*, April 19, 2007.

In the above-cited poem, the first sentence cuts across every line until the second-to-last one.[466]Another good example is the following poem composed of one sentence only and taking up the central *shafawi* theme of friendship and vitality of live oral exchange:

> Any one of us needs no more
> Than pass a wet tongue
> over his lips
> More than once and less than twice
> To kick out the silence
> And tell those around him in irony and depth
> About the hundreds of massacres and tragedies
> That probably happened
> Because of bad weather and misunderstandings
> As he points with his head and one of his feet
> Toward the corpses of empty sardine cans –
> So many it will forever be impossible to count –
> A sight causing him distress and confused thoughts
> About these mute peoples…
>
> November 26, 1973[467]

Here too the terminus of the poem remakes an observed triviality – the sardine cans taken from the soldier's derelict post – into a generalizing insight into Arab collective fate. This kind of sentence tries inasmuch as possible to mimic the movement of consciousness which knows no pause and, since its changes occur incrementally and by gradation, cannot be chopped up in the radical manners tried by Unsi al-Hajj.[468] It has put behind it the trademark metaphor-packed nominal sentence of *Shi^{c}r*. The specific points of reference in dates, places, and individuals are thus premised on an aesthetic remove that allows Masri to practice the reasoned "recollection in

[466] The magazine version is identical to the one in the 1979 collection, but the version in Masri's later edition of his first four volumes has twice as many line breaks. In the later stages of his career, Masri wanted to experiment with managing suspense by doubling the tension between sentence flow and line-break. He also began toying with punctuation. Rather than having blank spaces between large semantic divisions equal to stanzas, he inserted slashes. And after the last full stop of a poem, which for him usually ends in a double-dot ellipsis, he added an underline. The slash can be interpreted as a graphic reminder of indeterminacy. It implies a list of multiple possibilities without choosing between them, and one can find this use of the slash in al-Husayn's poems as well. The final underline is, I must admit, mysterious to me, but can be read as replacement for the author's autograph, like an X signature by illiterate people, added to accompany the place-name and date attached to each poem, and thus completing the requirement for assigning each poem a place, a date, and a person in a collection entitled *People, Dates, and Places*.

[467] *Bashar, Tawarikh*, 91. In the later edition Masri adds to this poem three lines in parentheses: "when their heads were disposed of / and their ocean replaced with cooking oil / the fish no doubt lost their memory." This addition enhanced the correspondence between the sardines and the mute Arab peoples implied at the end of the older version, and associates the de-humanizing of Arab collective life with collective amnesia. *Shafawiyya* and memory are thus closely tied together. See *Al-Majmu^{c}at al-Arba^{c}*, 165.

[468] This comment is loosely based on William James' observations in his classical essay "Stream of Consciousness." See the online resource *Classics in the History of Psychology* at https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/jimmy11.htm. Last visited March 4, 2019.

tranquility" which al-Maghut never sought to attain. This fact complicates Barut's accentuation of the oral and mimetic sides of this corpus, an accent which mistakenly points in either atavistic or derivative direction.

Shafawiyya's vernacularism is inseparable from shifting distances, as exemplified in Masri's modern gnomic poetics. Its rootedness in folk wisdom is enabled by these distanced perspectives. ᶜAbd al-Hamid, an agent of cinema culture in Syria, writes poems that report on live speech situations with the steady calm of a camera lens. ᶜAdil Mahmud's transmissions from his native Alawite "countryfolk" are permeated with the ironies of distance. Rather than reporting on everyday speech, Mahmud – part ethnographer, part reportage journalist, part poet – stages an interview with his uncle Ivan, a flower peddler, as an objective correlative to the state of the poet and his metaphor peddling. The poem is entitled "A World Grave [*qabr*] for my Uncle Ivan":[469]

> My uncle Ivan
> The flower peddler
> Who laughs like a cypress
> And knocks on the table
> With a large caked hand to affirm:
> "There are a hundred possible forms of love
> A hundred possible forms of despair
> And a hundred possible ways to die
> If only you
> Put a little sunshine between your sorry temples
> And lift up a song to pick through your teeth"
> My uncle Ivan
> Just before dying, said:
> "Here's a river, here's a boat
> Go away to the North Pole."
> […]
> He never dreamed of visiting Moscow
> Or Leningrad.
> He didn't like the word "exile"
> And used to marvel
> How people came to Siberia

[469] *Qabr* can be taken as an intertextual allusion to Adonis' 1971 influential poem "Qabr min ajli New York" (commonly translated as a grave for New York). Creswell understands this poem as translating into Arabic the genre of *tombeau*, a sub-genre of the elegy often practiced by modern French poets, and especially Mallarmé. Adonis "transfers" this sub-genre, claims Creswell, as a vehicle for claiming poetic legitimacy by revising the Arab elegy and fabricating a new culturally mixed poetic tradition. See Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 265-276. Mahmud's *qabr* is also concerned with establishing validity of transmission, only its interest is realistic and ethnographic and its medium oral.

In Stalin's day
With anything but baskets, flowers and zithers.
"are all these white plains,
good pigeon meat, bouquets of polar weather,
and long winter songs, the coffee
and green cognac, the juniper embers, the forest nymphs,
Is all this exile?
Idiocy!
Sons of bitches… exile he says… exile
Ptui!"
With a few juicy swear words he would then moisten his pipe
and turn his back on the planet […][470]

The interview is that of an urbanized intellectual of peasant upbringing revisiting his uncle's life as synergetic with the village life he left behind. The interest lies in the tense poles of irony and sympathy towards the uncle. Ivan is examined as an "authentic" Syrian peasant but also lovingly remembered as a dear family relation reflecting something of the poet's predicament. The irony resides in the uncle's ideological fixations about Stalin's gulags, and his refusal to imagine them as anything but ski resorts, places of hearty meals, leisure and beauty. Yet, the fact that an Alawite montane peasant is named Ivan and is required to take a stand on Stalin in articulating his life attitudes situates us in the modern global village and shortens the distance between uncle and nephew. It frustrates the speaker's expectation to find and preserve a pristine rural way of life, since the village has already been "contaminated" by newspapers and radios. There is then a thin line between the uncle's unfounded beliefs and the fictions necessary to sustain belief in poetry as "flower peddling."

A remarkable contribution of *shafawiyya* is the composition of poems, stanzas within poems, and images within stanzas as forms of midrash on common colloquial proverbs and the incorporation of what James Matisoff, in the context of Yiddish, calls "psycho-ostensive" speech acts – everyday greetings, blessings, and curses – in poetic language.[471] ᶜAbd al-Hamid, for

[470] Mahmud, *Qimsan Zarqaʾ*, 106-108.
[471] James Matisoff, *Blessings, Curses, Hopes and Fears: Psycho-ostensive expressions in Yiddish* (Stanford University Press, 2000).

example, transmits from an anonymous oral fellahi source ("the fellahin say…") the saying that "the earth hangs on a bull's horn."[472]Later on, the saying is modified within a broader poetic statement that brings to a close the long poem "Freedom Leads the People": "Our journey was beautiful and rough / on the small globe / rocking on a bull's horn / and visible to you / from the window of a hijacked airplane."[473] The "earth" (*arḍ*) becomes "globe" (*kurra*) and what once hanged unmoved is now shaking and tumbling due to the smallness of global consciousness. This smallness can be sensed from the bird's eye perspective of the commercial airplane, but also through mass media that give plane hijacking its global resonance. That very immediate reference to the news is set in stark contrast to the old wisdom of the fellahin, but they somehow dwell happily together as part of the low-mimetic. In his fictional postwar diary, Masri spins a witty stanza out of the phrase *al-dunyā qāʾima qāʿida* (literally: the world rises and subsides), a common way to describe a gigantic mess or chaos: "he spent his life / in wars / rising and not subsiding / between his mother Instincts / and his father Reason."[474] Yet this wisdom is spun in defiance of the expectation to conform to a "state of emergency" political rhetoric, as Masri puts the struggles of the individual psyche prior to actual wars.

ʿAdil Mahmud fashions a whole poem around the proverb *ḥabl al-kadhb qaṣīr* (a lie has short legs. Literally: the lie's rope is short). Mahmud's "The Rope" is a politically angry poem in the Maghutian vein. "With one rope," the formula is stated, one can climb a mountain, reach the well's water, execute ten men and drag a herd of sheep or mules. The point of the poem is the following: "but / how can you drag an entire country / to the tyrants' vault / with one short /

[472] *Mughamarat*, 96.
[473] Ibid., 99.
[474] Misri, *Al-Majmuʿat al-Arbaʿ*, 139.

tattered rope / called 'a lie'?"[475] This overly explicit poem is telling with respect to the directness and vernacularizing licenses that have grown in dominance since al-Maghut's poem.

In addition to these larger poetical units, more explicit use of dialect and vernacular elements is noticeable on the level of the individual word. In his very sparse poetic diction, ᶜAbd al-Hamid has little recourse to dialect, yet his method of prosification consists of reducing the store of adjectives and nouns to the extent of an almost complete overlap with the most ordinary lexical items shared by *fusha* and *ᶜammiyya*. In the lines just cited from "Freedom Leads the People," the journey is rough (*qāsin*) and beautiful (*jamīl*) and the globe is small (*ṣaghīr*). These two lines can be taken as indicative for the tendencies of the volume at large, whose small fund of basic adjectives in circulation comprises: *kabīr* (big), *qadīm* (old), *baᶜīd* (remote), *ṭawīl* (long), *wāsiᶜ* (wide), *ᶜālin* (high), *ṣāmit* (silent), *yābis* (dry), and *kaᵓīb* (depressed). Aside from making his poems suitable as class exercises for beginning students of Arabic, this practice can be seen as a partial adaptation of Tawfiq al-Hakim's experiments with dramatic dialogue in the mid-1950s. The Egyptian dramatist had tried writing plays in what he termed a "third language," i.e. a bivalent script and overlapping *fusha-ᶜammiyya* vocabulary so that the plays would be read as a literary work in literary Arabic and performed and sounded in Egyptian colloquial.[476] Though these plays did not go on to become a huge commercial or literary success, the quixotic effort put a dent in the modern history of Arabic literature as a creative solution to the problem of dialect and written language on the stage. When the conception of the poem in Syria changed to a sounded piece, the problem retuned, and with it the solution inspired by al-Hakim. There are also textual instances of phrases in *fusha* which seem to be transported from dialect. Such are, for

[475] Mahmud, *Muswaddat*, 91-92.
[476] On this topic see Sasson Somekh, "The Dilemma of Language in Tawfiq Al-Hakim's Plays," in: *Ha-Sifrut* 30-31 (April 1981), 88-94.

example, Abu ᶜAfsh's repeated rhetorical questions *"mā lladhī yaḥduthu? \ mā lladhī yaṣīru?"*[477] The most extensive direct use of *ᶜammiyya* appears in an early poem by Abu ᶜAfsh, before his full-scale conversion to *shafawiyya*.[478]

A slightly subtler attempt to sound colloquial comes from al-Husayn's poem "Qalb Maksur [Broken Heart]."[479] The title is unmistakable in its aim to resemble a popular lyric song, not only in stating this immortal theme but also in opting for the more colloquial adjective *maksūr* in lieu of the more decorous derivation of the seventh form, *munkasir*. The refrain line goes *lī qalbun maksūrun ka-safarjalatin*, or, "I have a heart broken like a quince." Quince is a local signifier. It has a long history of cultivation in the Fertile Crescent and along the Mediterranean, and the Arabic word *safarjala* can be traced back to the Akkadian *supurgillu*. The poem is one of al-Husayn's several attempts to write a kind of modern work song for the contemporary underpaid worker. Its theme and accessibility invite a reading in colloquial pronunciation. If read in *fusha* with full case endings, the first line sounds cumbersome and the fine alliterative play between ma*ksur* and *ka-safar*jala is drowned out by the two extra syllables. I think that the reading of the line closer to its original intention would be *lī qalb [*or *ᵓalb] maksūr ka-safarjaleh*.

On the level of phraseology, there are numerous emphatic small talk phrases shifted to a position of prominence within the poem. Though not violating the limits of proper *fusha*, these phrases are naturally understood as close references to the lifeworld. Abu ᶜAfsh's "Good Morning" illustrates the *shafawi* aspiration to return to basics of the oral stage: "hot soup on a

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[477] Abu ᶜAfsh, *Bayn Halakayn*, 95. "What's going on? What's happening?" The distressed question runs through the whole poem which begins *mādhā yaḥduthu fī amrīkā / mādhā yaḥduthu fī al-ᶜālami?* [What's happening in the world? What's happening in America?].

[478] *Al-Maᶜrifa* 115, September, 1971, 107-113. The poem is titled "Unnamable Blood" and models its voice on the ancient *rithāᵓ* paradigm of the grief-struck lamenting widow who breaks down after news of a loved one's death is broken to her. Something of the *hawas* (frenzy, derangement) associated with the figure of the widow had struck deep in Abu ᶜAfsh's poetic voice. Loose prose translation of the dialect segment: "curse on those who broke the news to me! Curse on whoever taught you to be so harsh! My life just turned into a lie. Look at me - waiting for those who come and go and for those who leave their names on my doorstep!"

[479] Al-Husayn, *Al-Aᶜmal*, 109.

small table […] and the joy of a child's first words."[480] This short poem is premised on three such colloquially inflected basic phrases: "*God forbid* […] I don't want to say *goodbye* / I will just smile and say to you: *good morning* [italics mine]."[481] Masri is fond of including emphatic small talk adverbs – *tamāman*, *ḥaqqan* – roughly equivalent to the English *really*, *actually*, *totally*. His use of the extremely routine greeting *ahlan wa-sahlan* in the dialogue poem with Victor is an exceptionally on-point case of this tendency. ᶜAdil Mahmud finds an ironical use for the conversational phrase *lā baʾs* – okay, fine, not bad – by applying it to a situation where things are clearly not okay.[482] Another poem from Mahmud's *Drafts on the World* (1983) shows what is at stake in employing these trite everyday formulas:

> **Barriers**
> We have no evenings
> we have no windows
> we have no free space outside our houses
> and we don't dwell in the wilderness anymore.
> […]
> we have no evenings
> yet we invite you all to watch the sunset:
> the setting of the sun
> the setting of our years
> So
> Come, let us take out our straw chairs
> And tea cups onto the sidewalk
> Sit back (as if the city belonged to us)
> And greet the passersby:
> "Good Evening"
> anonymous people
> and to you too, passing lady,
> "Good Evening…"[483]

The greeting is effectively part of an invitation to form a coalition of commiserators, who then cast the all-familiar blessing *masāʾ al-khayr* [good evening] on the heads of anonymous passersby. We thus have a low-key plea from the midst of modern urban alienation to restore to words their potency of invocation as incantatory spells, to magically deliver a measure of social

[480] Abu ᶜAfsh, *Ayyuha al-Zaman*, 105.
[481] Ibid., 105-106.
[482] Mahmud, *Muswaddat*, 93.
[483] Ibid., 69-70.

harmony into the street. This action used to be one of the main tasks with which orality, in pre-modern cultures, was entrusted.[484] These vernacularizing elements are nevertheless set in a modern framework of subjectivity and go into the construction of individual point of views. More than others, Masri submits personal memory to a higher meta-critique, making it into an active associative process wedded to the flow of life. In the interplay between the writing self and the character self of the lyric poem, the self's ceaseless mutability is put to critical reflection that affects the language of the poem.

The New Austerity, Its Contexts of Emergence, Its Alleged Translatability

After the old oligarchy was finally sacked by the Baath coup in 1963, a power struggle ensued between the moderate founders of the Baath party and the radical socialist wing that pushed for a "revolution from above" in an attempt to make Damascus the Hanoi of the Arab revolution.[485] When the radical wing led by the Alawite Salah Jadid prevailed, the Baath turned into "a vehicle of plebeian rural revolt" and a class war was set off that pitted the provincial lower middle class and peasants against the souk, the urban elites and Sunni bourgeoisie.[486] The radicals pushed for bolshevization of the state and centralized power, mobilized the lower classes and redistributed lands. The aggressive push towards social levelling was reversed only by the disregard for power calculus that comes with the radicalist territory. Syria was driven by the radicals into a humiliating military defeat in 1967, after which it developed an intellectual and literary discourse of lacerating self-critique. In the scramble for power following the debacle, Hafiz al-Assad, an Alawite native of Qirdaha and the scion of peasant soil workers who rose to

[484] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32.
[485] The phrase is coined by historian Raymond Hinnebusch in a book by the name of *Syria: Revolution from Above* (2000). For the political occurrences immediately after 1963, see Hinnebusch, 47-52, 57.
[486] Ibid., 52.

village notability, outwitted his opponents in the race to the top. A wily political actor, al-Assad took advantage of the fractioned climate in the war's aftermath, slowly enlarged his support in the ranks of the increasingly Alawite army, and cautiously made his strength known without staging an all-out *coup d'état*. On November 13, 1970, the Baath congress held by the state's radical leaders convened in the Barracks Plaza in Damacsus. They decided to relieve al-Assad of his post as defense minister. In response, al-Assad seized power and Salah Jadid was thrown in jail along with his associates. This was the beginning of the "corrective" movement and al-Assad's pragmatist Syria.[487]

Al-Assad's pragmatism produced immediate results. The outcomes of the 1973 war with Israel were inconclusive, but the Syrian military stood firm enough for it to be branded by the regime as triumph and show of valor. This helped al-Assad stabilize his power and introduce measures of industrialization and modernizing reforms. The overall goal was to establish "a machinery of power in the service of raison d'état" in Hinnebusch's aptly laconic formulation.[488] Al-Assad amassed enough credit to reassert the Syrian state as a regional power to be reckoned with. Internally, he balanced the conflicting power bases in the army and the party and took measures to accommodate the Sunni mercantile class. He accepted Gulf oil money in exchange for ceasing to export the radical secularism of Salah Jadid's government. This sparked a small economic boom in the mid-seventies that precipitated the rise of a new middle class from the previously marginalized minorities from the provinces.[489] Al-Assad's centralization of Damascus cemented its ruralization, as massive immigration from the periphery helped form the new Damascus-based bureaucracy.[490] This boom also bought industrial quiet as al-Assad slowly

[487] For the full story of al-Assad's rise to power see Hanna Batatu's longer telling of the story in *Syria's Peasantry*, 144-156, 170-175.
[488] Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 65.
[489] On the new middle classes that ascended with al-Assad's power and rose to prominence through the military and state-bureaucracy see Hinnebusch, 90-91. Especially the Alawite-Druze minorities turned from a radicalized underclass to a powerful group with privileges to defend.
[490] Ibid., 53.

arrogated to himself the sole political initiative while the system below was gradually patrimonialized.[491] Party ideology gave way to a personality cult centered around the unprepossessing figure of the president. The pillars of state power became the party apparatus and its absorptive capacities of civil association, the military, and the security forces.[492] The latter were necessary for the time when the short-lived economic upturn would come to a halt, class mobility devolve into corruption and cronyism, and political relaxation would no longer be sustainable. The violent domestic unrest of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the sharp decline in oil prices in 1986 and, finally, the fall of the Soviet Union, all had ominous consequences for the fragile balance maintained by the Syrian regime and required strong security forces in place.[493]

Barut concisely alludes to one aspect of these reforms as accelerated forms of urbanization that profoundly altered the appearance of Syrian cities in terms of shopfronts, streets, and paved roads.[494]The truth is that with the stabilization of the regime in 1970s, and especially after October 1973, the Syrian economy experienced unprecedented growth. Hafiz al-Assad's first decade of rule is often regarded as a turning point in terms of social and economic modernization all across the country. A better distributed, better equipped health system helped foster demographic growth, increase life span and reduce infant mortality rates. Bridges, railroads and highways were constructed across the country and facilitated better connectivity between city and countryside. Dams were built to regulate water supply and utilize natural energy. Between 1970 and 1992, 95 percent of all Syrian villages had been electrified. By 1980, 54 percent of the rural population (and 97 percent of urban population) were provided with piped water; increased mechanization of farming equipment contributed to the high agricultural growth

[491] Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 66-68. See also Wedeen's pertinent interpretation of familial symbolics in Syrian public imagery. Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 49-66.
[492] Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 84-88.
[493] On this see Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 93-104.
[494] Ibid.

rates.[495] An expanding education system gradually chipped away at illiteracy rates which, in rural Syria, ran very high. That literacy rates grew rapidly is evidenced by the fact that by 1976 the number of subscribers to al-*Maʿrifa* magazine – the central organ for Syrian literary and intellectual debates – had tripled itself.[496] This would be the background necessary to understand the burgeoning print culture in Damascus of the 1970s and its various state-sponsored outlets. Even when the culture industry failed to publish the work of young poets, it provided modest jobs and absorbed some of the bohemian immigrants from the Syrian provinces.

The upshot of this summary is, however, that al-Assad's "progressive" Syria contained much of the old and was not really bent on abolishing it. These processes of top-down modernization, though potentially enlarging the ranks of the Syrian reading public, had also created glaring inequalities, established a stagnant political status quo, and kept the public at tolerable dissatisfaction rate and well enough fed. High growth rates did not reflect deep changes in society. They were in large part a result of military aid from the USSR and Saudi financial aid offered to maintain Syria's position as a frontline state in the war against Zionism while curbing its socialist radicalism. They stopped when the Soviet Union crumbled, and when the interests of Syria and Saudi Arabia no longer aligned. Barut refers to the emerging formation of amorphous zones of independent endeavor and civil life that were nonetheless internally constrained by a sense of *takdīḥ*, a demoralizing exertion of the Syrian everyman. Hence the relocation of the dramas and tensions of poetry to the realm of small individuals mistrustful of prophetic language of any kind and wary of sweeping attractive slogans. The time that elapsed from 1973 to 1978 – when the group's output is starting to appear and attract modest attention – thus introduces another set of disappointments, more domestically concerned and thus unvented, on top of the

[495] All the statistics come from the account of Palestinian Marxist historian Hanna Batatu. See Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 63-74.
[496] See editorial of October 1976. *Al-Maʿrifa* 176, 4-6.

over-verbalized colossal ones of 1967. Barut defines the *shafawiyya* poets as growing into a Syrian generation of post-charisma.[497] The poetic experiences of Adonis and al-Maghut were formed in an age of the promising charisma of Arab political leadership in the image of a unifying father figure. Even at its most apolitical, Adonis' poetic experience is informed by a cosmic human model analogous to this father figure. Al-Maghut's poetic character rests on caricatures of charisma. The poets of the seventies may be seen as post-1967 poets in the sense that they have been confronted with the collapse of charisma and the scathing discourse of self-criticism that followed.

In a straight-speaking editorial published in *al-Maᶜrifa* magazine on the fifth anniversary of the October "victory," the fiction writer Zakariya Tamir assuredly states that the *waṭan* as a sovereign state let down its citizens by preventing "justice, freedom and joy."[498] On his account, the continuous withholding of basic rights and freedoms renders the country weak since it subverts national cohesion and cuts fraternal bonds, securing Israel's upper-hand against rulers isolated from the divided mass of ordinary Syrians. Tamir simply reiterates the basic truth that without delegating rights to individual citizens and minority groups and putting faith in the Arab *insān* [human being], the Arab state is doomed to expanding weakness, perennial losses and eventual collapse.[499]

The broader ramifications of these processes are that, however anomalous or distorted, a Syrian territorial state identity was forged and gradually implemented starting in October 1973.[500] On the level of praxis, the bolshevization of all social, political, and cultural institutions was mellowed only to be carried out by more covert means, making the state imperceptibly felt

[497] Barut, "Tayyarani fi al-Shiᶜr al-Suri al-Hadith." See n. 436.
[498] Zakariya Tamir, "Suriya Tishrin." *al-Maᶜrifa* 200, (October 1978), 5.
[499] Ibid., 5-6.
[500] On this topic see Eyal Zisser's very clear and helpful article "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria," in *Middle Eastern Studies* 42:2, 179-198.

on very intimate levels of everyday life: people's jobs, their pastimes, and their forms of social organization or lack thereof. On the level of discourse, Syrian history was rewritten by official scribes as an all-inclusive hodge-podge of ideological currents. Syrian state-identity was the invisible container for this vapid identity-stew. Issues that a decade or two before had been subject of volatile political conflict between contending parties – Pan-Arab vs. Pan-Syrian viewpoints, for example[501] – were diluted in a watered-down Syrian master-narrative full of contradictions that were never spelled out. Despite the fact that the ideological DNA of these discourses, so to speak, ran counter to recognizing the "artificiality" of Syrian national borders, the blend served to bolster the national cult centered on the Baath and the personality of its leader, a cult realized through several new holidays and commemorative events.[502] Syria as an "immortal" entity embodied by its leader extended its existence to inherit and reconcile everything starting from the Ancient Near East of the third millennium BCE, through the Roman Empire, Byzantine Christianity, the Umayyad Arab-Islamic Empire and Salah al-Din up until the Ottoman Empire and the anti-colonial national independence struggle.[503] These falsifying historical myths were then disseminated and perpetuated by the expanding reach of the Baath education system.

The literary field was naturally impacted by the growing role of the state in cultural production. It became more inward-looking, since much of world literary culture was stopped at

[501] That for the previous generation there were still political stakes involved in self-affiliation with either side, one can see from al-Maghut's conscious disaffiliation from his Pan-Syrian youth after returning from Beiruti exile, and the strong stress laid on Arab categories as the defining reality of individual identity.
[502] See Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism," 188-191. Important state holidays are, for example: Independence Day celebrating the evacuation of French soldiers from Syrian soil; Arab Unity Day celebrating the UAR; October War Liberation Day celebrating the "victory" over Israel; anniversary of the Baath party; anniversary of the Baath Revolution; anniversary of the Corrective Movement (al-Assad's rise to power). From the political viewpoint of the fifties and sixties there are major paradoxes in celebrating all of these events as part of a single narrative, since they are associated with hostile political opponents. For parallel processes in other Arab countries, and especially Egypt, See Emmanuel Sivan's brilliant argument drawing on the postage stamps of different Arab states after 1967. Sivan, *Mitosim politiyim ʿarviyim*, 121-145. In the context of the 1982 Hama massacre, Wedeen notes that the formulaic persistence of official language created a "reality that rendered the conflictual coherent and, ultimately, non-problematic." Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 48.
[503] Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism," 186-187 ,191-192.

the border. The defining trait of the Syrian poets under view here is that they were hungry for an outside and left to their own devices. Their formation was characterized by wide reading gaps and book shortage, hardly part of an Arab republic of letters and hardly part of a global one. This would be the main reason why they stuck together and drew intensively on one another's work. The prose poem instituted as a genre in Beirut of the late 1950s with an impersonal modernistic ideology for the purpose of creating an autotelic aesthetic realm now served the purpose of rehumanizing the sphere between beleaguered individuals and the non-human: language, ideas, collective life.

The poetic redress vis-à-vis state monopoly on discourse is not particular to the Syrian case. In *Between Two Fires*, Justin Quinn discusses Eastern European and Anglophone poetry in the context of a transnational movement of poetry in the Cold War. According to Quinn, the Cold War "synchronized culture across the globe, leading to similar themes, forms, and critical maneuvers," exerting "specific and terrible pressures on poetic discourse and its reception. It also brought a wide range of cultures and nations into sudden and unprecedented negotiation with each other, setting up parallels in poems themselves, critical discourse, and poets' biographies."[504] Quinn examines in detail cases of crossings and recrossing between Czech and American poetries. His explicit assumption in investigating these exchanges is that the Cold War "orchestrated an unprecedented amount of new transactions between cultures and languages,"[505] and that these formative transactions – though at times confounding in their waywardness – open up vast potential of transnational studies of modern poetry, which cannot be understood but through the prism of the ideologically fraught global zones created in many locals throughout the Cold War. In the realm of poetry, the cultural struggle is played out in a many-sided conflict

[504] Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 3.
[505] Ibid., 32.

between the materiality of a given poetic language with its nationally inflected literary history and the two ideological forces of Socialist Realism and free-standing Autonomy.

Some of the dilemmas that crop up on the Czech side of the Iron Curtain are especially illuminating. For example, once subjective lyricism is rejected as bourgeois and reactionary, and Zhdanovist theories of poetry's collectivist commitment seize hegemony, enormous pressures were exerted on poets to harness themselves to the glowing future of "the people" under Communism. In Syria, similar pressure from the Arab Socialist "progressive" state had paradoxically reenforced entrenchment in outmoded poetic forms fortifying Arab authenticity and effectively disconnected poets from the modernist phase in Beirut. But as a general sense of disillusionment sets in with respect to the role of the state in leading culture and society towards a better future – as had gradually happened in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc – collectivist discourse becomes marked as false ideology at the same time as the state needs to actively contain free speech protesting its illegitimacy. Poets then scramble again for autonomy in devious ways, and the same ideologies that subtly functioned to ban political material from poetry by exclusion of what is not aesthetically well-made become liberating across the Iron Curtain. It does not even have to be an influx of translated foreign works. In Latakia, Masri rediscovered Unsi al-Hajj and Shawqi Abu Shaqra, both Lebanese poets who had absorbed the modernist reform of *Shiᶜr*. In Czechoslovakia of the 1950s, the literary journal *Kvêten* (May) was set up to explore "milder modernist formal techniques" of engagement with the pre-ideological strata of lived experience.[506] The poet Jiří Kolář, whose work took amply from the humdrum of Prague everyday life, was castigated by the Stalinist poetic establishment for not organizing his material under the umbrella of the right ideas. Kolář was subsequently fired from his job,

[506] Ibid., 52.

incarcerated for eight months, and after his release shifted to *samizdat* publications reminiscent of *shafawiyya*'s modes of writing "by word of mouth."[507] In 1956, the Czech poet and immunologist Miroslav Holub published a landmark article titled "We Are Grounded in the Everyday" as implicit criticism of the subservience of poetry to Marxist propaganda. The category of the everyday was continuous with a kind "socialist humanism" but established its autonomy through an analogy with scientific inquiry and an insistence on the luminosity of solid facts from day-to-day life as opposed to general ideas.[508]

In Syria, an interest in the lucidity of facts as poetic material prominently arose in the next stage of development of the Aleppo Forum, though signs of it are apparent in Masri's work. The isomorphic parallels between the Czech and Syrian cases are especially strong in the following respect: the poetry of the everyday is adopted as antidote against declamatory excess of political and poetic rhetoric alike, while also rejecting subjectivist romanticism and symbolistic over-complexity. Political and poetic rhetoric, if seen as in some sense continuous in Syria, are embedded in Arab particularity, the traditional meters, ornamental opulence. Intricate symbolism is personified in the figure of Adonis whose presence was felt directly and indirectly through the odd group of Baathist modernist poets, referred to before as the generation of the 1960s. *Shafawiyya* develops a set of techniques – differing according to poetic temperaments and talents – to negotiate these pressures and come up with a concrete redress for the insidious conformism of poetry in a state-sponsored culture. As Quinn adeptly shows, to perform these poetic acrobatics, one must be a resourceful literary inventor and entrepreneur. Here is Munzir Masri's statement on finding freedom in unscripted impertinence:

> **The Irreverent One**
> He tore meter down

[507] Ibid., 64-69.
[508] Ibid., 111-114.

And filed for divorce from rhyme.
He said: "I have to become a lover again
I have to be fresh air."
\
He said: goodbye to paved roads
Goodbye to traffic signs
I have to take my own way in the forest
I have to play
truant.

1973[509]

I chose "austerity" as a consciously inexact enveloping title for these techniques and qualify it as "new" because the emergence of austerity in different national traditions of modern poetry is reiterative and promises renewal through paring down in the manner presented in my introduction. Austerity loosely describes an economy of the poem directed at removing figurative crust and dismantling the edifices of poetic eminence so that a poem would be able to travel lighter. If Masri really wanted to play truant along the independent road he travels, he must not carry more than elementary provisions. "Be fresh air" rather than "breath fresh air" means that the poem is imagined as a basic non-human necessity for human being, an additional lung in a choking discursive environment.[510] Austere anti-poetic measures against figurative density appear to be a cross-national recipe to generate this transformation. Figures of austerity provide critical vocabulary for poetic renovation in movements fighting against the untranslatibilities of poetic language and its deep embeddedness in material particularities of national poetic traditions.

The term is borrowed from Michael Hamburger's book *The Truth of Poetry*. In a chapter entitled "A New Austerity," Hamburger characterizes the "anti-poetry" emerging after World War II as expressing the belief that poetry "should also be capable of communicating as directly as prose, without resort to a special language mainly distinguished by its highly metaphorical

[509] Misri, *Antulujiya al-Shiᶜr al-Suri*, vol. 3, 23.
[510] See Masri's use of this metaphor in his remarks on ᶜAdil Mahmud's poetry. Misri, *Antulujiya al-Shiᶜr al-Suri*, vol. 3, 170.

character."[511] Hamburger singles out as harbingers mid-century poets like Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, and Bertolt Brecht, whose work is enriched by the tension between lyric expression and Marxist worldviews. With his laconic directness, Brecht set the higher bar for the poetically austere poem. In the 1930s, as politics engulfed artists' existential concerns, he came up with a practice of "language-washing" to strip committed verse to its bare essentials. All throughout his long career of political writings which often verged on the didactic, Brecht had strategically underscored the autotelic aspects of poetry. He was an arduous student of world literature who had at his fingertips a broad repertoire of literary models with which to convey his political messages. In later life, he countered the callous smugness of the new Stalinist regime in East Germany with his "Buckower Elegien [1953]," reconnecting with the elegiac mode of Rilke whom he had disparaged in his Marxist youth. Brecht's mastery of the brazen poetic gesture was now turned against Communist bureaucracy:

> **The Solution**
> After the uprising on June 17th
> The Secretary of the Authors' Union
> Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
> Which said that the people
> Had forfeited the government's confidence
> And could only win it back
> With redoubled labor. Wouldn't it
> Be simpler in that case if the government
> Dissolved the people and
> Elected another?[512]

The effrontery is aimed at the cooperation of the Writers Union with state interests, thus overturning their rhetoric against itself. This tactic illustrates the overlap between political rhetoric and literary power in justifying state brutalities and the importance of framing Brecht's unadorned poem as an act of political sincerity. In Syria, a direct poem like this one against the

[511] Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 220.
[512] Quoted in Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 189. *Lösung* (solution) is doubly ironic as it connotes the Nazi *Endlösung* (Final Solution) and, as in English, is the root at the base of the word "dissolution." The said uprising refers to the events devolving out of a construction workers' strike and protest march down the Stalinalle (now Karl-Marx-allee) in East Berlin.

Writers Union would have meant banishment from the literary establishment at enormous costs for one's reputation and prospects of employment and publication.

Mid-century and the inception of the Cold War would be the proper time to locate the escalation in poetic austerity. In my introduction, I refer to the term anti-poem deriving from Nicanor Parra's *Poemas y antipoemas* written 1938-1953 and published 1954 in Buenos Aires. As early as 1935 and before joining the Communist Party, Pablo Neruda had called a similar aspiration by a different name – *poésia sin pureza* – and spoke of a poetry that would "reek of the human" and help overcome the fear of "threadbare sentimentality."[513] In practice, Neruda found it very difficult to reduce his talents for poetic transmutation to a low common denominator, since the reduction was at cross purposes with the vatic role he consistently assumed. Like pursuing the rarefied heights of the absolute – the aspiration that poetry would arrive at the condition of music – austerity is an internalized ideal that can be pursued but only partially fulfilled; its full realization would do away with poetry as such. When Parra tries to downscale the literariness of his poems, he must also find the apt poetic image for rhetorical effect:

> **La montaña rusa**
> Durante medio siglo la poesía fue
> el paraíso del tonto solemne.
> Hasta que vine yo
> y me instalé con mi montaña rusa.
> Suban, si les parece.
> Claro que yo no respondo si bajan
> echando sangre por boca y narices.
>
> **Rollercoaster**
> For half a century
> Poetry was the paradise
> Of the solemn fool.
> Until I came along
> And built my rollercoaster.
> Go up if you feel like it.
> It's not my fault if you come down

[513] Ibid., 222.

Bleeding from your nose and mouth.[514]

The rollercoaster captures both the precarity and amusement promised by the new austerity, as the freedom from versification and over-absorption in sound brings the poem nearer to political and social commentary in unfree political climates.

In Latin American poetries, the poetic paradise of fools carries political baggage as it is associated with the colonial metropole. The Peruvian poet César Vallejo proposes a hybrid model of modernist transatlantic belonging and a tormented bad conscience. His conscience operates as an inner tension in the poem, pulling him away from the metropolitan Surrealist experiments that shaped his poetic vision and towards a rougher sense of the real:

> Un hombre pasa con un pan al hombro
> Voy a escribir, después, sobre mi doble?
>
> Otro se sienta, ráscase, extrae un piojo de su axila, mátalo.
> Con qué valor hablar del psicoanálisis?
> […]
> Un cojo pasa dando el brazo a un niño.
> Voy, después, a leer a André Bretón?
>
> Otro busca en el fango huesos, cáscaras.
> Como escribir, después, del infinito?
> […]
> Un albañil cae de un techo, muere y ya a no almuerza.
> Innovar, luego, el tropo, la metáfora?[515]

"The new anti-poetry," remarks Hamburger on Vallejo's poem, "[…] was to reduce poetic diction to those elements which no longer strike one as metaphorical or figurative, because they belong to the stock of prose usage. The invention of metaphors and similes was felt to be a luxury, a self-indulgence, if poetry could do without such personal linguistic accretions.

[514] Parra, *Antipoems*, 42-43. Trans. Miller Williams.
[515] "Un hombre pasa con un pan al hombre," written in Paris, November 3, 1937 and published in *Poemas humanos* (1939). "A man goes with a loaf on his shoulder. / How, then, can I write about my double? / Another sits down, scratches himself, extracts a flea from his armpit, kills it. / What's the use of talk about psychoanalysis? / A man with a wooden leg goes by holding a child by the hand. Will it help to read André Breton? / Another searches the mud for potato peels and for bones. / How, all the same, can I write about the infinite? / A laborer falls from the scaffolding and will not eat breakfast again. / What about tropological changes? A new use of metaphor?" Trans. Hamburger in *Truth of Poetry*, 230-231. For another English translation see Joseph Mulligan (ed.), *Selected Writings of César Vallejo* (Wesleyan, 2015), 513-514.

That particular austerity is one of the most characteristic features of the social and political poetry written in many languages after 1945, and indeed of poetry not overtly social or political in theme but shaped by a social and political consciousness."[516] Lamenting the uselessness of poetry, the poem is still ordered in measured couplets playing off observation against rhetorical question. The alliteration *muere-almuerza* is employed to capture the exact contour of the thought's impasse. The references to higher forms of art or intellectual discourse provide counterweight allowing the perceptions to come forth, as, for instance, Breton's art of disfigured dream images renders visible, but is also minimized by, the deformations of harsh social realities. In a poem dedicated to Vallejo, the Iraqi poet-translator Sargon Boulus channels the Peruvian's gritty and gnarled expression – the unpoetical scream – before the enormous scope of human suffering: "Allow me to open my mouth," Boulus addresses Vallejo, "so that windows rattle, so that universal metaphysics are dragged down to the bottom of the empty shoe of a soldier who died by his own crooked spear."[517] The authority to speak unpoetically still requires the sanctioning force transferred from Vallejo through Boulus' translations (in themselves informed by the US reception of Vallejo in English translation).

The most fully developed experiences of the new austerity presented by Hamburger come from postwar Poland and East Germany, where individuals had to come to terms with unfathomable extents of ruin and death while gradually falling under the shadow of Stalinist states. "Poetry as a verbal art bored me," the poet Zbigniew Herbert is quoted as writing,[518] hinting that there was less of a felt compulsion to depersonalize language than that felt by poets living in Western individualistic societies.[519]The Polish poet Tadeusz Rózewicz beheld poetry

[516] Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 231.
[517] Bulus, *ʿAzma Ukhra*, 25.
[518] Ibid., 252.
[519] Ibid. 260. This claim stands at the heart of the argument made by Clare Cavanagh in her *Lyric Poetry and Politics*.

with acute distrust, saying that "the more intricate, ornate, and surprising the poem's exterior, the more dubious its interior."[520] The metaphor as a mediating vehicle is potentially complicit in political fraudulence, and can therefore only serve as a detour in the poem. That Rózewicz continued writing his bare anti-poems Hamburger sees as a partial solution to the dilemma of how one can agree with Adorno's statement about the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz and still write poems.[521]

In the GDR, where artistic strictures were more binding than Poland, the antipoem took a different turn from Rózewicz's anonymous lean voice. Assertion of individuality in poems, observes Hamburger, "was most vehement where collective pressures have been greatest."[522] Wolf Biermann, an outspoken East German poet and folk singer, can write a talkative poem titled "Ich, Ich, Ich" not in attempt to reach the romantic egotistical sublime, but simply as a declaration of war on state-bureaucracy, or as an assertion of the right to be let alone to one's "deviations," a metaphor literalized in the poem: "*ich liebe euch heiss / aber jetzt lasst mich bitte allein sein / auf der schiefen Linie / getrennt vom Kollektiv / ich liege eben schief / ich lieg bei meiner Frau / and die kennt mein Herz*."[523]The colloquial diction making no claim to distinction renders this poem paradoxically paradigmatic for the individual as such. "The voice," writes Hamburger, "is a collective voice demanding freedom from the collective."[524]

Hamburger highlights and interprets styles of austerity from American, British, French, German (East and West), Hungarian, Italian, Latin American, Polish, Russian, and Yugoslav poetries. The scope of his argument is thus large, even if restricted to European languages. His

[520] Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 248.
[521] Ibid.
[522] Ibid., 257
[523] Hamburger's translation: "I love you all right / but now please leave me alone / on the deviating line / detached from the collective / that's how I happen to live / I don't lie straight with my wife / and she knows how I feel." *Truth of Poetry*, 258. The original German is purposefully "raw," suggesting an analogous affinity between "warm" (*heiss* is left out of the translation) speech and assertion of individual freedom at a base-level of human rights.
[524] Ibid.

reasoning for calling the new austerity an "international style" does not proceed by induction to infer a worldwide Esperanto of modern poetry in universal forms. What unites these poets is pre-literary, an attitude of "severe literalness" to a set of historical questions imposed upon them as verbal artists.[525] "Both personal idiosyncrasy and the national idiosyncrasies of language are subordinated to a bareness of utterance always close to the silence from which its minimal stock of words has been 'salvaged'."[526]

The realistic attitude averse to ornament is thus both nationally inflected and structurally transferable across poetries. As a veteran translator, Hamburger claims that poems in the austere mode lend themselves, in most cases, to be carried across with less "losses." Thick cultural and linguistic particularities determine the quality of speech in each and every case, but the common base is commensurable across cultures as "a point of departure and return, where silence has to be confronted, all the verbal equipment of poetry stripped down and put to the test of silence."[527] Justin Quinn's account of Miroslav Holub's poetics offer a deeper understanding of why this is the case. In a section titled "Halfway to Translation," Holub is described as finding a new direction for Czech poetry to engage with lived experience by analogy with science. Poetry is charged with capturing particular facts of everyday existence to test unfounded convictions and retain its critical task in the face of both "individual film frames" and socialist agitprop. Holub's visit to the US in the 1960s facilitated a burst of creative energy that inducted him as a "transnational" poet addressing multiple constituencies: while firmly set in a Czech frame of reference and carving out a space for non-ideological social engagement, Holub was also rewriting the Anglo-American tradition of modern poetry he imbibed and admired, and

[525] Ibid., 251.
[526] Ibid.
[527] Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry*, 252.

especially the imagism of William Carlos Williams.[528] From the outset, Holub emphasized meaning over words, insisted that a poem should make good sense above all and "dreamed of a poetry […] as sharable across the world as scientific work is."[529] This instrumental approach to language entailed a conscious effort to extricate poetry from the heavy materiality embedded in a national poetic tradition. Holub's early poem "Wings" responds to a motto quoted from Williams' "Some Simple Measures in the American Idiom and the Variable Foot": "we have / microscopic anatomy / of the whale / this / is / reassuring."[530] The shifts between the microcosmic and macrocosmic perspectives rearrange the coordinates of the relationship between the human and the non-human, which is also the domain of poetic language:

> we have
> a map of the universe
> for microbes
> we have
> a map of a microbe
> for the universe.
>
> We have
> A Grand Master of Chess
> Made of electronic circuits.
>
> But above all
> We have
> The ability
> To sort peas,
> To cup water in our hands,
> To seek the right screw
> under the sofa
> for hours
>
> this
> gives us
> wings.[531]

[528] Cavanagh makes similar claims about the poetry of Czesław Miłosz and his creative uses of Eliot, Blake, and Wordsworth to establish the aesthetic distance necessary to give *poetic* witness.
[529] Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 116.
[530] Christopher Macgowan (ed.), *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, Vol. 2: 1939-1963, 419. In the original English, the first words are "there is" not "we have."
[531] Holub, *Poems Before & After*, 60 (trans. George Theiner).

If the wings of discovery seem to be restricted to scientists, the last two strophes clarify that what gives buoyancy to humans resides in their motor skills and cognitive persistence which allow them to look for the right screw under the sofa rather than to be "a cog in the system." It is these reassuring faculties that Holub's poetry raises to consciousness while clipping the wings of intricate symbolism and utopic social engineering. The Czech commissars and state-bureaucrats, like their Syrian counterparts, predictably preferred a poetry flattering to the national ear, and Holub strongly intervened in the deformities of this national hegemony enforced by a Stalinist state apparatus.[532]

After the Prague Spring of 1968, when the prospects of publication in Czechoslovakia became unpropitious, Holub came to terms with a primary existence as a poet in foreign languages, stating that he wrote "multilingually" for a reader "anywhere in the world."[533] The translatability of the poems is thus a fact to be reckoned with as part of his self-fashioning for a global audience, a choice made under pressure from oppressive conditions in his home country and against the backdrop of home-grown symbolisms and lyricisms. As Quinn shows, Holub's schooling in Anglo-American modernism, conversely, freely informs his poems and conditions his English reception via A. Alvarez's prestigious series of Penguin Modern European Poets. In Holub's case, there is also the decisive factor of an amused and humbly ironic poetic temperament well-suited to travel and perform the acrobatics of speaking to multiple audiences.

Does an aspiration for a poem as sharable as a scientific finding necessarily entail a levelling down of cultural particularities? This assumption stands at the heart of the argument made in Stephen Owen's "What Is World Poetry?" where Owen discusses the English selection

[532] Quinn discusses this anti-bureaucratic aspect when explaining Holub's opting for a mode of light free-verse: "bureaucratic establishments of the kind Holub experienced were usually national in character—schools, universities, ministries, academies of science, writers' unions—and many of his poems explode the pompous pretentions of officials and teachers. Thus, in his view, when those authorities begin to lose their power, it is only natural that poetry should reflect this in unprescribed poetic form, that is, free verse." *Between Two Fires*, 119.
[533] Ibid., 117-118

from the Chinese poet Bei Dao as conforming to a bland Esperanto of modernist poetry to please a nebulous international readership.[534] Addressing the debate arising from Owen's article, David Damrosch points out that there is a false binary at play between "total immersion and airy vapidity."[535] The work in translation should be assessed, argues Damrosch, on a different scale of performance. Damrosch explores how Bei's poems work in multiple English translations and suggests avenues of exploration for those who read in the original Chinese. This move hints that the effective translations in an English-language universe of modern poetry reflect back on the original, leading Damrosch to assume a thick particularity in their original Chinese context of reception. Bei Dao's poems then seem far from superficial. They operate across different layers of locally inflected meanings, reshaping the tradition of Chinese poetic modernism and responding to Maoist impositions of what is socially correct poetry.[536]The generative power of Chinese Misty Poetry for local poetic culture should also be kept in view for evaluating its originality. Like the high-minded Beiruti modernism, this corpus – initially informed by what Bei Dao names a "translation style" – was followed by a negatively continuous movement towards everyday materials represented by the Feifeipai poets from Sichuan who broke with the hermetic tendencies of Chinese exilic poetry.[537]

While decoupling national poetic languages from their material "untranslatability," modes of austerity are never fully and easily translatable due to their intensive preoccupation with local knowledge and critical stances with respect to it. If poetry is, as T.S. Eliot has claimed, the most "stubbornly national art,"[538] this stubbornness must possess not only rigid muscle but

[534] Owen, "What is World Poetry?" in: *New Republic* 203, November 19, 1990, 28-32.
[535] Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 21.
[536] Ibid. For a good analysis of how Bei's poems do so with some analogies to East German poetry see Wolfgang Kubin's "End of the Prophet: Chinese Poetry between Modernity and Postmodernity," in: *Inside Out* (Aarhus University Press, 1993), 19-37.
[537] See Kubin, "The End of the Prophet," 28-30. See also Michael Day's 2005 dissertation on the Sichuan modern poets titled *China's Second World of Poetry*. *Feifei* in Chinese means Not-Not, and the group formed a journal by that name in the late 1980s, suggestive of the constructive critique of both socialism and individualism embedded in these movements.
[538] Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," in *On Poetry and Poets*, 8.

also the elastic capability to expand its limits through encounters with foreign poetries. This elasticity is tested and revindicated by the attitudes of austerity while remaining chiefly operative within a nationally specific corpus. Holub's dark humor (reminiscent of Kafka) is readily intelligible to Czech audiences and can easily be lost in translation; the Poznan-based poets Ryszard Krynicki and Stanisław Barańzcak propose linguistically aware poetry of the highest caliber as a form of duel with Polish *nowomowa* (newspeak) and the particular phantasmagorias of the Polish People's Republic.[539] Krynicki's poem "Act of Birth" takes its title from the Polish word for birth certificate and enacts its own delivery in an environment of dreary language hailing progress: "Born in transport / I came upon the place of death / the cult of the individual unit / of measures / and weights / the military unit / progressive paralysis / paralyzing progress / each day I listen to / the latest news / I live / in the place of death."[540]As Clare Cavanagh shows, the ironic references to stilted public discourse (the words for measures and weights, the empty signifier "progress," and even the modality of the verb "I live") have a strong local resonance in the original Polish.

The unsung pioneers of the antipoem combining grimy realism, free-wheeling vernacular, and lyric expression are the Yiddish poets of America (especially the so-called "sweatshop poets" and *inzikhists* of the inter-war period), many of whose poems are filled with extremely particular Jewish references and modes of speech. In this case, the dialectical vacillation between realism and subjectivism was geographically reversed to the one appearing in the late twentieth-century. It was not the Eastern European poets who advanced ahead of their Western peers in terms of reconnecting to history and common experience, but the Yiddish poets of the West who broke away from the interiorized tendencies of the East (influenced by German

[539] Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics*, 206-213.
[540] Ibid., 210.

modernism and Russian symbolism), pushing the boundaries of the poem to include the harsh realities of working-class immigrant America.

Ruth Wisse has aptly dubbed the poetry of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886-1932) antipoetic.[541] As of his arrival in New York in 1908, Halpern lived on and off on the brink of starvation, working as a window-washer, waiter and presser before being employed as a jack-of-all-trades in the Yiddish publishing business. His American experience drove him to peel off the crust of the German modernism which formed the high standard for a young poet growing up in his native Galicia under rule of the Austro-Hungarian empire. He wanted to artfully dramatize his existential struggles in an emphatically gesticulating language true to everyday speech while also drawing on the fictional models of literary soliloquys written for the characters of Sholem Aleichem and S.Y. Abramovich. The "modernism from below"[542] practiced by Haplern and his fellow New York Yiddish poets was well-positioned to explore the kind of poetic realism posited here, as the Yiddish language formed a bridge between Jewish tradition and European modern culture, permeated with both the warm particularities of Jewish life and an acute awareness of its transnationalist and polylingual character mixing variables of Russian, Polish, German, English, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Halpern reinvents his empirical self – Moyshe-Leyb – as an anarchic, bitter and feverish poetic persona instructing his one-and-a-half-year-old son in the manner of a clamorous Rabbi not to trust the self-bombast of artists and their inclination to believe their bullshit confections:

> They fabricate riddles from hard steel
> To resound, when they are opened like a hollow nut
> between a monkey's teeth.
> They believe that it is beautiful –
> With faces almost saffron yellow

[541] For a discussion of Halpern's novel "colloquial style and antipoetic swagger" (which at times obscured the degree of real existential suffering in his writings) see Ruth Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*, 94-101.
[542] Phrase borrowed from Julian Levinson, "Modernism from Below: Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and the Situation of Yiddish Poetry," *Jewish Social Studies* 10(3) Spring-Summer 2004, 143-160.

To circle, like dogs at night around a strange threshold
Around the word, which for them is a house with a door in front
Through which to enter
And a door in the back through which one should – like cat and mouse –
Run back outside
And once again inside.
They believe what is written down can last forever,
When one clothes it with the warmness of the sun which warms
Ice and shit.[543]

In the course of this wildly associative tirade of a poem, the boy is initiated into the rich conversational contours of Yiddish as an oral vehicle, while at the same time being urged to stay away from the uselessness of something as unpractical and deceitful as a poem. The poem exemplifies what Benjamin Harshav, alluding to Halpern's late work, named "talk-verse," an ironic, evaluative, and talkative poetic mode constructed as a kaleidoscopic concatenation of personal miseries, political commentary, dialogue within dialogue, and contorted metaphorical gestures.[544] The shifts in tone and imagery are so abrupt and the references so truncated as to require much readerly alertness, thus making these poems anything but "simple" reading. And the English translation would inevitably homogenize the rich medleys afforded by Yiddish speech, where multilingualism is by default written into the vernacular. In the Yiddish-English nexus, an additional challenge would be that American English has by now naturalized so much Yiddish colloquialism that some "foreignizing" effects are preempted. Translators would thus have to prove resourceful in finding compensations. Another of Moyshe-Leyb's choleric sermons to his son, in Barbara and Benjamin Harshav's careful English translation, opens thus:

And if I talk nicely to my son – what good does it do?
When he looks at me he stops just short
Of saying aloud: how about that!
My father the cow
Has opened his mouth again…[545]

[543] Quoted in Marc Miller, "The Persona of 'Moyshe-Leyb' in the Poetry of M.L. Halpern," 21.
[544] Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, 15-16. Halpern was positioned similarly to al-Maghut in benefiting from the cosmopolitanization of Yiddish modern poetry undertaken by the *Yunge* group (through translation and formal innovation) and yet resisting the insincere artsiness and pretention that came along with it.
[545] Ibid., 461. This poem is titled "My Only Son" and seems to be a working draft towards the lengthy tirade "Thus I Spoke to My Only Son…"

Now this reads colloquial enough, only without the original concoction of Germanic, Hebraic, and Russian words and morphemes. "Cow" stands for *behemenik*, a word derived from the Hebrew *behema* (beast) with the Russian suffix *-nik*; mouth is *moyl*, a coarse mouth of an animal like the German *Maul*; and *ot hostu dir* – an emphatic exclamation roughly meaning "now, look at that" – is rendered "how about that." However, there is a deeply ironic effect to reading this poem in English translation since its theme is the backwardness of the Yiddish-speaking American father through the eyes of the American-born, soon to be English-speaking son.

After vainly expounding on the idiocies of war and nationalist self-sacrifice, the vagaries of capitalism and the grinding exigencies of making money, the frustrated Moyshe-Leyb concludes his monologue with outspoken belligerence in vernacular English from the mouth of an Irish-American alter-ego:

> And when I try to threaten him and show my fist
> He stands there, touches it, and makes a face
> As if he were the only one in the Land of Tsimtsidrim
> The fist-hero Dirty Dog McCarthy[546]
> What a zero he is!
> I would really like to ask him
> If he'll recite Kaddish when I die.
>
> ---"Waddya mean kadesh?
> De old kike from stinkin' Polan' dragged wit' 'im
> Some yaysh-may-rabbery[547]
> To hel vit it--- dats right"[548]

With a wild leap from Jewish folklore to the brutality of the American "melting pot" (the Land of Tsimtsidrim leads through phonic association to the Land of Golden Dreams), Moyshe-Leyb transforms the situation into a parabolic fist-fight with his son, who is now imagined in the figure of an anti-Semitic Irish-American boxer in the image of Jack Dempsey. The boy is

[546] To avoid confusion: the poem was written long before the Red Scare led by Senator Joseph McCarthy.
[547] Distortion of the Aramaic formulaic text opening the Kaddish: *yitgadal ve-yitkadash shmei raba*.
[548] Ibid.,463-464.

projected to be so ignorant and contemptuous about Jewish tradition that he will not be able to recite Kaddish at his father's funeral. This battle of generations in the immigrant's household is thus played out by means of language, as the dad sticks to his Yiddish vernacular while the son, in the dad's paranoid imagination, is already conversant in Irish-American trash talk and distorts the Aramaic of the Jewish prayer to sound something like "raspberry." There is no way here to recreate in translation the estrangement effect caused by English slang in the Hebraic alphabet of the original poem, an estrangement that is part and parcel of the poem's meaning.

This analysis was meant to drive home the point that even what Stephen Owen, in an article revisiting the question of world poetry, calls the "linguistic fungibility" of the austere mode, has built-in untranslatables.[549] These are lodged in cultural specificity and nationally inflected language universes projected by the original poems. Returning to our Arabo-Syrian mode of austerity, we may want to test this claim against some enticing "translatable" samples in the *shafawi* corpus. Like their antipoetic counterparts in other traditions, the *shafawi* poems continue to proliferate images. Mundane images are delicately handled to poetic effect or, alternatively, the drab existence in which life-giving images are not found may also be narrativized in a poetic way. Munzir Masri is especially deft in making meaningful meditations out of ordinary nothings. In temperament and attitude, his probing into everyday pragmatic philosophy of mind surprisingly correlate with some of William James' most well-known essays, and especially "Stream of Consciousness." The four fundamental assumptions of that essay – that states are part of personal consciousness, that within each personal consciousness states are always changing, that consciousness is continuous, and that consciousness will choose to take interest in some parts of an object to the exclusion of others – delineate quite accurately Masri's

[549] Owen, "Stepping Forward and Back," 532.

limits of inquiry in his prose poems. The dynamic character of his cumulative sentences is attributable to his constant interest in questions of continuity and change, fringe and center, as they relate to the self and to personal consciousness.[550] No poem in the *shafawi* corpus seems to fuse the low-mimetic poetics of detail with the high-minded concreteness of the image quite as effortlessly as Masri's "The Orange":

> Life begins from your two thumbs
> holding the orange from its middle and top
> the moment you are hit in one eye
> with a squirt from its intoxicating juice
> as you break it in half.
>
> Alive. And before you
> two slices of orange
> I can see no higher form of happiness
> you should aspire to no higher form of happiness
> strictly defined, life
> is what you, in a moment, will squeeze out
> between your teeth…[551]

This is arguably as universal as a poetic truth claim gets, situated in a kitchen table experience recognizable to all. In English translation, the comparison with William Carlos Williams' plums in "This is Just to Say" leaps out and suggests that Masri is trying to outdo his American precursor's poem in terms of nuanced detail. The desperately vacuous discourse environment out of which this poem springs is seminal to its meaning in the Arabic original. Here we come back to Tamir's complaint that the regime has denied Syrians "freedom, justice, and *joy*." More than explicit thematizations of freedom, this poem articulates how free space is fortuitously found. It is a small "experience parcel" in Holub's formulation, fabricating an

[550] Masri's poem "What I Felt and Do Not Want To Say (*Al-Majmuᶜat al-Arbaᶜ*, 223-224)" contemplates the distinct state of mind brought up by James to demonstrate that the mind has a "fringe" from which words and images emerge if one just lingers for a while, like remembering a forgotten name. The service it performs, however, is to locate the poem at the immediate vicinity of that "fringe" intimating the uninterrupted flow of consciousness: "Every definite image in the mind", writes James, "is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it." Quoted from the online resource *Classics in the History of Psychology* at https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/jimmy11.htm. Last visited March 4, 2019.
[551] Misri, *Bashar Tawarikh*, 181.

objective situation to correlate with the scandal of being happy and alive in an overcast collective existence.

The orange reads differently in Arabic than in English. It is a signifier full of symbolic burden, as Jaffa's oranges were famously made by fiction writer Ghassan Kanafani into a vehicle for Palestinian nostalgia.[552] This exact image of the sliced orange is employed in a correspondence between Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qasim to represent the split between those Palestinian intellectuals who had stayed in Palestine (al-Qasim) and those who went into exile (Darwish).[553] Masri relieves the orange from this heavy sentimental baggage and recharges it with a more elusive quality of poetic meaning. The orange is an orange and nothing but that, and its parabolic gnomic force hinges on its sanitized, non-symbolic significance. The antipoetic poem likes to flag itself as coming out of nothing, sharing in the interminable historical perpetuity of language and human time but not in any form of transcendence and immortality. But it does so by distancing itself from locally charged myths of literary and rhetorical import.

When parting with symbolic provisions, the one thing Syrian poets are reluctant to part with is amorous love as a solid pillar for poetry composition. Looking back at the short and impactful poetic career of Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn, Masri remarks that al-Husayn's voice appears to him as a crystallization of the entire cultural and political gestalt of Hafiz al-Assad's Syria. One reason is that Riyad's receptivity formed an estuary for the major tributaries of the Syrian prose poem: al-Maghut's caricaturist gestures, ᶜAbd al-Hamid's spontaneity, and Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh's rhapsodic affect. His receptivity also meant that he was one of the last Syrian poets

[552] Kanafani, "Ard al-Burtuqal al-Hazin [The Land of Sad Oranges]," in the eponymous short story collection originally published 1963. The real and juicy oranges that appear in the beginning of that story are tragic because transformed into a symbol by the end of it, a sad memory after the *Nakba*. In the end, the oranges are said to be dry and wrinkled. That Masri allows himself to write a poem about juicy oranges goes against the grain of accepted truths that until the Palestinian question is addressed, there can be no peace, no content, no other collective issue in the Arab world.

[553] See the two-year long correspondence between the two in Hanna Amit-Kokhavi's Hebrew translation titled *Two Halves of the Orange* (*Beyn Shnei Hazaei ha-Tapuz*, 1991). The image appears in the letters with reference to Darwish and al-Qasim's written exchange and the fascination it holds for Palestinian readers. *Two Halves*, 88.

to independently channel poetic experiences from outside – both modern Arabic poetry and world poetry –before the gates of literary contact were more decidedly narrowed in the mid-1980s. Riyad established firm connections with a network of Iraqi poets and formed a crucial link in the arrival of the Iraqi prose poem in Syria. As the next chapter will show, al-Husayn fell under sway of the Bulgarian poet Nikola Vaptsarov and readapted the Bulgarian's voice to suit the Syrian situation. He had also adopted a casual stance modelled on that of the French lyricist Jacques Prévert, whose translated work Barut singles out as a formative influence on *shafawiyya*.

Masri leaves open why the particular blend that went into al-Husayn's voice was true to the historical moment in Syria, a model so influential, according to Masri, that it continues to underwrite much of the poetic creation in Syria at the outset of the twenty-first century. The short answer would be that with an awareness of the Pan-Arab poetics of detail coming into its own outside Syria, al-Husayn gave definitive local contours to the pursuit of poetry as "mythologizing the everyday" (his breakthrough collection is titled *Everyday Myths*) and by doing so became a semi-legendary figure himself. But the everyday as subject matter is an insufficient condition since it tells us nothing about al-Husayn's sources of authority. Al-Husayn's home turf is *eros* pure and simple, earthly *eros* for a lover, *filia* for a close companion, love in its superfluity and gratuitousness as the most basic human need in Syria. With the risk of greater banality, this choice of theme potentially keeps al-Husayn in the mainstream of Arabic poetry. Here is his version of poetic austerity:

Change
He throws his clothes in the well
He throws his books, his wedding ring
His sick past
And his fearful present
He throws away the old songs
And his hypocritical friends
He throws away everything within reach
Of papers and notes
Thoughts and dolls

Throws his life's well into the well
He throws away his last brain
And turns around
Pure, white, and easy

Only now
Can he say: I love you[554]

This poem enacts the method of elimination by which one would establish the autonomous private realm denied by the incursions of a hyper-politicized public space. The statement "I love you" is taken as an almost cosmic principle for progression running counter to the "progressive paralysis" imposed by the Syrian state. The loose connections with Marxist poets and thinkers suggest a cardinal belief in growth, change, the dynamism of history, things which, for the *shafawi* poets, Arab politics withholds. To enact this within the poem means to wash it clean of accrued language fat and enable it to speak both poetically and directly. Love is the free zone where life and poetry overlap and interact. "Love is not a room-to-rent," al-Husayn writes in a late poem, "we carelessly enter and depart"

Love is not an aspirin pill
To relieve our headaches
Nor is it a light-hearted joke
Exchanged in times of boredom
Love is not an ornamental flower
Nor a broken glass we throw in the trash bin
Love
Is a perpetual birth certificate
We carry with a lifted head
To cross the street of slaughter.[555]

And with the not-so-subtle allusion to the street of slaughter, the whole panorama of Syrian collective life comes into relief and gives us the clue to Masri's intention when he names al-Husayn as the emblematic Syrian poet.

A complex example for how *shafawiyya* makes inventive use of imagery while working against the autonomy of the image can be found in al-Husayn's poem "Qamar [Moon]," which

[554] Al-Husayn, *Al-Aʿmal*, 219.
[555] Ibid., 251.

gained some renewed interest after 2011.[556] The kind of talk espoused by al-Husayn cannot be bothered with the verisimilitude or objectivity of the stand-alone image. Yet stating the lyrical cliché, as does the title, creates an expectation for the mold to be broken with new associations, and al-Husayn delivers in an offhand way. The poem progresses in Maghutian hyperboles and Gibrani romantic phrases quite far off from the ideal of austerity:

> The flower of my body, every morning
> I pluck it and hurl it into the street
> To be trampled by leaders, rulers, bandits…
> The flower of my body, every evening
> I gather its crumbled petals to collect them for you
> And tell you all that happened to me.

The conventionality of "flower of my body" is here developed with some consistency and realistic force of both protest and cry for help. It retroactively thickens the previous images in the poem which appeared before as nothing but exaggerated strategies of persuasion. All are suddenly contracted into the innocent, politically tormented body and enhanced by it. The next stanza includes the only instances of purposeful innovation in imagery:

> Once at your side I sat and cried
> My heart was a scorched rice field
> My fingers were dangling like dogs' tongues in summer
> I wanted to express myself with movements:
> Break a glass,
> Open a window,
> Fall asleep…
> And I couldn't

Rice cultivation, to be clear, is not part of the Syrian agricultural system. The first metaphor in this section is thus primarily a cross-cultural intertextual reference rather than a folkloristic one. The Syrian Ministry of Culture issued, as early as 1970, an anthology of Vietnamese poetry in Arabic translation which could have inspired the line.[557] But more likely, it

[556] Ibid., 154-155. On the renewed interest see epilogue.
[557] One of Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad's many translational exploits to which the next chapter is dedicated. The volume – *al-Diwan al-Fiyatnami* (1970) – is unavailable yet there is record of a selection from Vietnamese poetry edited by al-Ahmad for *al-Maᶜrifa*. *Al-Maᶜrifa* 87 (May 1969), 46-82. The image could alternatively have stemmed from familiarity with Japanese Haiku attested in Riyad's early poems. On the topic of Haiku in Syria see chapter 5.

is the Vietnam War and the images disseminating from it through visual media that inform the metaphor. The simile in the following line – fingers dangling like tongues of dogs in summer – is of al-Husayn's inventiveness and informed by his experience as a deaf speaker (*ḥarakāt*, movements, also means vowels). It brilliantly communicates both the energies and exhaustion of communicating "orally" with the hands. Like the scorched rice field, it is incorporated in the figurative aggregate of pain inflicted on his fragile existence by the state.

The finale of the poem affords another instance of al-Husayn's solicitous wit:

> What will I talk about after twenty-six years?
> Or after twenty-six shots in the dark?
> I grow tired of speaking, of debt and work
> But of freedom I have not yet grown tired
> Here I am dreaming of but one thing, or slightly more:
> That the word become bread and grapes
> Bird and bed
> And that I wrap my left arm around your shoulder
> And my right arm around the world's shoulder
> And tell the moon:
> "Take a picture!"

It is a very anthropocentric twist, trying hard to make the poem disarming and deflate the gravity of the poet's invocation to the moon. Neutralized is the old double entendre of moon as both romantic addressee of the lonely poet and the term of endearment for a female companion. The poem needed that deflation for the wink that will make it special but not elevated. The extremely humanizing terms of the imagination are lightly verbalized but also shrink the space of impersonal language work and world pictures in the poem. Naming *shafawiyya* austere indicates that the *shafawi* poem compromises the autonomy of the image which by extension reaches for the impersonal non-human otherness of language. The *shafawi* cause is imagined as "humanitarian" (in the non-organizational sense) and unabashedly introduces back into the poem lyric clichés and over-used abstractions. Freedom is a central locus of meaning reworked over

and over again in this corpus. And the dream of the poem as the plain nourishing bread for the soul is a universal image for austerity amply found elsewhere.

II Coterie Poetics and the Politics of Friendship

let us reach an understanding together… let us communicate in sympathy
like an ant with its fellow ant
night with day […]
let us cite as witness our common sayings like normal people
but beforehand it is better […]
to leave our knives and guns at the door
and enter the common room with good intentions.[558]

Riyad al-Salih Husayn

Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh: Resituating the Lyric

Austerity is a critical stance in tense interaction with impulses to sensationalize the beleaguered state of the poet in pathos-filled testimonials. We can speculate that as witnesses to multiple shatterings of Arab revolutionary hopes, Syrian poets would simply have no confidence in the imaginary futures by which the Arab present is time after time decimated. Change and progress, once co-opted by the regime as part of a progressive radical discourse, become highly nefarious notions. The poem becomes a restorative response to a crisis of poets as non-citizens in the middle of a black hole, the glum plebeian world of coercive voicelessness in a country held in stasis. A reparative ritual performed through language, poetry is thought to restore a measure of harmony and joy to this broken world, whose brokenness is intimately experienced on the individual level. A vivid poetic illustration of this asphyxiating status quo comes from the following overture to Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh's poem "Al-Madiq [The Strait]" which literalizes the metaphor of a collective in "dire straits." This poem originally opened the second issue of

[558] Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal*, 188.

Mahmoud Darwish's Palestinian periodical *al-Karmil*[559] and was later collected in Abu ᶜAfsh's *Bayn Halakayn* [Between Ruinations, 1982]:

> Don't close down the hall
> We are coming out
> The air inside stinks… and we are coming out
> Wait for a moment, hey there, lady in the front row
> Slow down, you industrious *qadi*
> Usher! stop noting down the inventory and listen to me for a second
> The air in the building stinks!
>
> Calm down, friends in the barracks of despair
> Calm down, preacher in the *majlis*
> Hey, inhabitants of this earth
> Hey, masses
> lords
> plebs
> hey, building contractors
> the air in the building stinks
> and we…[560]

This long poem is a kind of parenthetical self-directed dirge. Its voice calls attention to a "we" being buried alive in the commotion and stench of the plural, entombed and isolated from an outside with no recourse to an assisting hand from within and without. It ends many pages later with an extended three-line long ellipsis, the silence of the dead or those resigned to their fate, and the informative report "they closed down the hall." This last line is followed by the designation of time and place, "Damascus, February 1981." Crisis is an understatement for this state, and no Beiruti exile can cure it or transcend it: the poet is there stranded with his fellows, shouting against the reek they all sense, until in the end the "we" becomes a dual, "only the two of us," abandoned by plebs, lords, earth inhabitants and "building contractors" alike.

Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh's preface to *O, Narrow Time, O Wide, Wide Earth* (1978) may serve as an explicating link between what appears like innocuous poems of private concern and the great collective concerns in Syria: personal security, violence, fear, mass silencing, social justice and

[559] *Al-Karmil* 2 (July 1981) 4-13.
[560] Abu ᶜAfsh, *Bayn Halakayn*, 53-54.

individual freedoms. It was taken as a kind of manifesto for the group, as it calls for poetry to return to square one and poses the problem of poetry in an age of destruction. As such, it clearly overstates its case. In the preface to his experimental *Lan* (1960), the Lebanese Unsi al-Hajj claims that a real poet cannot be linguistically or culturally conservative. In an historical "age of cancer" the poet's task is to "destroy, destroy, and destroy" the basic principles of poetic language in Arabic in order to follow through on the madness latent in self and society.[561] In Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh's preface, this experimentalist credo is rejected on the assumption that the destructive impulse of revolution has been fatally co-opted by political authorities everywhere to quench the voices of individuals and destroy everything people hold dear.[562] Hermetic poetics figure here as homologous to the insular and fictitious language of the totalitarian state.[563] As a humanizing enterprise, poetry must thus "regress" to its basic lyric modes better suited to grasp the particularities of lived historical life. This conservative turn is conservationist. It takes on a gloomy tone in Abu ᶜAfsh's historically pessimistic laments but has more upbeat sides in other *shafawi* subjectivities.

"Why We Write Poetry" is the title given to this piece, and it has nothing concrete to say about features of poetic language or the history of Arabic poetry. It is gushily romantic and wildly generalizing but not devoid of vision, and this vision is twofold: an overwhelmingly bleak picture of history complemented by a clear, if over-simplified, picture of the moral task of poetry in catastrophic times. Abu ᶜAfsh's rhetorical potpourri concludes in calling for poetical realism formulated on the basis of Husserl's *zu den Sachen selbst*: "poetry must go to life." Considering the Christian baggage of his concern with the salvation of the individual soul, it is questionable

[561] al-Hajj, *Lan*, 8-9.
[562] The discourse of a non-Arab Syrian identity as the cradle for Western civilization – an ideology central to Anton Saᶜada's politics and *Shiᶜr*'s literary project – was entirely co-opted by Syrian official discourse in the 1970s and put to use by political archeology. See Zisser, "Who's Afraid," 191-193.
[563] This formulation is indebted to Claire Cavanagh's *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics*, 205.

how earthly this realism really is. But it may well have been construed as such by readers without that baggage. The in-between status of this realism – between the histrionic existential-subjective and the documentarian-factual – is well suited for the testimonial function of poetry as protecting human singularity from the evils of politics and history. It also reflects Abu ᶜAfsh's tendency to moral extremism in his own poems whose rhapsodies of sadness and despair were puzzlingly received as energetic and winsome.

This preface adopts the categories eloquently laid out in Terrence De Pres's *Praises and Dispraises* (1988) for the psychologically intensive realism to which "poetry of witness" can aspire in a political age. Yet Abu ᶜAfsh embodies and performs them while intensifying their moral urgency. According to Des Pres, the reason why voices of certain political poets speak with force to his time is that they are acquainted with the "nightmare spectacle of politics" and articulate a poetic consciousness that can no longer ignore political agonies of global magnitude.[564] Des Pres proceeds to posit a shift from romantic fantasy to stark realism in poetic language premised on the shapes minds take under political pressures. Politics is tentatively defined as a clamorous intrusion, "the play of impersonal force disrupting personal life" and "a primary ground of misfortune."[565] As verbal artists with stakes in precise listening and lucid thought, poets feel the need to "support […] through the stamina of language, the trials of spirit in adversity."[566] Politics as "pressure from reality" – a phrase borrowed from Wallace Stevens' *Necessary Angel* – is seen as leading to the heart of poetic dilemmas in the 20th century:

> As soon as we ask what happens when poetry and politics collide, we are speaking of forces external to language, but which impinge so severely upon imagination's freedom, that the poetry, in order to suffice, must resort to resistance or evasion. To speak of "reality," as Stevens speaks of it, is to designate a condition in some sense universal – political intrusion, that is, as the general case arising from countless special cases. One way to test Stevens' formulation is to ask the

[564]Des Pres, *Praises and Dispraises*, xiv. The prolog provides a rich articulation of the book's thesis.
[565] Ibid., xvi.
[566] Ibid., xv.

> following question: what happens when communal misfortune disrupts the life of the poet who might otherwise feel free to pursue less noble, more indulgent matters in his or her art?[567]

If judging by Abu ᶜAfsh's preface, what might happen in extremity of misfortune is a hypertrophic swelling of romantic apolitical signifiers – innocence, justice, victimhood – as a distended "violence within" equal to the political "violence without."[568] To stay innocent and ccontinue humanizing, Abu ᶜAfsh suggests, poetry must stay on the helpless losing side of history:

> Why do we write poetry? In a world armed to its teeth, a world of tyranny, mass graveyards and plagues, what can poetry do? What can human innocence do?
> From Troy to the Opium Wars, from Hiroshima to football stadiums in Santiago, from yellow air to the electric chair, from escalating slavery to lab experiments with lunar dust, from the gladiators of ancient Rome to widespread famines … what can poetry do?[569]

Both Syria and Palestine are interestingly absent from this world map of catastrophe and misery. Syria is overlooked for obvious reasons of political censorship or self-censorship. It is an effaced site of world-historical significance, a plebeian, fragmented national framework with a strong sense of pathos and of its own victimhood on a cosmic scale of history. And to this framework the poet's subjectivity is keyed. Palestine is probably absent due to Abu ᶜAfsh's Christian origin against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war. The next segment takes a jab at the preciousness of Palestine as symbol for universal injustice by excluding it from the *qaḍiyya* [cause, issue] of poetry:

> Have you ever seen a defenseless, destitute, abandoned man? Have you ever experienced defenselessness, destitution, abandonment? That man and that moment… that's poetry.
> The purity of man facing the contamination of his world, the aspiration to live in the face of deaths all over the planet. His innocence in the face of hell: that's how a man discovers poetry. […]
> The problems of man as man – who can solve them?
> No one and nothing. That's the *qadiyya* of poetry.[570]

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[567] Ibid., 18.
[568] The reference is to Stevens' formulation in *Necessary Angel* regarding poetry as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without." See Ibid., 29.
[569] Abu ᶜAfsh, *Ayyuha al-Zaman*, 6.
[570] Ibid., 6-7.

The picture of the historical world is deterministic and schematic: it does not progress but moves in cycles of oppression and victimhood to no resolve. This picture is apolitical and immoral. Politics is nothing but senseless violence and futility: Rome falls, and a new Rome is established; the savagery of gladiator rings and racing chariots passes into oblivion and Pinochet's football stadiums emerge. By contrast, poetry's task is a supremely moral one. It serves as an ugly crone of inveterate pessimism whose dark eye records and remembers the crucifixions, mass suffering and death, that triumphant political authorities wish to erase.

> But poetry, poetry is that tragic aspiration with a black memory, eyes covered in smoke, fires, women's lament, and prison camps… poetry can reexamine the forgiving memory of Rome and look with pitch-black eyes into a recurring, increasingly darkening past. […] History forgives and falsifies the image of its future. But poetry must look to this future with eyes blindfolded to optimism. Poetry must view Rome as going to conquer the future… and poetry must do justice.[571]

Geoffrey Hartmann has cogently articulated the significance of the art of memory when faced by collectivizing pressures of ideological systems: "When art remains accessible," determines Hartmann, "it provides a counterforce to manufactured and monolithic memory."[572] Poetic imagination thus serves as a living memory and reminder of justice. All victorious nations want to portray their pasts optimistically as prefiguring a rosy future. That is the underlying premise for all official histories devised by organized states and national revivals. Against enormous pressure from historical victors, poetry expands the range of world-information at the disposal of the agents of language, enlarging their fields of feeling and perception. It is wedged between the individual and the waking nightmares of history, and furthers the existence of the frail, receding light of the 'I' against thickening darkness. Carrying the perpetually renewing symbolic power of flowers, birds, the sky's azure and the lover's sigh, poetry preserves the true names of things and their singularity, guaranteeing the specificity of an individual human life.

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[571] Ibid., 10.
[572] Hartman, "Public Memory and Its Discontents," in: *The Uses of Literary History*, 80.

For the Christian Abu ᶜAfsh, the self affirmed through poetry is nearly synonymous with a person's individual soul: "to gain himself and lose the world: that is the virtue of the poet."[573] The conservationist mission of poetry is nothing if not intractable before progressive forces of history. Poetry, however, will insist on what's indestructible in it, "will weep on its own private account,"[574] and this self-propriety is premised on everything that goes into the particular historical attachments of its makers. The resistance to the victors' historiography cannot but be directed to nationally particular historiographies and is deeply entangled in nationally specific languages and eidetic images.

Abu ᶜAfsh is a member of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, a claimant to the title of the oldest Christian church in the world. His Christianity represents a complexly situated minority identity in Syria. The Valley of Christians from which he hails is reflected in the poems as the proverbial Vale of Tears. This sentimental pathos is turned up in sync with strong communist sentiments commonly found in marginalized minorities in Syria. Christian imagery figures very prominently in his works, yet he departs from the heroic Tammuzi theme of self-sacrifice and national restoration. Instead, he reconnects with the homely aspects of Jesus as a holy man and social critic speaking truth to power, and with a dark historical memory of his ancient Christian community's persecutions by the Roman empire.

As the quasi-manifesto shows, this minority identity opens onto a universal horizon of individual redemption through meaningful suffering and a Marxist-humanist emphasis on the unbearable alienation of the wretched and dispossessed. In the titular poem from *O, Narrow Time, O Wide, Wide Earth*, Abu ᶜAfsh breaks down this state into a catalogue inventory of defunct materials:

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[573] Abu ᶜAfsh, *Ayyuha al-Zaman*, 8
[574] Ibid., 11.

F.M.
ten withered lilies and five mute birds.
a black cat stuffed with dust, straw and defunct screws.
nail clippers
discarded postcards
travelers, murderers, new congratulatory words fit for publication.
recorded messages of reproof: "we apologize for the approval"
the last hour of the last day of the ninth month:
these are
the contents
of my heart […]

we are the sons of man
our time is black and our hearts as white as snow
we are the sons of man
our planet is wide… and our homes narrow as a needle's eye
with ease death seizes us… but our life is a costly affair:
it is all we have.[575]

Poetically, Abu ᶜAfsh is regarded as one of the major links between *ruʾyā* and *shafawiyya*, visionary flights and up-to-the-minute immediacy.[576] Ancient Christian symbols meet with a rabid confessionalism, talkative and lachrymose to a degree that the formal inhibitions of *Shiᶜr* did not allow. By 1978, Abu ᶜAfsh had become a figure of some renown in Syrian poetic circles, his volumes carried like icons by young admirers, to each of them his own Helen, the name of the cherished female addressee in his well-known poem.[577] For these young poets, Abu ᶜAfsh was the "…guide to pure poetry, exemplary like Ritsos, Whitman and Saᶜdi Yusuf […] though closer to our torn spirits."[578] This comparative grouping is telling with respect to the centrality of Iraqi poet-translator Yusuf as the literary agent whose translations delivered Whitman and Ritsos into Arabic. These translations came to be formative for the development of the Arabic "poetics of detail" but were not readily available in Syria.

[575] Abu ᶜAfsh, *Ayyuha al-Zaman*, 61-62, 64-65.
[576] Barut, *al-Shiᶜr Yaktubu Ismah*, 98-99.
[577] Khalil Suwaylih, "Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh: ᶜAn Hamajiyyat al-ᶜAlam wa-Fuqdan al-Baraʾa [Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh: On the World's Savagery and the Loss of Innocence]," *al-Akhbar* August 1, 2008. See: https://al-akhbar.com/Archive_People/158479. Last visited March 26, 2019.
[578] Ibid.

Abu ᶜAfsh's presence in Syrian poetic circles passed through his eccentric character as much as his poems. He lived in a small dilapidated garage squeezed between two buildings and exposed to the street,

> A house more like an abandoned train wagon invaded by random squatters, who had left their few possessions in the wall's cavities, a double deck bed for his two sons Omar and Kinan, an old sofa where he would sit during the day and sleep at night, a few stools, books and drafts of poems, graffiti, music cassettes, watercolors, and, like a professional pharmacist, a variety of pills against the migraines from which he suffers to this day.[579]

He had both literally and figuratively adopted the spectacles of Allen Ginsberg, trying to write long-breath, parenthetically sweeping poems propelled forward in inclusive all-devouring lines. The tonality of these rhapsodies is predominantly dark and their main themes are the sadness and despair of a besieged individual in a crisis both spiritual and material. He fell under the spell of Colin Wilson's philosophy and found himself described in Wilson's *Outsider*,[580] leading the life of an embittered, ascetic *lā-muntamī* (non-belonging person). In his poems, he is the diametric opposite to ᶜAbd al-Hamid's taciturn and reserved nature.

The impact made by these poems on their Syrian contemporaries is to be ascribed to their vivacious reimagining of the *marthiya* (elegy) genre in a way that rendered a shared condition nameable. Regarding Adonis' modernistic elegiac style, Robyn Creswell has argued that "it is by way of elegy […] that Adonis negotiates the turn away from the political and seeks to establish a counter-canon of 'modernist' poets […] that provides him with a compensatory non-political authority."[581] Much less literarily concerned, Abu ᶜAfsh's elegy enacts a struggle of individuation and a desperate search for an alternative collective. His *rithāʾ* performances are

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[579] Ibid.
[580] Colin's Wilson's book was a global sensation, translated into dozens of languages and never out of print. It came out in Arabic translation as *al-La Muntami* in the mid 1960s in Beirut and the first printed edition ran out unusually fast. On its unbearable popularity see Bulus, "Al-Hajis al-Aqwa: Khawatir Hawla al-Sittinat [The Greatest Scruple: Ruminations on the Sixties]," in: *Faradis* 4-5 (August 1992), 41. Colin Wilson was also an official guest of the Arab Writers Union in Damascus sometime in the summer of 1974, as reported by *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* (1:1 July 1974, 298-299), gave a lecture and met with Syrian writers and intellectuals. Abu ᶜAfsh's poetry had given a decidedly pessimistic bent to Wilson's "optimistic existentialism"
[581] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 247.

such an associative hodge-podge of exhortations, pleas and wailing, that they are barely recognizable as such, often taking long detours into moral sermons, foolish praise, effusive declarations of love, dramatized dialogue with friends and family, and all manner of personal pontifications. Whereas Adonis' densely intertextual elegies were offered as "document[s] of disaffiliation"[582] with politics and a shared sense of fate, Abu ᶜAfsh's introspective jabbering introduces affect back into the genre in the form of parentheses, dialogue, digression and phatic interferences. Adonis's persona in "Elegy for The Present Days" (1958) speaks of despair from an ironized distant point well beyond it;[583] Abu ᶜAfsh's despair is immanent and palpable in his speech.

Out of a felt relation to the breadth and ubiquity of the divine, Abu ᶜAfsh seems to have bracketed al-Maghut's formal looseness and raised it to its power: not a trace of stanza division, no regularity of line length nor strange parallel pairings. The chopping-up and reassembling of the poetic bits are even more anarchic and abrupt. Within a single poem, he varies between brief one-word lines, free-flowing Whitmanesque lines, and staircase structures à la Mayakovski. This irregularity makes the text appear on the page like an open field of intersecting and conflictual currents. But even when the poem strays far afield in its development, it always returns to the tonic, the home key of gloom, despair, misery. The goal is to vocalize griefs and terrors of one's own, rather than express them as opaque by-products of a cultural palimpsest.

A Literary Society of Affection: New Themes and Genres

Abu ᶜAfsh's response is on a declarative level, yet the more meaningful response to the situation described is behavioral: the actual grouping together of the *shafawiyya* poets and the

[582] Ibid., 260.
[583] See discussion of this poem in Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 126.

social bonds forged by them to supplant the lack of literary infrastrcutre. I propose to view the poetic interchanges between the these poets as articulating a "politics of friendship," where microcosms of civic cooperation centering around non-political common enterprises serve as counterweight to the dissolution and hostility among other powerful social groups – political, sectarian, ethnic, and religious.[584]Figuring in the poems, these relationships humanize the text and bring into existence new genres and themes.

But before the textual aspects are addressed, let me give a collective profile of the *shafawi* poets in broad strokes. Born in the late 1940s to a reality of a decolonized Syrian state, they all immigrated from socio-economically struggling Syrian provinces to Damascus during the 1970s (aside from Munzir Masri who was born and still lives in Latakia). Abu ᶜAfsh came from Marmarita, a small town in Wadi al-Nasara [Valley of Christians] in the northwest of the country; ᶜAdil Mahmud came from a family of farmers in ᶜAyn al-Bum, a tiny Alawite village located at the very top of the Syrian coastal mountain range; Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid came from Tell Safouk, a Bedouin settlement in the deserts of al-Jazira on the border with Iraq; Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn hailed from Darᶜa in the southwest near the border with Jordan, the provincial town from which the Syrian uprising was sparked off. In contrast to the members of the first-wave modernism, whose academic training in AUB or abroad was formative of their poetics, these poets were professedly non-academic. They received minimal formal schooling beyond

[584] This concept is cogently presented and discussed in scholarship on the coterie poetics of the English 17th century poet Katherine Philips (1631-1664). A dedicated Royalist, Katharine made her home in Cardigan, Wales into a literary center with political dimensions. Her project was to bind together Royalist sympathizers as an affectionate "society of friendship," as she called it, through artful correspondence and collaborative creation. This was a political necessity against the backdrop of the English Civil War (1642-1651) and the Interregnum period that followed when royalist activities were disbanded, threatened and dispersed. As a poet, she positioned herself as an "apostle of passionate female friendship" whose most "highly charged" amorous verses are dedicated to women confidantes, particularly her friend Anne Owen, also known as "Lucasia." Her most anthologized poem titled "Friendship's Mysterys" has been read as "promoting earthly and heavenly coherence" by weighing the "religion of friendship" against civil dissent and conflict. Royalist politics are coded into it by denouncing the brutish "world" (that cruelly put the King to death) and by elliptical reference to a loss by which hearts are doubled. The loss decried may be of the monarchy itself or of the dear "friends," i.e. political allies, who are now physically separated due to being on the losing side and wish to call up the spiritual body of the King as a unifying body politic. See Alison Shell's chapter on seventeenth-century poetry for the *Cambridge History of English Poetry* and Hero Chalmers's chapter in *Royalist Women Writers* titled "Her Harmonious Numbers: The Politics of Friendship in the Poems and Plays of Katherine Philips." Chalmers's chapter includes a useful survey of the critical literature on Philips. For biographical data, I draw on the entry in the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Philips, Katharine."

high-school and did not acquire a second language until later adulthood. The ones from the remotest, poorest provinces (ᶜAbd al-Hamid, Mahmud, and al-Husayn), where illiteracy was still the norm, barely completed their high-school education or had to travel great distances to go to school. By 1973, they were all in some way war veterans in their mid- to late-twenties, who experienced as impressionable young men the emotional devastation of the 1967 defeat and the ensuing political turn inwards of the Baath regime. After 1973 they plunged headlong into the burgeoning print culture in Damascus, where most of the daily newspapers, broadcast agencies and periodicals that employed them were based. In their political worldviews, they were affiliated in some form with international leftism yet were by no means party members with either oppositional or coalition factions of the Syrian Communist Party. Marxist affinities become with them personalized and whimsical, relativized by the discrepancies between the local and the imaginary global. Their poems refer to posters of Lenin, Marx, and Che Guevara hanging next to paintings by their Syrian friends or their photo portraits. Stripped to its essentials of camaraderie and solidarity with the lesser-to-do, their Marxism is non-doctrinaire and non-militant, diluted with political quietism. It is tempered by what Barut calls their radical democratic beliefs.

Their names began appearing in Syrian literary magazines around 1973, and their debut collections of *shafawi* poetry published between 1975-1978 in the state-owned press run by the Ministry of Culture. As part of this cultural revival and the funds it made available, some of them received government grants to enroll in the University of Damascus, or go abroad in various capacities, primarily to countries in the USSR's sphere of influence. Mahmud wrote oblique anti-war poems from East Berlin and Budapest, and after the regime banned his publication, he attached himself to the fate of PLO magazines and travelled with them to Nicosia, Belgrade and

Tunisia. ᶜAbd al-Hamid was awarded a state prize of travelling to Yugoslavia for his excellence in high-school, only to have it revoked. In the late 1970s, he developed an avid passion for cinema in Budapest, where he watched films that were banned in Syria. Masri travelled to Warsaw in 1979 to obtain a diploma in regional planning before coming back to work in the Directorate of Town Planning in Latakia. In a Syrian poetic climate notorious for its conservatism and fondness for grand political stances, they started out in prosodic compositions and step by step over the 1970s – with the influential precedents of Muhammad al-Maghut and Adonis – converted to *qasidat al-nathr*. The range of their reading was planetary in interest but eclectic, and mostly determined by the vicissitudes of local circulation in book and magazine culture.

They were not "pure" poets but *mutafanninūn* (versatile artists), who came to poetry by accident or as a second choice, and often left it when they could. Mahmud was a professional war reporter and gave up poetry in the late nineties. Abu ᶜAfsh is equally known as a painter and shows up on lists of Syrian visual artists; Munzir Masri is a skilled draughtsman, a devoted cultural collector, and originally planned to become a visual artist; Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid is a film connoisseur who served as editor-in-chief of *Cinema Life* (1979-2006), the first exclusive journal for cinema studies in Syria funded by the Ministry of Culture; Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn – who was afflicted with deafness and died at the age of 28 – was a journalist and wrote children stories. Most of them eventually had run-ins with state authority and the censors. They were either denied publication at one point or incarcerated for short intervals (for unspecified reasons), or both.

They used to gather informally in various formations and with irregular intervals in cafes and private spaces. Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid's small apartment in al-Salihiya neighborhood,

northwest of the Old City of Damascus, formed one such common meeting point throughout the 1970s:

> An open salon that consists of one room and one kitchen […] in which no appointment is needed since the door is always open even when the owner is away. An alternative space for ideas, projects and free debates. Cultural currents of all kinds come together fortuitously in unmapped discussions, feeding on improvised dishes that Bandar invents on the spot with whatever is at hand: wild herbs, wondrous plants, alcoholic mixtures. On the living room walls silent conversations take place between those whose images hang in happenstance disarray. Here are poets and filmmakers and thinkers, filmstars from the golden age of cinema, in what resembles a Surrealist mural. Disjointed conversations and memories from this place with no interwoven plot […][585]

Suwaylih describes the kind of place from which the "mumbling of the modern poem" springs: a quasi-hippy scene, tucked away underneath Syrian official culture, whose actors pay greater attention to smaller scale questions: not Palestine and Pan-Arab unity, but the state of Syrian ordinary citizens; not committed art or aesthetic autonomy, but the most recent Syrian or Hollywood film. This small and chaotic interior was a place of intimacy and confidence where the young bohemia huddled around "glocalized" culture and free conversation. "Through Bandar's room," writes Masri, "in a little alley off al-ᶜAbed street, in the middle of Damascus in the middle of the 1970s, everyone passed […] There, on his walls, were crowded together pictures of world artists, actors, poets, pictures he would obtain who knows where from… Sometimes he would use scissors to cut and repaste them in different collagist arrangements, using them as covers for his and his friends' poetry collections."[586] Poetry appears better suited to capture the episodic life experience of artists with no interwoven master-plot, moving from situation to situation without feeling any progress.

The *shafawi* poem as an outgrowth of this creative space toned down the Arabness of the Arabic prose poem and went to seek globally recognizable life materials while at the same time

[585] Khalil Suwaylih, "Bayt Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid," in *al-Akhbar* October 25, 2015. https://al-akhbar.com/Literature_Arts/8442 Last visited August 7, 2018.
[586] Misri, *Antulujiya al-Shiᶜr al-Suri*, 221.

strengthening its footing in the Syrian habitus. Objects of the modern environment with its global market economy enter the poems more freely on the level of *realia*. The *shafawi* poem went farther than al-Maghut in this direction because of its irreverence towards topics of Arab concern and Arab types, and also because in certain areas of life, if deemed representable for art, global market products had simply become unavoidable. Cinema is a major avenue of image transport, and once it becomes poetically acceptable to equate freedom with going to the movies with your girlfriend,[587] the road to references from global cinematic popular culture is open. Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth make appearances by name in ᶜAbd al-Hamid's and Masri's poems.

Two areas in which foreign vocabulary figures prominently are (1) food and drink and (2) medical products and chemicals. This can be explained by the haste with which these brand names arrive by hearsay through mass media, or physically on the local markets as soon as the country slightly opens up to modernization and global trade. Thus, we have the poets eating *sandwishāt* (sandwiches), *biskawīt* (biscuits), and sausage, and drinking Coke, Pepsi, beer, whiskey (which al-Maghut also used to drink), and vodka. Brand labels are sometimes named – Marlboro cigarettes, Ronson lighters, Kalashnikov rifles, Phantom jets, Nacet razors – and so are big international corporations like General Motors. All of these referents are part of the lifeworld whether as physically present objects, or through film and television screens and radio transmitters. They belong to the lower register of popular culture that increases the anti-poetic shares in the *shafawi* poem. One instructive example comes from ᶜAdil Mahmud, whose anti-folklorist ironic poems are noted for de-romanticizing the pristineness of Syrian fellahi life:

> Yesterday
> My clean mother decided she was going to wash a pillow
> and was perplexed – of course – to find it clean.

[587] Al-Husayn, *Al-Aᶜmal*, 66.

But after getting ready for this famous house chore
She discovered a black moon on the cloth's white.
It was the tear of a sad
Woman on account of my broken heart
I told my mother:
"Don't dunk the moon in a bucket of Tide!
Let the world stay dirty at least to the measure of this innocence."[588]

That lyric sentiment is here threatened with extinction by modern cleaning chemicals is ironic given the fact that the rustic mother is more modern in terms of material "equipment" than her son, the modern poet. This domestic reference is innocuous in comparison to other Latinized scientific nomenclature which comes up in contexts of political oppression or Cold War anxieties about the bomb and its concomitant migraines and sleep deprivation. The list of chemicals and consumed drugs includes: tear gas, aspirin, sleeping pills, coricidin (cough medicine), anti-mucus medication and marijuana. Al-Husayn's poem "Marseillaise to the Atomic Age" includes references to morphine and DDT, plastic love and plastic hearts, and exhausted seasonal workers "from the pyramids to Bokassa's exquisite diamonds."[589] Reference to the self-appointed emperor of Central Africa who displayed ostentations wealth, ran his country to bankruptcy, and was deposed 1979 in a military coup belongs in the category of current-events frames of reference that signal the up-to-dateness of the *shafawi* poem and its global awareness. Thus, we have mentions of hijacked airplanes,[590] the Nicaraguan revolution, Jimmy Carter, and Anwar Sadat.

* * *

Syrian coterie poetics cultivate a *religio* of friendship – a religion in the primary etymological sense of the Latin *religio* as binding together – in the face of a social world full of sedition and strife. The bonds thus forged, coded into the poems and made central in the poetical

[588] Mahmud, *Qimsan*, 39-40.
[589] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 49.
[590] Ibid., 159; ʿAbd al-Hamid, *Mughamarat*, 99.

identities projected through them, make up an alternative to the otherwise forbidden political association outside the Baath party. Close companionship, debate, and friendly competition are listed high on their hierarchy of values, since their moral growth as individual poets requires models for emulation, but also checks and balances, mirrors that reflect their shortcomings. Many textual examples from this corpus can be adduced. Here is an especially appealing one from Masri's *People, Dates, and Places* (1979), where, in dialogue with the poem about the three Arab friends, Syrian friendship is established as template for other models of solidarity:

A Fate as Bad as Ours Suffices

A fate as bad as ours
Suffices
For us to gather close together on the level
Of friends – above the ordinary –
All our deep-seated disputes
Will add nothing
To our marginal interests
Three or four names
we will write in quick longhand
One on top of the other
\
a fate as bad
as ours
suffices
for me to surprise you while
you're still asleep[591]
or for us to agree
vaguely over the telephone
or for you to shout at me from the end of the street
and we will spend an entire day together
distracted by our feet
piling ourselves at storefronts
our shoe heels
pressing on our heads
exhausting our hearts
until nothing agrees with us anymore
\
a fate
as bad
as ours
suffices
for us to step out onto the narrow balcony
together and all at once
To each of us his color
To each his smell

[591] The Arabic has no gender ambiguity in the pronoun here. It is in the masculine singular.

And when we wrap our arms around our waists
We really, but *really* look
Like a bouquet
Of suspicious
Flowers.
\
And in that same room
Contrary to our former opinions
We will drink
Whatever is at hand
And have a competition in inventing drinking toasts
And smashing glasses
Out of respect
For our modest whims
Of being more noisy
Than the clamorous music
As we manufacture for ourselves
Even
More
Memories.[592]

The affection for friends, their faces, physique, and manners, takes on an existential dimension in these poems, as the interest in the fates of individuals is compounded against the backdrop of collective destruction. Friendship thus inscribed guarantees the continuity of cultural memory beyond the passing individual. With the low means at their disposal, these poets can only latch on to a literary infrastructure unsuited to their project. The loose structure of their grouping is attributable to this setting. Nevertheless, as group bonds can be written into the single-author collection, so can the need for the institutionalizing force of genre be read into the single poem. The notion of friendship so central to the shaping of a new poetics is ideally suited to the format of a contemporary anthology. The vase of flowers is a recurring motif in Masri's poems suggesting the Greek *anthologia*, which originally means gathering flowers. In place of the impossible anthology, we get the poem-anthology. The reality depicted is, like Abu ᶜAfsh's theater hall, lived *en masse*, yet the dreariness flips to sprightliness: a group of redundant men "hang" together so as to lessen their aimlessness; bits and pieces of senseless masculine folly; a

[592]Misri, *Bashar Tawarikh*, 205-208.

group photo on a narrow balcony in what must be a depressing low-cost apartment block, where loud music from the street penetrates through the thin walls; a place of very permeable boundaries containing an adhesive human amalgam that continues rolling and unfurling by force of an inscrutable "fate." Yet human life continues to grow despite of paralysis, or is made to grow by actively manufacturing memories of its unrepeatability. The transformation of friendship into recorded memory is paralleled by the change from a single unitary poem reflective of a unique subjectivity into a poem-anthology, diversified, open to mixture, humbler and more colorful, authored by multiple names scribbled on top of each other.

In his essay on minor poetry, T.S. Eliot begins by associating minor poetry with the kind of poetry one finds in anthologies, and then goes off on a long digression about the uses of anthologies. He starts with their cultural uses as regulating the literary field: allowing budding poets a first shot at publication and giving them an initial group identity, allowing readers to become acquainted with lesser known poets who are particularly palatable to them, giving adequate knowledge of important poets one doesn't enjoy, or saving time by selecting for us the good bits of poets whose work is too long or too dull. But the pleasure of the anthology, to which Eliot assigns paramount significance, is in the principle of joyful comparison in passing from poet to poet: "several very different poems, by authors of different temperaments and different ages, when read together, may each bring out the peculiar savour of each other, each having something that the others lack. To enjoy this pleasure, we need a good anthology."[593] Masri's blurring of boundaries between anthology and anthropology has something to do with the lack of literary infrastructure to produce these canonizing mechanisms and pleasurable anthological collections. Yet he still wants the differences in color, smell, and attitudes to be registered. The

[593] T.S. Eliot, "What is Minor Poetry?" *The Sewanee Review*, 54 no. 1 (January-March 1946), 7.

minor poet here becomes not the one whom we read in anthologies, but the one whose peculiar personal charm become suggestive of the pleasures of potential anthologies, for now enjoyed in life's medley of personalities. The lack is compensated for by recoding the existence of one's fellow poets and writing them into the single poem and the single-author volume. This existence needs to be recorded because in the near and foreseeable future these friends and their books might well disappear. The poem creates for Masri a shadow of an anthology in which he too is included. For many years, Masri was not primarily known through his own individual collections but by his presence in a low-key anthology, and in his later career he produced several more volumes that read in part like anthologies.

To offer a historical analogy, the Polish "New Wave" poets, or the generation of 68', as they are often called, are said to have joined forces and by the "distinctive lyrical gifts" that each possessed persisted in articulating "private experience in a state recognizing only collective existence."[594] "Poetry's task, as they saw it," writes Clare Cavanagh in arguing for the difference between Western and Eastern European sixty-eighters, "was to wrench language away from its prescribed social functions in hopes of revealing glimpses of human reality that had survived the various ideologies and social constructs designed to distort or disguise it."[595] The poets she refers to are Stanislaw Barańczak, Ryszard Krynicki, and Adam Zagajewski, who also formed a "loosely affiliated group of young writers"[596] in Sovietized Poland, and who were all deeply wary of the seductions of avant-garde poetic myths. Czesław Miłosz had intimated this rift between Eastern and Western European poetries and political stance-taking in his Nobel lecture of 1980, where he posits a "hidden link between theories of literature as *écriture,* of speech

[594] Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry*, 225.
[595] Ibid., 226.
[596] Discussed in Cavanagh'a introduction to her selections from Ryszard Krynicki. See Krynicki, *Magnetic Point*, xix.

feeding on itself, and the growth of the totalitarian state."[597] The poem for this group is equally a self-conscious verbal construct, but one that draws lines around a linguistic "zone of purity" where contaminated propaganda language can only enter through the gate of the spurned, unrepresented, "minor league reality" lived by citizens of the People's Republic in a "cut-rate quotidian."[598] The Poznan-based Barańczak and Krynicki, both stark language-poets, had went to seek of "maximally specific language" to counter the linguistic phantasmagoria perpetuated in "newspeak" and put trust in lyric poetry's "propensity for the particular."[599] Zagajewki chose to divest himself entirely of the trappings of Polish romantic bardom to write "straight-speaking" poems as ordinary and "necessary as bread and air,"[600] a common trope, as we have seen, for the esthetic of austerity.

The Polish 68' poets were catalysts for the civil dissent of the Solidarity Movement in the early 1980s, and their poems were circulated, memorized, and recited by disgruntled citizens and dissidents alike. The Polish dissident Adam Michnik has acknowledged the debt to these poets who "worked out a new language for its conversation with reality: we ceased to be slaves of others' words."[601] Cavanagh puts this fact in sharp relief to the theoretical pretenses of members of the Parisian sixty-eighters of the Tel Quel circle, whose rhetoric of fusing revolutionary politics and aesthetics found itself reabsorbed in the bourgeois academic sphere they were rallying against. Our Syrian poets, by comparison, found no societal space to absorb their movement, and in many senses, were in a greater state of impoverishment than their Polish counterparts. The Assadist state's patronage of culture and the arts thrived for as long as it could serve as a veneer of prosperity and keep artists employed and thus indebted to the state. When

[597] Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry*, 201.
[598] Ibid., 213.
[599] Barańcak's phrase. Ibid., 227-228.
[600] Ibid., 219.
[601] *Magnetic Point*, xxi.

crisis hit in the late 1970s, and with greater force in the mid 1980s as the Soviet Union was crumbling and oil prices decreased, there came a much less tolerant age for free expression.

The Syrian coterie is clearly homosocial, a "boy gang." In a society with as yet fixed gender roles and that still frowns upon gender intermixture, any other formation would draw unnecessary fire. We may still try to picture them as trying to construct a reformist social cell whose continuity would guarantee the existence of a germ for a future civil society in Syria. But how reformist is this cell without women? And, more practically, how would the germ proliferate without increasing and multiplying through procreation? Some of their love poems certainly suggest respectful exchanges with specific women as equal agents, concrete addressees and unique unrepeatable partners in love. Their code of friendship (*ṣadīq* is an oft-repeated noun in both singular and plural form) applies equally to women. In Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid's poem "Siege," the poet's companion is referred to as *ṣadīqatī ᶜAbbāsa*, my woman friend ᶜAbbasa, an uncommon personal name with a strangely masculine ring to it. The poem makes clear that ᶜAbbasa is more than just a friend:

> My friend ᶜAbbasa and I
> feel besieged by big cars
> and imported perfumes
> we escape to the empty side-streets
> and talk about little wars
> the prices of matches and tea
> and Saddat's visit to Israel
> my friend says
> that she heard a vague statement
> made by the American Foreign Secretary
> she laughs, my friend ᶜAbbasa,
> and steals a small white flower for me
> as we stroll along
> pass by the military court
> I extend my hand
> and touch hers stealthily
> I tell her about Tell Sheᶜir village[602]
> and confess to her
> that, in my childhood,

[602] A village in the far north of Syria, right on the border with Turkey, and very close to the town of Kobane.

I used to play in mud.[603]

This poem may well be read as anticipating a utopic situation or an ideal to strive for. Once the barriers are down, women as friends will be engaged in the conversation on equal level, intimate confidants in addition to erotic objects of desire. Sexual deprivation is suffered equally by both sides, though made up for by stimulating conversation. Laughing and smiling, the "adventures of the fingers" are more important in their implications than any philosophical and political conversation. ᶜAbd al-Hamid's cinematic sensibility often equalizes verbal exchange with an entire set of visual impressions and non-verbal communications. The big topics – Middle East politics, living costs and poverty, state oppression – are dwarfed in comparison to the speaker's best-guarded secret, i.e., that he used to play in mud. Is playing in mud so private because ᶜAbd al-Hamid's Bedouin origins are revealed before a sophisticated Damascene young woman? On a second look, it might be an insinuation that he is used to rolling around on the ground, and thus an impossible sexual invitation. While exposing the constraints laid on free sexual relationships, the poem also intimates the possibilities for the art of conversation deriving from these constraints.

Alongside the anthology-poem, the state of deprivation gives rise to a genre of "chamber poetry" which by withdrawing from public space, opens up the narrow confines of the private room. Their dilapidated temporary habitations welcome not only individual reflections and the interexchange of poetic missives, but also forms of engagement with Arab and world literature. This phenomenon has already been shown in the references to pictures of internationally renowned figures adorning the walls of their bachelor pads. In the Soviet 1930s, the lyric poetry of the Acmeists Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova was defamed as "chamber poetry" to connote

[603] ᶜAbd al-Hamid, *Mughamarat*, 72-73.

the reactionary bourgeois origin of the lyric I no longer welcome in the new social order. Their poetry thus went underground, departed from the printed letter and furtively lived from mouth to mouth. At the same time as the aesthetic doctrine of Socialist Realism was formally consecrated in 1932, Mandelstam spoke of his writing as "civic verse" subverting what the regime thought of as civility.[604]

In Syria, the sense of reality closed-in on itself creeped in in more devious ways than mass arrests, deportations and executions of intellectuals. It had to do with the metastasizing presence of official ideological discourse in public life. Lisa Wedeen has demonstrated the effects which dissemination of ideologically symbolic vocabulary had on everyday life in Syria. In her account, the patently spurious claims spread by official state rhetoric served to entrench external compliance and in effect "kill politics." The lies, hyperboles, and half-truths involved were so transparent and crude that people were compelled to constantly dissimulate – act 'as if' and pay lip service – while ambiguously transgressing them. Part of the demeaning pressing-down of the population was thus performed through inundating the public sphere with garish, shabby discourse that could be publicly resisted only at great costs. The power communicated through these rhetorical formulas provided guidelines for licensed civil behavior in language – "for everyone language is like a seatbelt," one interviewee says[605] – but also uncontestably cluttered public space. "To be Syrian," writes Wedeen, "is to operate within this rhetorical universe."[606]

One of Masri's central cycles in *People, Dates and Places* is called "Poems from the Room" in which Masri bemusedly draws and redraws the boundaries of his private sphere with

[604] Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry*, 112-113.
[605] Ibid., 46.
[606] Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 65.

reference to politics, history and literature. Here is a self-portrait of Masri as an exasperated reader:

> **Now… as I suddenly close a book**
>
> I glued, next to Stalin's image,
> A picture of Papa Hemingway
> As he hunches – smiling towards death –
> Over the corpse of an African bull
> With its tongue pulled out.
> \
> I was humming the tune of *La Cumparsita*
> As I watched three lame men in life's prime.
> I happened to run into them yesterday, standing on the beach
> With interlocking arms.
> \
> Now
> I suddenly close a book
> And utter a sigh
> Which means – as far as I'm concerned –
> That I do not differ much
> With the passing of days.[607]

Because of the monotonous politicization of print culture, the written word just doesn't seem to provide meaningful experience parcels. The sensibility of this poem is thus fundamentally averse to strategies of poetic self-legitimation through intertextuality, which were central for the modernists of the 1960s. The felt futility of books – captured in the visual rhyme between hunching over a boring book and Papa Hemingway hunching over the bull's corpse – presents however new possibilities for intertextuality. It makes way for memory work which forges new associations such as that between the remembered Tango tune – *La Cumparsita* – and the three young invalids spotted on the beach in Latakia. The relation between the two is not entirely random: *cumparsita* denotes a group of friends dressed up together to go to the carnival, and Masri's three invalids seem to have come out of a Diane Arbus photograph. The song lyrics are however about missing those friends: *los amigos ya no vienen / ni siquiera visitarme / nadie quiere cosolarme en mi aflicción*. This is the exact sentiment articulated in the last strophe of "A

[607] Misri, *Bashar Tawarikh*, 178-179. Translation from later edition: *al-Majmuᶜat al-Arbaᶜ*, 226.

Palestinian, A Sudanese, and the Third, A Moroccan."[608] When Masri is fed up with the book, he misses the live presence of his author friends who have departed and neither call nor write. He finds objective correlatives for that feeling in the song and the sight of companionship. Intertextuality is thus a much too narrow term for the range of references provided by the local environment with its global fragments: an American author hanging next to a Soviet politician on a Latakiyan wall, situated in a Spanish bull ring over an African bull; a Latin American tune superimposed on a scene from the local seashore. These are the kind of mixed encounters usually prompted by books. For whatever reason, books are *now* not performing their designated role, but remain as a blueprint structuring that sort of experience.

Even if this chamber lyric seems to fall short of a genre with all the elaborate repertoire of poetic conventions, it does reflect a moment of literary transmission. Al-Husayn's posthumous volume *Waᶜl fi al-Ghaba* [A Mountain Goat in the Woods, 1983] begins with a short poetic cycle composed of four rooms: "The Poet's Room," "The Warrior's Room," "The Tourist's Room," and "Mahdi Muhammad ᶜAli's Room."[609] The first three rooms are all different aspects of al-Husayn's room, persona poems performed by means of relating to different spaces. The fourth is dedicated to ᶜAli, a Shiite poet from Basra exiled in Damascus for Saddam Hussein's systematic oppression of the Iraqi Shiᶜa. Riyad and Mahdi jointly create the room as a common space with tropes of sacredness and disaster:

> we enter it at night like two beautiful saints and
> with us enter communists and sun-worshippers
> and news from cities in flames
> here it is: *his* room
> farther away from the homeland
> snugger than the space between the eyelash and the eye
> O, Mahdi
> Show us your hands
> Are you not covered in sleeping grass?

[608] See introduction, 22-24.
[609] Al-Husayn, *Al-Aᶜmal*, 195-200.

Have the branches of your heart not sprouted?
What ever happened to Basra's plants
And Basra's earth?[610]

The interrelation between natural greenery and Mahdi's body and heart is a poetic conceit driven home in the last lines of the poem. Though Mahdi is for the time being "a caged bird," he discovers a woman by divining the future through patterns in his coffee cup. It is then that all ornamental plants, flowers, fruit, grass and trees knock on his door and occupy his room. The underlying metaphor is that of the Garden of Eden which is supposedly located at the meeting point of the Tigris and the Euphrates, i.e., approximately where Basra is located. Mahdi thus not only carries the scars of a ruined state and the weight of personal and collective tragedies, but also embodies a promise of paradisiacal harmony between man, woman, and nature. By keeping Mahdi alive, his crummy room and the poem that constructs it also keep this potential alive. The four rooms thus introduce four aspects of "world": the world as existential anguish, death and corrosive passage of time (the poet); the world as a political, social, economic struggle between warring parties (the warrior); the world as a global village full of lucrative destinations, a map for travelling (the tourist); and the world as afterlife, the next world as the undying human dream of immortality and permanent fullness. All four aspects crisscross in all four poems.

The down and low existence in al-Husayn's room is a theme comparable to Whitman's American democracy and is thus worthy of a Whitmanesque encyclopedic treatment. "A Small, Narrow Room and Nothing but That" can serve as prototype for the chamber poem whose protective shell affords the scant but sufficient ratio of mental nourishment. It is worth quoting at some length:

And since I was born with no native land

[610] Ibid., 199.

And since my native land became a grave
And since the grave became a book
And since the book became a jailhouse
And since the jaihouse became a dream
And since the dream became a native land
I have been looking for a small, narrow room
Where I could breathe freely.

A small room fit to live in
A small narrow room fit to die in
A small, musty room unfit for anything.
A small room in which are:
A woman peeling potatoes and despair
A concrete worker who never sleeps
A girl crying for no reason
And me, a quarrelsome boy, a kind boy
I have books and friends
And nothing but that.

I breathe freely
In a small, narrow room
I take off my clothes and go to sleep
I take off my mouth and talk
I take off my foot and go for a walk underneath the dust of my bed
Searching for food scraps and cats that like to play.

On the shelf in the room there are books and friends
There is also a dry bunch of alfalfa leaves
A picture of Guevara and a black painting by Munzir Masri
When I starve I devour books and call on friends:
Come my friends let's talk
And my friends are many
Those who love me don't give me a chance to die
Those who hate me don't give me a chance to live
And tomorrow I will probably
Eat up my friends
As I had eaten up my books and all the UN resolutions
And tomorrow I will probably
Withdraw from dreams
As Lady "S" withdrew her hand from the matters of my heart
And tomorrow I will probably
Let my room constitute my life
With its five bloody walls
And its one open window.[611]

The room referred to is the very modest place of occupancy held by al-Husayn from the beginning of 1978 in al-Diwaniyya, a cheap Damascus neighborhood historically associated with the Albanian migrant population. It was a single bedroom with a few shabby wooden steps above

[611] Ibid., 161-162.

street level equipped with nothing but toilet and kitchenette and a washstand by the door.[612] The room is contiguous with the life of a pauperized bachelor, barely employed, sexually deprived (his girlfriend "S" has just broken up with him), and desperately seeking some flavor to life. But the emphasis lies on the comforts and small joys afforded by the room, and conversation in particular. When living is so contracted, this poetic catalogue of unpoetical stuff becomes a vital extension of self, existence turned for a while into being.

The lines about the room being a substitute order for the disintegrating *waṭan* are to be construed as emerging from al-Husayn's intense contact with émigré poets from Iraq. The narrow room is a site of transmission not only from the historically situated self but from currents of the modern Arabic prose poem outside Syria. These transmissions partly occurred face-to-face, since the Iraqis were physically present in Damscus in the 1970s and infiltrated the ranks of the Syrians. The Iraqi contingent included the following poets: ᶜAbd al-Karim Kasid, Hashim Shafiq, Mahdi Muhammad ᶜAli, and Salah Faᵓiq. Kasid and ᶜAli belonged to the most intimate circle of Riyad's friends. Salih Diab determines that Salah Faᵓiq's *Rahaᵓin* [Hostages, 1975] – some of whose poems were published in Syrian magazines over the course of the 1970s – caused the equivalent of an esthetic shock in Syria.[613]The collection offers a balance between long and talkative prose poems and miniature imagistic imitations imbued with plain-spoken strangeness. Faᵓiq splintered off from an antecedent Iraqi poetic clique which enjoyed wide access to Anglo-American modernist literature and English-language poetry translations. The Kirkuk group, as they were later called, was likewise a unique, scantly documented phenomenon

[612] Described in Masri's introduction. See Ibid., 9.
[613] Saleh Diab, *Poésie syrienne*, 14. For a representative segment see no. 17 of "Asfar [Travels]," a long poem in 32 cantos published in pieces in *al-Maᶜrifa* and dedicated to Munzir Masri. "I will discover my boredom / in small sections [or, syllables] / that resemble flocks of birds / when they migrate confusedly / nothing will escape me. / on the sidewalks / Bedouins set their traps for rabbits. / no one is left in the city / everyone is gone to places far away / every single one forgot their mark on the street / or at home […]." Faᵓiq, *Rahaᵓin*, 39-40.

in the life of modern Arabic poetry.[614] The city of Kirkuk, situated in the Kurdish-dominated north of the country, was a highly heterogeneous, multilingual provincial city with a civilizational heritage stretching all the way back to the third millennium BCE and a violently tumultuous 20th century history of political contest between ethnicities, religions, national and imperial powers over its rich oil resources. The young writers who chanced to gather there in the late 1950s – Fadil al-ᶜAzzawi, Muʾayyid al-Rawi, Jalil Qaysi and Jan Dammu, to name some of them – developed voracious appetites for the new and were able to feed handsomely on the libraries British colonial officers left behind after decolonization. The extensive reading and literary conversations in this group prompted one of the most consummate poetic voices of the Arab 20th century, Sargon Boulus. Boulus headed for the US via Beirut in 1969 and by conscious decision was absent from Arab poetic circles while immersing himself in American and world culture in California. In a literary environment beset by the poetic convulsions of the "poetics of resistance" and its homages to Palestine, the desperation for some form of literary autonomy made the low-key Iraqi poetry of the everyday seem like a huge discovery.

But influence went both ways. The Iraqi poet Hashim Shafiq has founded his poetics on imitating the ethics of *filia* embodied by al-Husayn. In the preface to his *Aqmar Manzaliyya* [Domestic Moons, 1981], Shafiq articulates the collaborative philosophy that underlies his emulation of al-Husayn:

> We turned away from the grinding mill of "modernity" in the direction of the grinding mill of the *waṭan*, to the trials scattered in its folds and numerous pores […] They are digging underneath it to collapse it into catastrophe, and we are persevering underneath, so that carnations can open up in the cracks on the wall, and "because we are behind the wall / we shall die behind it / and let our blood spill on our weapons / while our fingers continue to cling to the last drops of perfume falling from the poem."
>
> They invent shiny cudgels, detectors that can count the number of your glances and steps, they invent silent guns that win your beautiful compliance. We in turn invent carnations lit by our

[614] One very helpful anthology representing the output of the Kirkuk poets is Hisham al-Qaysi's *Shuᶜaraʾ Jamaᶜat Kirkuk* (second ed. 2016). See also Sargon Boulus' beautiful chapter on Kirkuk in a book he co-authored with Bosnian writer Safeta Obhodjas. Obhodjas & Boulus, "An den Ufern der Kindheit," in: *Legenden und Staub,* 64-79.

sorrows, we invent a small pond for democracy, so that over its shimmering waters a peace dove may fly.
And so, this is how we live…
We share our shirts, our books, and our meagre provisions, we occupy together a small street of liberty and guard its checkpoints. And when we gather in our popular cafes and our modest houses, we discuss the expanse of carnations and the patches of destruction, until our throats grow narrow and space grows wider.[615]

The domestic moons in the volume's title are the local models of emulation emerging from this intensive friction, all of which are consciously on the periphery of the literary planetary orbit. The final poem in this collection is dedicated to al-Husayn as the major satellite poet. He is memorialized as a poet-lover and a kind of *wali*, a mystic saint and friend of God:

Riyad son of Salih
conversing with me in the evenings
sitting with me at the table
enters the form of a stone
And then turns into the desert thorn [*ʿawsaja*]
Of limpid skies

He is a desert thorn bush now
Made of Damascene silk
In possession of al-Salihiya
And of mothers who passed through the fire
In possession of words
And of that dewy god
With the fragrance of precious saffron

Riyad…
Loves to mix pebbles with stars
Loves the disputes of birds
In the tree
And loves the violin
In the hands of the old musicians
Riyad…
He is a desert thorn bush now
of green rains
And pebbles speaking in the imagination of his drinking friends.

September, 1980[616]

Al-Husayn is portrayed as a moral example able to metamorphose and enter into the being of things, embodying a high ideal of "negative capability." He is an exuberant lover, a

[615] Shafiq, *Aqmar Manziliyya*, 6-7.
[616] Ibid., 93-94.

mixer of highs and lows, both passionate and tender; a selfless, democratic, life-affirming spirit caring for the disputes of birds in the tree. He is made to dwell in the figure of the *ʿawsaja*, a thick and thorny desert tree suggestive of his troubled life and suffering but also an intertextual referent to Moses' burning bush and ʿUdhri love poets who obsessively observe their beloved in every rock, pebble and desert plant.

That these archaic levels of symbolic meaning are superimposed over the ordinariness of Riyad the café conversationalist suggests that Shafiq seeks invisible layers of meaning to complement the visible and the material. These invisible substances add to make up alternative models of male heroism to those offered by the *fidāʾī* warrior, the resistance martyr or the revolutionary. They are equally distant from Adonis' ethereal "knight of strange words." They come closer to the Maghutian prototype sunk in materiality, yet not quite as boisterous and nihilistic. Al-Husayn's poetic experience, writes Khalaf Ali Khalaf, "led the Maghutian poem – which must be considered its spiritual forefather – to an inner tranquility, inside the self rather than out to the milieu."[617] Nor is this masculine model as Arab as al-Maghut's. In al-Husayn's poetry, this model is homely, chatty, sensual and affectionate, a foregone loser ready for merriment. His fullest embodiment is imported from Greece: Nikos Kazantzakis' Alexis Zorbas, or Zorba the Greek. Al-Husayn uses Kazantzakis as a motto for his second collection *Everyday Myths*.[618] A poem in the collection is dedicated to Zorba: "Zorba / you loved as many women as the number of whip lashes your body suffered / your defeats are as many as the letters you wrote to your mistresses / you were a communist in Egypt / and a capitalist in the Balkans / are you a saint or a revolutionary?"[619] The germ for the Syrian Zorbas was likely first transmitted via film

[617] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 300.
[618] Ibid., 79.
[619] Ibid., 122.

rather than text: Anthony Quinn's famed depiction of Zorba in Michael Cacoyannis' 1964 *Zorba the Greek* was no doubt screened in Damascus. An Eros-driven poor miner of immediate amicability and wild expressivity, Zorba is set in contrast to the intellectual, stiff upper-lipped Basil and gradually wins him over. Zorba exemplifies the instinctual artist as an everyman, whose reaction to a miserably failed project is to burst into hysteric *sirtaki* dance and laughter. Clearly on the wrong side of history, he presents al-Husayn with a moral example of workaday chameleon qualities and an irrepressible zest for life that overcomes cultural gentility.

Poets and critics like to eulogize al-Husayn and at times do so in gushing language of quasi hagiography.[620] He is often associated with nouns and adjectives from a semantic field of innocence and purity. The sense is that his stance for civilian solidarity and his jovial disposition despite hardships became a meaningful yardstick by which others measured their own experience. The myths surrounding him were compounded by his premature death and by his final poem whose last line cryptically speaks of awaiting a revolution. The poems are also complicit in spawning the myth of natural kindness, simplicity and saintliness, but when read deeper, they also afford the myth's self-questioning. Especially in his two last volumes, there are poems of exhaustion and disconsolate clarity that avoid an all-too-easy luxuriating confessional rhetoric of his early work.

Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn was born in Dar^{c}a to a family that migrated south from Mari^{c} (a rural town on the outskirts of Aleppo) due to the father's employment with the Syrian army. Riyad attended elementary school near Damascus but was forced to quit due to an inflammation in the urinary system which devolved into an acute kidney failure. He underwent a kidney

[620] A representative sampling is found at the end of the 2016 collected poems. Those are relatively restrained and matter-of-fact compared to what one can find with an on-line search. The contemporary Syrian poet Julan al-Hajji writes for example: "[Riyad's poetry is, D.B.] a pristine nostalgia to a world which was never beautiful except when we remember it"; Ahmad Yusuf Da$^{\flat}$ud states that "Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn's poetry is childhood's self-expression as it confronts the world with astonishment and unique language." Ibid., 299-300.

removal procedure in al-Muwasat Hospital and medical malpractice left him completely deaf and with a severe speech impediment. He would remain deaf for the rest of his life. In 1974, he travelled (presumably with government aid) to Bulgaria for a second operation that was supposed to ameliorate the damage of the first. There he fell for a young woman by the name of Samar al-Mir who would figure in the poems as "S," or "Lady S":

> Lady S is my friend.
> She has thin hair the color of carob
> Her hair is crossed running by a furious horse
> And an aqueduct of moans
> She sells Chiclets in the stations until sundown
> And returns home with a loaded chest of night and stars
> With dried-up dreams and newspaper clips […]
>
> "S" […]
> slept in my bed last night
> after shaking off from her thin carob-colored hair
> six demolished tanks
> and a field of yellow grain
> "S" – an open kingdom to all
> with a firm body and a heart as good as peaches –
> once asked me teasingly: "what is the earth?"

He settled in al-Sakhur neighborhood in Aleppo in 1975 and worked day shifts spinning yarn in the textile industry. ᶜAli Katkhuda, a fellow poet and co-worker in the factory, took him along to work for al-Amali institute in the University of Aleppo, a low-budget printing press for academic textbooks supported by the local student union. Though their job was at the bottommost pay level of the print industry, namely, page layout and composition, Riyad was fond of reading, managed to attain some literary proficiency and make some important acquaintances from the small literary circles of young Aleppine poets and novelists. His interest in poetry began to grow and he started writing in prosodic lines known as *tafᶜila*.

By the time he moved to Damascus in the beginning of 1978, he had fully transformed into a poet of *qasidat al-nathr*. He rented a small room in al-Diwaniya, began working as assistant tailor with his brother Hasan, and then moved up to do office work for the Center for

Palestine Studies. He participated in running a small underground magazine entitled *al-Kurras al-Adabi* which ran for nine issues before the regime closed it down and sent its contributors to short periods in jail. He was subjected to multiple interrogations and torture, since his interrogators thought he was feigning muteness.

His first volume, *Breaking the Blood Cycle*, was published 1979 in the Ministry of Culture press. His second volume, *Everyday Myths*, was published a year later with the same press, and its range of themes and styles was markedly more varied. The preface was anonymously written by Antun al-Maqdasi, the doyen of Syrian letters at the time. The last volume published in his lifetime, *Simple as Water, Clear as a Gunshot* (1982), came out with the small Palestinian press Dar al-Jarmaq in Damascus. It included a long introduction by Iraqi poet Saᶜdi Yusuf and a cover drawn by the Syrian artist Yusuf ᶜAbdelke.

In Riyad's last year, he became romantically involved with an Iraqi woman, Hayfaᵓ Ahmad, a widow with children and the niece of a prominent member of the Central Committee of the Iraqi Communist Party exiled with his entire family in Damascus. Riyad, whose physical constitution was extremely frail, had an emotional breakdown after Ahmad suddenly left him. He stayed alone in his room for several sleepless nights, doing nothing but smoking and drinking alcohol. On November 19, 1982, he was brought to al-Muwasat Hospital once again, where he died a day later. He was buried in his father's native town near Aleppo. After his death, Mahdi Muhammad ᶜAli went back to Riyad's room and found another manuscript in his desk drawer. It was published in 1983 with the title *A Mountain Goat in the Woods*.

That a deaf poet forms the crux for what was to be named the poetic turn to "orality" is both ironic and appropriate. Riyad is said to have communicated with his friends in a private sign language or through letters, written cards and slips of paper. The poems are thus part of a front of

normalcy, and initially attempt to artfully reconstruct manners of luxuriating speech with a sharp awareness of its impossibility in real life. The signature poem for this – the first one in his first volume – was presented in my introduction. In his later poems, Riyad tried to purify this written fluency and produce more crystalline speech moments. This change was brought about by a quick process of poetic maturation precipitated by his correspondence with Munzir Masri. Masri was very loyal to his hometown Latakia and removed himself from the close friction of the Damascene scene. Their affectionate friendship began by correspondence and was followed by occasional visits of al-Husayn to Masri's hometown. There is documentary value in this distance since Masri, an assiduous collector, saved the letters and published them.[621] One of the letters comments with astonishment on Masri's *People, Dates and Places*: "Why don't you write about women?" as if by avoiding this theme Masri comes off as heartless or is somehow betraying his vocation as an Arab poet. Al-Husayn goes on to suggest that Masri should write with more spontaneity. The distance in geography between Masri and al-Husayn is thus overlaid with a difference in poetic temperament, where both sides feel the attraction of the opposite pole: Masri desires the pliant fluency and exuberance of al-Husayn's poems and al-Husayn, between the lines of his critique, is fascinated by Masri's philosophical dryness. In a letter addressed to Masri days before al-Husayn's death (the loss of which Masri laments), Riyad is reported to have said that in his current stage of writing he tries to approach Masri's "lukewarm feeling," to write poems as if he were "a half-sleeping man waving off a fly from his face."[622]

Masri and al-Husayn were thus moving in cross-directions: as Masri was about to try his hand at erotic poetry after *People, Dates and Places*, al-Husayn was in the process of trimming down his confessional gusts in emulation of Masri's playful distance. The interplay between

[621] Mundhir Misri, "Min Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn [From Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn]," in: *Nizwa* 54 (April 2008), 264-267.
[622] Ibid., 266.

these factors – overpowering Eros and a modern sensibility for minimally lucid expression – forms the crucible of austerity in modern Syrian poetry. Countering *ᶜishq* with poetic distance and historical witness meant wrenching it away from the domain of the tradition-laden poet-prophet whose *nasib* (erotic prelude) will inexorably end in political jingles. The presence of both poles brings Arabic poetry into its native element of love while grounding it in a concrete sense of place and a historical-material interpretation of the self. The loves expressed thus are "privatized," as al-Husayn writes,[623] to become a form of rescue from collectivizing pressures and salvage the specific possessions of individual poets: al-Husayn's Lady S with the carob-colored hair is the first Arab beloved to sell Chiclets in a bus station kiosk; Masri's friends are all recollected in their personal names and specific characteristics.

The fruit of this negotiation is to be found in al-Husayn's frequently anthologized poem "Al-Khanjar [The Dagger]." The scribble-like quality of this poem hides the paradoxical nature of al-Husayn's poetry of witness. In his manifesto, Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh rhetorically asked "who wants to replace a lip with a dagger? Exchange a flower for a bomb?" as a claim for the human justice realized by poetry. Al-Husayn transcends these simplistic moral categories to cast doubt on a romanticized humanism which takes no account of the impersonality of death and its potential as a model for distant objectivity:

The Dagger

The man died
Dagger in his heart
Smile on his lips
The man died
He takes a walk in his grave
Looks up
Looks down
Looks all around
Nothing but earth

[623] See the poem "167 cm (al-Husayn, *Al-Aᶜmal*, 108)" where Riyad reveals an attitude towards women different from the machismo around him. "You're a handsome young man," he's encouraged by his friends, "pluck yourself one of the women hanging like neon lamps in the Damascus international fair." "No, you ignorant friend," answers al-Husayn, "Love belongs to the private sector, hence we must work for it."

Nothing but the shining handle
Of the dagger in his chest
The dead man smiles
And strokes the dagger's handle
The dagger is his only friend
The dagger –
A dear memory from those on top.[624]

From a certain vantage point, the poem argues, the dagger and the kiss are equal. The dagger – a particularly Damascene image for the agent of death – is loved by association with the world of the living, a world so inclusive as to be oblivious to distinctions between this and that, victim and executioner. Death is Riyad's closest friend, says Masri in interpreting the poem, since it goes with him all the way into the earth, as no other friend can do.[625] The man smiles towards that which receives him and strokes the vehicle carrying all the sweetness and beauty of the world with it. Love for one's death shadow is thus the archetype for all other affections and earthly loves. It is also, however trite, a metaphor for the heart-piercing poem that the over-sensitive al-Husayn aspires to write. But for this to happen the dagger must be nailed into the heart of the reader who momentarily dies the death-in-life of the artist. To give true poetic witness, the poem implies in opposition to Abu ᶜAfsh, poetry must forget about the grave moral mission weighing it down or neutralize it. "Contrary to what Riyad would always believe and insist on with respect to poetry," Masri again writes, "namely, that poetry records and archives daily occurrences and fleeting feelings from lived experience, this poem grabs on to something from the fruit of the timeless tree of death."[626]

Riyad's poem originated from a night of joint meandering and conversation. Sometime in 1981 Masri was visiting in Damascus. Riyad and Munzir both spent a long evening in Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid's "crib" until the air became too stuffed with cigarette smoke. It was too late to

[624] Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal*, 227.
[625] Misri, "Khanjar Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn," in: *Al-Faysal* November 6, 2016. https://www.alfaisalmag.com/?p=3408. Last visited March 4, 2019.
[626] Ibid.

go back to Latakia, and Riyad invited Masri to spend the night at his small, cramped room in al-Diwaniyya. The two left ᶜAbd al-Hamid's gathering in al-Salihiya at about 2 a.m. and in the clear night air set out on their march in the direction of al-Husayn's place approximately two-and-a-half kilometers away. All the way there al-Husayn was hopping, skipping and jumping around Masri. In his unusual speaking voice that resembled the muffled singing of a man "drawing his last breaths" (as Masri describes it), al-Husayn repeated the phrases: "*innahā ḥayātun jamīla… innahā ḥayātun ḥilwa… innahā ḥayātun lazīza…* [o, this life is beautiful, o, this life is sweet, o, this life is joyful]."[627] When they arrived, they climbed the wooden steps to Riyad's apartment, and Masri hand-washed his dirty grey socks in the washstand near the room. When they came inside Masri noticed a heightened bed with two mattresses stacked on top of each other and a big pile of bed sheets on top of them. It was a feeling of fate, as if al-Husayn had premeditated extending the invitation. There was also Munzir's black painting hanging next to a picture of Che Guevara. They chatted for a while longer until Riyad started scribbling in his notebook. He was writing "The Dagger." The paradox at the heart of al-Husayn's "Dagger" touched Masri and he could not formulate his thoughts but through writing a twin poem to complement it. "That night," he recounts, "while shutting our eyes for no more than two or three hours, we alighted as visitors in the tent of Death, and I too decided to compose a poem":

> with this intake of air
> life is beautiful
> this evening
> with this footstep
> yes, this life is beautiful
> tonight
> as we pass by the burial ground in trembling footsteps
> listening to the dead breathing
> …
> yes, this life is beautiful

[627] The story is related in full by Munzir Masri and I re-tell it with my chosen emphases. It appeared in an article written apropos the anniversary of al-Husayn's death in *al-Faysal*, a magazine based in Riyad and supported by the King Faysal Foundation. See n. 625.

Contrary to al-Husayn, Masri's integrity cannot part with partialities and contingency: at this moment, with this footstep, this evening. These are the only terms on which he may cede to the spontaneous expression al-Husayn urges him to adopt. Only thus may a statement like "life is beautiful" be validated. The other condition for incorporating these sentimental words with a straight face is that it is not Masri who said it, that it is taken "from the air" as it were, an objectively existing utterance, true like anything else that exists.

The washed socks hanging to dry – which also existed and were therefore irrefutably true – were, alas, forgotten.

CHAPTER 4: TRANSLATION IN SYRIA AND THE BULGARIAN DIWAN

I Translation in Syria, Theory and Practice

With al-Assad's rule, the establishment of Syrian state-sponsored literary platforms, and the gradual shut-in of the book market, the Syrian literary system became a semi-autonomous entity within the greater Arab one. Aside from several major authors, this literary system occupied by default a peripheral position within the Arab world, since its products did not travel much outside Syria. Within this system, translated literature occupied a peripheral place. In the course of this chapter I will refer to the "Syrian translation movement" based on several critical essays that indicate its existence.[628] Whether the corpus of translated literature in Syria from, say, 1973 onwards may qualify as a movement lies in the eyes of the beholder. My overall impression is that the relative awakening in the field of translation in Syria – neatly dovetailing with the consecration of Syrian territorial identity – falls short of a movement, and never made it to the center of literary practice and innovation. As will be noted, the material and institutional framework in which translators conducted their work was far from adequate to support a major movement.

As a preliminary note, I want to foreground the following finding: translation in Syria happens as if through dense screens. The existence of these screens is attributable, on the macro scale, to the country's isolation from the international community, and, on the micro scale, to the individual translator's hazy state of mind owing to a complex set of cultural, political, economic and psychological variables. If translation offers a middle-ground between the processes of reading and writing, both of these practices are crucially determined by the overloaded concerns

[628] See for example ᶜAbduh ᶜAbbud, "Mushkilat Harakat al-Tarjama fi Surya [The Problems of Syria's Translation Movement]," in: *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 87 (July 1996), 23-34.

of the translating mind. The spaces between the translator's mind, the source text, and the translation produced in Syria are frayed and highly disruptive. Critical disruptions of general applicability in the field of poetry translation can be listed as follows: (1) lack of access to originals and translations from other Arab countries, insufficient command of the original's language, lack of material aides (reference works, dictionaries) and reliable and accessible knowledge about the particular cultures and traditions in which the source poem is embedded. (2) varying degrees of traditionalist standards for poetry that iron out the folds of fragmentary twentieth century poetic experiences. This culture exemplifies what Itamar Even-Zohar means when alluding to translation culture lagging behind the literary center and adhering to outdated norms that have already been rejected.[629] (3) A consuming concern with the fate of the Arab nation, and the collective and individual life of Arabs. This anxiety distorts forms of attentiveness to cultural others and reduces poems to political pamphlets that would "revolutionize" the state. Even the golden standard of translation, a literal rendition of the text's meanings and ideas, was severely encumbered in al-Assad's Syria for political, cultural and psychological factors.

And yet side-by-side with ideologically dogmatic translation culture framed as "creative," there quietly developed a style of unassuming prose translation from foreign poetries that decently kept its meanings straight. This helped partially satisfy the hunger for outside poetic voices among select poets who relied on translation as an Arabic original, a reliance meaning high potential for stylistic pollination. In the last part of this chapter, I try to reconstruct the mindset of Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn, a thirsty poet-reader situated in a parched translation landscape. Facing paucity of voice-otherness, al-Husayn tries to break through the clot of

[629] Even Zohar, "The Position of Translated Literature," in: *Polysystems Studies*, 48-49.

outmoded translation styles while enacting the reading process of doing so in metaphorical language. Though applied to this one particular poet, this conjecture may illustrate that engaged readers of all sorts were actively shaping the foreign literatures mediated to them at a basic, and at times inadequate level.

It is against this anomalous backdrop that a periphery-to-periphery – or second- to third-world – transmission of poetry takes shape in Syria. As in Masri's poem about Victor, it arises out of growing global awareness and a desire for the coveted contraband of otherness in a state of foreclosed political horizons. It is, however, still assisted by and mediated through knowledge accumulated in first-world book culture and its major languages, English and French.

The Institutional Platforms

The Syrian journal *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* [Foreign Literature Quarterly, 1974-2010] – on which much of the focus will lie – was solely devoted to translated literature and can be taken as a felicitous sign for the status of translations. In reality, however, the relative insularity of the journal's project in the larger literary landscape shaped it as a place where translations are cordoned off and kept away from the center. The Syrian Ministry of Culture operated a Directorate for Composition and Translation administered by Antun Maqdasi, a liberal-minded and approachable intellectual with a PhD in philosophy from the Sorbonne. Considering the low turnaround of the Ministry's publishing press, and the much lower number of translation titles within the sum of publications, the impact of foreign models of writing on local production would have been minimal. Privately owned publishing houses existed by the dozen, and some of them issued translations, but their market share was expectedly small. The translations that did exist lived an erratic shelf existence and often vanished as if disappearing from the face of the

earth. It is questionable whether some of them arrived at a shelf in the local booksellers in the first place. The quality, range and availability of foreign language acquisition in Syrian universities were limited, and only the lucky few could receive government grants to go abroad. Libraries were vastly understocked and it is attested that by the mid-1980s, newly published foreign books were simply impossible to come by except by privately carrying them into the country.[630]

These general circumstances determined the ways of reception of foreign poetry but did not prevent it. In the micro-world of *shafawiyya*, poets were eager to find foreign models of relation, were actively seeking them out, and worked with whatever was at their disposal. None of the *shafawi* poets turned a poet-translator, an interesting fact attributable to the obstacles faced for attaining proficiency in foreign languages and literatures.[631] Adequate exposure to the translations of the previous generation – i.e., *Shi*ᶜ*r* magazine – cannot be taken for granted.[632] Books, journals, and other print items were, according to oral accounts at least, wedded to the shifting sands of the Arab publishing world, where print runs are very limited and distribution unreliable. In this situation, it is possible even for a major journal to vanish. [633] In discussing the channels of Syrian transmission from world poetry, I choose to focus on products of literary

[630] These assertions are founded on consistent oral accounts and are intimated in ᶜAbbud's article. To corroborate them, there are two helpful sources about the difficulties of the book industry in the Arab world – one dealing with Egypt, the other with Lebanon: Abou-Zeid, "A Report from Lebanon on Publishing in the Arab World," in: *Publishing Research Quarterly* 30(1) 2014, 93-103) and Botros, "Problems of Book Development in the Arab World with Special Reference to Egypt," in *Library Trends* 26 (4), Spring 1978, 567-573. Though the piece about Egypt is outdated, the articles in conjunction show that some things – like bad book distribution – have not changed much. In general, the remarks sharpen the picture of how the institution of the book differs in the Arab world. Problems existing in Lebanon and Egypt are at times irrelevant to Syria, because publishers are mostly privately owned, but some problems seem to have been compounded in the Syrian context, like censorship and piracy.

[631] Departments of comparative literature have never existed in Syrian universities. On the website of the University of Damascus (http://www.damascusuniversity.edu.sy/) comparative literature is included as a sub-field within the different national literatures. With respect to departments of national literature, the representation has not been very diverse. Until recently there wasn't a department for German literature, which meant that academic study of foreign languages and literatures was confined to English, French and Russian. The University of Aleppo is not renowned for its Faculty of Letters and has even less offerings in this respect than Damascus.

[632] Barut writes that the new poets in Syria write from below as if they had never read the *Shi*ᶜ*r* poets and become aware of the bar set by poetic transcendence. See Barut, "al-Hassasiyyat al-Kubra fi Shiᶜr al-Sabᶜinat [The Major Sensibilities in the Poetry of the 1970s]," in: *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 138-139 (1982), 42. This seems overstated, but in the general disruption of book and magazine availability, it is likely that their familiarity with translated poetry from *Shi*ᶜ*r* was limited or mostly by hearsay.

[633] This does not exclude the possibility that poets had access here and there to translated poetry published in Cairo and Beirut or gained access to foreign poetries during trips abroad. Yet the lion's share of what was circulating seems to have been made in Syria.

translation made in Syria which were more likely to have reached the hands of the poets in question.

These translations are produced in a heavily state-sponsored institutional configuration. The important institutions for the cultural sphere are the Syrian Ministry of Culture and the Arab Writers Union.[634] Though organizationally different, the two institutions belong de facto to the same system of operation, since the union functions as an executive arm for the Ministry in the belletristic field. This is easily seen in the overlap between the names of contributors and makeup of editorial boards in their respective venues. Each owns a publisher. The Ministry press publishes the majority of books in Syria and claims to the status of a national curator.[635] Amounts of books per year are in the low hundreds.[636] Its books are sold mostly in the Ministry's cultural centers [*marākiz thaqāfiyya*] at a discounted price. Such centers administered by the state exist in every Syrian city and offer a public space for events: music concerts, art exhibits, literary readings. Small libraries and book-sale venues are accommodated as well.[637] Private bookstores are dominated by Lebanese and Egyptian publishers, principally because the marketable Syrian authors – Hanna Minah, Nizar Qabbani, Sadiq al-ᶜAzm, Saᶜdallah Wannus and Zakariya Tamir – preferred to take the majority of their book contracts outside Syria.[638] The Arab Writers Union Press was geared more towards original works of contemporary authors, principally union members. Membership required only that a Syrian author have two published

[634] Assad al-al-Saleh has written a helpful and concise study on the Ministry and its multi-sided role in Syrian cultural life. See Al-al-Salih, "The Ministry of Culture in Syria: History, Production and Restriction of Official Culture," in *Journal for Cultural Research* 20:2 (January 2016), 1-20.

[635] This status was cemented in 1984 with the inauguration of the al-Assad National Library, the largest public library in Syria, under the auspices of the Ministry. The nine-story building, designed by Polish architects in an imposing Brutalist architectural style, is situated in the Omayyad Square at the heart of Damascus. It houses the Damascus International Book Fair every August. See al-al-Saleh, 13-14.

[636] Ibid., 11-12. As of the establishment of the General Organization of the Book in 2006, the Ministry website has tried to make one free book from its stores available every day in downloadable PDF format, demonstrating its commitment to affordability and wide-access. It is stated that the goal of the organization was to reach production of 300 books instead of the current (2006) 200 or so.

[637] Ibid., 13.

[638] Ibid., 11. There are exceptions to this general truth: Hanna Minah's *al-Shams fi Yawm Ghaʾim* [Sun on a Cloudy Day, 1973] was first published with the Ministry's press, as were Zakariyya Tamir's *Limadha Sakata al-Nahr* [Why Was the River Silent?, 1973], Saᶜdallah Wannus's *al-Fil ya Malik al-Zaman* [Elephant, Lord of Time, 1971], *Manarat* [Lighthouses, 1976] by Saint-John Perse in Adonis' translation, and the widely acclaimed novel *al-Zayni Barakat* (1974) by Egyptian writer Jamal al-Ghitani.

books. Major Syrian authors who were critical of the regime, wanted no ties with its agendas, and could afford it in terms of reputation, rejected union affiliation. Qabbani and Sadiq al-ᶜAzm, for instance, never became members.

The history of the Ministry reflects the political history of Syria in miniature. Salah al-Din al-Bitar, co-founder of the Baath Party, was appointed minister by Nasser in 1958 and soon resigned in the turmoil surrounding unification. After the demise of the UAR in 1961, every change of power came with a change of minister. There were twelve such changes over a period of fifteen years.[639] In 1976, Hafiz al-Assad, once stabilized in office, appointed Najah al- ᶜAttar – an acclaimed translator with a PhD in Arabic literature from the University of Edinburgh – to serve as minister and promote "the emancipation of women."[640] Al-ᶜAttar was the highest-ranking woman in office in modern Arab history and ushered in what is widely considered as the golden age of the Ministry. She held the position until Hafiz al-Assad's death in 2000.[641] Before becoming minister, al-ᶜAttar ran the Ministry's Directorate of Composition and Translation. She was followed by Antun al-Maqdasi, a free-thinking intellectual and professor of Greek philosophy at the University of Damascus, who served as its presiding head for thirty-five years (1965-2000). Al-Maqdasi is single-handedly responsible for bringing into print many emerging voices of Syrian letters.[642] Any volume of translated literature that saw light with the Ministry most probably passed through his hands. A major area in which al-Maqdasi offered advice was whether manuscripts would pass the censorship inspection of the Ministry of Information, which

[639] Ibid., 2-4
[640] Ibid., 4. The appointment was meant not only to present a veneer of equity and cultural distinction. Najah belongs to the Damascene Sunni elite and is the sister of ᶜIsam al-ᶜAttar, leader of the Damascus faction of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood at this time was beginning to be pushed towards anti-regime militarization and established its Fighting Vanguard. Najah's appointment was thus a strategically co-optive move to appease the Sunni urban elite and distance their leaders from military activity. See Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 265.
[641] After six years away from government roles following the ascent of Bashar, she came back to serve as his Vice President in 2006, a higher position than Minister of Culture, and has kept holding this position through the uprising and ensuing civil war. Her loyalty to the regime runs parallel with that of Buthayna Shaᶜban, senior advisor and spokeswoman of the Syrian regime, who holds a PhD from Warwick University in English literature and frequently appears on English-speaking television to defend Syrian policies.
[642] See collection of articles and testimonials in remembrance of al-Maqdasi gathered by Faʾiz Sarah in *Antun al-Maqdisi: al-Hayah wa-al-Thaqafa wa-al-Muwatana* (Damascus, 2005).

required obtaining a *muwāfaqa* (permit) before releasing books to the press. In case of an expected breach, reviewing and editing suggestions would be offered. The clearest censorship taboos pertain to the regime and its policies, both domestic and foreign. Familiar literary strategies of expressing dissent by symbolic language and historical distancing were common among Syrian authors, most notably Zakariya Tamir and Ulfat Idlibi.[643] Translated literature, in that respect, is safely marked as distant and may have benefited from greater censorial leniency. Official culture was anyway never governed by fixed rules in terms of censorship. Decisions were made arbitrarily, and the system was set up to tolerate "responsible" or "selective" criticism so as to ensure its veneer of legitimacy through minimal spaces of freedom. Miriam Cooke has described these spaces of *tanaffus* (venting-out) in Syria and analyzed their precarious nature as "commissioned" opposition tailored to suit the regime's interests and entrench the status quo.[644]

The share of translated poetry in the Ministry's publication output is hard to ascertain. Its hands were extended into many branches of culture and knowledge. ᶜAbduh ᶜAbbud's data leads him to estimate that, until 1996, no more than an average of one hundred books of translation appeared yearly in Syria from overwhelmingly three languages: English, French and Russian.[645] The share of poetry in that lot must have been small: a rudimentary survey of book advertisements for Ministry publications in *al-Maᶜrifa* reveals that poetry had to compete with translated works in philosophy, political and economic thought, literary criticism and novels. The most ambitious enterprise the Ministry undertook in its first two decades was to produce the first full Arabic translation of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* in a solid academic edition. The three-volume

[643] See Mohja Kahf, "The Silence of Contemporary Syrian Literature," *World Literature Today* 75:2 (Spring 2001), 231-235.
[644] On direct and indirect censorship practices in Syria See al-al-Saleh, 8-10 and Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 72-77.
[645] ᶜAbbud, *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 87, 25.

edition of *Raʾs al-Mal* appeared in 1971, translated from the French by Antun al-Himsi.[646] Another gigantic translation project was Tolstoy's complete works in three volumes by the acclaimed Syrian translator from Russian Sami Droubi.

Getting published with the Ministry was desirable because it meant subsidized book prices and inclusion in the national archive, but not necessarily good distribution: Ministry books were often barred from being sold outside the designated "cultural centers."[647]Authors' complaints about missing manuscripts and the universally slow wheels of bureaucratic mechanisms allows us to guess that the pipelines of book publication were permanently congested. For whatever obscure reason, books were never reprinted by the Ministry even if there was demand.[648] A high rate of book "disappearance" must be taken into account in any attempt to trace publication numbers and assess availability. The library catalogue includes about 120 titles for the ten years between 1973-1982, far from a complete list and surely not including translations, but still an indication that turnaround speed was tortoise. We can infer as much from the frequency of repeated book ads in *al-Maʿrifa*.

For a complex set of reasons, Syrian authors and translators rarely turned to other Arab publishers unless their names in the Arab world were big enough. What allowed them to refrain from doing so was the existence of active state-sponsored literary periodicals providing small monetary compensations and enabling quicker channels for publication, with the obvious downside of greater ephemerality. The Ministry established its monthly periodical *Majallat al-Maʿrifa* (1962-2011) almost as soon as the union with Egypt collapsed. *Al-Maʿrifa* was conceived broad-mindedly as an inclusive cultural journal with a strong Socialist Pan-Arab

[646] The three volumes were accomplished by 1978. See Marx, Karl (tr. Antun Himsi). *Raʾs al-Mal: Naqd al-Iqtisad al-Siyasi*. Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa, 1971-1978. This full version has in the meantime been supplanted by the 2013 Dar al-Farabi edition, translated directly from the German.
[647] ʿAbbud, *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 87, 30.
[648] Ibid. This held true until it started uploading books on its website for free.

leaning. Its repertoire of items was varied and expanded over the years: philosophy, political science, economics and sociology, literature in its various branches and genres: poetry, short story, drama, Arab *turāth*, literary and cultural criticism, fine arts and cinema. The dominant in all branches of cultural production is political commentary and analysis. The magazine's priorities were transparently topical and were decided by current events. This gives some credence to President al-Quwwatli's humorous remark to Nasser upon the 1958 unification, namely, thanking Nasser for relieving him of being answerable to Syria's "five million inhabitants, all of whom consider themselves retired politicans."[649]

After Syria was forced into Assadism, the broad political concerns seem to have served as a displacement mechanism for the lack of actual say in Syrian politics. The ideological foundation of this magazine can be concisely summed up in the belief that the current hegemonic formation of Syrian identity can open itself up to, and accommodate, all forms of art, thought, and human organization. It is thus a magazine expressive of the universalizing aspiration of a territorial national identity par excellence. As such, it exemplifies the problem of top-down culture as a repressive vehicle of homogenization in place to preempt expression of difference and dissent.

Due to political emphasis, the share of literature in translation is small. In its early years (1962-1967), a regular column titled *fi al-maktaba al-ᶜālamiyya* [From the World's Library] was written by various authors in rotation reviewing recently published books abroad. In addition to this brief review column, there was occasional trickling of essays about individual foreign authors with sample translation or, rarely, stand-alone translations of poems and short stories.

[649] Quoted in Kahf, "The Silence of Contemporary Syrian Literature," 228 [translation slightly changed]. According to al-Quwatli's jesting statistics, half of all Syrians claim actual political leadership, one fourth claim prophecy, and at least ten percent claim divinity. Presumably, the category of prophets overlaps with the poets, and the one of gods with Islamists. Where the rest of the Syrian population falls is unclear.

The range was wide and did not confine itself to politically sanctioned affinities, but the volume was far short of anything aspiring to create a library of world literature. After the 1967 war, its editorial line was led by Adib al-Lujami, a staunch Baathist and loyal institutional persona. Before filling this role, he was a founding member of the Ministry of Culture in 1958 and served as director of the national broadcast agency; after filling it, he went on to become the Deputy Minister of Najah al-ᶜAttar. The mainstream establishment's focus fell on the Palestinian *qaḍiyya* and aggressively promoted the culture of *muqāwama* [resistance] and *niḍāl* [struggle]. This further ate away at the share of translated literature which could not be forced into that category. One of the first translated items after June 1967 is "Israel, fait colonial," an article written by the Jewish-French Marxist and anti-Zionist historian Maxime Rodinson for Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*.[650] This direction persisted with a series of translated articles taking an oppositional stance to Israel's "colonial aggression" from around the world.[651]It was in this post-1967 period that Saᶜdallah Wannus gave the magazine the first pieces of his vigorous and caustic Arab political theater.[652]When the editorial desk saw another reshuffle in 1972, the literary critic Muhyi al-Din Subhi took over and reoriented the magazine towards a more literary and pan-artistic approach. With yet a strong nationalist discourse, the magazine saw an increase in the number of translated pieces from world literature. This trend persisted even after the editor-in-chief changed in 1974 to Safwan al-Qudsi, a pale establishment figure who held the position until Zakariyya Tamir took over in 1978. From then on, and in response to the global vision of *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya*, the number of translated items further increased.

[650] Rodinson, "Israʾil Waqiᶜ Istiᶜmari," *al-Maᶜrifa* 67 (July 1967), 20-43.
[651] See *al-Maᶜrifa* 66, 182, where the series is declared.
[652] *Al-Fil ya Malik al-Zaman* first published in issue no. 86 (April 1969), 84-111; *Mughamarat Raʾs al-Mamluk Jabir* published in issue no. 105, (November 1970), 185-286.

In the meantime, there emerged some competition to *al-Maʿrifa*'s hegemony. The Arab Writers Union (est. 1970) instituted its own literary magazine – *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* – in 1971. This quarterly was primarily focused on new Syrian voices in poetry, short story and criticism, yet its exclusive literariness made more room for translation. Aside from the standard pick of critics from the Soviet Union, the journal printed in its first four years translations of plays by Bertolt Brecht and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and poetry by Federico Garcia Lorca and Vladimir Mayakovski. It also printed a segment of Hani al-Rahib's translation of the novel *Dust* by Israeli author Yael Dayan, future Labor politician and daughter of Moshe Dayan.[653]After *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* – its companion Union-sponsored magazine – was up and running, the share of translations significantly decreased. By the early 1980s, *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* published nothing but original works, overwhelmingly by Syrian authors.

Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya and Its Modes of Transmission

In 1974, the lack of proper outlets for translation was answered by the Arab Writer Union's second journal, *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* or the *Foreign Literature Quarterly*.[654] If you were a young poet in Syria looking for an international horizon, this journal would probably be your first taste of it. Its importance for directing the tastes of the generation of poets discussed in my chapters is thus hard to overestimate. The quarterly's stated purpose was "to reflect the movements in literature, esthetic and critical thought in the contemporary world."[655] The idea to start it was presented to the Union by its editor-in-chief Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad, who perceived the neglect of translation in the cultural sphere and derived the format from similar

[653] *Al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 4:1 (May 1974), 81-144. To my knowledge, this is the only piece of Israeli literature translated in Syria in this time period selected for its depiction of the decadence in Israel at the time of the Six Day War. The novel was originally published in English. See Yaël Dayan, *Dust* (Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1963).
[654] The English title is borrowed from Assad al-al-Saleh. The name would be literally translated as *Foreign Literatures*.
[655] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:1 (January 1975), 294.

journals in Eastern Bloc countries.[656] It ran translations of poetry, short stories, and drama; it ran literary criticism and literary theory by Arab critics and in translation. It tried to forge global horizons and strayed from canonical views of Euro-American literatures and authors with worldwide prestige.

Selections were eclectic and flung wide and thus blurred the translational profile of the magazine. This applies to languages, genre, and periods. Canonical figures from world literature – Goethe, Victor Hugo, T.S. Eliot – gave it a traditional literary profile. Contemporary American fiction – Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, John Steinbeck, Sherwood Anderson, Bernard Malamud and Eudora Welty – presented a hip contemporary profile. English- and French-language literatures were expectedly dominant but were so with some awareness of the Anglophone and Francophone worlds.[657] In the Soviet sphere, literatures from the smaller Central Asian nations were given room (Chukchi, Circassian, Azerbaijani, Kyrgyz, and Yakuti or Sakha). Modern Italian and Latin American literature are nicely represented, as is German literature in both East and West variants, and in both pre- and post-war periods. In general, selections of modern poetries and short stories introducing a nation's literature showed preference for Eastern Bloc countries: GDR, Poland, Czech Republic, the Former Yugoslavia, and Hungary. Bulgarian literature and literary criticism ran in high numbers. The solidarity with the periphery was also expressed in showing favor to women's literature and running a selection from contemporary Canadian women poets. A series on Greek and Roman mythologies began to appear early on, and there were occasional representatives of other world mythologies with oblique connections to the Islamic world: Adygean or Persian, for example. East Asian literatures were largely

[656] Ibid. The prototype must have been the Soviet journal *Internatsionalnaya Literatura* (1933-1943), but there were others like it across countries in the Soviet sphere of influence.
[657] This applies particularly to English for some reason. English language texts include the following countries: South Africa, Rhodesia, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In terms of American literature, an attempt was made to translate many women fiction writers and poets.

confined to Chinese and Japanese, and largely restricted to 20th century literature, but there were exceptions such as a substantive selection form Korean literature, and a sample from the Chinese Book of Songs. Literature from Southeast Asia is dominated by the reception of modern Vietnamese poetry in light of the Vietnam War. Short stories from Burma and Indonesia were also translated. Aside from the neighboring Hebrew, what is conspicuously absent from this library of translation is the languages of the Indian subcontinent. In my count, the magazine presented translated literatures from twenty-eight languages over the course of ten years. That most of the translations passed through a third language is obvious but also beside the point. The vision was an ambitiously global one, yet openly parochial: its fulfilment required, on the practical level, a considerable amount of instrumentalist tokenizing.

In addition to compiling a small library of world literature, the magazine fashions itself as an amateur lab for comparative literature in the absence of university departments in Syria practicing the discipline. Literary criticism and theory were mostly carried over from contemporary French and English critical discourses with the occasional Russian and Bulgarian contribution. Some of the familiar names featured are Gaston Bachelard on psychoanalysis, Phillipe Sollers representing the *Tel Quel* theoretical approach, Frank Kermode on novel and narrative, Michael Hamburger and Roman Jakobson on poetry, Péter Szondi on modern drama, Raymond Williams on the romantic artist, and Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), the first Bolshevik People's Commissar for Education, on socialist realism.

As for original comparative works across cultures, they more or less followed the protocols of text-based 'compare and contrast' dominated by a politicized discourse of culture and somewhat tainted with parochialism. A comparative piece would, for example, present a free-verse translation of a poem by Alphonse De Lamartine facing a translation of the same

poem in Khalilean meter with hardly any commentary apart from letting readers decide which one they like best. The free-verse version, prepared by Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad, is called "artistic prose" and meant to faithfully transmit the semantics of the poem as a prose translation, while Elias Naddur's domesticating translation in classical columns is implied to be the truly "poetic" one. The surface message of this exercise – appearing in the magazine's first issue – showcases cultural openness, displaying how accommodating the venue is to contemporary strands of Arab poetic styles. Its underlying belief, however, is that poetic authenticity still resides with traditional Arab meters.[658]

The most curious example for how comparative literature was conducted and conceptualized in this framework comes from a long entry by As^{c}ad ^{c}Ali entitled "Education of Six Hundred Million Wise Men: Poetry in China."[659] A multi-disciplinary professor of rhetoric, philosophy, law, and literature in the University of Damascus, ^{c}Ali is also the self-described founder and chairman of the World Union of Arab Writers.[660] His massive article is arranged in inscrutably multiple divisions and sub-divisions, spreads out over seventy pages in one issue and thirty more in the next and is featured as an opener, signaling its programmatic importance. It is an odd amalgamation of things: a close reading and retranslation of Mao Zedong's poems into Arabic supported by a theory of retranslation, a survey of China's place in classical Arabic poetry, a theological-political treatise on Maoist unity, a comparative polemical study of the figure of the rainbow as used in Mao's poem "Taboti" and in a qasida by the Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rumi (836-896), and finally, a practical application of Eliot's concept of the objective correlative to a poem by Mao to grasp "the essence" of Mao's spirit and revolutionary vision.

[658] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:1 (July 1974), 233-243.
[659] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 3:1 (January 1976), 3-72; *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 3:2 (April 1976), 62-90.
[660] For all I was able to research, this is an entirely bogus organization with no active members except for Ali himself.

The grounds for comparison are not cultural or literary but political and are explicated as the major impetus for writing the piece. As he was nursing the wounds of Arab disunity, ᶜAli lifted his eyes eastward to China and felt awed by the enormous accomplishment of Chairman Mao in unifying its diverse ethnic groups. By translating Mao's poetry and explicating its unifying power, ᶜAli hopes to render the political experience of transformative leadership commensurable with the Arab experience of discord, rupture and defeat. "I dedicate this study," he grandly announces, "to the sons of my nation, to its leaders, thinkers, and peoples. Perhaps one of them will be able someday to unite them, so that we can be one Arab nation spread across one Arab homeland."[661] If Mao could harmonize six hundred million people with cultural education, as ᶜAli seems to believe that he did, why can't the Arab world pull it together and unite its hundred and fifty million?[662] His translation is supposed to bring this reality closer. It expresses a repressed yearning for the near Syrian past of perpetual radical revolution prior to al-Assad's statist pragmatism.

ᶜAli's theory of retranslation is set in place to make up for the fact that he cannot read the poems in the original Chinese but is dissatisfied with the work of its Arab translator from French, who is apparently led by faulty ideological principles. The word *tajāwuz* – transcending – comes up often in ᶜAli's description of his modus operandi. It is borrowed from the *Shiᶜr* modernists whose poetry sought to transcend its historical condition but is used to entirely different ends. By "retranslating" a second-hand translation, ᶜAli transcends the translation's literality, redeems it from dry impartiality, and reinfuses it with its original and true Maoist spirit, as he understands it.[663] In practice, ᶜAli's *tarjamat al-tarjama* doesn't seem to change anything in the wording of

[661] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 3:1, 11.
[662] Figures of total population of the Arab world in 1976 are taken from the World Bank online database. https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SPPOPTOTLARB. Last visited March 26, 2019.
[663] "The study I hereby submit […] transcends the translational impartiality [*al-ḥiyād al-naqlī*] to arrive at a kind of comparison and argumentation [*taᶜlīl*] bringing us closer to the rhythm of modern life in China and the Arab *waṭan.*" Ibid., 5.

the Arabic version, which is cited with proper footnotes. It is a form of political exegesis in a doctrinal hermeneutic mode. The gist of it is formulated as a monotheistic-sounding article of faith in *saj*ᶜ, rhymed prose: *rūḥ al-shi*ᶜ*r al-māwī rūḥ wahīd, wa-waḥdatuhu tajdīd wa-tawḥīd*.[664] The poems are explicated in their "correct" intended meaning for their Arab audience and held up as a beacon of modernity in the Maoist fashion to be followed admiringly.

Tajāwuz is also performed on the discipline of comparative literature with its armchair formalism.[665] Making Mao's spirit politically explicable in Arabic moves beyond comparative literature into comparative "thinking," so claims ᶜAli,[666] and the act of thinking is loaded with all the Marxist revolutionary baggage of Lenin and the CPC. What all this has to do with rainbows and the Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rumi is not immediately apparent. This point is in fact a polemical one, argued in adversarial fashion to the Arab translator Mamduh al-Haqqi, who claims that there are unbridgeable gaps between Mao's poetic language and its Arabic counterpart, that the music of the Chinese line and the sound of Chinese place names are entirely foreign to the Arab ear, that references to historical events and figures and to the Chinese classics do not resonate at all with the Arab reader.[667] This commonsensical assertion of difference as a premise for translation is objected to by ᶜAli because it leads al-Haqqi to disparage Mao's imagery – and specifically the image of the rainbow in the poem "Taboti"[668] – when contrasted with the treatment of the same image in a *khamriyya* (wine song) by Ibn al-Rumi. In al-Haqqi's view, the colors in Ibn Rumi's

[664] "The spirit of Mao's poetry is one alone, and its oneness means renewal and unification." Ibid., 27.
[665] Ibid., 4-5.
[666] Ibid., 10.
[667] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 3:2, 62-63.
[668] In the original Chinese, the title is "Dabaidi," a town in Jiangxi province where an important battle led by Mao's general Zhu De took place during the Agrarian Revolutionary War in February 1929. The battle is considered a milestone victory for Mao's army. The poem's form is given as *pu-sa man*, a lyric form harking back to the Tang Royal Academy and made popular during the Song dynasty. The poem is still taught and memorized in elementary schools in China.

rainbow glow with gusto, prance and jostle in joy. Mao's rainbow is sagging and "materialistic," he says.[669] For ᶜAli, the subtext is that the political horizons represented by Mao are written off.

At any rate, the contested territory is about the ethics of translation and is therefore an interesting one. On the one hand, the actual translator articulating the problem of cultural difference as "untranslatable" and in the same breath chauvinistically claiming superiority of the host poetic language. On the other hand, the translation's interpreter, who is more than partial to Mao's political vision, putting faith in translatability through explication and putting the stakes of the Arab political future on the line. ᶜAli then proceeds to reinterpret the poem by his dogma of Maoist unity, availing himself of the term objective correlative to prove that Mao is both modernist and consummate unifier. In his comparative analysis, Ibn al-Rumi's poetic *niẓām* (organization) evinces degeneration and external "pasting-together."[670] The wine motif correlates with the general slumbering character and languidness of the Arab world, while Mao's poem is buzzing with energy and readiness to act: "Chairman Mao's energy unified a hundred peoples, while Ibn al-Rumi's energy was incapable of lifting up even himself."[671] The grounds for comparison, the language of critical analysis, and the theoretical and practical discussion of translation are all subordinated to tropes of politics and reflect a consuming anxiety with the political and cultural disintegration of the Arab world. Such are the politicized and parochializing conditions under which translation and comparative poetics in Syria take place.

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Care is needed in drawing distinctions between this journal's ideals and its actual capability to carry them out. When doing this, I refer to al-Ahmad's original conception of the

[669] Ibid., 64.
[670] Ibid., 76.
[671] Ibid., 79.

journal, which seems not to have changed much after his departure in 1977. On the level of ideals, it is self-evidently founded on an encompassing global vision and an ethos of cultural interaction between humans and arts that goes beyond political divides. This fact would not need underscoring, were it not for the apparent resistance the journal met with for allegedly betraying the political message of art by putting universal human values first.[672] To prove his political credentials, al-Ahmad later articulates the mission of translation as a national, Pan-Arab task of metaphorically "watering the native soil" so as to make it arable for the emergence of local literary crops.[673]To bolster this vision, al-Ahmad summarizes a speech he gave at an important Arab writers' conference in Morocco,[674] and more than once includes letters to the editor from across the Arab world expressing gratitude for the journal's contribution.[675] On the level of the professional identity of the translator, it is explicitly stated that the goal is to raise the rank of the translator from a second-rate writer to a *mubdiᶜ*, a creative author.[676]This direction is noticeable in ᶜAli's self-conception as a pioneer in the field of translation and retranslation. The idea is supported with the authority of thinkers from both sides of the cold-war divide, and, in a later editorial, with fitting quotations from the Abbasid poet Abu Tammam.[677] The self-respectability of translators and their profession leads the journal to adopt the principle of direct translation only, a challenging obstacle given the scope of languages and cultures to which it commits itself. Al-Ahmad is willing to allow translations of more minor literatures from French and English translations on the condition that they really are second-hand and not third-hand. He will not, however, tolerate second-hand translations of French- or English-language originals from a more

[672] The attacks are implied in al-Ahmad's defensive tone in one of the journal's editorials. See *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:3, 3-4.
[673] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:4 (October 1975), 3-4; see also al-Ahmad's essay "On Poetic Translation," *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:1, 217.
[674] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:1 (January 1975), 3-4.
[675] See for example: *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:1(January 1975), 297-302.
[676] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:1 (July 1974), 4.
[677] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:2 (October 1974), 3-4.

minor language, say Russian or Bulgarian. It is clear from the context in which this principle is stated that al-Ahmad actually received such manuscripts and had to reject them.[678]

The poet-translator ideal and an ethos of professional honesty, though not necessarily easy to reconcile, are the hallmarks of al-Ahmad's translational credo. Al-Ahmad illustrates how he thinks this credo should be put to practice in an essay – "On Poetic Translation" – for the journal's first issue.[679] Only a quarter of this essay is devoted to explication and three quarters to a self-provided model translation from a single poet, the Romanian national poet Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889). The choice and manner of the translation is more revealing about al-Ahmad's "poet-translator" concept than his explicit remarks. An extensive extract is provided from "Luceafarul" [Lucifer, or "Morning Star"], Eminescu's opus magnum. The passage exults in high sentiments of romantic nationalism and is couched in a pantheistic cosmology and the topoi of Romanian folktales. Under a guise of praise for the poem's universal beauty arrived at through the French edition, al-Ahmad's extract tacitly appropriates it to speak for Syrian social marginality made cosmic. Denarrativized, stripped of context and specificity, it intimates the rise of Lucifer's star from the Alawite province to national consciousness and capital dominance. This self-serving type of domestication, embedded in short prosodic lines and tropes of Arab folk storytelling, realizes al-Ahmad's ideal of "poetic justice" in translation.

Yet an independent claim is also made for the vitality of cultural interaction: "If we resort to deriving benefit from foreign literatures – and of them what possesses high objective and aesthetic merit – we do not forego the benefits of national literary authenticity. On the contrary: the interaction of authentic local culture with proper foreign culture is necessary for the former to embark on a path of development and progress in the same way that a man needs air and fields

[678] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:4 (October 1975), 4. The discussion of second-hand translation is to be found in this editorial.
[679] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:1 (April 1974), 216-232.

need water – as the saying attached to countryside roots goes. any culture that does not walk this path is doomed to freeze cold, the worst kind of death."[680] The language of this manifesto accurately reflects a socialist Pan Arab universe shifting between cultural authenticity, countryside roots and Soviet literary ideologies of correct progressive literature. There is more than a hint of apology in this both-and approach and the rhetoric of necessity lodged in the verb *lajaʾa ilā* [resort to] and the hyperboles of extinction.

When al-Ahmad uses the word *shāʿir* (poet) what he has in mind is the classic Arab bard, or a modern iteration thereof. Importantly, Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad is the brother of Muhammad Sulayman al-Ahmad, also known as Badawi al-Jabal, who, alongside the Iraqi Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, embodied the highest example of modern neo-classical bardom in the Arab 20th century. The siblings are heirs to a family of Alawite religious elite and their father served as the head Alawite Imam of the Latakiyan district. Badawi al-Jabal had served in multiple ministerial positions prior to 1958 and had a long history of turbulent encounters with political authority forcing him into self-imposed exile. He returned to Syria after the dissolution of the union with Egypt, to which he fiercely opposed. With the rise to power of the radical Baath in the mid-1960s, Badawi al-Jabal was subjected to civil boycott for not publicly conforming to the party line. The situation was aggravated after he wrote a lacerating qasida about the 1967 war entitled "Min Wahyi al-Hazima [From the Revelations of Defeat]." The qasida virtually names Hafiz al-Assad – referring to him as *al-mushīr* – as responsible for Syrian humiliation. In 1968, the regime – and specifically Hafiz al-Assad, who was then Minister of Defense – hired proxy agents to rough up al-Ahmad while avoiding direct responsibility. While out on his morning run, he was taken into custody, brutally beaten, and left by the side of the

[680] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:1, 217.

road. The skull injuries he suffered are said to have led to his premature death in 1981.[681]His son Adnan died suspiciously in Beirut in 1968; His second son Munir died under torture in confinement in 1992. Sometime in the late 1970s, Muhammad's brother Ahmad fell out of favor with the authorities, and his prolific writing for *al-Maᶜrifa* and *al-Adab al-Ajanbiyya* came to a sudden halt. What followed remains unknown, yet al-Ahmad was driven out of Syria and relocated to Bulgaria. In 1993, he had also died under mysterious circumstances in his apartment in Sofia.

The two brothers exemplify a particular Syrian amalgam of old-fashioned literary tastes with immense reverence for *turāth* [cultural patrimony] and a grassroots progressive mission of edification with which the journal of foreign literatures is infused. The choice of a Romanian national poet from an era when liberationist nationalism provided the revolutionary spur for the smaller European nations is not coincidental. Nor is the fact that these poems often strike romantic notes, are filled with folkloristic material, and show solidarity with the underclasses. Predictably, the translation sets the Romanian poems in almost perfect Khalilean meters with modern line-breaks, which effectively means that they are rewritten in the *tafᶜīla* form. One does not simply shake off a literary education thoroughly steeped in Arabic classics as was al-Ahmad's.

To see how widespread the political concerns are, we may examine an ostensibly non-political translation. One of the senior contributors of *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya*, Khaldun al-Shamᶜa, is a prolific literary critic who got his PhD at the University of Cambridge in the 1960s, where he picked up a wide range of approaches to literature. In the Syrian constellation, one can hardly find a more formalistic literary critic than al-Shamᶜa, who also dabbles in translation of

[681] See the recently aired documentary reportage on this incident from Orient News as part of their series of TV reports entitled "The Syrian Encyclopedia of Politics." http://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/140075/0/. First aired August 27, 2017. Last visited July 4, 2018.

contemporary American and British poetry. As literary foreign correspondent in the UK for *al-Maᶜrifa*, he introduced the Beatniks to Syrian readership with both translated poems and a transcribed interview with Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whom al-Shamᶜa met in person in a London poetry reading.[682] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* includes a complementary dossier on Ferlinghetti with a short foreword on the Beat Generation.[683] The quality most praised in Ferlinghetti's poetry is the unique combination of *mushāfaha* and *muᶜāṣara*, orality and contemporaneity.[684] Ferlinghetti is interpreted in terms akin to al-Maghut and characterized by his *ṣaᶜlaka* (vagabond nomad type in pre-Islamic poetry)*, fawḍawiyya* (anarchism) and *sukhriyya* (satiric, cynical, ironic). The major piece in the selection is a selection of cantos from *Coney Island of the Mind* (1958). The translation provided is neither in the so-called oral and contemporary spirit of Ferlinghetti nor in the spirit of al-Maghut. It is an artless prose translation in a brushed-up, stolid mold of Arabic prose.[685] The first striking feature of this translation is that the tightness of the bi-column magazine format presses al-Shamᶜa to narrow down Ferlinghetti linear experimentation with "open field" and asymmetric page typography. Ferlinghetti's poem opens thus:

> In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see
> the people of the world
> exactly at the moment when
> they first attained the title of
> 'suffering humanity'
> They writhe upon the page
> in a veritable rage
> of adversity

Due to the journal's space constraints, the poem's appearance is immediately standardized. Since Ferlinghetti is treated as a major American poet, some accommodation to

[682] *Al-Maᶜrifa* 59 (November 1966), 158-171.
[683] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:3 (July 1975), 68-87. For the translation of the cantos from *Coney Island...* see pages 70-75.
[684] some of the translated poems are taken from a section in Ferlinghetti's collection titled "Oral Messages" whose poems "were conceived specifically for jazz accompaniment." *Coney Island of the Mind* (2008), 48.
[685] By brushed-up I mean both polished and bowdlerized. In canto 22 of *Coney Island*, al-Shamᶜa translates the opening line "Johnny Nolan has a patch on his ass" as "Johnny Nolan has a patch on his trousers' behind." *Coney Island of the Mind* (2008), 37; *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:3 (July 1975), 75.

what major status means in Arabic must be observed. Even with rhyme and meter gone, the lexicon and grammar are stately.[686] In general, the translation is not primarily concerned with finding sonic or tonal equivalences to the alliterative games, leaps of register, and American colloquialisms abounding in Ferlinghetti's poetry. The Arabic thus takes away some of the fun in *Coney Island*'s line carousels and register pendulums. Yet the attempt is decent in trying to confer upon him a dignified appearance which would make him palatable to Syrian readers with more traditional tastes.

In this opening, five relatively conversational lines are followed by three where something more richly poetic is going on: the rhyme between "page" and "rage," the cross-artistic reference formed through the word "page," and the alliteration in the Latinate words *ve*ritable and ad*ve*rsity. What unites the two registers, if we may call them that, is the dynamic indentation of the line opening a wide field of speech that may stray anywhere on the page, and thus bridges the two with a continuous tone. Al-Shamᶜa's version blurs this dynamism, and in general, is led by a principle of semantic equivalence alone. There is no hint of taking liberties of poetic creativity: "people of the world" is rendered with the odd literalism *bashar al-ᶜālam*, and "veritable rage of adversity" is diluted to its semantic meaning of *ghaḍaban ḥaqīqiyyan* [true anger].[687]

Al-Shamᶜa's most interesting choices of translation come up in rendering the next lines beginning with the participle "heaped up" and enumerating the horrors depicted by Goya:

> […] slippery gibbets
> cadavers and carnivorous cocks

[686] "Let's Go" – Ferlinghetti's opening line to "Junkman's Obbligato" – is rendered by al-Shamᶜa *fal-nadhhabanna* in a textbook grammatical structure of classical Quranic Arabic. Ibid., 76.

[687] Al-Shamᶜa renders "veritable" as a synonym of "true," whereas to me it seems to be part of the "oral" effect of the poem, serving as a redundant intensifier that adds little meaning except for that contained in the acoustic impact. Another example for the pitfalls of literalizing semantics turn up in canto 14 where al-Shamᶜa is misled by Ferlinghetti's allusion to Chagall's violin and interprets the double-entendre "and there were no strings attached" as applying solely to the instrument rather than the nude: "and there were no taut strings to the violin" in Arabic. I suspect that the whole notion embedded in the phrase "no strings attached" is alien to al-Shamᶜa. *Coney Island of the Mind* (2008), 29; *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:3 (July 1975), 75.

and all the final hollering monsters
of the
'imagination of disaster'
they are so bloody real
it is as if they really still existed

And they do

Here too al-Shamᶜa chooses to ignore Ferlinghetti's habit of register leaps from line to line. The line "cadavers and carnivorous cocks" screams out for some form of creative equivalence but this call remains unanswered. Nor does the translation offer equivalences for the juicy colloquial parts such as "they are so bloody real / as if they really still existed." An equivalence to spoken register is attempted by changing conventional word order: "*ḥaqīqatun hiya / kaʾannahā mawjūdatun lā tazāl* [real *they are* / as if they existed *still*]."

The Arabization of the phrase "imagination of disaster" provides the most instructive instance of Syrian translation strategies. This phrase, originally conceived as an allusion to Goya's famous etching inscription, is "transculturated"[688] by al-Shamᶜa and turned into *khayāl al-nakba*, *nakba* being an obvious signifier for the Palestinian Nakba, the tragedy of defeat to the Zionists in 1948. To make Ferlinghetti speak Arabic and Goya speak to Arab concern, Arab disaster is superimposed on the superimposition of Goya's human terrors onto America of the 1950s. The conventions of serious poetry in Syria demand that a poet speak as political prophet; Ferlinghetti, on whom prophecy in an American idiom is not altogether lost, is made to speak Arab prophecy. Even at its most unengaged politically, Syrian translation is thus susceptible to culturo-political determinants. Is this a gesture towards Syrian official culture? A blatant Arabizing assimilation of Ferlinghetti's poem? Is it a nod to the prevailing dogmas which allows the translation to pass the formal checkpoints in order to express unformal feelings and thoughts?

[688] On *transculturación* see the original coining of the term in Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 97-103.

Is it nothing but a slip of the pen? Whatever stands behind this choice, it indicates the kind of mindset in which translation in Syria takes place.

These frames of mind impose a mold of rudimentary or surface-level translation, in the most neutral sense of the term. And yet it is hard to speak of a uniform culture of translation – a policy, behavior, a set of norms. We can first define it by what it is not: it is not in the vein of modernist experiment, and it does not, despite the lofty ideal, render the translator visible as equal to an author. The translator's presence is mostly felt in the paratext needed to introduce and explicate many of the peripheral poets and literatures included. If a translation passes through a third language, traces of this mediation are eliminated. Otherwise, the functional fiction of the Arabic version as the original poem governs these translations and so does the illusion of the foreign poet as sole author.

Yet the situation into which the translation is introduced opens the possibility that even minimal fidelity to literal meanings will communicate "difference" as a good translation should, for it is able to express what original works often cannot. This line of argument runs parallel to what was claimed with respect to Baydun's critique of ʿAbd al-Hamid's so-called platitudinous poem: the honest plainness makes a difference in a discursive universe saturated with hollow symbols and official lies. Assuming that a majority of Syrian readers lack access to originals, it is in fact a source of strength for these poetry translations that they pass as originals with no parallel text and with the presence of mediation reduced to a minimum. Even when the conservative factor is dominant, there are additional incalculable factors – such as the thirst of young poets for translated literature – that lead to meaningful reception of what would otherwise be substandard, reactionary translation works. I will soon have more to say about this matter of rudimentary translation in analogy with GDR translation culture as presented by Ruth Owen.

Briefly, she writes that "the sudden difference" of translated poetry in the GDR "stemmed from a text inevitably being read against the background noise of the overfamiliar official discourse."[689]The Chinese poet Bei Dao has demarcated a literary "translation style" that exists as a marginal form of dissent from official discourse and allows the continual transformation of literary styles.[690] That Syrian translation behavior was peripheral, obfuscated by self-concern, and, to varying degrees, abandoned to caprice, there is no doubt; but its existence on the outermost periphery potentially harbored enormous impact for a small number of voracious readers who had no alternative access to world poetry.

The Syrian Translator's Labor

If this culture falls far short in practice from its articulated ideals, it is to be ascribed not only to ideological superstructures or collective psychology but to the poor infrastructural setting in which Syrian translation exists. What it meant to be a translator in Syria we may glean from two sources: (1) an article by Salih Diab featured in *al-Nahar*'s literary supplement (December 28, 1998) and titled "Translation in Syria: Absence of Criteria and Cultural Fragility" and (2) ᶜAbduh ᶜAbbud's thorough academic work on the sociology of translation in Syria. Diab is a poet, translator, anthologist and scholar of modern Arabic poetry, who lives in Paris. ᶜAbbud is a professor of comparative literature who specializes in translations from German and translation studies in general. In his studies on the Syrian translation movement and the literary relationships between Arabic and German, ᶜAbbud occasionally includes eye-opening remarks about translators' hardships in Syria.[691] In an essay for *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* in 1996,[692] he maps out

[689] Ruth Owen, "Freedoms of Expression," 144.
[690] Bei Dao, "Translation Style: A Quiet Revolution," in: *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture*, 60.
[691] ᶜAbduh ᶜAbbud, "al-ᶜAlaqat al-Adabiyya al-Suriyya al-Almaniyya al-Muᶜasira Waqiᶜuha wa-Afaquha [Contemporary German-Syrian Literary Relationships: Its, Present and Future Horizons]," in: *Majallat Jamiᶜat Dimashq* 18:1 (2002), 15-35.
[692] ᶜAbbud, "Mushkilat Harakat al-Tarjama Fi Surya." See n. 628.

the difficulties faced by the so-called Syrian translation movement. ᶜAbbud considers *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya*– due to its scope and breadth of translation vision –a one-off phenomenon in the Arab world. He also calls attention to two smaller publishing houses that set a relatively high professional standard for translation. And yet his bottom line is that the negative aspects of Syrian translation culture outweigh the positive.

He first highlights the meagre pay received in Syria for literary translation. Pay was by-the-word and at a fixed low rate, and the Ministry of Culture had some ingenious methods of word-count that worked to their advantage.[693] This is one of the main reasons why the translation movement, however sluggish, came to an almost complete halt by the mid-1980s. Badly paid, exploited translators simply gave up on the profession and switched to more profitable business such as foreign language teaching or tourist guidance.[694]Though some translators belong to the Arab Writers Union, there did not exist a professional syndicate for translators until 1986. The exploitative treatment from publishers – which ᶜAbbud compares to petty merchants in an oriental bazaar[695] – is reflected in several seedy practices. To save money, publishers often choose to employ the cheapest translator rather than the most qualified one.[696] Since Syria had not signed on the Berne Convention treaty of copyright protection law, both state-owned and private publishers often acted lawlessly, pirated translations, and were not held to any basic standard of decency vis-à-vis translators and makers of the original. The original title of a translated book, its publisher, date and place of publication, are often omitted from the title page. There was a frequent demand from translators to sign draconian contracts foregoing all copyrights for the work, thus denying them of all the boons of authorship, including book-sale

[693] ᶜAbbud, "Mushkilat Harakat al-Tarjama," 30.
[694] ᶜAbbud, "al-ᶜAlaqat al-Adabiyya," 20.
[695] ᶜAbbud, "Mushkilat Harakat al-Tarjama," 29.
[696] Ibid., 30.

royalties.[697] Diab notes that the Ministry often manipulated the common fear of censorship to bend translators to agree to demeaning terms of labor. In Diab's report, several cases are recorded of publishers holding manuscripts hostage and extorting translators.[698] When a work is finally printed, translators often find that their name mysteriously decreases in font-size by comparison with the publisher's name or the names of "artistic supervisors," a euphemism enabling the directors of the publishing house to include their personal names.[699]

Second, there is the issue of language proficiency and material aides. Abboud ascribes the scarcity of interest in German literature to the lack of proper departments for German studies anywhere in Syria. Nor are there sufficient German language courses, since universities confine foreign language study to English and French.[700] A fleet of translators from the languages of the world was thus a distant dream, though the range did expand over time to Russian, German, Spanish, Turkish, Greek, and Bulgarian. Diab names the 1960s and 1970s the "golden age" in terms of availability of foreign books in Syria. Yet even then, foreign books were hard to come by. By the 1990s Syria's book market was entirely shut-in. Translators had to form personal contacts abroad and have books – which they heard about by reading the random magazine – sent to them by mail. Alternatively, some returned from Beirut or from overseas with suitcases full of books to last a long while. Others simply settled for what publishers told them to translate. There were shortages of updated dictionaries, encyclopedias and reference books to assist translators in looking up unknown words and concepts.[701]

Third, there is a severe lack of coordination between Arab translators and publishers and there exists no equivalent to an Arab "translation institute" regulating literary translation,

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[697c] Abbud, "al-ᶜAlaqat al-Adabiyya," 20.
[698] Diab, "al-Tarjama fi Surya," in the cultural page of *al-Nahar*, December 28, 1998, 6-7.
[699] Ibid., 6.
[700c] Abbud, "al-ᶜAlaqat al-Adabiyya," 20.
[701] Diab, "al-Tarjama fi Surya," 7.

consolidating achievements and locating needs. What seems like a diverse and varied endeavor by multiple agents in different places, perpetuates in actuality a wasteful expenditure of effort due to dispersion, individual obscurantism, and lack of a structured plan. Part of this is due to acute problems of book distribution among the Arab countries. But, according to Diab, even on the level of the nation-state, Aleppo doesn't know what Damascus is translating, and Homs is ignorant of Tartus.[702] This is related to both copyright infringement and the infamous rivalry between Syrian locales. It causes much grievance to translators who suddenly discover that their effort is in vain because a fellow translator in another place is translating the same work. ᶜAbbud cites a case in which Günter Grass's *Tin Drum* came out in two different Arabic editions at almost the same time.[703] A lagging book culture for which every translated book is doubly valuable cannot afford such wastefulness. For ᶜAbbud, these disruptions reflect the major problem of the Syrian translation movement: a lack of design and planned strategy, no effective knowledge sharing with respect to translation, individual agents operating quixotically by their own isolated strengths and arbitrary tastes. *Al-Adab al-Ajnabbiya* tries to close gaps in this respect but seems in the end to be governed by the randomness, impoverishment and wastefulness of the translation culture around it.

Al-Shamᶜa's translation, in itself fairly proficient, faithfully represents plan and pattern disruption. Namely, he does not acknowledge, or is unfamiliar with, previous and more well-informed transmissions of Beat culture into Arabic on which he could build.[704]It is as if behind him stood no history of translation of American poetry into Arabic. This isolated frame of mind is endemic to the translator's work environment. In a broader view, it causes confusion and

[702] Ibid., 6.
[703] ᶜAbbud, "al-ᶜAlaqat al-Adabiyya," 20-21.
[704] The Iraqi poet-translator Sargon Boulus had formerly published in *Shiᶜr* magazine a mini-anthology of Beat poetry which included poems by Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure. It was accompanied by a vividly descriptive essay about Beat culture and lifestyle on North Beach. See *Shiᶜr* 40 (October 1968), 61-96.

diffusiveness. A negative plurality of drifting author fragments in translation circulate like disconnected atoms. A single author's impact becomes dissipated through his/her partial mutations that are rarely brought together. ᶜAbbud surveys several examples from German authors and especially highlights the negative plurality of Brecht's Arabic versions.

Translation and *Shafawiyya*: Adaptations and Generative Plagiarisms

To return to *shafawiyya*, Barut names Jacques Prévert's lyricism with its atmosphere of simple speech as a major conduit for the new sensibility. But which of Prévert's Arabic versions is left unspecified. In *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* alone there are three transmitted version by three different Syrian translators: one apropos his death in 1977, and two other versions two years apart which seem to know nothing of each other or of previously transmitted versions.[705] Each one introduces Prévert as if for the first time. The full translation of Prévert's *Paroles* was prepared by yet a fourth Syrian translator – Siyah al-Jahim – who seems oblivious to the others or uninterested in their work.[706] Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn's Iraqi friend ᶜAbd al-Karim Kasid had his own selection from *Paroles* printed in Beirut in 1981.[707] The first magazine version I was able to trace appears in *Shiᶜr* issue of January 1959 with a selection by translator Fawwaz Tarablusi.[708] In 1961, Prévert receives a bilingual Arabic-French facing page translation. The translator is unnamed; by inference from the sequence, he appears to have been the poet and senior editorial member Unsi al-Hajj.[709] In 1967, al-Hajj has another translation included. It is seductively titled "In Jacques Prévert's Room (New Poems)" and includes an interview with

[705] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1-3 (August 1977), 61-72 (trans. Ziyad al-ᶜAwda); *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 37 (October 1983), 183-190 (trans. Muhammad al-Arnaʾut); *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 45 (October 1985), 91-98 (trans. Mahmud al-Mawᶜid).
[706] Brifir, Jak [Prévert, Jacques]. *Kalimat*. Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa, 1995.
[707] Brifir, Jak [Prévert, Jacques]. *Kalimat*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Rushd, 1981.
[708] "Mukhtarat Shiᶜriyya [Poetry Selections]," *Shiᶜr* 9 (January 1959), 26-55.
[709] "Ashjar [Trees]," *Shiᶜr* 18 (April 1961), 28-35; "Ashjar II [Trees II]," *Shiᶜr* 19 (July 1961), 26-25. In the second entry, al-Hajj's poems immediately precede the translation.

Prévert conducted by al-Hajj, who met the French poet in person and has photos of autograph manuscripts to show for it.[710] Al-Hajj's transmission is probably the one al-Maghut associates with *Shi*^{c}*r*'s westernized elitism.

Prévert's popularity soared among translators from 1967 onwards. All in all, from 1964 to 1995, Prévert had twelve separate appearances in Arab literary journals by twelve different translators, none of which I can find acknowledging their fellow translators' work. In addition, there are four book titles of Prévert's poetry in Arabic, one made in Iraq (by Sami Mahdi), one made by an Iraqi in Lebanon (Kasid), another one in Lebanon (by ^{c}Abduh Wazin) and the previously mentioned *Kalimat* (*Paroles*) of Syrian make by al-Jahim. Translations in daily newspapers and translation anthologies are left out of this count.

Though individual dispositions towards world poetry differed among the *shafawi* poets, their corpus of poems bears out the claim that Prévert is among their tutelary spirits. Three features of Prévert's style can be listed as important for *shafawiyya*: the juggling between sentiment and sentimentality, the denunciation of official culture as conspiring against common joys, and the cinematic eye fond of exact detail.[711] For post-*Shi*^{c}*r* idioms of modern poetry in general, Prévert's rehabilitation of the banal was received as winsome in its ability to humanize modern city life.[712] ^{c}Abd al-Hamid's poems are particularly suffused with a Prévert-inspired atmosphere of disdain for fussy formalism and respect for the surface of the simple word as a "password." Al-Husayn too was a professed admirer, as suggested by his poem "Smoke" with its cigarette conceit and Prévert-like impertinence. His collections are adorned with more than one epigraph from Prévert. The version cited by him, and which perhaps gives us a clue as to the

[710] "Fi Ghurfat Jak Brifir [In Jacques Prévert's Room]," *Shi*^{c}*r* 35 (June 1967), 57-68.
[711] These features are based on Ferlinghetti's succinct introduction to his selected translations from *Paroles* in the Penguin series of modern European poets. See Prévert, *Selections*, 9-12
[712] Like William Carlos Williams and Brecht, Prévert seems to have been an establishing figure of anti-poetry across cultures. He was also an influential example for Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Miroslav Holub. See Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 123.

version circulating among other group members, is that of the Lebanese poet-translator and critic Paul Chaoul: *lastu anā man yughannī / bal al-azhāru llatī raʾaytuhā / lastu anā man yabkī / innahu ḥubbī al-ḍāʾiᶜ*.[713] The translation from which these lines are excerpted appeared not in a journal but in an elegant and meticulously prepared anthology of modern French poetry edited by Chaoul and entitled *Kitab al-Shiᶜr al-Faransi al-Hadith: 1900-1980* [The Book of Modern French Poetry 1900-1980] (Beirut: Dar al-Taliᶜa, 1980).[714]

The quote opens the last cycle in the posthumous collection in which are included several key poems in al-Husayn's oeuvre.[715] For this last volume, al-Husayn draws handsomely on Chaoul's anthology for cycle mottos, choosing to highlight not the amply represented abstract language-poets – most prominently Yves Bonnefoy (whose complete works were translated to Arabic by Adonis) – but those whose austere idioms are more akin to his own: Phillipe Jaccottet, Guillevic, and Paul Vincensini.[716] I previously brought up the work of Henri Meschonnic as a major theoretical conduit for *shafawiyya*, specifically by its proposal that poetic subjectivity be indexed to oral accentuation. Meschonnic is represented with a single poem in Chaoul's volume and shares a marked affinity with these French poets of austerity, whose painstaking bareness strives for what Barthes calls zero-degree writing.[717] Al-Husayn's extreme personability as a poet has little to do with such zero-degree bareness, but his later poetry posits it as an ideal. He

[713] Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal*, 243. "It is not I who sings / but the flowers I saw / it is not I who cries / but my lost love." See Chaoul, *Kitab al-Shiᶜr al-Faransi*, 104. The lines are taken from an untitled poem ("ces n'est pas moi qui chante") which was made into a chanson sung by Serge Reggiani.
[714]Chaoul is in general a very deft translator from French and gives Prévert his due by not constraining him in strict Arab verse. His purported plainness notwithstanding, Prévert can be a bedeviling poet to translate, since so many of his references are firmly anchored in a French environment.
[715] Some of them I included in translation in the previous chapter.
[716]Ibid., 162, 268, 284 respectively. Al-Husayn's choice of lines from Vincensini, a virtually obscure French poet, gave him a not insignificant afterlife in Arabic, to judge by the frequency with which they are posted and tweeted on social media. They read thus (trans. from Arabic): "I count the days on my fingers / with which I also count / my friends and acquaintances / and some day / I will count on my fingers / nothing but my fingers." Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal*, 211.
[717] Chaoul, *Kitab al-Shiᶜr al-Faransi*, 329-330. On the difference of the French modes of austerity from other European poetic cultures see Hamburger, *Truth of Poetry* 241-247. The upshot is that, French poets, even after the war, were still wedded to the abstract and averse to "naming" and thus "had little use for their empirical and social selves." Jaccottet is singled out for his "far more radical" poetic phenomenalism that strives towards zero imagery (246).

attempts to raise his profile as a poet from a confessional poet of "pure heart" to a poet-reader with examples of literary distinction.

A telling instance of the Syrian reception of Prévert is a borderline case of literary theft, where local and foreign transmissions converge and the lines between translation, adaptation, and original composition are blurred. In Barut's original conception of the term, *shafawiyya* was attributed not only to the Maghutian impact but also to "the space of meaning" adumbrated in Prévert's early collections – *Paroles* (1946), *Histoires* (1946), and *Spectacle* (1951).[718] But the formation of this space was indebted in no lesser degree to Nizar Qabbani, the most Arab of Syrian poets. Qabbani is a less conspicuous antecedent to the group, but an important one. Like al-Maghut, his poetics is appropriated and reshaped by *shafawiyya*: his fondness for the quotidian is stripped entirely of its bardic Arab sound. It was not only the extreme westernizers, as al-Maghut claims, that were susceptible to Prévert's influence, but also al-Maghut himself, and Qabbani as well. This is borne out in Qabbani's Arabization of Prévert's "Déjeuner du Matin," an adaptive poem that nowhere acknowledges its source of inspiration. Titled "Maᶜa Jarida [With a Newspaper]", this poem is dated to 1956 and thus precedes the earliest magazine version:

> He took the newspaper out from his coat,
> and a box of matches.
> Without noticing my confusion,
> with no concern for me,
> took the sugar from in front of me
> and melted two cubes in a cup…
> melted me … melted two cubes.
> Two minutes later,
> without seeing me
> without sensing my longing for him,
> he took the coat from in front of me
> and disappeared into the crowd,
> leaving behind… the newspaper
> alone…

[718] Barut, *al-Shiᶜr Yaktubu Ismah*, 92.

like me… alone.[719]

To skirt the question of whether this actually qualifies as literary theft, I prefer to examine it under the rubric of "imitation"[720] or what Lawrence Venuti calls a "poet's version," namely, a free translation relieved of the burden of academic accuracy for the sake of being raised to a different standard of generative artistic creativity in the receiving culture.[721] The scene sketched here is clearly the same as the one in Prévert's poem: a woman closely observing the mundane gestures of the aloof café man whom she fancies, as he disregards her. Yet the feel is altogether different. The French woman in Prévert's poem is deceptively detached as she reports on the man's actions: *il a mis le café / dans la tasse / il a mis la lait / dans la tasse de café / il a mis le sucre / dans le café au lait / avec le petite cuiller / il a tourné / il a bu le café au lait / et il a reposé la tasse / sans me parler […]*. It is not until the last line cited here that we realize that this is an emotionally charged report, yet the perceived matter-of-factness that precedes the interjection of the speaker allows for the ritualistic aspect of the coffee-drinking – building up from line to line in precise, pithy language – to appear both neutral, as if from a camera lens, and mysterious. In fact, the pointedness of Prévert's poem rests on the tense incongruity between the extremely realistic wryness of the report and the sentimental content that gushes out in the last line: *et il est parti / sous la pluie / sans un parole / sans me regarder / et moi j'ai pris / ma tête*

[719] Qabbani, *Qasaʾid* (1967), 17-18. This is a 1967 reprint of the 1956 original. The French original is a widely popular poem. According to one source, "generations of French schoolchildren have grown up learning poems like [it] by heart." (http://www1.rfi.fr/actuen/articles/107/article_2092.asp last visited March 26, 2019). For its accessibility and charm, it is also a favorite among instructors of French to teach the *passé composé*.

[720] John Dryden's label for translations which, in David Damrosch's phrasing, "use the original work as a starting point for a fresh creation in the new language." Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (2nd edition), 85.

[721] See Venuti, "The Poet's Version; or, an Ethics of Translation," *Translation Studies*, 4:2, 230-247. For the upshot of the article turn to pages 245-246, where Venuti describes what constitutes an "event" in poetic adaptations. On the question of Qabbani's supposed plagiarism see Magda Ibrahim's *Nizar Kabbani a-t-il plagié Jacques Prévert?* (Paris: Harmattan, 2010) and the oblique reference in Muhammad Ghunaymi al-Hilal's *Dirasat wa-Namadhij* (1974), 131-132. Al-Hilal gives a literal translation of Prévert's poem and says that a certain poet "of our own […] re-composed it as Arabic poetry and falsely laid claim to it [*naẓammahā shiʿran ʿarabiyyan wa-ddaʿāhā*]." Ibid., 132.

dans ma main / e j'ai pleuré.[722] Though the onlooker is no doubt the woman, the perspectives – feminine-masculine, emotional-neutral, subjective-objective – are fused.

This kind of French wry sentimentality is certainly not a trait of Qabbani's poem whose sensibility recasts the scene in an Arab mold. His version is in strong prosodic cadence and laced together with end-line rhymes. It forgoes the dry beauty of closely observed minutiae. The referent 'coffee' – so central to the French – doesn't appear once in the Arabic, only suggested by the presence of cup and sugar. The man is not drinking something as specific as a café-au-lait and leaves the café "disappear[ing] into the crowd," an explication thematizing the city and too obvious to note when the action is tacitly set in Paris. The long spoon-churning extending to three lines is replaced with cubes of sugar simply dissolving in the drink with no stirring agent. The stirring of the coffee symbolizes nothing in the French; it shines by mere realistic gratuity. The cubes, however, are there to dissolve because of poetic necessity: they melt as a romantic counterpart to the melting of speaker's heart. The focus in Qabbani shifts to an object entirely absent from Prévert's poem – the newspaper, an item related by associative contiguity with the coffee, which nonetheless gives the man in the poem a more political profile befitting a Syrian café-goer. The main reason for this, however, seems to be acoustic: *jarīda* (newspaper) rhymes nicely with the adjective *waḥīda* (lonely in the feminine declension), which prepares for a fancy bowtie ending. And importantly, the tension between observed versus felt reality is dissolved by disclosing the woman's feelings from the beginning: "melted me… melted two cubes"; "without seeing me […] without sensing my longing for him." A comparative reading makes this choice appear indiscreet.

[722] Quoted from the Penguin bilingual edition (trans. Ferlinghetti). Prévert, *Selections*, 56.

By Venuti's criteria of introducing a fresh "interpretive inscription" into the target poetic language, Qabbani's poem can be regarded as a success, since it had a long afterlife. At the outset of her singing career, the Lebanese soprano Majida al-Rumi took up Qabbani's short lyric and made it into a performance of vocal virtuosity spanning ten minutes in the manner of Egyptian singers Umm Kulthum and Leila Mourad.[723] Fifty years after Qabbani's original, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish composed a spinoff on Qabbani's theme – "A Café, and You with the Newspaper" – and turned its meanings around once again.[724] The addressee in the title is the poet's self as a close companion. The café is no longer a place of alienation and failed communication but of individual freedom and self-recollection. The motif of coffee rituals as realization of individual freedom goes all the way back to Darwish's *Dhakira li-l-Nisyan* [*Memory for Forgetfulness*], his poetic memoir from Beirut in 1982, where individual steadfastness comes down to his insistence on sipping his morning coffee in the kitchen under Israeli bombardments.[725] This brings out the background of catastrophe behind an otherwise exceedingly mundane scene, a background which explains why normality and routine are celebrated. Analogous backdrops are potentially present for the socially conscious Syrian poets of the 1970s as well as for Prévert in the recently liberated Paris of 1946.[726] Here is another variation on Prévert's theme by the *shafawi* poet Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn. The coffee is this time drunk at home:

Routine
Coffee with milk in the morning
A wife's quick kiss
The way to work
The way home

[723] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0xY64rCwXI. Last visited February 16, 2019.
[724] Darwish, *Ka-Zahr al-Lawz aw Abʿad* (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyes: 2005), 25-27. For an English translation see *Almond Blossoms and Beyond* (trans. Muhammad Shaheen; Northampton, Mass: Interlink, 2009), "A Café, and You with the Newspaper," 7-10.
[725] See Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982* (trans. Ibrahim Muhawi), 6-8.
[726] Ferlinghetti has the following words to say about Prévert's poems as part of post-war reality: "Many of the poems in *Paroles* grew out of the Second World War and the Occupation in France, and it is plain that 'paroles' means both 'words' and 'passwords'. Prévert spoke particularly to the French youth immediately after the war, especially to those who grew up during the Occupation and felt totally estranged from Church and State." Prévert, *Selections*, 9.

The way to bed
And then…
Coffee with milk in the morning

In truth, he is alive and well.
Touch him, don't be afraid
The dead, you know, have no fear.[727]

The motif is made al-Husayn's own by being woven into a poetic subgenre in which al-Husayn specializes – the "overturning poem."[728] An extremely prosaic habitual occurrence becomes meaningful by the swift change in the speaker's vantage point: the sudden address to a grave-dweller. The ploy is witty in the manner of oral *fawāzīr*, playful riddles for children, a genre Hermann Bausinger associates with folk poetry.[729] In its tragic undertones, al-Husayn's version is darker than a riddle and thus removed from Prévert's light touch. The dark tone would relate to the backdrop of anonymous mass death and deprivation. It is a layer of tragic irony that expresses al-Husayn's first-hand experience but also comes from reading experiences other than Prévert.

II Syria Writes Bulgarian: The Bulgarian Diwan and Beyond

Translation, Officialdom and Freedoms of Expression

I could not really imagine Bulgaria, unless I brought to mind her flowers, her heroes and her poets.

Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad[730]

In the general soup of disorder in which the Syrian translation movement swims, there is however one more or less cohesive diwan of East Central European and Balkan poetry, and Bulgarian in particular. This phenomenon of a periphery-to-periphery, second- to third-world

[727] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 215.
[728] See Introduction, n. 19.
[729] Hermann Bausinger, *Formen der Volkspoesie* (1968), 125-136.
[730] Kamenov (ed.), *International Recognition of the Bulgarian Poet Nikola Vaptsarov* (Sofia, 1979), 24.

transmission would proceed naturally from the destinations open to Syrian students through government grants in Eastern Bloc countries. We began to see notes of the inclination towards Eastern Europe with al-Ahmad's illustration of his ideas on translation with romantic Romanian poetry. But al-Ahmad would have come across Eminescu while completing his PhD in the Sorbonne, and the translation was certainly carried out via French. After Paris and a brief stint in Moscow, al-Ahmad found a teaching position as instructor of Arabic at the University of Sofia. There he acquired some proficiency in the Bulgarian language and married a Bulgarian woman. Like most of the poetic outgrowth in Syria of the 1970s, the seeds of translations from Bulgarian were sown in Lebanon of the 1950s. Al-Ahmad pioneered his Bulgarian translations with selection from the communist revolutionary poet Nikola Vaptsarov (1909-1942) – to be discussed in detail shortly – published by Dar al-Maᶜarif, a Beiruti press, in 1957.[731]

As early as 1967, textual items dealing with, or translating from, Bulgarian literature began appearing in Syria both in journals and as independent titles with al-Ahmad's translation signature, but other translators were to follow. Upon the occasion of the tenth issue of *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* (October 1976), al-Ahmad conducted an inventory of what had been translated up to that point by national categories: twelve items from France and ten from England; the US and the Soviet Union are tied at nine; and Bulgaria is tied with Germany at seven.[732] A peripheral literature in both the global system and the Soviet one, Bulgarian was up with the biggest players in the field of translated literature in Syria.

This boom was, among other things, an outcome of Syrian ties with the Soviet Union, which soon after the war and as part of cold-war cultural warfare, allowed government grants to

[731] This book is difficult to locate in the records since al-Ahmad transcribed Vaptsarov's name in Arabic with *zāy* rather than *sīn* in the fourth consonant, which is the more common transliteration. Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad, *Fabtzaruf, Shaᶜir Bulghariya al-Shahid* [Vapstsarov, Bulgaria's Martyr-Poet]. Beirut: Dar al-Maᶜarif, 1957.
[732] *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 3:4 (October 1976), 3-4.

be given to exchange students with Bulgaria in the 1940s and 1950s. Even though Bulgarian literature was popularized by Syrians who had gone to study in Bulgaria, many of them had not yet attained fluency in the language. Translation were still carried out with heavy reliance on French versions and then edited by people with insufficient knowledge of either Arabic or Bulgarian. ʿIzz al-Din al-Manasira speculates that al-Ahmad's translation from Vaptsarov was overseen by none other than his wife.[733]The Lebanese translator Fuʾad al-Khashin, who edited an anthology of Bulgarian poetry for a Lebanese press, had encountered similar language barriers.[734]

The process of reception seems to have become at some point self-propelling. Al-Manasira seems to think that the roots of the Syrian-Bulgarian bond may be traced back to the inception of Communist politics in the Arab world. A speech made by the Bulgarian communist politician Georgi Dimitrov (1882-1949) before the Comintern in 1935 had appeared in Arabic translation in 1938, and cited at great length by Khalid Bakdash, the General Secretary of the Syrian Communist Party and "Dean of Arab Communism."[735] In any case, al-Ahmad's first Syrian-based anthology of modern Bulgarian poetry was titled *Qasaʾid li-l-Insan wa-l-Hurriyya* [Poems for Man and Freedom, 1967].[736] A second anthology was given the strangely orientalistic title *Sayf Dimashq* [Damascus Sword, 1974], probably taken from a Bulgarian poem translated in the volume.[737] According to the Arab Writer Union website (which is not always reliable), both were printed by the Ministry of Culture.[738] Over the course of the 1970s, the Ministry printed

[733] Al-Manasira, *al-Naqd al-Thaqafī al-Muqaran*, 550.
[734] Ibid., 554-555.
[735] Ibid., 548.
[736] Grand universalizing titles are for some reason very prevalent in translations from second-world poetries. An anthology from Hungarian poetry carries a similar title and so is a volume of selections from Yannis Ritsos' poems.
[737] Al-Ahmad's bibliography on the Arab Writers Union website includes an anthology titled *al-Diwan al-Bulghari* [Anthology of Bulgarian Poetry] which seems to be a misattribution unless there were two titles by the exact same name. *Al-Diwan al-Bulghari* is the name of the anthology by Lebanese translator Fuʾad al-Khashin, who translated with help of the French. The publisher is the Beiruti Dar al-ʿAwda and the year of publication 1973. *Sayf Dimashq* is dated to 1974 and al-Ahmad's supposed *Diwan* to 1970. I have found no evidence to verify the existence of the latter. See Al-Manasira, *al-Naqd al-Thaqafi al-Muqaran,* 555 and 565 (n. 13).
[738] See: http://www.awu.sy/print_details.php?page=category&id=168 Last visited August 10, 2018.

several more volumes of individual Bulgarian poets edited and translated by al-Ahmad. Poetry was but a chunk of the entire corpus of translation from Bulgarian, which comprised over fifty volumes. It comprised poems, short stories, drama, children's literature and literary criticism. The list of Arabized Bulgarian authors grew long, and the following list is a partial one: Hristo Botev (1848-1876), Ivan Vazov (1850-1921), Penčo Slavejkov (1866-1912), Elin Pelin (1877-1949), Yordan Yovkov (1880-1937), Nikola Vapstsarov (1909-1942), Alexander Gerov (1919-1997), Nikolay Haytov (1919-2002), Valeri Petrov (1920-2014), Liliana Stefanova (b. 1929), Penyo Penev (1930-1959) and Liubomir Levchev (b. 1935). Counting journal entries, there were dozens more items. The Bulgarian literary critic Efrem Karanfilov was translated as an authority on modern Bulgarian literature and Soviet literature in general, and the Bulgarian folklorist Damian Burniakov as an expert on folk humor and wit.[739] Vaptsarov's *Motor Songs* (1940), rendered in Arabic *Aghani al-Muharrik*, reappeared in Syria in 1975, the same year of publication as Salah Faʾiq's *Rahaʾin* [Captives].[740]

Though Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad was an inordinately prolific writer and translator, he could not have built this diwan alone. The two other major translators from Bulgarian were Husayn Raji and Mikhaʾil ʿId. All three are, in terms of literary sensibilities, a generation behind the *shafawi* poets who would read their translations. In some sense, their translation work slightly runs ahead of their poetics, and one may wonder whether they felt freer to experiment in poetry translation, while feeling constrained in their original poems. ʿId (1936-2004) has over forty translated volumes to his name, overwhelmingly from Bulgarian, and overwhelmingly

[739] For Burniakov see *al-Maʿrifa* 204 (February 1979), 129-136; Karanfilov was an official guest of the Arab Writers Union in June, 1983. ʿId had translated individual essays and two critical books of his on modern poetry and prose. See for example *al-Judhur wa-l-ʿAjalat* (Dar Tlas, 1986). Naturally, the transmission of the prominent Bulgarian-French literary critics Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva passed via French and is thus left out of the survey. An excerpt from Todorov's *Théorie de la littérature* was translated in *al-Maʿrifa* 203 (January 1979), 116-124. Kristeva's reception came about a decade later.

[740] Nikulay Fabtsaruf, *Aghani al-Muharrik* (Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa), 1975. On the importance of Faʾiq's collection for the *shafawiyya* movement see chapter 3, n. 613.

printed by either Ministry or the Arab Writers Union.[741] He graduated in the 1950s from the University of Sofia with a PhD in political economy and philosophy and returned to Syria to work with government agencies in various capacities as journal editor and proofreader.[742] In the 1990s, while serving on the executive board of the Arab Writers Union, he published countless articles in *al-Maᶜrifa* on literary authors from a wide range of time periods and nations. Bulgarian literature, Soviet literature and its offshoots, the practice of translation, and ᶜId's high institutional credentials all initiated him as an expert authority on world literature in Syria. In terms of his own literary work, he was, like al-Ahmad, of strictly conservative tastes, and his writing maintained proper separation between high *tafᶜīla* poems and low colloquial *azjāl*. His biography indicates that within the narrowing confines of the Syrian book world, Bulgarian literature was by necessity becoming the local getaway door out into world literature.

While ᶜId's translations mainly delivered prose fiction, drama, and children's literature, Husayn Raji (1931-2002) chiefly translated Bulgarian poetry. Raji is a much less prolific translator and of a lower institutional profile than ᶜId. Though a *tafᶜīla* poet himself, Raji took more care to be innovative, and was praised by the prominent Egyptian scholar Mahmud Amin al-ᶜAlim for his immersive visionary creations.[743] Unlike many Arabs who studied in Bulgaria and specialized in sciences and medical professions, Raji graduated from the University of Sofia with a PhD in Russian literature and Bulgarian language.[744] Raji's slightly more modern sensibility is reflected in his choice to translate contemporary Bulgarian poets: Lyubomir Levchev (1935-), Liliana Stefanova (1929-), and Penyo Penev (1930-1959). The first two are

[741] For full bibliographical list see: https://kfarbou-magazine.com/issue/8390 Last visited February 16, 2019.
[742] For career milestones see obituary in the Jordanian daily newspaper al-Ray: http://alrai.com/article/83803.html Last visited February 16, 2019.
[743] The remark is taken from Raji's 1972 collection prefaced by al-ᶜAlim. See Raji, *Mudhakirrat Shaᶜir Jawwal* (Damascus: Dar al-Ajyal, 1972), 7.
[744] "Husayn Raji," in: *Muᶜjam al-Babtayn*. See: http://www.almoajam.org/poet_details.php?id=2137. Last visited March 26, 2019. This lexicon entry includes a full list of both his original and translated works.

acclaimed poets identified with the Soviet establishment and serving as high-ranking state employees in the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education and with the Bulgarian Writers Union. They are both translated and received outside Bulgaria, and, according to Roumiana Deltcheva, this is a good indication that their artistic merit goes beyond their party credentials.[745] Penev's story is tragically different and will be recounted in greater detail in what follows.

These key translation volumes for my investigation, namely the poetry anthologies and two individual collections by Vaptsarov and Penyo Penev, are sadly unavailable for perusal. But corresponding journal publications can give us a sense of the choices and styles of translations. The first Bulgarian poet to appear in *al-Maᶜrifa* is Hristo Botev (1848-1876).[746] Much like Eminescu, Botev is a national poet from the romantic age of revolutionary nationalism, a symbol of Bulgarian liberation from Ottoman occupation. He died as a war hero while leading a company of Russian-trained Bulgarian troops from Romania into Ottoman territory. Botev's symbolic significance as a martyr of national freedom drives al-Ahmad's narrating of his life story with inset translated poems representing, according to al-Ahmad, the true voice of the Bulgarian people.

The first poem cited in al-Ahmad's translation is set at the time when Botev exited Bulgaria to agitate for national liberation from the neighboring Romania. Later on, Botev's heroism as a freedom fighter is compared to the legendary might of pre-Islamic Arab hero ᶜAntara Bin Shaddad. In terms of the language of translation, it is slightly less stultifying than the translation from Eminescu. It is free of prosody but not of heroic parallelism and declamation

[745] Roumiana Deltcheva, "Post-Totalitarian Tendencies in Bulgarian Literature" in: *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (September 1, 1995) 22(3), 859. For full article see 853-865. Deltcheva's article presents a very good overview of twentieth century Bulgarian poetry under Stalinism, and it is from this chapter that the information is derived. Stefanova was translated by American poet Denise Levertov. See under Bulgarian in "Other Slavic Languages," a review in *World Literature Today* 63(2), 330.
[746] *Al-Maᶜrifa* 83 (November 1968), 116-131.

and makes repeated use of words from the emotive sphere of passionate heroic struggle: *muḥārib* [warrior], *munāḍil* [resistance fighter], *kifāḥ* [struggle]. Botev's relevance to al-Ahmad's time lies in his "theory of poetry," namely the ability of poems to give voice to a people and help it pursue liberation and independence. This romanticist theory of national poetry is hardly anything new. The felt newness has to do with the Arab post-1967 cultural climate, particularly pervasive in Syria, in which the newly discovered Arabic poetry from Palestine is lauded for giving voice and a national identity to Palestinian Arabs under Israeli rule. Antun al-Maqdasi, the aforementioned chief of the Directorate for Composition and Translation, wrote extensively on the matter in various capacities: as a philosopher, a literary critic, and a political thinker. His signature article is titled "Watan Alifahu al-Kalam [A Homeland Made of Words]," a long-winded essay whose main argument is concisely captured in the title: the humanizing potential of the poetic "speech act" lies in its ability to assemble a collective.[747] Consequently, the poetic works of Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, Tawfiq Ziyad and Rashid Husayn constituted the collective existence of the Palestinian people as a historical reality and thus saved it from annihilation.[748]

The most canonical anthology of poetry in post-1967 Syrian literary circles was an extensive collection of Palestinian poetry entitled *Diwan al-Watan al-Muhtall* [Anthology of the Occupied Homeland. Damascus: Dar Filastin,1968] edited by Yusuf al-Khatib. This anthology – unabashedly radicalized – could well be regarded as a foreign poetry replacement in terms of its impact and reception. In his lengthy polemical introduction to this anthology, al-Khatib claims that all Arabic literature must rise to the occasion of the *Nakba* as the Palestinian poets had

[747] *Al-Maʿrifa* 147 (May 1974), 145-198.
[748] For a concise version of al-Maqdasi's ideas see the short piece he wrote for *al-Mawqif al-Adabi*, where his stance is firmly anchored in close readings of poems by Samih al-Qasim and Mahmoud Darwish. They were probably transmitted through al-Khatib's *Diwan*. Antun al-Maqdisi, "al-Huwiyya al-Mustaʿada," *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 1:7 (October 1971), 9-12.

done,[749] a dictum that with time was strongly felt also in the domains of drama and the novel. From al-Khatib's perspective, the universal humanity aimed for by artists is not attainable before the Palestinian question is addressed.[750] Therefore, the focus on the *Nakba* must come at the expense of political concerns with the non-Arab world. The grinding invocations of the Palestinian disaster with which institutional mainstream culture forces itself upon literature are precisely what the *shafawi* poets sought to escape.

On the level of discursive superstructure at least, most of the framing in which these translations are set legitimizes them by conforming to the atmosphere of Palestine-centered literature and martyrdom kitsch dominating Syria. In translation, Botev becomes a generic "national poet" assimilable to voices of armed anti-colonial national struggle coming out of Palestine. The need for something new is superficially met with previously unheard-of Bulgarian poetry, but the hegemonic ideas of the Syrian cultural field are not contested but revindicated. This is translation used as an ideological tool to empower the status quo.

Yet the matter is not all that simple for translation forms an intensified meeting point where the contradictory values in the literary and intellectual sphere may be negotiated, enacted or performed. The choice of Arabizing Bulgarian literature already deviates from pure Arab commitment to Palestine and reflects a climate of cold-war affinities with the Eastern Bloc. With an altered mode of reading, it can imply poetic solidarity with beleaguered individuals under oppressive regimes. Liberation, struggle, and social justice are floating concepts in the literary

[749] Al-Khatib, *Diwan al-Watan al-Muhtall*, 21-22. Al-Khatib asserts that no Arab author to date (1968) has sufficiently delved into the *qadiyya* – the greatest tragedy of the age, he says – for fussy concerns with artistic finesse. The great writers' eyes look outside to Stockholm and the Nobel Prize instead of inside into the core Arab problem. In retrospect, one may argue that Elias Khoury's work proves that you can look to both directions at the same time.

[750] Ibid., 20-21. Al-Khatib draws analogies between the victimhood of Palestinians and that of Native Americans, African Americans, and the European Jewry in the Second World War. The implication is that since Palestinians and Arabs by extension are at the bottom (or top, depends how we look at it) of the ladder of victimhood, they cannot afford to ignore the Palestinian problem. Later, he spins elaborate explanations for the distressing fact that the Palestinian poetry he lauds is published by Communist presses in Israel and that the poets themselves are strongly affiliated with the Communist party. That they are communist is bad enough but that the Communist Party in Israel (Mapam) is Jewish-Arab is too hard for him to swallow. Ibid., 77-83, 91-94.

and intellectual spheres with strong legitimating force when it comes to Palestine, but dangerously uncalled-for when addressing local realities within Syrian boundaries or human rights issues which imply critique of the regime. Yet those local realities were no doubt felt as pressing on the consciousness of literary producers. Translation may thus serve as a form of psychological *Verschiebung* (displacement) of speech, a defense mechanism allaying the anxieties of all that cannot be spoken out. This analysis is by virtue of hindsight, not necessarily that gained by the 2011 uprising, but the slightly forgotten voice of protest that rose up in the so-called Damascus Spring which accompanied the change of rule from al-Assad the Father to al-Assad the Son in the late months of 2000. In that context, the liberal-minded Maqdasi turned the discourse of freedom and social justice, previously exclusive to Palestine, against the coercive nature of the Syrian regime.[751]Furthermore, while a nineteenth century Bulgarian national poet can be readily used as a generic signifier for universal political martyrdom, twentieth century political experience of Bulgarian poets, as we will see, was not as generic and thus communicated more difference on a basic sematic level.

There are, then, alternative ways of seeing the function of translation in these conditions. In her article on the East Berlin based translation magazine *Poesiealbum* (1967-1990), Ruth Owen proposes that poetry translations be viewed as opening possibilities of free expression in a tightly politically controlled environment.[752] The inflow of world poetry into the GDR through this venue meant that its internationalism, like that of *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya*, involved a complex

[751] On August 14, 2000, al-Maqdasi published in *al-Hayat* newspaper a letter he wrote to Bashar al-Assad urging him to embrace democratic reforms. This letter got him fired, and he made it into an open letter after the fact. For full version of the letter see Fayiz Sarah, *Antun al-Maqdisi*, 25-26. A select passage: "Mr. President, we have grown weary of over-generalized speech: 'the gains of the people, the achievements of the people, the will of the people' – the people as such have been absent, Mr. President, for too long. Their paralyzed will is reduced to nothing but two goals: on the private level, working day and night to bring bread home for their children, and on the public level, to say what they're expected to say and behave in the ways they're expected to behave (processions, slogans etc.). What keeps the people from ruin is that they have learned to live with this state of affliction as a sick person learns to live with a chronic disease […] Maybe in the 1970s, after the 1967 *Naksa* and the collapse of our society's tribal structures, we were in need of a strong government to gather our dispersed parts. But, as you say, Mr. President, we have now entered the 21st century."

[752] Ruth J. Owen, "Freedoms of Expression: Poetry translations in the East Berlin *Poesiealbum*," *Translation Studies* 4:2, 2011, 133-148.

negotiating process between official state culture with its ideological dos and don'ts and artistic autonomy that puts the source poetry first.[753] Much like the Syrian translation venues, *Poesiealbum* sought to edify its readership with education in world poetry "at grassroots level."[754] The socialistic ideal gave it a freer hand in terms of censorship and allowed it to extend its range to twenty languages. The historically lower profile of translators was to their advantage in this case, since it allowed them – without much ado – to shift the interpretive frames of poems towards the here and now. More than prose fiction and drama, modern poetry is universally the art of individual autonomy, and poetry translation provided a conduit for autonomous self-expression without being implicated in the dangers of creative authorship. In translated poetry, for example, GDR authors could less noticeably diverge from the hard line of socially optimistic art imposed from above.[755] Rather than bending translations to express correct meanings, faithful translation could communicate taboo-breaking meanings while being packaged as "correct" or perceived as too marginal to be bothered with.[756] Selection and strategies were less than uniform. Alongside iconic world authors, appeared lesser-known, politically sanctioned "poets of struggle" whose credentials were set forth with para-textual explications at a basic biographical level.[757]The East German censors were on to this strategy, but still let many translations pass because of their foreign authorship, as opposed to original works like those of the poet songwriter Wolf Biermann who was penalized in 1976 with expatriation.[758]

In an essay on the quiet revolution introduced by styles of Chinese literary translation in the 1950s, Bei Dao claims that before the appearance of underground texts in the late 1970s,

[753] Ibid., 135-136.
[754] Ibid., 136.
[755] Owen presents the case of translating the Bulgarian poet Alexander Gerov, whose German book only barely made it past the censors. Ibid., 137-138.
[756] Ibid., 139.
[757] The author-based approach is a salient common denominator between the East German and Arab magazines. Despite the theoretically sophisticated apparatus, this was also the method endorsed by Sulayman and Yasin in their influential book of Marxist literary criticism.
[758] Ibid., 136.

"translation style" was "the only medium for transformation of literature" in China and served as creative authors' guide to style.[759] Under the pressures from Maoist propaganda and censorship, translation could either serve as haven for genuine expression or perpetuate populist nationalism promoted by the party. At first, the main venue for poetry translation was the journal *Shijie wenxue* [World Literature], which was burdened with tensions similar to those of *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* and *Poesiealbum*. In the 1960s, the Writers Publishing House was erected to provide literary translations without which the emergence of underground literature in the 1970s was inconceivable.[760] Interestingly, Bei associates the impact of translation into Chinese with the radical difference of the ideographic script system shaken up more drastically by the foreign culture influx and compelled to change.[761] This hypothesis offers a telling similarity to revolutions in Arabic poetic styles both in the *Shi^{c}r* period and in Baathist Syria.

The Syrian Eastern Bloc *diwan* slowly collected by the magazine and Ministry publications is likewise riven with tensions between serving officialdom and asserting autonomy.[762] East German poetry was in fact one of the first to be included in this *diwan*. Translator Ahmad al-Hamu pieced together a mini-anthology of twenty-four poets, among them Brecht, with one or two poems each.[763] This style of casting a wide net with maximum names and minimum poem consistency is symptomatic of Syrian tokenizing strategies, a style correlating to the basic grassroots level at which translation is aimed. That East German poets were among the first to be translated has to do with fact that a literary delegation from East Germany came for an official visit to Syria and met with the Arab Writers Union shortly

[759] Bei Dao, "Translation Style: A Quiet Revolution," 60.
[760] Ibid., 62-63.
[761] Ibid., 61.
[762] The list is based on back-issues of *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya*. The full range of the Ministry's titles is nearly impossible to reconstruct. This diwan went on to include poems from Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, the Former Yugoslavia (from Serbian and Macedonian), Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.
[763] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:2 (October 1974), 61-109.

beforehand.[764] In the manner of the complex negotiation process discussed by Owen, the mini-anthology includes standard ideologically correct poems about peasants and proletarians alongside powerful expressions of poetic autonomy. A poem can hardly be more literary than Johannes Bobrowski's "Sprache," for example. It is originally composed as a poetic homage to Paul Celan in a Celanian manner of hermetic minimalism and receives a faithful literal rendition by Ahmad Haydar (without however informing the reader about this German inter-literary affinity).[765]There is a gain in that omission, seeing that the evocative reference to a language indefinitely deferring its arrival to "the neighbor's house" – originally a metaphor for the seductive difficulty of Celan's communications – is made into a figure for the act of translation. Reiner Kunze's "Die Liebe [Love]" is likewise an apolitical poem in the extreme, setting the wild heart's desires in the figure of a deep-rooted wild rose (that also requires the knife of reason to bloom), and thereby asserting that a minimal space for personal aberrations cannot be eradicated by political control.[766] Al-Hamu's version of this poem is slightly confusing in terms of syntactical construction,[767] but the meanings and energies communicated richly resonate with the atmosphere of al-Husayn's politically defiant love poems. In the German, love compared to a wild rose *wächst wuchert / und eines morgens / oder eines abends / fühlen wir nur / sie verlangt /*

[764] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:1 (July 1974), 297-299. Yusuf al-Yusuf, who wrote the report, says that there is also a forthcoming anthology of East German poetry in the works, presumably with the Arab Writers Union press. The members of the East German delegation promised, in exchange, that they would advocate for the publication of an anthology of Syrian short stories. That nothing came of this can be explained by analogy with the Egyptian case alluded to in the introduction. Ibid., 298.

[765] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 1:2, 86. Haydar does away with Bobrowski's stanza division, renders some lines a bit too verbose, and does not attempt to find compensation for the finesse of the German alliterations. However, the accurate prose rendition still carries across the feel of Bobrowski's punctilious poem. For instance: "*Sprache / abgehetzt / mit dem müden Mund / auf dem endlosen Weg / zum Hause des Nachbarn"* is simplified to *"al-lughatu / murhaqatun / maᶜa al-fami al-mutᶜabi / ᶜalā al-ṭarīq al-lā mutanāhiyati / ilā bayti al-jīrān."* The intertextual reference in the participle *abgehetzt* is lost and so is the rich alliterative sound of *mit dem müden Mund*. *Murhaq* and *mutᶜab* in the translation seem repetitive in a way that the German does not allow, but the overall unadorned style of translation fits the ambience of the original.

[766] Ibid., 78-79.

[767] In my understanding of the poem's grammar, al-Hamu twice misconstrues the position of the dependent conditional clauses with respect to their main clauses and adds a redundant *waw al-ᶜatf*.

raum in uns.[768] Even in term of stylistics, Kunze's paralleling of "one morning" or "one evening" resembles the oralized *merismo* constructs favored by Al-Husayn.

One of the prepossessing figures of translated Eastern Bloc literature seems to have been Rasul Gamzatov. Gamzatov, People's Poet of Dagestan and a highly decorated Soviet bard writing in the Avar language,[769] made no less than four appearances in the magazine and two more in *al-Maᶜrifa*.[770] Dagestan, lying on the Caspian Sea at the southernmost tip of the Russian west, belongs to a group of republics in the North Caucasus officially subject to the Russian federation. Even though Russian serves as lingua franca between its many diverse ethnicities and languages, Dagestan is almost homogenously a Muslim country in terms of the religion of its citizens. This is doubly significant: for one, Dagestani culture has a robust history of Arabic learning in the Islamic sciences, remnants of which survive despite the heavy Sovietizing and Russianizing processes since the triumph of the Bolsheviks in Dagestan in 1921, after fierce local resistance.[771] That Gamzatov's personal name is Rasul ("prophet" in Arabic) indicates not only this Arabo-Islamic patrimony, but also that there is an Arab prophetic manner in his bardic style. His Arabic renditions – retranslated from Russian – thus read as a sort of stylistic homecoming. Second, Gamzatov is taken, like Mao, to be an icon of political harmonization through poetry, unifying an ethnically diverse population, and carrying its power from a small realm in the most extreme periphery to the central stage of Soviet canonical consecration. In this

[768] Prose translation: [Love as wild rose] "Grows, proliferates, and one morning or one evening, we only feel that it demands space within us." Al-Hamu's Arabic: *taḍribu judhūrahā fīnā, tanmū / wa-fī masāᵓin aw fī ṣabāḥin / nashᶜuru faqat / innahā tuṭālibunā bi-ḥayyizin / lahā fīnā.* Ibid., 79.

[769] Gamzatov's poems are almost immediately converted to Russian upon their completion. He tends to work with the same translators and had also introduced many Russian works into Avar to expand his native literary language. According to Wikipedia, the Avar language currently has around 760,000 native speakers.

[770] Rasul Hamzatuf, "Daghastan Baladi," in: *A-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:1 (January 1975), 194-293. For another example see also *Al-Maᶜrifa* 187 (September 1977), 94-100 (trans. Mikhaᵓil ᶜId).

[771] On the waves of Islamization in Dagestan, and its proud heritage of Arabic learning see the chapter "Islam in Daghestan" in Anna Zelkina's *In Quest for God and Freedom*, 26-32.

respect, Gamzatov represents the parochial dreams of the Syrian poet-prophets in their divided political realm: both political unity and universal acceptance.[772]

Gamzatov's debut translation comes in the form of a short autobiographical novel sprinkled with poems. It occupies the space of a hundred pages in the January issue (1975) of *al-Adab al-Ajnabyya,* which is tantamount to a full third. This work gives us the most direct line of passage between the magazine's output and the *shafawiyya* corpus, since ᶜAdil Mahmud adopts a motto from the translated autobiography to adorn the opening of a section in *Muswaddat ᶜan al-ᶜAlam*. The choice belongs to the genre of the roughly hewn wisdom of the montane male, which in paraphrase goes something like "don't pull out your dagger for no reason, but if you do, make sure to use it fast."[773]

In terms of literary ideology and reading background, Mahmud is the most Soviet-leaning of the *shafawi* poets. He is also the most deliberate in terms of intertextual reference, but his mottos are a patchwork of conflicting affinities. Another epigraph in *Muswaddat* is taken from Lucien Becker (1911-1984), a French poet born to farmer parents, who in his youth associated with French Surrealist circles and travelled in French colonies,[774] and after the Second World War gradually turned reclusive. Becker is most remembered for his erotic poems in a Gallimard volume titled *Plein amour* (1954). An Arabic selection of Becker's poems with biographical and critical explication by (who other than) Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad appeared in a 1976 issue of *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya*.[775] From this selection, Mahmud picks an epigraph that highlights the poetic potential in finding images for erotic desire in mundane detail: "I love you so fiercely / so

[772] Upon invitation, Gamzatov came to Syria as an official guest of the Arabs Writers Union in December 1980 and was greeted with a ceremonial reception. See Muhammad Mundhir Lutfi, "al-Shaᶜir al-Sufiyati Rasul Hamzatuf wa-l-Mahalliyya llati Tuʾaddi ila al-ᶜAlamiyya [The Soviet Poet Rasul Gamzatov and the Localism which Leads to Universality]," in: *al-Bayan al-Kuwaytiyya* 179 (February 1981), 132-141.
[773] Mahmud, *Muswaddat ᶜan al-ᶜAlam*, 25.
[774] According to al-Ahmad's introduction, Becker visited Aleppo in the early 1930s and formed personal contacts through correspondence with George Schehadé, the Francophone Lebanese poet and playwright. See *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 3:3 (July 1976), 7.
[775] Ibid., 5-24.

much that your absence flaps inside me / like a door left open on a windy night."[776]The image in translation reads like an interpretive comment on the colloquial *shamī* saying "when you feel the wind coming through the door, shut it and go rest."[777]The intertextual reference also works as a kind of poet's recommendation to read Becker's erotically explicit poems in their Arabic version, since the foreign source attribution allows more liberties in expressing sexuality.

Mottos taken as adornment are easy to spot and trace back to the source. The deeper impact of translations, however, goes well beyond that and crosses over into original texts in circuitous and unlikely ways.

The Vagaries of the Political: Modern Bulgarian Poetry in Syria

As we try to reach deeper down into the texture of the *shafawi* contact with Bulgarian poetry, the following question arises: can the Other be reliably constructed and contacted through the screens of politicized and predominantly conservative domestications? From a generalized standpoint, certainly not. But on the level of particular instances subject to the fortuities of chance encounters and possibilities, the answer is positive. Specifically, not all Syrian translation is domesticating to the same extent, and the mode of artless prosified translation practiced by al-Ahmad was rudimentary and yet decently exact. Moreover, even though poets are selected on a political basis of flashy martyrdom, the selection and the actual translation work are two separate matters. My larger argument in this section is that in spite of being chosen for political reasons,

[776] Mahmud, *Muswaddat ʿan al-ʿAlam*, 105; *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 3:3 (July 1976), 23. The lines in the original translation do not follow in sequence. Mahmud chopped up the stanza and re-assembled lines together. Also, signifiers relating to the house and the elements have a cumulative symbolic significance in Becker's work. They seem to come from the deep well of memories from his early childhood on the farm (his mother left the farm after his father died and took him with her at the age of three). The soil is a pervasive image in the poems that bestows a cosmic significance on the eroticism. "Countryside and village are renewed in the miracle of woman's flesh," writes his English translator Christopher Pilling. Pilling quotes a letter from Becker in which he is said to tend towards "degree-zero writing" after he got tired of the verbosity of Surrealism. This is long before Barthes made the term popular. His "plainness," according to Piling, consists of dwindled vocabulary and "deliberate monotony." Claude Vigée nicely writes that the poems have a kind of "dull luster." See Becker, *Love at the Full*, 9-11, 14.
[777] In usage, the proverb is appropriate for a situation in which a bothersome task needs to be "laid to rest."

the poetic experiences of Penyo Penev and Nikola Vaptsarov communicate much more than politics and garish heroism. This is largely truer in their case than in that of Botev for the historically qualitative difference between nineteenth and twentieth century experiences. Poems, in this respect, tend to outsmart the reasons of their choosers. The caveat to an answer in a bold positive, however, is this: the voices of these others – human voices that go beyond political determinations – need to be heard, or better, actively reimagined and animated by readers in the target culture. There were such readers in Syria, and I try to reconstruct their reading process (as inscribed in their work) in the last part of the chapter.

First, let us take a look at Penyo Penev's poetry as modeling a human type carried over into Syria. I have not been able to obtain Raji's 1981 translation, nor locate journal versions of Penev's Arabized poems. However, on the schematic level of theme, sentiment, and near-complete interpenetration of personal biography, political destiny, and the poetic text, there are conjectures worth pursuing with respect to his Syrian reception. Penev joined the youth laborer brigades upon high-school graduation in 1947 and took part in the massive building projects launched by the state after the Second World War. He was so devoted to these projects that he moved his wife and child to live in the newly planned city of Dimitrovgrad in Haskovo province, a city which he helped build. While doing so, he wrote poems rejoicing in utopian socialism and modern machines. A typical epigrammatic poem is "One of The People I Am," here in Peter Tempest's translation:

I dream
not of glory
and easy ways,

But a quilted jacket
for winter days.

In glory eternal
forever
stand

Everything built
here
by my hand![778]

The poems were mostly ignored in his lifetime. He soon lost favor with the state for failing to comply with party prescriptions and was defamed and condemned to unemployment and extreme poverty. Disillusioned and dejected at twenty-nine, Penev committed suicide by swallowing poison. Hours before, he wrote a note to a friend: "I'm tired of being homeless, unemployed, unloved." Not unlike the cynical uses of Mayakovski in Soviet Russia, Penev's gruesome death did not prevent the party from using his ideologically hopeful poems as cultural propaganda. The city of Dimitrovgrad celebrates the poet's heritage with a Penyo Penev Memorial Park (which includes a monument to the poet) and a Penyo Penev Museum-House. There is a national literary prize for poetry named after him. In 1980, The Bulgarian government issued a stamp with his portrait in commemoration of the 50th anniversary to his birth.

Two things are worth noting. First, a frightful feeling of the thin ice on which poets in politicized cultural climates tread. This feeling is a distinctly different one from simply identifying with the aggrandized image of a poet-hero and has a strong basis in reality. It cannot be coincidental that the three of the most widely received Bulgarian poets in Syria – Botev, Vaptsarov, and Penev – all died before their 33rd birthday. Since the biographical data about Penev was probably communicated to the Arab reader, the Arabic poem could have been probed with the knowledge of a poet fatefully hanging on a precipice between life and death. Even if not, the personal biography is smeared all over the poems, which in no way try to hide the fragility of the poet as a small human bolt in the system of a mighty state. This strategy of eliminating screens between the poem and the poet is central to *shafawiyya*, and while possibly

[778] Trans. Peter Tempest. *Anthology of Bulgarian Poetry*, 475. See also blog entry on *Blazing Bulgaria*: https://blazingbulgaria.wordpress.com/2012/09/25/penyo-penev-poet-profile/ Last visited February 17, 2019.

developing in an inner course, must have had relations to outside experiences. Both the prominence of empirical selves and the precipitous existence of the poet are central to al-Husayn's work, as we have seen.

Second, the image of the martyr-hero in Penev, though at core mythologized, deviates from more licensed Arab molds of political martyrdom. Penev is harnessed to a grand political project, and poetically draws strength from his progressive mission, yet he is not a soldier. He is a builder of modern cities, a commoner without a winter jacket but with a huge social heart. This type is significantly different from the hero-type presented by Kheir Beik's militarized Cadmus persona, and from the way in which Palestinian guerillas were profusely celebrated in Syrian poetry for fighting courageously in the Battle of Karameh (1968). These features would have been communicated with even the most stolid translation that kept its literal meanings straight. Raji, the translator, seems in other instances to have been quite relaxed in terms of the traditional muscle of his translation style, and produced neat and readable prose versions of Bulgarian poet Liubomir Levchev.[779]

Ideologically naïve or not, Penev's experience is framed as a twentieth century experience of total politics and records the enormous hopes pinned on the new Socialist states in their beginnings. Poetically, he is a self-fashioned continuation of the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Yesenin. Ideologically, his life illustrates the human price paid for the paradoxes of commitment to teleological History and its realization through the State. A poem called "We of the Twentieth Century" provides a revealing articulation of Socialist optimism, whose fervor and enthusiasm cannot but be read with a sense of tragic irony. "Upon our shoulders are borne the burdens of our century," Penev exclaims in Peter Tempest's translation.

[779] *Al-Thaqafa al-Usbuʿiyya* 4 (April 1981), 45-47.

Borne "Ungrudgingly" the poet startlingly adds. There is no grudge because they – "We" of the twentieth century – are "a generational bridge for the shores of years to come." The Arabic version must have rung with the image of the bridge, owing to Khalil Hawi's famous poem by that name which uses the bridge in analogous metaphoric ways.[780] The lofty meaning bestowed on the workers' sweat and tears was to be wholly belied by the actual future, yet the wording is so ambivalently candid about actual suffering that the text elicits interpretation in the vein of de-Manian aporias as undermining its ideological purpose:

At the behest
of a stern dictator –
Whose proper name
is
the human heart
Piece by piece
from the hard day's battlement
Our happiness
we
dig and crop
Crumb by crumb
our country gathers it
Drinks it sweetly
drop by drop.
Tomorrow
they shall indeed
be happier,
Those who
Follow after us.[781]

Take out lines 2-4 and line 7, omit "sweetly" or replace it with a critical adverb, replace "be happier" with "know," and you get a chilling testimonial poem to the excessive suffering perpetrated by the state in the name of lofty ideals. Idealism is thus curbed by a latent sense of the real pressing on the poet. The poetically modern element would have been obfuscated in the language of conservative translation. But the two other elements cross over better and could have

[780] For a good in-situ reading and translation of this poem see Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*, 26-32. In a ghastly correspondence, Hawi had also committed suicide when in 1982 his hopes for Arab unity and revival were dashed.
[781] *Anthology of Bulgarian Poetry*, 478. Penev has no available English translation other than the four poems included in Tempest's anthology. For biographical information and some observations about Penev's literary formation see blog *Blazing Bulgaria* (n. 778).

spoken forcefully of twentieth-century predicaments to a sub-group of interested poets in the target culture.

Whereas in the case of Penyo Penev's poems I am merely speculating about possibilities of the translation's reception, the case of Vaptsarov provides some documented evidence that Syrian poets were emulating translation-modified models of poetic experience transferred from Bulgaria. As I delve into a lot of textual specifics in poems by Nikola Vapstsarov and Riyad al-al-Salih al-Husayn, the bigger frame to keep in mind is that the type of anti-poem described as relating by analogy to other world poetries is actualized in Syria by deriving example and legitimacy from the concrete poems at hand. These poems, poetry collections, and poets happened to have been Bulgarian, and happened to have been translated in the manners described above, for the reasons listed throughout this chapter. By both accident and necessity, there grew a sisterly relationship between Bulgarian and Syrian poetries in the last quarter of the 20th century, a relationship that affected the actual profile of the poems composed in Syria and, in turn, reshaped and expanded the range of association for the source poetry. There is thus a contested arena between reader-poets and the bureaucracy of state translators with regard to the parameters and qualities of the Syrian-specific field of world literature. While the Ministry of Culture and *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* construct, in generalized terms, a flat map of the world's literatures for purposes of presenting a veneer of culture, astute readers rescue from this output those translations that can be made to inform a home-grown world literature capable of holding together global awareness and local experience.

Nikola Vaptsarov (1909-1942) is sometimes named alongside Penev as paragon for a tough-minded realistic idiom of Bulgarian Communist poetry.[782]Wide admiration in Bulgaria for

[782] "Bulgaria, Poetry of," in: *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012 ed.), 169.

both his humanizing voice and his poetic prowess makes him a kind of unofficial national poet – an icon for Bulgarian poetry at its local and cosmopolitan best rather than for the Bulgarian nation alone.[783] He is the most widely translated among Bulgarian poets, and had distinguished translators such as Yannis Ritsos, Salvatore Quasimodo and Nicolas Guillén.[784] His poems are interwoven with his biography and political activism in a similar manner to Penev and to other leftist heroes of world poetry.[785]

His life-story was also easy to pass on as an ideological lesson, since he was member of the Bulgarian anti-fascist underground, and after being captured by the pro-Nazi authorities was shot dead by a firing squad. In Soviet Bulgaria, he was made a monumental part of the curriculum and reduced to predetermined clichés of devotion to the Party.[786] His extremely short and turbulent life coincides with Europe's most agitated years of political and social upheaval. He was born in the town of Bansko close to the Macedonian border, a fact accounting for his disputed national identity as both a Macedonian and a Bulgarian patriotic poet.[787] His father was a resolute and wealthy Bulgarian revolutionary, who forced Nikola to enlist in the Naval Academy against his wish to study literature. In this wish, he took after his sensitive and intelligent mother Elena to whom he was deeply attached. After graduating from the academy, he worked as assistant mechanic on board a ship sailing the Mediterranean. He visited Egypt, Istanbul, mandatory Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. When he returned home, he first worked as a railway stoker and then as a mechanical engineer in a paper factory. Well-read and socially

[783] In my remarks about the broader context of Vaptsarov's reputation in Bulgaria, as well as the discussion of the formal and semantic details of the original poems, I am deeply indebted to the help of Maria Vassileva, a PhD candidate in the Department for Slavic Languages and Literatures at Harvard.
[784] For a full list of world translators see: Yordan Kamenov, *International Recognition of the Bulgarian poet Nikola Vaptsarov* (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1979), 5-15. n
[785] Having forged an internationalist vision of politics, Vaptsarov dedicates a poem to Spain in the customary vein of leftist poets in the 1930s. See *Kino*, 51-52. The poem very candidly starts "what did you mean to me? Nothing," referring to Spain, continues "But now you are my destiny" and ends bombastically "Have courage, Man! The world is ours."
[786] Gospodinov, *Kino*, 8. The fragments of the biography are based on Gospodinov's introduction to the English selection. *Kino*, 7-23.
[787] Al-Manasira reports that in 1979 a crisis broke out between the former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria about Vaptsarov's national credentials. Al-Manasira, *al-Naqd al-Thaqafi al-Muqaran*, 547-548.

sensitive, he immediately became a proletariat leader, and went on to establish an amateur theater company. The entire corpus of his work was produced in six years, from 1936 to 1942, alongside intense underground political activity, and was recognized only posthumously as being of any literary merit. In November 1940, shortly before Bulgaria joined the Axis Powers, Vaptsarov was arrested for the first time on a charge of insurgency based on a poem – "Country Chronicle."[788] His trial turned into an occasion for a literary-political debate whether his poem had autonomous artistic value or whether he had actually called for an alliance with the USSR. He was eventually acquitted and released, but the Bulgarian police monitored his clandestine activity for the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. He held secret meetings with political exiles and distributed weapons to activist cells militarized by the breakdown of the Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact. On March 4, 1942, he was arrested by the secret police. In July, he was put on trial again and convicted. On the morning of July 23, the court sentenced him to death and that night he was executed. In between, he completed the second stanza of a poem he had started after his arrest. The following is Kalina Filipova's English translation:

> The struggle is mercilessly cruel.
> The struggle, as they like to say, is epic.
> I fell. Someone else will take my place.
> That's all. What does one person matter?
>
> The firing squad. And then the worms.
> The facts can't be denied.
> But when the storm comes, my people,
> We will be there at your side.[789]

Motor Songs (1940) was chosen as the title to Vaptsarov's only poetry collection to reflect his experience as a factory machinist who declares that "romance is now in the

[788] The poem is a fictional dramatization of a political argument caused by listening jointly to the news on a radio transistor and is thus ambiguous as to the actual speaker who utters the offensive words: "so I am saying / since cooking oil / is scarce / and our bread is harder / than our pains are, / our slogan should be / Stop the terror! / Alliance with the USSR!" Trans. Bilyana Kourtasheva. *Kino*, 70-71.
[789] Vaptsarov, *Kino*, 78.

motors."[790] A slender English selection from this volume was recently published by Smokestack Books, a small British publisher with a socialist orientation and specializing in poetry. It is titled *Kino* after Vapstsarov's fascination with cinema and the cinematic in poetry. The English cover is dominated by a powerful mug shot of him upon his second arrest. One of the blurbs quotes praise from the fellow Balkan Marxist Yannis Ritsos, who considers Vaptsarov "a brother in poetry and struggle." A personal and learned introduction by Georgi Gospodinov situates the poet in context and addresses his poetry's appeal to ordinary and professional readers alike. Vaptsarov's poetry, according to him, lived a curious afterlife: after 1944, a slow process of literary recognition and canonization took shape. This process started from below, from people who had loved the poems, memorized them, and circulated them orally. But this process was interrupted by the Soviet state apparatus that co-opted him as a communist hero and hollowed out his image. Only after 1989 his literary reputation began to be reassessed again.

In terms of poetic language, Vaptsarov liked using "harsh, crude words," according to his wife's testimony. He brought Bulgarian poetry closer to the modern street and shifted the parameters of the political and the personal. A reviewer of *Kino*, George Kalamaras, determines that there is a unique blend of fierceness and tenderness in his sensibility of the political poem.[791] His poetry is strongly situated in a discursive space of newsreels, radio broadcasts, and cinema – now part of the everyday life of ordinary men and women– communicating an international vision of politics and human struggle.[792] That Vaptsarov was viewed as a political martyr facilitated his Syrian reception, but his political poems are uninformed by state ideology and aspire to be read on par with those of the great leftist poets of the 20th century and those of the

[790] Ibid., 30.
[791] Kalamaras, "Kino." This is a review of the selection for the e-journal *Rain Taxi Review of Books*. See: http://www.raintaxi.com/kino-the-poetry-of-nikola-vaptsarov/ Last visited July 16, 2018.
[792]Vaptsarov, *Kino*, 16-19.

East and Central European modernists– Mayakovski, Yesenin, and Khlebnikov; Tristan Tzara and Attila József. According to Gospodinov, his voice as a poet was enriched by personal inflections, by the way in which he made poetry talk of everyday things, tell interesting stories, use clichés lightly and transform the poem into a fiction of easy conversation as if taken from real life.[793] Kalina Filipova's translation of the poem "Song of Man" – dramatizing a dialogue between a man and a woman on "the issue of 'man in our time'" – manages to carry over this aspect.[794] It seems to closely correspond with methods by which the Syrian *shafawi* poets opened up the Arabic poem to everyday speech.

By making Vaptsarov's collection available in Syria, the translator Ahmad Sulayman al-Ahmad started on a local scale a process comparable to the one set off by Arabic translations of Ritsos and Cavafy made via English by Iraqi émigré poet Saᶜdi Yusuf.[795] These translations, and especially the Arab Ritsos, are seen as constitutive of the Arab "poetics of detail" previously mentioned. They were both printed in Beirut in 1979, and, with the help of the author's good name, were widely distributed and became influential among young practitioners of the prose poem. Ritsos' Marxist credentials and the tactful and oblique ways by which politics entered his poems were also conducive to his reception among modern Arab poets.[796] In his book on this subject, Fakhri Salih detects traces of Yusuf's Ritsos translation in the works of the Lebanese poet Wadiᶜ Saᶜada (b. 1948), the Jordanian Amjad Nasir (b. 1955), the Palestinian Walid Khaznidar (b. 1950), and the Syrians Nuri al-Jarrah (b. 1956) and Lina al-Tibi (b. 1963).[797] The

[793] Ibid., 19-20.
[794] Ibid., 41-46.
[795] Ritsos, *Imaʾat* (Dar Ibn Rushd, 1979); Kafafi [Cavafy], *Wadaᶜan al-Iskandariyyah llati Taftaqiduha* (Dar al-Farabi, 1979). Though both poets left their mark on Yusuf's own work, it is an open question why Ritsos was more enthusiastically received than Cavafy. It has no doubt something to do with his political credentials, but also with the fact that Arab poets were hungry for the objective image, and Ritsos gave them a consistent objective stance within a framework of political commitment.
[796] This aspect was especially valuable to Mahmoud Darwish who formed a personal relationship with Ritsos based, among other things, on Ritsos's support for Palestinian liberation, but on a pure poetic level, Darwish was constantly searching for something commensurable with the complex balance Ritsos held between his Greek-ness as a poet and his leftist cosmopolitan commitments.
[797] Salih, *Shiᶜriyyat al-Tafasil*, 101-124. Salih speaks of a general feeling of exhaustion among the young generation who grew up reading *Shiᶜr* magazine and were led to look for untried foreign models. He adds that by the 1970s many poets who chose to be influenced by Ritsos could

defining feature of Yusuf's selection is that he worked off of a 1974 English selection from Ritsos' work that mostly included minimalistic, hyper-realistic poems with closely observed quotidian detail made strange with paradox and enigma.[798] It was this particular aspect of Ritsos's multifaceted work (Ritsos published about a hundred volumes of poetry in his lifetime) that fertilized the Arabic poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. Interestingly, both al-Jarrah and al-Tibi, who left Syria to settle in London,[799] embraced Yusuf's Ritsos and changed their poetics accordingly, while other Syrian poets who remained behind and still wanted to keep up with the times had probably had no access to this translation. They thus turned to other emulative models.

My claim is that Bulgarian poetry such as that of Vaptsarov performed a similar function for them. That Syrian *shafawiyya* took a turn towards forms of dialogism rather than the objective minimalism of Ritsos' Arabic translations might have something to do with the centrality of Vaptsarov's experience. I am convinced that al-Husayn, for example, had devotedly pored over al-Ahmad's selection of fifteen poems from *Motor Songs*.[800] The impact is hard to locate when a poetic experience as a whole becomes a relational object, or a kind of active parabolic likeness to the original poet's experience.

The history of this edition is quite entangled and I will do my best to disentangle it without access to the books. My largest aid in accomplishing this task is found in a book written by ʿIzz al-Din al-Manasira, a Palestinian scholar who holds a PhD in comparative literature from

have done so by reading his poems in English and French (6-7). The appeal of Ritsos's poems is summarized in the following points: the effacing of the subjective I, the narrative quality and magical-realist happenings, its bareness or "austerity" and the surface simplicity undergirded with mythic layers of complexity. Ibid., 103-104.

[798] All of the poems were chosen from four of Ritsos' books published between 1972-1973: *Hints, Stones*, *Repetitions*, and *Corridor and Stairs*. Yusuf named his selection after the first of those. Perhaps one of the great misses in reading Ritsos as a poet of the miniature and small detail is the interconnectedness of the motifs from book to book and how the poems add up into a kind of novella. In their cumulative effect, they thus retain something of the ancient Greek epic. See Keeley, *Ritsos in Parenthesis*, xxiv-xxv.

[799] Unlike Baydun, I think that al-Jarrah's idiom is too rarefied to be considered representative of the *shafawi* poetics or the Maghutian lineage.

[800] This reading history is yet undocumented in the critical literature about al-Husayn, except for a short indication in al-Husayn's short bio in Saleh Diab's anthology *Poésie syrienne contemporaine*, 259. In an interview with Diab, he claims to have done research to show that Vaptsarov was a central inspiration for al-Husayn through al-Ahmad's translation. I was unable to obtain his French dissertation on modern Arabic poetry.

the University of Sofia.[801] Al-Manasira wrote his dissertation in Bulgarian on the impact of world poetry on Vaptsarov and on Palestinian resistance poetry, and presented it before the committee of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in November 1981.[802] His chapter on the reception of Vaptsarov is thus founded on intimate knowledge of both the Bulgarian original and the various Arabic editions which he traces in detective-like fashion. The first edition, as mentioned, is the selection of fourteen poems translated by al-Ahmad and published 1957 in Beirut. The translated foreword to this edition – by the Bulgarian critic Nikolai Shmirgela – became the authoritative source for most recapitulations of Vaptsarov's life and discussion of his poetry in Arabic.[803] Al-Ahmad also included interviews he had conducted with Vaptsarov's wife and mother which made the grounds for reception intensely personal. When summarizing the contents of these interviews, al-Manasira draws attention to the words of Vaptsarov's wife: "I told him to stop using some of those harsh, crude words in his poetry, but he would tell me that he must portray life as it is in all its hardship and crudeness."[804] The reason they deserve attention, observes al-Manasira, is that they are the rare exception in Vapstsarov's reception of addressing his poetry rather than his martyr status.[805] This edition was then reprinted in Damascus by the Ministry of Culture under the name *Aghani al-Muharrik* [Engine Songs, 1975]. The format including foreword and supplemental interviews was identical, but the poems seem to have undergone slight revision.[806] In spite of the title, this was not a full translation of

[801] Al-Manasira is generationally on par with the *shafawi* poets and is thus of a more historicist and cosmopolitan sensibility than the first generation of Arabs in Bulgaria. His work is set forth in a chapter of his voluminous *al-Naqd al-Thaqafi al-Muqaran* [Comparative Cultural Criticism], 546-566.
[802] Ibid., 566 (n. 22).
[803] Ibid., 550-551. See for example Muhyi al-Din Subhi, "Fabzaruf Shaʿir Bulghariya al-Shahid [Vaptsarov, Bulgaria's Martyr Poet]," *Al-Thaqafa al-Usbuʿiyya* 8 (August 1960), 49-50. This short review is written on the occasion of the jubilee to Vaptsarov's birth "celebrated by all the literary progressive circles in the world."
[804] Al-Manasira, *al-Naqd al-Thaqafi al-Muqaran*, 551.
[805] Al-Subhi's review rehashes the biographical details and emphasizes its heroic aspects. The poems cited by him must be al-Ahmad's translations, though the translator is, alas, left unacknowledged. I use these citations later on to reconstruct the wording of the 1957 edition.
[806] This conjecture is based on multiple Arabic versions of the key poems found circulating on-line. One version appears in a short feature by an anonymous author for the literary supplement of the Saudi *al-Jazira* newspaper titled "Qasaʾid Mutarjama min al-Adab al-Bulghari," in *al-Jazira* 16 July 1999. http://www.al-jazirah.com/1999/19990716/wn7.htm [Last visited August 11, 2018]. It cites two poems and references *Aghani al-Muharrik* by Katia al-Ahmad, which suggests that al-Ahmad's wife is at least partly responsible for the Bulgarian version. The version of

Vaptsarov's collection: the number of selected poems was actually reduced from fifteen in the Beirut edition to fourteen.

In between these editions, another Lebanese version was produced in an anthology of Bulgarian poetry. The translator, Fuʾad Khashin, included three poems by Vaptsarov: "Faith," "Valediction" and the untitled "the struggle is mercilessly cruel." The latter two are his life's last and thus permeated with the pathos of his death. Al-Manasira appreciates both efforts made by Vaptsarov's translators to get it right but finds many inaccuracies and faulty departures from the language of the original.[807]According to him, Khashin must have resorted to the French since his command of Bulgarian was weak, and his translations suffer from over-affectedness and a monotonic use of Arabic prosody. Al-Ahmad's moderately prosified versions read quite well in comparison to this description.

Yet much like al-Shamʿa's translations of Ferlinghetti, even when a poem's semantics are accurately literalized, the large distance between Bulgarian and Arab poetic cultures generates bumps and wrinkles. When Vaptsarov's poem declares "No it's not a good time for poetry / for the ringing joy of a rhyme"[808] and then proceeds to develop a poetic argument in quatrains deprived of end-rhymes, the overall effect in Arabic is entirely altered by the "literal" translation of rhyme as *qāfiya*. Not only is the mono-rhyme structure of the classical *qāfiya* much stricter and more recondite than the ABAB quatrain; the meanings it communicates are incommensurable with prosodic structures in Bulgarian. "You start to write and suddenly / not a rhyme but a shell explodes,"[809] says the poem in Filipova's rendering, and in terms of semantics,

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"Valediction" is almost identical to the one cited by al-Subhi in 1960 with one minor difference in word choice: *wa-lā tatrukīnī khārijan ʿalā* al-aʿtāb */ wa-lā tuwsidī bi-wajhī al-abwāb.*" The rhyme reflects the Damascus edition. The word *aʿtāb* (thresholds) chosen to rhyme with *abwāb* (doors) replaces *ṭarīq*, road, which is the more literally accurate choice. Other on-line circulating versions correspond with the *tarīq* wording of the Beiruti edition. The poem is discussed in detail later on.

[807]Al-Manasira, *Al-Naqd al-Thaqafi al-Muqaran*, 553-555.

[808] Vaptsarov, *Kino*, 74.

[809] Ibid.

the Arabic is no different: *taʾkhudhu bi-l-kitābati wa-hākadhā badalan mina al-qāfiyati / tanfajiru qunbulatun.*[810] But the clamor of war has rarely before interfered with composition in *qāfiya*. On the contrary, Kheir Beik's stately columns of poetry practically trumpet war and so do many qasidas couched in classical prosody. The event of translation, even at a minimal literal level, introduces an entire cultural complex or sensibility by which poetry is seen as esthetically detached and the socially conscious poem is constructed as an austere anti-poem in relation to esthetic falsity. The parameters of politics and esthetics communicated here are patently different from the conventional ones couched in old Arab prosody. Yet, as I argue in the previous chapters, this whole sensibility can be made commensurable in Arabic owing to the reiterative dialectic introduced by Arab modernism.

Tunneling Across: Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn as Reader of Vaptsarov

In this section, I will finally try to locate the points of contact between poems by Vaptsasrov and the *shafawi* output on mid-level resolution of attitudes, themes, and key images. The fine resolution of stylistic correspondence is beyond my purview, and I will still have to triangulate via English to assess this translation's impact. The focus will fall on three poems by Vapsarov which al-Husayn seems to have carefully read: "History," "Valediction" and the aforementioned "the struggle is mercilessly cruel." The Arabic version of "History" is, alas, irretrievable at present. "Valediction" was found to have two relatively literal Arabic versions with minor differences between them. As will be noted towards the end, "The struggle" seems to have suffered from a romantic amplification in the 1975 Damascus edition.[811]

[810] Quoted in Subhi, "Fabzaruf Shaʿir Bulghariya al-Shahid," 50.
[811] Quoted from the on-line version on *al-Jazira*. See note no. 807.

Starting from his second volume *Asatir Yawmiyya* [Daily Myths, 1980], Riyad al-al-Salih al-Husayn steps up his intertextual game of reference to foreign authors. It is at this point that Zorba emerges as a model for masculinity, that French and Italian poets serve as epigraphs, that poems grow shorter and more concise, and that meta-poetic statements such as this one appear: "Yes, they are very small things, / small things yet not insignificant: / houses, shops, sidewalks, hunger / and also / a poem sleeping in an old magazine."[812] His next volume's opening cycle is titled "Tafasil [Details]." It opens with an attempt to describe a smell. Neither a stench nor perfume, this smell cannot be transparently worded. It is "sharp and wavering," a smell of poverty "like the tears of a little girl crying for her torn-up doll":

> It enters my room bashful in the early mornings
> Washes my face
> Listens, like me, to a sad song coming from deep down,
> A smell
> That always reminds me
> Of soldiers coming home from war
> Of the sea
> Of a young woman who used to chase me laughing
> Through cotton fields.[813]

Even though the imagistic syntax is Maghutian, the subject matter and the its handling are different. Al-Maghut's hyperbolic smells would have no middle ground between sewage and roses. The indistinct smell chosen by al-Husayn is worked out as a figure for historical life in the lower rungs, an abstraction beyond moral categories and irreducible to either grotesque or sublime beauty.[814] This amorphous life is translated into equivocating adjective clusters (sharp, wavering, and poor) and the images are of mixed emotional import, combining exhaustion, joyousness, bitterness, eroticism, and maudlin Hollywoodish sentiment. The theme of the poem

[812] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 110.
[813] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 139.
[814] Maybe by mere coincidence, the first fully-formed expression of an anti-literary novelistic sensibility that expanded the limits of the Arabic novel is Sonallah Ibrahim's *That Smell* (trans. Robyn Creswell, New York: New Directions, 2013). Not unlike al-Maghut, Ibrahim stakes a claim on the real rooted in prison experience and the indistinct sense of defeat that accompanies the novel's antihero. The notes for the novel were taken, like the drafts for al-Maghut's "The Killing," on Bafra-brand cigarette boxes.

"Some Smell" is not a smell at all, but a sense of the times and the poem's reworking of it on human terms of a "sad song coming from deep down." The "real" is not only sleazy and raw but also animated by will and potency. Some measure of objectivity is conferred on it by not simply tagging it as disagreeable. The smell is hard to pin down because it is of a continuous present in which a personal history and a personal future, a mythology of the everyday, are shaped and reshaped. The poem thus represents a dynamic concept of microhistory where things are left open-ended. The quotidian detail and the soldiers returning from war situate us in the anti-poetic field of poetry, and thus in the twentieth century tough-minded realistic sensibility. Poverty is a mistranslation of *miskīn*, the wonderfully rich word of Turkish origin meaning poor, miserable, dirty or any combination thereof. The theme of social and political *maskana* has risen to prominence with the Leftist poets of the twentieth century. In al-Husayn's case, the non-privileged poet does not have to go out and seek the downtrodden masses. It is enough to examine his own *miskīn* life and give it voice. Yet the imperative not to unduly sentimentalize poverty of existence, to objectivize it poetically as it were, has been felt with equal pressure.

This poem, I want to argue, takes up not only the theme, but also the direction of handling it from Vaptsarov's long poem "History." Part of the force of that poem is that despite its anti-poetic tendencies, it is marshalled in ABAB rhyming quatrains in the original Bulgarian. Peter Tempest and Bilyana Kourtasheva both render it in a formal English equivalent. Whether al-Ahmad did so is unknown, but the rest of his translated poems suggest that he didn't. Judging by precedents, the stanza structure would be broken and rendered in prose translation with some register heightening and the occasional rhyme. Here are fragments from Tempest's more elevated version:

> History, will you mention us
> In your faded scroll?
> We worked in factories, offices -

Our names were not well known.

We worked in fields, smelled strongly
Of onions and sour bread.
Through thick moustaches angrily
We coursed the life we led.

Will you at least be grateful
We fattened you with news,
And slaked your thirst so richly
With the blood of slaughtered crowds?

You'll lose the human focus
To view the panorama,
And no one will remember
The simple human drama.[815]

Recording the simple human drama effaced by History is associated by imagery with capturing the palpable and bodily, since official writing cannot withstand the actualities embodied in the smell of onions and sour bread. But the bodily repulsive imagery is also used for the supposed cleanliness of news reports whose dishonest cover-up is regurgitated by pamphleteering poets:

The poets will be distracted
With pamphlets, progress rates;
Our unrecorded suffering
Will roam alone in space.

And then the olfactory sense of the real is revealed again as emerging from the underworld of soil- and factory-workers:

Was it a life worth nothing
A life worth digging up?
Unearthed, it reeks of poison,
Tastes bitter in the cup.

Vaptsarov goes on to delineate a poetic microhistory of those whose suffering goes unnoticed in the first-person plural. One of the powerful things that any literal translation would

[815] Quoted from Nikola Yonkov Vaptsarov, *Poems* (trans. Peter Tempest). Sofia: Committee for Science, Art, and Culture, 1952, 39. For full poem see 39-41. See also on-line version at https://archive.org/stream/NikolaYonkovVaptsarovSelectedPoems/bulgaria_vaptsarov_djvu.txt. Last visited February 17, 2019.

capture is the milestones in this collective biography which, in the English at least, reads like a hybrid between a ballad and rudimentary film plot:

> We were born along the hedgerows,
> In the shelter of the stray thorns
> Our mothers lay perspiring
> Their dry lips tightly drawn.
>
> We died like flies in autumn.
> The women mourned the dead,
> Turned their lament to singing -
> But only the wild grass heard.
>
> We who survived our brothers,
> Sweated from every pore,
> Took any job that offered,
> Toiled as the oxen do.
>
> At home our fathers taught us:
> "So shall it always be."
> But we scowled back and spat on
> Their fool's philosophy.
>
> We kicked the table over,
> Ran out of doors, and there
> In the open felt the stirring
> Of something bright and fair.
>
> How anxiously we waited
> In little-known cafes,
> And turned in late at night
> Of something bright and fair.
>
> How we were soothed in hoping!
> But leaden skies pressed lower,
> The scorching wind hissed viciously
> Till we could stand no more!

With the past promise of “something bright and fair” dispelled, the poem pins its hope on the manner by which collective misery will receive an adequate expression with a “raw tongue” and lie hidden under the lines of scripted victorious speech:

> Yet in your endless volumes
> Beneath each letter and line
> Our pain will leer forbiddingly
> And rise a bitter cry.
>
> For life, showing no mercy,
> With heavy brutish paw
> Battered our hungry faces.

That's why our tongue is raw.

That's why the poem I'm writing
In hours I steal from sleep,
Have not the grace of perfume,
But brief and scowling beat.

For the hardship and affliction
We do not seek rewards,
Nor do we want our pictures
In the calendar of years.

Just tell our story simply
To those we shall not see,
Tell those who will replace us -
We fought courageously.

Bilyana Kourtasheva renders the key lines about late-night poem composition as follows: "and why, in the early hours / the poems that we write / are sullen and brief / not perfumed and bright."[816] The appeal of writing "sullen and brief" poems removed from the deceitful literary perfumes goes back to the al-Maghut's rancor against the princely silkiness of Arabic poetry.

Much of what would be gained in translation rides on the change of the "we" in Vaptsarov's poem. For al-Husayn, the Communist network of activists had ceased to exist. Nor is the national community a very viable collective framework. The plural of al-Husayn's poems is a much less political pronoun, more individualized and more universal at the same time. Subtracting other collectives, it may be construed as referring to the world society of modern poets assumed in Enzensberger's foreword. These are the discontinuities. And yet in terms of the continuity, Al-Husayn's "we" tries to retell the simple story mandated by Vaptsarov's poetic will of testament, including in it the *miskīn* individuals living in Syria with no such collective hopes of a future change of guard. By doing so, it fulfils its witness obligation to Vaptsarov and enlarges the potential meanings of "History" far beyond its contextual limits.

[816] Vaptsarov, *Kino*, 66. For Kourtasheva's full translation see: ibid., 64-66.

Al-Husayn's major poem "Bayna Yadayka Ayyuha al-ᶜAlam [Standing Before You, World]" can be fruitfully read as a fuller intertext reshaping Vaptsarov's "History."[817] The parameters have shifted from History – a term loaded with class struggle, politics and society – to World, whose connotations are more poetic and existential. The subjective singular I takes the poem forward and at times switches to the plural in the mode of al-Husayn's *Ana-nas* (Pineapple, same spelling as I-People). When it does, the similarities to Vaptsarov are quite striking except that the revolutionary visions of the future are gone:

> […]
> Time will never change
> Time has never changed
> Summer like autumn
> Saturday like Sunday like Wednesday
> What ceaselessly changes
> Is us
> We who go to wars, factories, and pastures
> And invent everything related to us
> Bullets and bread
> Prisons and freedom
> Cigarettes and pens
> […]
> We do all that we can
> Standing before you, world[818]

The marked transition from courageous fight to getting by can be otherwise expressed as a change from being "at strife with life"[819] to sensing that life is "closed-shut"[820] yet accompanied by vapid discourse of struggle. Al-Husayn trusts that this resigned stance will be more accommodating to the world and by extension to the poem. Aside from the obvious Maghutian paraphernalia, the rhetoric of the poem operates continuously with merismic tropes, merism being an entirety constructed as a combination of two poles such as in the opening verse of the Hebrew Bible: "In the Beginning, God created *heaven and earth.*" The *merismos* go along

[817] Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal*, 170-178.
[818] Ibid., 170-171.
[819] Vaptsarov, *Kino*, 27.
[820] Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal*, 228.

with the humanizing holism implied in the concept World and its correlative in individual consciousness. This lends the poem a static, anti-narrative character. For long stretches, it is dominated by a confessional, digressive speaker resembling the one we encountered in "Smoke." The mode of address to the world is then revealed as a supplication or a plea for recognition, like an orphan begging for parenthood to be acknowledged. Demanding to be adopted and recognized entails a demand for freedom, an individual's freedom to carry the world rather than be determined by it. This individual freedom would be best understood as corresponding to the most elementary sense of Article 3 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person." In the poem's words, it is the right emanating from having a personal name, and this makes al-Husayn's singular self paradigmatic and representational: "standing before you, world / I count my wars and defeats and victories / and record the names of the executioners and victims / the names of lovers and losers and adventurers […] / and I will not forget my own name / my sole and singular recurring name / known to everyone and unknown to all / Mahmud or Elias or Miriam / Riyad or Suzanne or [c]Adil / That's none of my business."[821] Vaptsarov, remember, wrote in his last poem that the individual person doesn't matter. Here the name matters, but universally so: if one matters, then all matter.

To drive the point home, al-Husayn's last switch to the plural is introduced by juxtaposing the tautology "The state is the state" with the refrain "standing before you, world" as if to suggest that the state by nature will be malicious, and the individual as such relies on the world's good will. This is where the poem reveals the political underpinnings of soliciting recognition from the world:

> Standing before you, world

[821] Ibid., 175.

We are not happy
Standing before you, world
We are not wretched
We are nothing, null
This is what the breeze says
This is what America says
Standing before you, world
We call out repeating the words:
Freedom…freedom…freedom
Bread…bread…bread
Love…love… love[822]

Al-Husayn has adapted Vaptsarov's poem and reframed its context to suit what seems like an even more acute crisis in Syria of the 1980s, where political action and the struggle for a better life – even through underground activity – are nullified. What needs to be saved is not the "simple human drama," or the story of "unrecorded suffering"; it precedes narrative and dramatic action. It is the life and dignity of the person at an existential base-level.

One of the predicaments through which al-Husayn and other poets needed guidance was how to stay connected to the stream of common life, which is overall bleak and inundated with crude symbolism, and yet write non-ideological life-affirming poems. With al-Husayn, the strategy is often to pass through negations of what pretends to be life-giving but is actually nullifying. There are several variations on this theme, one of which includes a prominent intertextual allusion to Vaptsarov's poem "Kino." In that poem, the speaker derives a harsh realistic effect of actual life from contrasting it with "human drama" as depicted on movie posters and on the film screen. Hollywood-produced films are presented as a sordid commercial business selling unreal myths as real life. Here is Bilyana Kourtasheva's English version:

The lights dim
And in the white rectangle
The Metro-Goldwyn lion
Yawns drowsily.
Suddenly –
A highway,
Then a wood
And in the background

[822] Ibid., 177-178.

Sky, so vastly blue.

On the bend in the highway,
Two fancy limousines
meet.
Say hello to our hero
And heroine.

Though the ideological denunciation of cinema is commonly found in Marxist thinking, the grounds for critique here are not those of modernist refinement but of "common people" who are also enticed by the medium's glamor. The speaker rehearses the enticing details of the movie, if only for the sake of indignation and derision:

After the crash
The breathless girl behind the wheel
Falls into the arms of steel.
She opens her eyes
And stares.
Such burning, swimming eyes,
Man – what a girl!
What a thoroughbred mare.
[…]
A soft-focused John
Kisses Greta passionately –
Lustful slobber on his lips.
Enough!
Where is the 'drama'?
Where am I in all this? Well?
The loaded gun of these explosive times
Is held against our minds.

How can we love and grieve
With such naïve serenity?
Our chests are full of smoke
Our lungs are full of cavities

Is this the way
We really meet –
In limousines?
Our love is born
From toil
Between the smoke,
The soot,
And the machine.

After that – grey life,
The fight for bread,
Vague dreams;
And in the night, the narrow bed
Where we unnoticed fade away.
This is the real human drama.

This is our plight.
The rest –
Is lies.[823]

Not spelled out in this poem, however, is the underlying assumption that the 'real' human drama is believed to be played out by the forces of History with the underclasses as heroes and heroines. There is thus an implied call to battle against the mind industry of Hollywood. The harsh present is pitted with strife towards a brighter future envisioned as possible to achieve by cooperative work and joint struggle. Al-Husayn envisions his future only as far as tomorrow. It is envisioned on altered terms of impasse and despair, and his realistic impulse is directed towards the smaller sphere of the private and quotidian, as if the basic right to be let alone to "fade away" in bed was endangered. Italicized are the Vaptsarov-inspired passages:

Beginning is tomorrow
And tomorrow is not an elegant tie or a fancy shoe
Beginning is tomorrow
And tomorrow is not chopped-up words or the Havana conference[824]
Beginning is tomorrow
And tomorrow under the gallows or between chains
I will demand a new life
Since the life that we see on TV ads
And the life drowsing on the sidewalks
Is not the life we want.
[…]
Tomorrow
In extreme simplicity and despair
I will hold out my hand and demand only:
Work, bread, books, security, travel, etc.[825]

The gallows and chains are treated as a fact of life and al-Husayn's demands reflect middle-class standards which would be considered reactionary in Vaptsarov's mighty vision of the future. The reality of the one-party authoritarian state made this difference.

[823]Vaptsarov, *Kino*, 67-69. The film referred to is with all probability the silent movie *Woman of Affairs* (1928), in which Greta Garbo stars alongside John Gilbert. The two had also engaged in a widely publicized affair off the screens.
[824] An important summit of the top US crime families memorably represented in Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather II* (1974).
[825] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 179.

In many of al-Husayn's poems, the life-affirming element is bound up with the awareness of living as if in a mass grave. After passing the threshold of death, the dead go on living in a surreally normal human way, as in the following short poem:

> the boy on the bike
> happy, laughing, delirious
> rides around in the grave's courtyard
>
> (when he was alive
> he fell off the bike and died)
>
> the boy in the grave's courtyard
> riding a bike of bones
> happy, laughing, delirious. [826]

The dismaying effect is made possible by the matter-of-factness and the parenthetical comment, enabling suspension between real and imaginary. A feeling of uncanniness along the lines of Todorov's conception of the fantastic creeps into this poem and others like it.[827] What's anti-literary about this literary trick is that, rhetorically at least, it shares its prerogative of time-transcending belonging to a literary continuum with an image of a commoner's "unimportant" life and death. An indivisible continuum belonging to no one, life knows no end. Conversely, the artist crafts his work, as does the boy on the bike, with bones, making no esthetic objects from them, but lasting cultural artifacts of common use often found in archeological digs: rings, earrings, plates and cups.[828]

Life in such poems is stripped of transcendental justification but not of a sense of indivisible continuum shared by persons one and all, living and dead. Vapstsarov had only marginally touched on this ghostly theme. It emerges in his next to last poem dedicated to his wife:

> **Valediction**
> *For my wife*

[826] Two prominent poems that create this effect are positioned almost side-by side in al-Husayn's posthumous collection: "Fannan [Artist]" and "al-Darraja [the Bicycle]." Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 238, 240 respectively.
[827] See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre* (trans. Richard Howard; Cornell Paperbacks, 1975), 24-40.
[828] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 238.

Sometimes I'll come home in your dreams,
And sit and watch you as you sleep.
Just leave the door upon the latch,
Then in the darkness I will keep

My soft and silent bedside watch,
An unexpected guest, and when
My eyes have drunk their fill of you,
I'll kiss you, then I'll go again.[829]

A literal translation of Al-Ahmad's Arabic translation would run thus:[830]

I will come to you in your light sleep
Like a distant, unexpected visitor
Don't leave me out on the thresholds
Don't shut the door in my face
I will enter noiselessly
And sit quietly
My eyes will be fixated in the darkness
On your face
And when I will have looked at you until I've exhausted my eyes
I will hug you and then leave.

Though unnecessarily wordy, al-Ahmad's translation faithfully carries over the core meanings of the poem. Nonetheless, two differences between these translations are noteworthy: first, the English translator tries to maintain a formal equivalence by keeping the two ABAB stanzas, while al-Ahmad lumps the two together. And second, al-Ahmad takes a few liberties in elaborating the plain language of this parting poem: an unexpected guest or visitor becomes "distant" in addition to unexpected. The door of the house becomes "doors" lest she by accident leave the back door locked as well, and the plea "don't leave me on the street" becomes "don't leave me out on the thresholds." These two changes are made so as to rhyme *abwāb* (doors) and *aʿtāb* (thresholds), a CC rhyme which is the only one in the Arabic. The gaze in the dark is denoted in Arabic as eyes "nailed" on the wife's face, adding yet another metaphor to the sparse

[829] Vaptsarov, *Kino*, 77. Judging by al-Ahmad's translation, Tempest's version is closer to the original order of presentation and Filipova shifted things around a little bit.
[830] For reference see n. 806.

imagery. And in the end, the poet does not kiss his wife, but "enwraps" her (*ṭawwaqa*) which along with the fixated gaze suggests an obsessively protective husband rather than a tender one.

Vaptsarov's poem calls up a central theme in al-Husayn's oeuvre: how the narrow world of love suddenly becomes a form of meaningful defiance when the poet's personal life caves in under politics. Al-Husayn has written several poems in this vein, some of which appear to be directly inspired by Vaptsarov's way of treatment. The inspiration is premised on seeing Vaptsarov as both a pedestrian civilian-poet and a freedom fighter. One poem seems to allude to Vaptsarov himself as a living-dead presence: "look at him / look only at him / his body has decomposed / a long time ago / and still he carries the flag of freedom."[831]Though this third-person referent can be practically anyone, the reference to the decomposing body is a give-away that its intertext is Vaptsarov's last poem "the struggle is mercilessly cruel" with its line about the worms. The imperative "Look" is in the male plural form, directing group attention to a master or prophet as a disciple would alert followers to a miracle performed by a holy man. The idolizing of Vapstarov as a fighter seems to be directed by the heroic amplification of al-Ahmad's Arabic version: *man yasqutu fī maᶜrakat al-ḥurriya/ lā yamūtu abadan / la yastaṭīᶜu an yamūta.*[832] These lines are a fanciful addition by the Arab translator: they have no trance in both English versions of this poem, nor in the Bulgarian original.

Al-Husayn's poem "al-ᶜAshiq [the Lover]" pays homage to Vaptsarov's valediction poem to his wife. The illusion of a private missive and the visitation of the poet's ghost in "Valediction" seem to stand in stark contrast to Vaptsarov's last poem before the firing squad with its impersonal mercilessness, corporeal inevitability, and promise of a collective future. In fact, both poems are charged with tension between personal and collective and differ in

[831] Al-Husayn, *al-Aᶜmal*, 221.
[832] "He who falls in the battle for freedom / will never die / cannot die." For reference to the Arabic version see n. 803, 806.

emphasis, one is tender, the other fierce. Al-Husayn connects to the former aspect rather than the latter, yet renders the feeling archetypal, the I-voice becomes "the lover" and the wife becomes a generic beloved who cannot be reached:

> The lover digs with his fingernails
> Through the grave's earth
> Digs in the remains of history
> Has been digging for a thousand years
> Digs to arrive
> Digs painlessly
> (the dead do not feel pain)
> and the dead lover
> wants to reach the person he loves
> and will keep digging with his teeth and fingernails
> through the grave's earth
> he will keep digging forever.[833]

If taken to be a poem-after-the-poet, al-Husayn undermines the assumption that a dead poet can ethereally wander to greet his wife after he's buried. That fiction, we may infer, was founded on the belief in a poet's special immaterial status conferred on him by election and by belonging in the tradition of poetry. With the examples of Lorca, Yesenin and Mayakovski, Vapstrarov would suppose that his name too will have an individual's afterlife. This is where second-world and third-world poetries part ways. As a disinherited person, al-Husayn's threadbare existence cannot put faith in the poetic tradition or the fiction of individual afterlife for the poet. He has to tunnel his way out like a gopher and is doomed to fail. He will dig forever. Is it because of collective amnesia with respect to him? Is it because of the distrust of historical change, the belief that no new vantage points of the past will ever emerge to "unearth" him? There is something truly terrible about this finality of disconnect between living and dead, a terribleness on a different scale from the terror of the firing squad. It is terrible because it is an image of the tunneled life from which the lover came.

[833] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal, 242*.

Thinking about connection or disconnect between the living and the dead inevitably leads to a mediation on tradition and translation. How can a loving voice from the dead – Vaptsarov in this case – dig his way from Bulgaria to Syria? What goes into the imagination involved in reading poetry in mediocre prose translation, having no more than fifteen poems and badly wishing to hear more of the foreignness of the voice? The tunnel work of translation is likewise doomed to fail: all one visibly gets is the earth in the gopher's tunnel entrance, especially when a conservative translation culture conceals difference. Yet the engine of burrowing, the *production désirante*, knows no boundaries. Voices dead to us, foreign voices, can be heard even through cloddish, assimilative translations. It hinges on the force of a reader's desire-driven digging. And digging here would be a metaphor not solely for seeking understanding through hermeneutics but for any form of writing. It is through poetic composition, I suppose, that al-Husayn the reader pickaxed his way to the "surprise of otherness,"[834] encountering Vaptsarov in some hybridized Arabic version of his own making, waiting to greet him as yet another poet-friend. This hypothetical encounter is intimated by the growing presence of the third person ("lover") in al-Husayn's late poetry: a sign that the warm, exuberant, confessional rhapsodist was estranging himself, moving to higher plains of apperception. This change was produced by, among other things, merging with the foreign selves he met in translation. Through all the veils and missteps, something did arrive "at the neighbor's house."

[834] The phrase is taken from Barbara Johnson's "Nothing Fails Like Success," where she discusses ways of re-energizing de-constructionist literary approaches after institutional enervation sets in. Johnson's surprise refers to the intellectual surprises elicited by the self-critical moments of theoretical investigations "A reading is strong, I would therefore submit, to the extent that it encounters and propagates the surprise of otherness. The impossible but necessary task of the reader is to set herself up to be surprised." See: *The Surprise of Otherness: The Barbara Johnson Reader* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2014), 331-332. For full essay see 328-333.

CHAPTER 5: THE VIEW FROM ALEPPO: THE UNIVERSITY FORUM, ITS TRADITIONS, ITS CRITICS, ITS POETS

I The Formation of the Aleppo Literary Forum

Aleppo \ Fuʾad Muhammad Fuʾad

Where letters are locked up in mailboxes
and the passerby
moving from one café to another,
drinks his coffee salted.
where boredom rises up
stone after stone
and the old epic tales
are no good anymore
for passing the time.

Peace be upon you, insects
climbing up the table
the waiter
will clear you out
with one blow
from his dirty rag![835]

By the late 1970s, Hafiz al-Assad had managed to successfully co-opt the Damascene middle classes, whose urbanization and material enrichment went hand-in-hand with the social premium attached to the rising membership in the Baath. The Syrian capital was overrun by an aspirant and newly embourgeoised bureaucratic class which – with its mostly countryside Alawite origins – owed its ascendance to the regime's favoritism. The new Damascene bourgeoisie was by nature quiescent and compliant, and largely indifferent to the universal well-being of Syrians.[836] The overtaking of Damascus as seat of rule bode well for al-Assad's efforts to consolidate and monopolize political power but did not spell auspicious signs for the low-key literary scene described in chapter 3. The core of this new class was ambitious in terms of social climbing and yet disinterested in art, a reality severing the connection between literary production, its material base of production in the petit-bourgeoisie, and its readerly consumption by the sedate

[835] Quoted in Diab, *Poèsie syrienne contemporaine*, 302. From Fuʾad's *al-Matruk Janiban* [The One Left Aside], Damascus, 1998.
[836] Hinnebusch, *Revolution from Above*, 97.

bourgeoisie. As this middle class was expanding, the regime was at the same time intent on containing its growing power and preventing it from attaining self-consciousness which would raise demands for more political freedoms. This strategy put Damascus under increased pressure of security forces and eventually led to a serious legitimation crisis.[837]It also further constrained the limits of free speech in the state-sponsored venues presented before and pushed out the minimally independent voices.

This would be the prelude to explaining the relocation of creative energies from Damascus to Aleppo sometime around 1980. Until the late seventies, Aleppo – dominated by a robust, devout and diversified Sunni middle class – had stayed warily clear of baathization and watched askance as Damascus asserted its primacy.[838] The two Syrian cities are famously interlocked in historical rivalry whose parameters of local-patriotism and city-pride are articulated by contrast with one another. Fouad Ajami generously describes the contest between them:

> In the Ottoman centuries, the two cities were the seats of provinces that answered directly to Istanbul. They had entirely different mental geographies: Damascus, the gathering point of the annual pilgrimage to the holy cities, looked eastward to the Hijaz and westward to Beirut as its port, but Aleppo's world was oriented northward toward Anatolia, and to southwest Iraq. Its port was Alexandretta, which would be lost to the Turkish state in 1939. If political and religious primacy belonged to Damascus, the edge in commerce belonged to Aleppo. In the early years of the last century, Damascus carried the banner of Arab nationalism, and Aleppo was slow to stir to the movement. The urban cultures differed: Damascus was sure of itself and its political and religious mission, whereas the Aleppines were more flexible and supple—the Anatolian world was near, the hinterland was Kurdish, and the city was favored by Western consuls and merchants. Only grudgingly did the Aleppines, in the course of the struggle for independence, and the development of the Syrian state in the aftermath of World War II, come to accept the primacy of Damascus. There remained in them the pride of memory, and the stubborn conviction that they had been shortchanged by the rise of Damascus. Politics trumped economics and trade in Syria's turbulent history, and there settled upon the Aleppines a subdued sentiment that this new political world was unkind to their beloved home.[839]

[837] On the formation of this class and its political co-opting see ibid., 91-93.
[838] Ajami mentions that in 1979 the Baath party had numbered only 600 members in a city of over a million inhabitants. Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Revolution*, 40.
[839] Fouad Ajami, "The Honor of Aleppo," in: *The New Republic*, March 1, 2012, 22-23 (full article 22-28). Re-printed in Ajami's *In This Arab Time*, 47-67.

T.E. Lawrence was under the impression that the city's strength as a longstanding commercial center lay in its capacity to accommodate "the races, creeds, and tongues of the Ottoman Empire" and make them meet in "in a spirit of compromise."[840] Though worldly, this mercantile spirit is famously prudent and not as fond of change as that of Beirut. "The Cairene and Damascene always respond impetuously, the Aleppine only after consulting his mother," goes a local proverb.[841] The city had historically developed its own brand of cosmopolitanism, its own etiquette and sense of urbanity, its food culture and manners, its gentlemanly ideals (*halabi chalabi*, goes another proverb[842]), and its own dialect, whose pronunciation is said to be hard-edged and "mean business" in comparison to the effete Damascenes with their prolonged clausula-like sentence endings. The hegemony of the Ottoman millet system provides the base structure for Aleppine tolerance. It is often claimed that Damascus belongs to Arabs, Aleppo to merchants, but this mercantile identity is deeply embedded in the pre-national Islamic identity formations that allowed it to flourish. When modern ideas of nationality came around, a thick layer of conservativism and suspicion towards the new was added to the calculating manners of Aleppine merchants. This history was gradually receding into the memories of Aleppines, as the twentieth-century reality of their modern city, especially after the Baathist takeover, was heading towards political solutions very far removed from its illustrious tolerance and worldliness.

The Sunni landowners of Aleppo who have historically dominated (and exploited) the rural provinces around them were the immediate losers from the agrarian reform and land re-distribution of the 1960s. They thus justifiably feared change initiated by the political center in

[840] Cited by Ajami in "The Honor of Aleppo," 23.
[841] This proverb, quoted in Ajami's article, first appears in Kheir al-Din al-Asadi's *Comparative Encyclopedia of Aleppo*, from which it made its way into Abraham Marcus' eye-opening book *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity* (1989), 33.
[842] Ibid. Marcus interprets this saying as a self-projection of the Aleppine gentleman as "tolerant, composed, and sober." The urbane gentlemanly ideal is articulated in contrast to the countryside folk who were traditionally viewed with scorn by Aleppine urbanites. *Chalabi* betrays the roots of this self-conception and signal to what extent Aleppine cosmopolitanism was predicated on pride in mastering types of aristocratic refinement in the Ottoman world.

Damascus. When the regime's legitimacy eroded in the mid-seventies due to economic setbacks and unpopular interventions against the Palestinians in the Lebanese civil war, the stratum of educated Sunni professionals and artisans – hostile to the Baathi rule in the first place – gravitated more decidedly towards Islamic movements of protest against a regime identified with Alawite sectarianism.[843] The urban-rural divide – perhaps the most divisive fault-line of political identification in Syria[844] – does not map neatly onto religious identity as it often does: the urban population was religiously pre-inclined and when push came to shove, it resorted to forming alliances between the souk and the mosque. The rural countryside, however, tied its fate to the corporatism of the secular Baath and by extension to the power of the Assadist state which could coerce the Sunni merchants to abide by its policies.

Between 1979-1981, the regime came to a bloody head-on collision with the Aleppine branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and its sympathizers. Previously split between three factions, the Brotherhood steadily pushed internal conflict to the background and stood behind the Hamawite militant faction called the Fighting Vanguard.[845] Events gravely escalated after a Sunni army Captain by the name of Ibrahim Yusuf summoned 300 military cadets to the assembly hall of the Aleppo artillery school. Reading from a list he had prepared in advance, Yusuf called out the names of the Alawite cadets as a militia stormed into the hall and shot dead several dozen of them, while others were severely injured and mutilated. For the next year and a half, Aleppo was virtually under siege, gripped by a series of armed confrontations between regime forces and Islamic militia cells supported by segments of the local population. These included demonstrations and strikes but also violent targeting of police patrols and government

[843] On this polarizing process see Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, 39-40, 84-85; and Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 95-103. The gradual radicalization of the Aleppine Sunni middle class was given an epic novelistic representation in Khaled Khalifa's *Madih al-Karahiyya* (2006) [English translation *In Praise of Hatred*, 2014].
[844] Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, 90.
[845] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 262.

officials. In March 1980, the opposition shut down the Aleppo business district for two weeks, an act of political defiance that hastened the regime's retaliation. The Syrian army's 3rd Division was redeployed from Lebanon and its 30,000 men stationed on the city's outskirts. The government attack, led by al-Assad's Special Forces, was launched on April 1. Over the month of April, hundreds were killed in street warfare, sometimes within the narrow alleyways of the souk. By May the government regained control of Aleppo but was then repeatedly hit by insurgency attacks that were met with brutal retaliatory killings. Serious de-escalation was reached in Aleppo by February 1981, yet this had only been the first round in an open conflict that would continue to be played out in more brutal ways. An attempt on the President's life that summer resulted in mass executions of hundreds of Islamic prisoners in Palmyra prison. And in Aleppo's smaller sister-city Hama a year later, the regime's fury was unleashed with greater ferocity, resulting in thousands of civilian casualties, the exact number of which has not been determined.[846]

These events have more than an oblique relationship to events in literary culture. As Batatu notes, the Islamic uprising had also emboldened other cultures of secular opposition.[847] Al-Assad's cautious pragmatism had initially dictated a guarded approach to civilian uproar for which violence was a last remedy after softer methods of containment had been tried. On October 9, 1979, the president held a seven-hour conference meeting with the Arab Writers Union in which grievances were aired. This was part of his strategy to defuse the image of the

[846] Numbers of death toll vary between 2,000 and 40,000. For some number speculation see Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, 83-84; Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 274 and Robert Fisk's article for the *Independent* https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-freedom-democracy-and-human-rights-in-syria-2080463.html Last visited September 19, 2018.
[847] Batatu, *Syria's Peasntry*, 271.

government as sectarian and to keep open lines of communication with moderate intelletuals. Batatu reports some of what was said in this meeting:

> One writer lamented that "the whole people are living in a great prison!" Another pointedly asked: "How can Syria deal with Camp David when it cannot deal with the problem of bread?" Particularly outspoken was the ᶜAlawī poet Mamdūḥ ᶜUdwān. "I work," he said, "for an information medium of which I am ashamed because it lies about everything… even about the cholera. Why does the regime lie? Lies stem from fear and the regime that lies fears the people, fears that people will see it as it really is."[848]

Other intellectuals, rather than directly addressing the political crisis with the authorities (a method which eventually proved futile),[849] sought to leverage the regime's momentary weakness to their advantage. This would be the context for the emergence of the University of Aleppo Literary Forum [*al-multaqā al-adabī li-jāmiᶜat ḥalab*] at just about the time when the city was shaken by political unrest. The establishment of the Forum was spearheaded by no other than Muhammad Jamal Barut, a name frequently mentioned in this dissertation as the most lucid and industrious critical voice to come out of Syria in the last quarter of the 20th century. A doctoral graduate of the Sorbonne and a former member of the Baath party, Barut was at heart a resourceful pragmatist whose knowledge in the ways of the Syrian world would enable him to persuade the powers that be that a secular, open-minded, critically engaged literary forum was exactly what the regime needs to quell civil uproar in Aleppo. With help from two professors in the Faculty of Letters – Fuʾad Mirᶜi and Fayiz Daya – Barut formulated a *bayān* that served as the Forum's charter and officially opened its activities.[850]

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[848] Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, 271.
[849] In the 1990s ᶜUdwan already spoke differently, saying that "too much time and energy has been wasted in confronting dictatorship directly." Cooke, *Dissident Syria*, 91.
[850] For this particular account of the Forum's beginning see: Najm al-Din Samman, "al-Multaqa al-Adabi li-Jamiᶜat Halab Namudhajan [The Literary Forum of the University of Aleppo as Model]," *Geiroon* August 5, 2017: https://geiroon.net/archives/90555 Last visited September 19, 2018. The manifesto is lost, but in an interview (conducted via email on September 21, 2018) Samman notes that he still remembers Barut using in it the phrase "small-scale prophets" to contrast the *shabāb* with the large-scale prophets of *Shiᶜr*.

The format was as follows: the organizers held a biannual general assembly for which they arranged a keynote lecture by a leading Syrian literary figure. Subjects varied as greatly as questions of *qasidat al-nathr* and the legacy of Adonis, concision in the modern short story, and innovations in Syrian visual art. The organizers then designated a select number of young outstanding writers who would read their work before the audience. To be chosen was regarded a tremendous honor. Thereafter followed questions, debates, and roundtable discussions that would spill into nearby bars and cafes and go on after hours. Barut emphatically stresses that the space of discourse was kept absolutely free for a plurality of opinions, and presumably allowed raising taboo concerns about Syrian politics.[851]This general assembly was but the culmination of round-the-clock year-long activities chiefly maintained by the *shabāb* (youth), the energetic bohemian writers from Aleppo and its periphery who in myriad get-togethers, both formal and informal, continued the conversation about culture and the arts. A whole week was devoted, says Barut, to teasing out all the threads of Adonis' critical and poetic works and re-assessing his project in extremely sharp polemical tones. A *thulāthāʾ*, or Tuesday salon, was set up to match and outdo *Shiʿr*'s famous *khamīs*, Thursday salon. Much of the contested territory was determined by a generational divide between the old-school critics or professors and the emerging writers who wanted to finally shake off the Syrian reverence for the old. Even though the stage was set in a university campus, the atmosphere was thoroughly non-academic. Their jovial spirits notwithstanding, the young participants were dead set on making themselves into serious artists. "When intellectuals can do nothing else they start a magazine," wrote Irving Howe upon the 1954 foundation of *Dissent* magazine.[852] The Syrian example shows that when they can't start a magazine, they start a semi-clandestine forum.

[851] Barut, "Tayyarani fi al-Shiʿr al-Suri al-Hadith," n. 15.
[852] Quoted in Howe, *A Margin of Hope*, 235.

The University of Aleppo was veritably virgin ground in several respects. The artistic landscape in Aleppo was long accustomed to old styles of amusement and esthetic pleasures cultivated by its premodern middle classes. The *ṭarab* elicited by elegiac, thick-textured music with very long instrumental intros was nostalgically relished. Husayn Darwish, one of the Forum's organizers and a poet in his own right (no relation to Mahmoud), attests that

> it is not easy to be a poet from Aleppo and not a *muṭrib* [traditional singer or musician]; this city, which manufactures dozens of sorts of *kibbeh* and heavy foods like it, overstuffing men's stomachs and making women plump and white; this city, which greets the days with the sweetest melodic voices of the morning *ādhān*, and seals its nights with Sabah Fakhri;[853] in-between it piles up its copious earnings, furthering the abundant waterflow of its vast life, so that its ancient nobility can become a global trademark, its authenticity a national portal whose chords are played by foreigners' remembrance, all the foreigners who come to soak up the pleasures of its cafes and snug neighborhoods and then quickly discover the roads to Damascus or Beirut; a city whose roots of indifference to modernity go deep and whose stance is awkward and puzzled midway between Turkish entrancement and Arab roots; a city whose days are lived as Sufi and whose nights are colored in the variety of half-hidden pleasures of life. From this city with its fastidious demands it was not easy or pleasurable to write a modern prose poem as everyone around you sings *qul li-l-malīḥati*.[854]

Fuʾad's poem serving as motto to this chapter indicates a similar predicament: while the old styles of bourgeois entertainment decline, the modern poets are still swept aside like insects by Aleppo's formidable food culture and tourist industry. Darwish's graceful statement should be read with more than a hint of irony, as he feels proud to be the one to explore the *terra incognita* of a modern poem from Aleppo. This feeling of a vast potential waiting to be realized seems to have been widespread among the Forum members. On another level, the university was itself a malleable, untested arena. It sprouted soon after independence as an extension of the University of Damascus with nothing but a modest Faculty of Engineering. In 1958, its institutional role was enlarged to make the second state university. It officially opened its doors

[853] An iconic Aleppine tenor known for his mastery of Arab traditional music.
[854] A well-known number of singer Sabah Fakhri. For Darwish's witness account see: http://www.aljaml.com/%D9%82%D9%85%D8%AD%20%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1%20%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9%20%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A9%20%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9 Last visited September 19, 2018.

in 1960, offering advanced degrees in engineering, agriculture, and law. The Faculty of Letters was inaugurated in 1966, only some fifteen years before the Forum was launched. The university was significantly located in the western boroughs of the city, geographically removed from its historical center. As the city's core felt smothered with silence and fear in the aftermath of the violent events, the university provided breathing room for free-thinking writers.[855] The Forum members turned to its campus as a site for alternative cultural centers. A film club and music club were established, and so was a small theater group. The resources for a literary magazine were lacking, but the founders re-invigorated the modest university feuilleton which, under Barut's direction, grew over time from four pages to ten and twelve, and published the written works of the *shabāb*.[856]

It is not only the prose poem that sought to break its way out of the Aleppine honeycomb, but also the short story and novel. The *shabāb* who attended the forum were a mix of poets and prose writers. Four of its regular members became the engine behind a new novelistic sensibility that blended realistic documentation with post-modern narrative experiments and magical realism. Nihad Sirees and Khaled Khalifa are the more internationally renowned and widely translated of the four, yet Faysal Khartash and Muhammad Abu Maᶜtuq are upscale prose artists in their own right. Both Sirees' and Khalifa's works draw abundantly on Aleppo's modern history and the thick particularities of its daily life. Sirees' novel *Halat Sharaf* [*A State of Passion*, 1997] is entirely dedicated to *banāt al-ᶜishra*, a distinctly Aleppine social phenomenon of women "who form intense, intimate relationships with other women and who meet in groups in order to sing, dance and socialize." Sirees defines the atmosphere at these soirees as "rife with coquettishness, jealousy and love. Each woman would sit next to her particular friend and, in

[855] Samman, email interview, September 21, 2018.
[856] Samman, email interview, September 21, 2018.

turn, would sing her a song. These songs were called ataba — songs of lament."[857] Even though these social interactions bordered on the sexual, the husbands turned a blind eye because they were confined to women. It is thus part of a social world – which receded with modernization – where gender segregation is real and thick. This is also apparent in the fact that the Forum was almost exclusively composed of men. Khalifa's *In Praise of Hatred* dealing with the years of Islamic radicalization in Aleppo is narrated from the viewpoint of a young woman brought up entirely by women for the very same reason of realistic faithfulness to the culture of the place.

The orientation towards prose found in Aleppo had a political dimension. The poet Luqman Derki (1967-) observes that the new horizons for writing had to do with Perestroika policies in the Soviet Union which invigorated the New Arab Left, making it less rigidly ideological and more connected to the open-minded bohemian youth. "We the poets of the University of Aleppo Literary Forum," writes Derki, "became in the mid-1980s a chaotic target for the meticulously organized Left."[858] A budding energetic poet at the time of the Forum, Derki records his participation in day-long sessions with ᶜAbd al-Razzaq ᶜId, a resounding voice of the leftist awakening and staunch advocate of human rights and civil society. ᶜId held bi-monthly sessions in café al-Qasr – a well-known hub for Aleppine literati with big glass windows looking out to the street and comfortable sofas suitable for long sprawls[859] – to which he invited Syrian prose writers like Hani al-Rahib and Haydar Haydar. The hottest topics of discussion were *Riyah al-Shimal* [North Winds] and *Shajarat al-Kalam* [Tree of Speech], novels by Sirees and Abu Maᶜtuq respectively, which, although not professedly political, raised to the surface major

[857] Nihad Sirees, "A Song of Lament for Syria," *New York Times*, April 26 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/opinion/a-writers-lament-for-the-female-musicians-of-aleppo-syria.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all& Last visited September 20, 2018.
[858] Dayraki, "Maqha al-Qasr – Rijal Tahta al-Mirwaha [al-Qasr Café: Men under the Ventilator]," in: http://alantologia.com/blogs/7987/ Last visited September 20, 2018.
[859] The café is mentioned in Khaled Khalifa's latest novel as the favorite place of gathering for the Aleppine poet and encyclopedist Kheir al-Din al-Asadi and the painter Luʾay Kayyali. See Khalifa, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* (trans. Leri Price), 37.

political and social concerns. Faysal Khartash christened their discussion group with the name "Men under the Ventilator," an ironic reference to the novella *Men in the Sun* by Ghassan Kanafani, signaling that the parameters of politics in literature had shifted from the grand pathos of the Palestinian cause to the struggle of little men to find a little space to "chill." In this context, poetry was deemed an ill-suited vehicle to reach the masses except by subservient, oppressive, or arrogant ways. The arcane poet Hukm al-Baba read before the group, and one of the listeners rose up and said that his poems care nothing for the masses. "The masses are asses," al-Baba answered. There was little patience any longer for this sort of claim: "your mom and my mom are asses?" asked the man. "Yours is; mine definitely isn't," answered al-Baba. Even as complex modernist poets, Aleppines were apparently still consulting their mothers. This rejoinder did well to shut up Baba's opponent but also proved the faulty logic of his claim.[860]

Sirees' novel *The Silence and the Roar* – depicting a surreal day in the life of a banned writer in an unnamed Arab country – is often termed Orwellian. Beyond the presentation of a dystopian political reality, there is much to the comparison with Orwell. Sirees, who is an engineer by training, firmly believes that reasoned, lucid prose is a political vehicle of enlightenment much needed in the Arab world, a belief analogous to the one articulated by Orwell in "Politics and the English Language." If one gets rid of "the slovenliness of language" which makes for "foolish thoughts," Orwell writes in that essay, "one can think more clearly and to think clearly is the necessary first step towards political regeneration."[861] The writer Fathi, Sirees' avatar in *The Silence and the Roar*, meditates on the reasons why his writing is disallowed by the state and concludes that malign authorities are deeply aligned with the

[860] Dayraki, "Maqha al-Qasr – Rijal Tahta al-Mirwaha."
[861] Orwell, *Collected Essays*, 128. For a parallel essay by Sirees see "Fi al-Difaᶜ ᶜan al-Kalam [In Defense of Speech]," where Sirees argues that the novel must be founded on sound knowledge and research to perform its tasks. http://nihadsirees.com/2012-07-02-08-08-28/85-2012-07-10-10-37-59.html Last visited September 21, 2018.

heightened obfuscations of poetry, from whose esthetic disconnect they benefit and whose watered-down structures they use as propagandist formulas:

> Here is an interesting titbit: in my country slogans are arranged into lines of rhyming poetry. I'm sure that the Party has a research institute somewhere dedicated to drafting and crafting slogans according to the particular needs of the era. The masses, our masses, are raised on metered slogans. Every era has a slogan that is repeated nonstop. A few moments earlier I heard a brand new slogan that had been drafted in order to make the people praise God for having created them during the Age of the Leader. The man being carried started off his slogan like this "R…R… Our Leader," and the crowd would repeat after him […]. So long as it rhymed, they would repeat the same line over and over again with ecstatic pleasure. In my country people love rhymed speech and rhymed prose and inspirational metered verse. Just watch how they will repeat phrases that have no meaning whatsoever but that rhyme perfectly well. In the end this means that if the ruler wants the masses to adore him he must immediately set up a centre dedicated to the production of new slogans about him, on the condition that they resemble poetry because we are a people who love poetry so much that we love things that only resemble poetry. We might even be satisfied with only occasionally rhyming speech, regardless of its content. Didn't someone say that the era of mass politics is the era of poetry? If so then the reverse is also true, because poetry is geared towards the masses just like the prose that I am now writing is intended for the individual […] Prose is oriented towards rational minds and individuals whereas poetry directs and is directed towards the masses. It isn't strange that the curtailment of poetry began in the West. Poetry inspires zealotry and melts away individual personality whereas prose moulds the rational mind, individuality and personality. Finally, I would like to point out that my country still lives in the Age of the Masses, which is why metered speech and rhyming verses are a fundamental requirement in our life. My works and prose writings are the imaginations of a traitor and a fucking cunt, as the man in khaki was kind enough to remind me a little while ago.[862]

The optimistic conviction running through the text is that rational prose, if only allowed to reach men and women of the masses, would be able draw out the individualizing potential latent within them. The novel's distribution was banned in Syria, showing that the authorities agreed with this point.

Sirees put this belief into practice by working in the 1990s with the medium of the greatest mass appeal in Syria, the television serial (*musalsal*). Long before the current golden age of high-quality television shows as the dominant mode of long-form serialized storytelling, Sirees developed the idea of a "televised novel" that would raise the screenwriter to the level of an *auteur*, as had previously happened in the histories of both the novel and cinema to prove

[862] Sirees, *The Silence and the Roar* (trans. Max Weiss), 16-18.

false the detractors of television as low-brow mass entertainment.[863] Other prose writers who were members of the Forum wrote television miniseries as a way to make a living, not necessarily a pleasant job since their artistic freedom was severely curtailed: the regime kept close watch on what was being aired, and its censorial policy was doubly rigid because of the mass appeal. Sirees' *Khan al-Harir* [Silk Market, 1996-1998][864] – a masterpiece of TV writing that has become a classic – lay in the bureaucratic pipes for a long time due to censorship constraints. The series fictionalizes the days in the mid-1950s leading up to the Syrian unification with Egypt under Nasser, showing how the rising political power of Arab nationalism shakes the stabilities maintained by the old-guard affluent merchants of the Aleppine souk. The censorship office finally approved it, but strictly forbade calling the Syrian political parties of the 1950s by their real name (as if merely naming them would recall a more politically pluralistic age). The second season was approved quickly due to the first season's success, yet the censors would watch each episode hours before it was aired to put the final stamp on it. The season dealt with the events precipitating the downfall of the union, and as the censors sat watching, they repeatedly asked for scenes to be cut out at the last minute. These scenes would, for instance, present Communist ideas in a favorable light, or imply that the union collapsed for a more complex set of reasons than Zionist-imperialist conspiracies.[865]

[863] Sirees, "Madkhal ila al-Riwaya al-Tilifizyuniyya [Introduction to the Televised Novel]." Sirees describes how his intellectual friends made him feel embarrassed when he said he was working on writing a TV screenplay and puts this feeling in the context of elitist bias against popular modes of art. TV production in Syria appears low-quality, claims Sirees, for financial reasons and not reasons inherent in the medium. It is because of the bias that producers of TV drama can get away with shabby camera work and bad acting to suit a preconceived image of dumb viewers. See http://nihadsirees.com/2012-07-02-08-08-28/90-2012-07-11-11-43-18.html Last visited September 21, 2018

[864] The dates are important since in the mid-1990s occurs a watershed moment in the transition from national broadcast networks to satellite television in the Arab world (*Al-Jazeera* was established in 1996). Beyond the information revolution created by this change, the meaning of this is that Syrian television, and especially Ramadan series, would begin to become popular on a mass Arab scale. Though *Khan al-Harir* was produced for the Syrian General Organization for Radio and TV, its reputation benefited from the growing interest in Syrian television across the Arab world.

[865] The details of Sirees' experience with Syrian censorship are related in "Tajribati maʿa al-Raqaba [My Experience with the Censors]," in: http://nihadsirees.com/2012-07-02-08-08-28/56-2012-07-03-12-47-31.html Last visited September 21, 2018.

Yet these small hindrances did not diminish the overall achievement of Sirees' new realism. The series is shot on-location in the souk and is packed with its details. The camerawork is patient and precise. Celebrity Syrian actors were used but also unknown semi-professionals who were market vendors in real life. The much-told story of the rise and fall of Arab nationalism looks different and refreshing when situated in Aleppo's market, a point of view that many Syrians had not fully appreciated before.[866] The show also provides the usual excitements of TV drama: heartrending love stories, affairs, disguised identities, money intrigues, plot twists and quick turns of fortune.

The opening scene of the first episode is a dazzling illustration of the level of nuance which the new realism bestowed upon the representation of Aleppo. We see all the male characters seated around a fountain-pool in the middle of a capacious *ṣaḥn*, the inner courtyard of an old Arab house, blowing their shishas under the sky's dome in the temperate evening and listening to a traditional Aleppine singer accompanied by the nay and the qanun (a kind of zither). The song sung is "Ibᶜath li Jawab [Send me a Letter]", one of Sabah Fakhri's most beloved tunes. They are all overcome with joy, and the camera moves slowly to capture each and every character's singular way of enjoying the music. This is the emblematic picture of Aleppine social harmony that will gradually crack and fall apart as business, sex, and politics will come to disrupt its bliss. Yet as the narrative progresses and conflict between the characters escalates, the men repeatedly return to this lovely courtyard and listen to the same singer singing the same tunes as a healing ritual to repair their discord. Though this ritual is viewed with growing irony – as it invariably fails to mend the wounds – the symbolic force of the scene is drawn from the

[866] Literary critic Hanna ᶜAbbud claims that in the 1960s and 1970s Damascus was the only city represented in modern Syrian poetry and formed a symbolic site of struggle reflecting its potency as a political symbol. Though perhaps overstated, this claim demonstrates how marginal Aleppo seemed to Syrian politics and individual political commitments. See ᶜAbbud, *al-Nahl al-Barri*, 133.

heart of Aleppine ideals of community and commonality against which the stark political and social divides of the new modern era play out.

The Forum's political valence was not only expressed in allowing for open, rationally argued discussions but also by staving off powerful opposition on multiple fronts. First, there were the hardened Marxists who still demanded exclusive portrayal of positive "socialist" heroes. Fuʾad Mirʿi, a literature professor and one of the Forum founders, relates that at a short story reading by the writer Fadil al-Sibaʿi, the communist opposition vehemently rose against the author for a "negative" portrayal of a state official who intentionally delays procedures. Al-Sibaʿi replied by reading out an older story of his, based on the ending to Nikolai Gogol's "Overcoat," in which a clerk who has been tortured to death by a security apparatus joins a ghost vendetta operation to hunt down government officials and beat them to death with police batons. The Soviet-parroting critics were left speechless by both the reference to the Russian classic and the moral undecidability of the clerk's portrayal.[867] Second, there were the uncompromising Islamists leading the violent resistance to the state. Mirʿi remarks that the volume of Islamist slogans and the vague goals of their violent attacks often made the atmosphere extremely sensitive. The Mufti of Aleppo himself was irritated by an "improper" line in a poem by Maha Bakr, one of the Forum's women poets, and demanded to have it expunged.[868] Finally, there was the state-backed Baath student union. Once the union leaders recognized the free-thinking nature of the Forum, they constantly sought to disrupt its activities. Their determination and political clout finally succeeded in bringing about the Forum's closure and appropriation by the regime in 1986.[869]

[867] Told in Mirʿi, *Fi al-Lugha wa-l-Tafkir*, 40.
[868] Samman, e-mail interview, September 21, 2018.
[869] Samman, "al-Multaqa al-Adabi li-Jamiʿat Halab Namudhajan."

II Aleppo's Modern Traditions

That political and social history as seen from Aleppo differs from its conventional narratives consecrated in Damascus and Cairo is one of the foundational insights of the Forum leaders. As a work of poetry criticism, Barut's *Poetry Writes Its Name* is pathbreaking not only because it calls attention to the new *shafawi* sensibility, but also because it seizes on the emergence of new poetics to re-think the history of modern poetry in Syria. The first chapter in the book treats what Barut calls "the beginnings of the prose poem in Syria" and casts light on two proto-modernist collections of poetry that originated in Aleppo between 1947 and 1950, thus undermining the conventional narrative of an anti-modernist city. These proto-modernist works share an interest in the unconscious and interior life and translate this interest into an experimental exploration in language that significantly departs from the prevailing poetic molds.

Siryal (circa 1947), co-authored by ᶜAli Nasir and Urkhan Muyassar, is regarded as a pioneering attempt to translate Freudian psychology through its surrealist interpretation into Arabic poetry.[870] In its preface, Muyassar challenges the European Surrealists' interpretation of Freud and casts his own poetics as a restoration of Freud's "scientific" theory in an attempt to regulate Surrealist waywardness and correct its poetic application. The interest in Freud does not stem from the dream theory's potential of challenging bourgeois conventions. On the contrary, Freud appeals to Muyassar as a doctor, a man of science and method.[871] Khalida Saᶜid attests that Muyassar "was taken with medicine and geometry. His interest in medicine was sparked by

[870] The first edition of *Siryal* was published sometime between 1946-1948 and the date is unverifiable because it was omitted from the title page. This edition is not readily available. The one circulating is a revised and reprinted edition dating to 1979 and whose re-publication was promoted by Adonis in cooperation with the Arab Writers Union. Adonis wrote a short foreword and preceded its publication with a selection from the book in *Mawaqif.* Alongside Jamal Barut, Adonis holds a large share in the re-introduction of *Siryal* to Syrian literary history. The 1947 dating is attributed to him as well. The original printing included illustrations by the Aleppine artist Fateh al-Mudarres and gave more prominence to the co-authorship of the volume. In Adonis' re-printed edition, Muyassar is designated as the sole author and other poems from Muyassar's estate are included. Khalida Saᶜid echoes the opinion that most of the poems in *Siryal* are to be attributed to Muyassar rather than Ali Nasir.

[871] Tellingly, Freud never enjoyed a wide reception in the Arab national age as did Karl Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre both of whom were adopted as inspirations for influential groups of Arab intellectuals for their capcity to sanction politically engaged writing.

his intense admiration of Freud and his eagerness to learn about the secrets of human anatomy. As for geometry, he thought of it as the alphabet of art."[872] Muyassar richly contextualizes the emergence of the European Surrealists against the background of prudish 19th-century morals and literary traditions, interwar period politics, and the rise of psychoanalysis. The impulsive calls for artistic liberation, claims Muyassar, were then answered by intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic, who transformed these ideas into a distinct field of cross-artistic practice governed by an ideal of Surrealism, which Muyassar succinctly formulates as follows: "Images, pictured on the peculiar terms of the inner mind,[873] with which the mind's individual reality is represented as blended with the desire of all the ages living within it."[874] Supplanting this definition with a nuanced explanation on the structures of the unconscious and the ego, Muyassar then argues that the major Surrealist artists fall short of this ideal, since they ornament images with symbols taken from traditional repertoires of Western myths. And because of its cerebral quality, this partial symbolism detracts from the objective limpidness of the original images, which Muyassar – with scientific credentials – describes as held by the center of attention for a very brief moment. André Breton, Lionel Abel, Pablo Picasso and others are thus only para-Surrealists in Muyassar's opinion because they fail to conform to the rigors of correct scientific method. "The Surrealism of André Breton and his group," writes Muyassar, "does not go beyond being direct cerebral remains [of the original crystalline image] shaped by the geometric lines of extreme symbolism."[875] Whatever one may think of this low rating of Breton and Picasso as Surrealists,

[872] Saᶜid, *Yutubiya*, 250. Originally an article published in the literary supplement of *Al-Hayat*. See Saᶜid, "Dhat Yawm tahta Samaᵓ Halab: Hikaya Suryaliyya bi-la Waratha [One Upon a Time Under Aleppo's Sky... A Surrealist Story with no Heirs]," in: *Al-Hayat* July 27, 1992. This beautiful homage article to the local Surrealist movement in Syria is incomparably richer in information and interpretation than the rest of the eulogies to Muyassar in the official Syrian platforms. It is re-printed in Saᶜid's *Yutubiya al-Madina al-Muthaqqafa* [The Utopia of a Civilized City, 2012], 249-259.
[873] *Al-ᶜaql al-bāṭin*, to which Muyassar imputes an existence as that of an unconsciously active repository that occasionally "tosses up" images of trans-historical value to the exterior mind's surface which are then recorded by artists. This psychological realism is the essence of Surrealism.
[874] *Siryal*, 18.
[875] Ibid., 21

it is founded on a complex and well-informed appreciation of both the Surrealist project and Freudian theory.

Muyassar's formal schooling was in the natural sciences: he began as a student of medicine at AUB and then changed his course to literature and physics. In the late 1930s he attained a graduate degree at the University of Chicago with a Masters' thesis entitled "The Endocrine Glands and their Effects on Human Behavior." His ideal surrealist poem is thus visualized, as suggested by Sa^{c}id, in terms borrowed from medicine, engineering, and visual design, all of them realms that demand painstaking accuracy. Muyassar's collaborator ^{c}Ali Nasir, twenty years Urkhan's senior, was likewise a doctor by training.

The preface is a persuasive invitation for the Arab reader to engage in a tutorial on the bizarre miscreants forged in the unconscious and released in the poems. The key point made by Muyassar is that the disjointed Surrealist images – the "strange lines and obscure colors" of the poem as he calls them – can cohere if understood as coming from both raw history and strenuous intellectual labor. Raw history – timeless desire moving through human generations – is to be found in aspects of existence considered below the *waqār* [gravity] of the qasida and its customary, mechanical pleasures. The qasida is diagnosed as damaging to the nervous system for its repression of the unformed material of the unconscious, i.e., the all-too-human dreams and passions and the dignity residing in fulfilment of everyday social roles. These are the matters shaped and liberated by artistic production in poetry, painting and music, says Muyassar, and when they come under methodical inspection

> we see these phantoms stripped of their dignified dress […] we see our highest ideals, our lofty desires, our sweet hopes, our ambition in both its excitements and dumb discharge, we see our struggles, our individual and social dignity, our children whom we feel proud to throw into existence… we see all this condensed into one essence imparting to us a clear, precise sensation that in our shape, our 'thrownness', our primordial matter, we resemble and are connected to all beings on this great planet that grow and reproduce or fall apart and transform. And we also see that, in spite of this,

> we cannot eradicate in the depths of our human cells the lines of mirage scattered in the fringes of these configurations which became the one essence.[876]

The mind's phantoms, when recorded in the microscope of poetic consciousness, are disfigured because the act of compression exposes the stitches of selection and exclusion. There is then a psychological structure studied in myriad forms throughout the collection and addressing the constant need of the self for concrete images in mental acts of cognition and recognition. The images are referred to in various terms – shadows, dolls, embryos – yet prominently figure as *musūkh*, misshapen transmutations or re-incarnations, a term with symbolic baggage going back to an orthodox exegesis of a Quranic verse (5:60), where those upon whom God lays a curse (widely interpreted to be the Jews) are re-incarnated in the form of swine and monkeys. *Maskh* is thus a downgrading transformation into an uglier, meaner form. The term is introduced in the collection's epigraphic poem, which takes the form of a dedication to

> This ravenous 'I' that doesn't see [or is not seen]
> And labors to engender *musūkh* and serve them
> As offering to its altar full of defunct *musūkh*
> So that afterwards it may rest for a moment
> In which contentment follows pleasure
> And between them, it can recuperate
> And return to generating more *musūkh*.[877]

This cemetery of images is profoundly disturbing to the reality of a stable self, and the dream-quality of *Siryal* is meant to capture this frightening shadow game. *Siryal* does not really offer concrete examples of the high ideal of Surrealism where individual consciousness merges with the "desire of all ages." It outlines the parameters for conducting poetic experiments that would examine such moments of heightened consciousness and exposes the risks involved. It reveals the record of struggles to be as true as one can to what would be moments of trans-

[876] Ibid., 40.
[877] Ibid., 5.

generational harmony without adorning them with items from the stock of dignified poetic dress. This would be the hard-won prize for the ceaseless cranking-out of images, a demand imposed on consciousness by the "noise of history." From the first poem, this endeavor is imagined as *sibāq akhyila* [a race of images], a pun on 'imagination' and 'horses' (derived in Arabic from the same stem-root) that connotes the hellish interminable racecourse in which the mind is locked:

> A race of strange spectral images
> Whose colors swing from side to side
> Whose lines disappear in twists, sometimes thin
> sometimes swelling
> A race of images:
> A space that contracts oceans
> A stream that widens and expands.[878]

This introductory poem is meant to dispel the cliché of a listless Orient that the Western-educated Muyassar must have often encountered. Arab minds as projected by *Siryal* are caught in frantic circular racing, which is dizzying but also releases the energies cooped up in the unconscious. As a response to this frenzy, the question of scale becomes crucial for the poetics of the volume. Muyassar draws an analogy between the poem as a compact capsule of past, present and future, and scientific developments of vitamin C tablets equivalent to "three or four oranges" in both taste and nutrition value. He then goes on to describe the process of collaborating on *Siryal* with ᶜAli Nasir, who had a predilection for "eating oranges in large quantities,"[879] i.e., composing sprawling prose poems. Muyassar prescribed a new poetic regimen enabling Nasir "to say in a few words what he had previously said in many lines."[880] A 1937 poem of fifteen lines is shown to have been beneficially trimmed down by 1947. It is made up of only sixteen words: "lip / torn flower remnants / disfigured; harmony / reduced to nothing but a blood-drop / an eye's gaze."[881] Between 1939 and 1947, a poem of 113 words became a svelte twelve-word

[878] Ibid., 46.
[879] Ibid., 40.
[880] Ibid., 41.
[881] Ibid., 42.

poem: "I…I… / meteor / coal-grain / inventing, invented god / stench / despondency / shame nozzle."[882]

The miniature scale of the poems is intended to grasp the short space of lucidity "between contentment and pleasure" and intimate the long stretches of frantic running in-between. The poems are pauses for breath in an otherwise breathless effort – *luhāth* in the poems – to keep pace with the impetus to proliferate images. It will leave open gaps rather than fill them with extravagant symbolism as Muyassar believes Breton to have done. The co-authorship, in turn, was experimental when paired with automatic writing, as Muyassar's high theory of the layered psyche and surrealist regulation was used to curb the reckless fantasy ascribed to Nasir.[883]Saᶜid attributes the lion's share of poems in *Siryal* to Muyassar. In terms of the authors' intent, however, it should be attributed to Siryal as a quasi-person, an amalgamation of two poets that arrogates real authorship to itself, or simply an avatar of the anonymous collective unconscious. "I wrote a literary piece in cooperation with another author," says Nasir in a letter, "and we called it the *Siryal*. My share of it was written under the inspiration of the unconscious, as they say, and after returning to my waking consciousness I would hesitate in understanding what I had written, not knowing sometimes whether it was a product of mine or not."[884] From the intratextual commentary, it is clear that Muyassar's scrutinizing eye helped Nasir economize these forays into the unconscious and endow them with their properly scientific surrealist form.

The transmission from European Surrealisms is likewise governed by selecting and inspecting "mnestic traces"[885] left by works of art. Muyassar seems to have been more avidly absorbed in the Surrealist branches of paintings than in poetry. Saᶜid observes that inexpensive

[882] Ibid., 45.
[883] Saᶜid refers to Nasir as enamored with the marvelous and fantastic [*ᶜajāᵓibī*] and Barut speaks of him as a poet of epic aspirations.
[884] Quoted in Barut, *al-Shiᶜr Yaktubu Ismahu*, 14-15.
[885] Monaco uses this phrase in summarizing *Siryal*'s surrealistic method. Arturo Monaco, "Syria and the Reception of Surrealism," in: Roger Allen et al., *New Geographies: Texts and Contexts in Modern Arabic Literature*, 115-134. The phrase appears on p. 120.

reproductions of Dali's paintings hung on the walls of his apartment as "windows onto artistic freedom." Conversation with Urkhan always turned and returned to them. "The Temptation of St. Anthony" (1946) – with its weightless elephants carrying lewd images on thin legs that look like stilts – hung in front of his favorite chair and he is said to have found inexhaustible meanings in it.[886] In the collection, Nasir and Muyassar refashion Max Ernst in accordance with Muyassar's meta-surrealist theory. The poem titled "Max Ernst" leaves ambiguity as to whether it refers to the artist himself or to one of his paintings: "Wrapped in stone-like shrouds," the poem begins, "his body twists / over the waters of a tranquil pond that debates whether to swallow him up or spit him out."[887] These lines might well call up Ernst's "Aquis Submersus" (1919), yet inaccurately mix up the elements of that painting: the figure half-submerged in the water is not the one petrified in shrouds, standing just outside the water. The body of water in the painting is not a lake or pond [*buḥayra*] but clearly an urban swimming pool or large fountain. This mix-up contributes however to the truthfulness of the poem, since it lends it the authenticity of being really called up by human memory with its imaginative distortions.

In the poem, Ernst's drowning man is made to scream in terror as he is suffocated "between the pulses of breathlessness." "Help!" he cries, "ravenous, evil *musūkh*! Their interiors are full! / Echoes of rolling laughter."[888] The demonic laugh keeps echoing in the end, as Ernst himself becomes a *maskh* swallowed up by Siryal's omnivorous unconscious. Muyassar's self-confidence with respect to the European metropoles is thus reflected in his overturning of the center-periphery paradigm along the lines of Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928) which recommends devouring whatever comes from Europe to strengthen Brazilian

[886] Sa^{c}id, *Yutubiya*, 249.
[887] *Siryal*, 58.
[888] Ibid.

culture.[889] The metaphor of creative cannibalizing for translating Surrealism is never spelled out, yet the idea of unconscious desire spanning all ages no doubt extends across geographical borders and cultural power-structures as well. Surrealism is not so much cannibalized as drowned or immersed in the imagination of *Siryal*.

The poem preceding "Max Ernst" in the 1979 edition is clearly inspired by the same painting but processes its motifs beyond easy recognition:

> **Clay**
> I work to pile up stacks of shadows
> Lines and colors – I leave them as flavor to my dreams that
> Devour without my knowing.
> As for me, I the abstracted from shadows and colors and the pulse of dreams,
> I pass like the hoarseness of a torn string, a flood in mud.[890]

The statuesque figure standing beside Ernst's pool seems to be made of clay and casts a long shadow in the direction of the pool.[891] *Ghamr fī ṭīn* – which I translate as flood in mud – strongly evokes Ernst's drowning man but also means "waterflow in clay," a phrase precisely capturing Muyassar's ideas about universal human categories of psychology.

That Aleppo provides the setting for these early experiments with Surrealistic language may not seem particularly important, yet there is extratextual evidence to the contrary. First, Muyassar's exceptionally complex appreciation of Freud and the Surrealists is indebted to a linguistic and cultural fluency in both English and French, in addition to his native command of Arabic and Turkish. These multicultural assets are not free-floating: they belong to the refined Ottoman aristocracy on whose cultivation Aleppo used to pride itself. Muyassar was a living embodiment of a *çelebi ḥalabi*, an educated Aleppine gentleman who became a redundant misfit as the values of his class declined and the Syrian state came into its own. Saᶜid nicely indicates

[889] On the importance of this manifesto and its language for translational practices in a postcolonial context see Susan Basnett, "Postcolonialism and/as Translation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (2018), 351-353 (for full article see 340-358).
[890] *Siryal*, 57.
[891] These shadows are absurd in terms of the empirical world, since the bright moon and its reflection in the pool are both visible. The absurdity in realistic terms suggests that the painting lends itself to allegorical-psychological interpretations.

Muyassar's non-Arab appearance – "his face," she writes, "had a mixture of Caucasian, Balkan and Turkish features"[892] – and describes the impression he made on her as a "disinherited prince." Muyassar was born in Istanbul but his grandparents hailed from distinguished Aleppine families with blood lines going back to the Ottoman court and the Janissaries. He was sent to elementary school in Aleppo, and then attended secondary school in the Lebanese city of Aley, where he was captivated by Khalil Gibran's poetry and mentored by the Lebanese intellectual Marun ᶜAbbud, one of the pre-eminent literary figures of the Arab liberal age. In the late 1930s, after he completed his studies abroad and came back to look after his family property in Aleppo, Muyyasar actively supported the Syrian liberation struggle against the French. It is said that his financial means were used to fund arms for the Arab struggle against the Zionists in mandatory Palestine.[893] The upper echelons of the educated bourgeoisie to which he belonged were among the intellectual pillars of the Arab pre-state national age. Arturo Monaco rightly notes that the motto of liberating the unconscious – echoed in both Adonis' and Khalida Saᶜid's appraisals of Muyassar – is inseparable from political liberationist aspirations, which both critics play down. The belief in rational inquiry and scientific method as carrying this project forward is also tied to Muyassar's historical position as witness to the crepuscular stages of the Nahda, the Arab Renaissance, about to be swept away by the realities of the nation-state.

The blend between Surrealism and a pronounced nationalist program is, as Monaco notes, unique and sets *Siryal* apart from other branches of Surrealism famously aligned with Communist anti-bourgeois politics. Monaco examines an untitled poem in *Siryal* in light of Muyassar's nationalist commitments, and centers on the following lines: "This desire that wants

[892] Saᶜid, *Yutubiya*, 249.
[893] Mentioned by Saᶜd Saᵓib, "Urkhan Muyassar Adiban wa-Naqidan [Urkhan Muyassar as Intellectual and Critic]," in: *al-Maᶜrifa* 160 (June 1975), 172-183] and cited in Monaco, "Syria and the Reception of Surrealism,"116-117.

to glean from / the loose ends of my yesterday / remains, images and statues / transformed by the years into dry, faded fibers / wants to freeze them in my visions / as blooming, fragrant bouquets."[894] Siryal can be read here, suggests Monaco, as revolutionary Syria personified, a nation in the making coming into its own identity by recognizing and re-vitalizing its buried pasts. It is necessary to add to this account that Muyassar's introspective Surrealist poems are also complexly ambiguous and critical with respect to these national prospects and avoid playing into the ideological myths propounded by Antun Saᶜada. A poem titled "My Country," while unquestionably welcoming national liberation with anticipatory glee, profoundly questions the empirical existence of a continuous Syrian nation from ancient Phoenicia to the present. Siryal's country is a "a myth dragged along by myth," an imaginary cedar tree covered in Levantine flora but itself intangible, a hazy mountain summit that keeps receding in the horizon. Its existence is as paradoxical as the baseless tip of a pyramid floating above ground. The intellectual's hopes still await the base to support it: *Yā ᶜāruha / lā ᶜār / bilādi / innaha lam tūlad baᶜd* [You, her dishonor, / are not dishonorable / my country / it is not yet born]. Like the racecourse of images, the future prospects of this embryonic country are both frightening and exhilarating. And the critical reflection on the various *musūkh* – miscreants of the imagination devised out of repressed wish-fulfilments – can be directed to national myth-making as well. Muyassar's relative distance from the centers of Pan-Arab ideological fervor allows for more skepticism with regard to superficial nationalist agendas.

In addition, *Siryal* reflects its Aleppine habitus in originating from close interpersonal communications in a setting of a Surrealist cross-artistic workshop. A revealing comment in Muyassar's preface tries to make the strangeness of the collection palatable to readers by

[894] Translation is Monaco's with slight revisions. Monaco, "Syria and the Reception of Surrealism," 123.

suggesting that the poems draw on languages of everyday life: "we pay serious attention to the diverse manners of speech exchanged by people in their assemblies, places of amusement, during visits paid to one another, in nightly gatherings and when they're alone. We try to register what's novel and exquisite [in these exchanges] with utmost precision."[895] On the declaratory level at least, this comment foreshadows the *shafawi* movement of the 1970s. While on the textual level oddities overwhelm quotidian detail in *Siryal,*[896] the comment holds true for the way in which the volume was born and conceived: Syrian Surrealism did chiefly emerge from oral encounters mirroring the socio-poetic formations of the 1970s.

Khalida Saᶜid transmits an account she heard from the Syrian artist Fateh al-Mudarres (1922-1999), a pathbreaking modernist in Syrian art, according to which he came as a frequent visitor to the Muyassar home in Aleppo at the time of the Second World War. Urkhan and his brother ᶜAdnan – a gifted, taciturn painter – ran a low-key literary salon that attracted many of the prominent Aleppine literati of the time. Al-Mudarres reports that he heard ᶜAli Nasir read out his poems and witnessed Urkhan's responses to them; he also observed ᶜAdnan take inspiration from the poems to draw "watery" pictures. A young man of barely twenty years, Mudarres followed suit and so was introduced to experimental art. The same year of *Siryal*'s publication, Mudarres' Surrealist painting was displayed – alongside works by eight other artists – in the first-ever exhibition of modern art in Syria in the stately Jawdat al-Hashimi college in Damascus.[897]

This local Surrealist scene virtually vanished after the Syrian state was established, a fact having to do with the growing importance of Damascus as the political center. The cultural

[895] *Siryal*, 21-22.
[896] There are occasional sentences and phrases at spoken low-register such as the opening line of "Dolls (*Siryal*, 64)": *mā ajmalu al-laᶜb bi-l-dumā!* [how nice to play with dolls!], but these are few and far apart.
[897] Quoted in Saᶜid, *Yutubiya*, 251.

identities native to Aleppo were increasingly sidelined and later, in the radical years of the Baath, came under open attack. Muyassar moved to Damascus in the early 1950s where he was employed as an interpreter in the Indian embassy for his fluency in English. Aside from scattered magazine items he stopped publishing. His private residence was however maintained as a site of hiding for open literary discussion with broad cultural horizons: according to Sa^{c}id, it was there that she and her husband Adonis first came across the names and ideas of the French Surrealists between 1950 and 1954.[898] In her eulogy to Muyassar, the novelist Ulfat Idlibi generously describes his character as literary mentor in the early state years to whose home young writers would bring their work with the expectation of getting helpful feedback from an honest and knowledgeable critic.[899] The Surrealist legacy of cross-artistic workshops likewise had an afterlife that effaced its Aleppine beginnings. The budding scene of modern Syrian visual arts (*al-funūn al-taskhkīliyya*) – which was to grow and develop over the course of the 20th century – seems to owe a great deal to the conversations started in this forum.[900] Al-Mudarres defines Muyassar as a spiritual father and describes the atmosphere he created in the meetings as rich with thought, spirit and knowledge. Sa^{c}id echoes this statement in stressing his importance for modern poetry, observing that with his low written output "he was a poet of life. His influence came in ways of personal contact and oral conversation."[901]

The Syrian state about which Muyassar was warily hopeful decided his fate. He was forced out of his native Aleppo. Not only did his publication come to a near halt, but in the mid-sixties, as the country was going through the upheavals of a Baathist revolution targeting the last remains of the *ancien régime*, he was arrested on political grounds, tortured and humiliated by

[898] Sa^{c}id, *Yutubiya*, 256.
[899] Ulfat Idlibi, "Urkhan Muyassar: Lamha min Hayatihi al-Shakhsiyy [Urkahn Muyassar: Glimpse of his Persoanl Life]," in: *al-Ma^{c}rifa* 160 (June 1975), 164-171.
[900] On the main figures and developments in the Aleppo art scene see Tahir Bunni, *al-Fann al-Tashkili fi Halab* [Visual Arts in Aleppo, 1997].
[901] Sa^{c}id, *Yutubiya*, 255-256.

his jailors. He died soon after the arrest in 1965. His collaborator ᶜAli Nasir remained in Aleppo where he served as a chief health official overseeing Aleppo's hospital. Nasir was killed in his clinic under mysterious circumstances in the early 1970s.

Running parallel to *Siryal*, another invisible chapter in the history of modern Arabic poetry was written in Aleppo and re-surfaced through the Forum's critical work. In tandem with Syrian Surrealism of the 1940s, Barut argues, an eccentric recluse by the name of Khayr al-Din al-Asadi proposed a template for a visionary metaphysical poem indexed to Sufi sensibilities that anticipated much of what would make the prose poem institutionalized by *Shiᶜr*. Over the course of the 1940s, al-Asadi wrote a sequence of what he called *nafaḥāt min al-shiᶜr al-ṣūfī al-manthūr* [gusts of Sufi poetry in prose], *nafaḥāt* being a Sufi term which means "gusts" but charged with mystical content roughly means "in-takes of the divine." These poetic pieces were then collected in an exceptional book titled *Aghani al-Qubba* [Songs of the Shrine, 1950-51] and divided into self-proclaimed Quran-like suras with interspersed illustrations as if depicting Aleppo in distorted dream fragments: Islamic religious architecture and traditional music instruments in disproportional sizes mix with nude figures, oversized body organs, artefacts and supernatural elements. Each sura is strung together with several unmetrical, unrhymed, often cryptic poetic utterances whose unit-length is comparable to that of a Quranic verse. In his foreword, al-Asadi writes that he considered repressing his "birdsongs" but decided for publication in order to pose a counterweight to the bigotry of political poetry. These *nafaḥāt*, says al-Asadi, "are slender, gentle and cordial, in languages and terms all their own, creating their own ambience and horizons, brushed by the hand of art and bettered by the chisel of the imagination […] they are a private missive for elect souls. A spirit of expanse blows through them; not a muddy love – as

ignorance believes – and not earthly wine […] but exaltation and spiritual ardor."[902] Barut regards this foreword as the first real manifesto of the visionary prose poem keyed to Sufi experience.[903] It represents an interesting intermediary stage in the development of the prose poem prior to Adonis' influential statement that he "knew Surrealism by another name, which is Sufism."[904] That grafting of Surrealism onto Adonis' Neo-Sufism became hard to untangle once it formed a crucible for Arab modernism and the cultural identities invested in it, though some have controversially tried to undo the tangle.[905] Al-Asadi's Sufi gusts and *Siryal* developed in parallel lines yet separately. With al-Asadi, we get in embryo a theory of the visionary prose poem as antithetical to *khaṭāba*, yet in terms couched in deep-seated Islamic traditions of thought and art, and without the ideological caginess of Adonis and the inwardness of a besieged sect which had internalized violence. Later Syrian poets with visionary amplitude would choose to re-connect with al-Asadi to create a line of occultist visionary poetry divorced from Adonis' dominant ideologies. The Forum's extensive critical debates about Adonis' poetry helped create these alternatives.

Importantly, al-Asadi was raised in a close-knit Islamic milieu and attended the Ottoman *madrasa* where his mentors were prominent Aleppine religious scholars.[906] His cultural horizons went, however, beyond Quran and *hadith*. During the French mandate, al-Asadi worked as an Arabic instructor in local schools. He directed an amateur play by the name of *American Independence* for the students of al-Faruqiya school. On opening night, a quantity of gunpowder

[902] Al-Asadi, *Aghani al-Qubba*, iii.
[903] Barut, *Al-Shiʿr Yaktubu Ismahu*, 15.
[904] Ibid., 9.
[905] ʿAbd al-Qadir Al-Jannabi, *Risala Maftuha ila Adunis* [An Open Letter to Adonis] (Dar al-Jadid, 199-). In this venomous take-down of Adonis' book *Surrealism and Sufism*, al-Jannabi addresses the author in the second person and accuses him of *tarjīm*, a pun on *tarjama* [translation], by which he means "a lousy translation aiming to 'stone' (*rajm*) the thinking of others." In the context of Surrealism, al-Jannabi claims that by blurring the lines between Surrealist and Sufi poetry, Adonis has mistakenly sacralized what was supposed to be an atheistic and blasphemous poetic ethos. He also takes issue with Adonis' ideological de-historicizing of Surrealism to force it into his own notions of *ghaybiyya* [metaphysical mysteries].
[906] Al-Asadi, *Ahyaʾ Halab wa-Aswaquha* [Aleppo's Neighborhoods and Markets], 7.

exploded in his hand, and his wrist had to be amputated.[907] Due to this accident, he experienced a severe crisis of faith which entirely changed his habits of bodily and spiritual nutrition. He chose to become a vegetarian and drew closer to Sufi philosophy and poetry, as his physical defect made him a social outsider.[908] He was entirely autodidactic and became an assiduous collector of books and cultural artefacts. He ended up having one of the largest book collections in Aleppo.

Al-Asadi seems to have been a linguistic prodigy. He mastered both synchronic and diachronic aspects of the Arabic language and wrote student primers on Arabic calligraphy, grammar and rhetoric. Motivated by his love of Sufi poetry, he also gained fluency in other languages and cultures from the region: Turkish he knew from his upbringing, and Persian he learned well enough to read Hafez, Rumi, and Farid al-Din al-ᶜAttar in the original. He co-translated a long poem by the Armenian poet Avetik Isahakyan (1875-1957) written about the medieval Arab poet Abu al-ᶜAlaᵓ al-Maᶜarri.[909] Unlike that of Muyassar, Al-Asadi's multilingualism was firmly rooted in regional sympathies and the Pan-Islamic cultural sphere, and his influences are more Asiatic than European. His transmissions from Eastern Islamic Sufis writing in Persian are self-understood as intracultural, even though they are not intralinguistic.

As he developed the etiquette of Sufi metaphysical love, his creative energies were also invested in his native city. The overwhelmingly nostalgic, localist identity cultivated in isolation provided him a powerful counterforce to the political identities – identities highly distasteful to him – on offer in the new state. The clinging to his locale is however governed by regenerative love rather than by the hatred and venom so painstakingly described in Khalifa's much later

[907] Ibid., 7-8.
[908] Al-Asadi was taunted for his one arm and his deformed appearance aggravated his bad reputation of being a deviant accused of *harṭaqa* (hereticism). See Khatib Badla, "La Taqsifu Khayr al-Din al-Asadi Rajaᵓan [Please Don't Harass Khayr al-Din al-Asadi]," in: *Al-ᶜArabi al-Jadid* October 23, 2016. Last visited March 24, 2019.
[909] Not coincidently, this translation occurred at a period of massive immigration waves of Armenians into Aleppo during the First World War following Turkish organized massacres and deportations. Thousands of Armenians at first settled down in shabby neighborhoods and refugee camps on the city's outskirts and slowly became integrated into the city's landscape. See Al-Asadi, *Ahyaᵓ Halab wa-Aswaquha*, 9.

novel. He was appointed vice-chairman of al-Adeyat archeological society and went on scientific expeditions abroad, visiting libraries, viewing manuscripts and meeting fellow scholars.[910] He took upon himself the role of an encyclopedic ethnographer whose life's project was to meticulously record every aspect of human life in Aleppo. He compiled a 3,000-page long, seven-volume *Comparative Encyclopedia of Aleppo*, left unfinished at the time of his death and published posthumously.[911] A separate reference work on Aleppine landmarks (neighborhoods, markets, mosques, schools etc.) was produced to make a more accessible guide to the city.[912] In his estate were found thousands of photographs of Aleppo's population, buildings, and streets.

The encyclopedia is indexed to al-Asadi's linguistic specialties and records the intimacies of Aleppine life through its native dialect. Barut determines that al-Asadi's studies are a unique combination of lexicography, ethnography and semiology, free of orientalist prejudice and with an insider's affection for detail.[913] In alphabetical order of stem-roots, one finds a treasure trove of words, stock phrases, proverbs, food and drink, popular beliefs, prayers and swear words, games, vendor's calls, and wedding songs. Entries are often flavored with local sentiment for Aleppo. Here is an excerpt from the entry on the anise spirit Arak:

> Arak: the name of a spirit distilled mostly from pressed grapes. Called *ᶜaraq* [sweat] because the extract evaporates after being boiled; the vapors pass through long, bending, chilled tubes that transform them into a liquid – like that of human sweat – placed in a receptacle at the end of the process. *Al-Muqtataf* […] names it *ᶜaraqī*, perhaps to reflect the Turkish word Raki […]. The Polish language derives its name from Turkish and calls it ARAKI [Romanized script in original]. In Persian it is also called *ᶜaraq*. […] With respect to its distillation, there are two sorts: *dūz* [double] and *muthallath* [triple]. Its extract is often boiled with anise. It is sometimes called "milk of lions" because when mixed with water it takes on a milky color that inspires courage[914] in its drinker […] Aleppo is famous for its distillation, especially Jabal al-Akrad, where there are *qaysī* grapes. Usually drunk in an elegant glass bottle made in Armanaz [a town in Aleppo's northwest] and called *baẓṭa*. And how men exiled from Aleppo fondly

[910] Ibid., 8.
[911] Al-Asadi, *Mawsuᶜat Halab al-Muqarana*, 7 v., 1981-1988.
[912] Al-Asadi, *Ahyaᵓ Halab wa-Aswaquha* (ed. ᶜAbd al-Fattah Qilᶜaji), 1990.
[913] Barut, "Al-ᶜAwda ila Khayr al-Din al-Asadi [The Return to Khayr al-Din al-Asadi]" in: *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 147 (July 1983), 105-106.
[914] The verb is *yastaᵓsidu,* to make a lion out of someone, display courage such as that of a lion.

> remember the *ᶜaraq* of Aleppo and the gurgling sound it makes when it flows from the *baṭṭa* to the mouth.[915]

Then follow anecdotes, proverbs and dialect songs around the drink. According to one story, a foreigner visiting Aleppo came down with a violent illness. For lack of doctors, a surgeon working on a trade vessel suggested fasting as cure, but the foreigner's condition only worsened. Delirious with illness and an empty stomach, the foreigner drank a sip of Arak and his health immediately improved sufficiently for him to tour the city and pay visits to its foreign consuls. But the drink can have reverse effects: "Arak – how white in the glass, how black inside your head," runs a colloquial proverb warning of depression and blackouts following from its consumption.

As a work of poetry, *Songs of the Shrine* is, like *Siryal*, comparative in the sense that it situates itself as continuous with the one great Sufi poem written in multiple Islamic languages over centuries. It cross-references texts from the circles of Sufi mystics – Rumi, Ibn Arabi, Ibn al-Farid, al-Hallaj, Rabiᶜa al-ᶜAdawiyya, Abu Yazid al-Bistami and more – as if they were an integral part of the book's projected monad. Each of the 27 poems opens with a short glossary of obscure locutions and names, and a list of "influences" titled *al-taʾaththur*. The *taʾaththur* transparently names all of the intertexts in a given sura. The one from sura no. 7 runs as follows: "abundant flow from Hafez, with alteration; a sentence from [Abu Yazid] al-Bistami, with alteration; four sentences from Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, with alteration; one sentence from Abu Saᶜid [Ibn Abi al-Kheir, an 11th-century Sufi poet from Nishapur], with alteration; the rest belongs to the author of this book."[916]

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[915] Al-Asadi, *Mawsuᶜat Halab al-Muqarana*, vol. 5, 375 (*ᶜ/r/q*).
[916] *Aghani al-Qubba*, 49. Note that each list ends with the phrase "the rest belongs to the author of this book" as if to replace the text-embedded signature of the old ghazal poets.

The example of Hafez overwhelms all others and is ubiquitous throughout the collection. In his foreword, al-Asadi states that his "songs" are loving imitations of *lisān al-ghayb* – Language of the Unseen, which is also Hafez's sobriquet – and that in this he follows the precedent of Goethe in the *West-östlicher Divan*. Hafez "watered" every single poem cultivated in the collection and the degree of his influence is indicated to be never less than abundant, specified as either *ghadq* [copious flow] or *ghamr* [flood]. Al-Asadi's heterodox Quran is thus at the same time a rewriting of the ghazal tradition brimming with inflow from the great master Hafez. The last verset of the first sura – "Surat al-Madraj" – ends not with the author's signature, as ghazals conventionally do, but with a direct address to the reader urging to adore and study Hafez: "Repeat after me: Hafez is the string of life, his provisions are like assistance from the lip of the Unseen [*ghayb*], when silence is attentive and its mouth full of speech."[917]

Even though the strung-couplet structure of the Persian ghazal is not replicated, the poems are arranged in versets of roughly equal length. Each poem contains, with few exceptions, 25-26 versets. This consistency lends a solidity of structure to the book and is faithful to the spirit of the Persian ghazal by making the poem into a playful formal pursuit.[918] The numbers are likewise significant – 25-26 versets in each of the 27 suras – because they nearly touch on the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet (28), which for al-Asadi held profound magical power. It expresses the idea intrinsic to the book that the language of mystical love creates a universe of beauty sufficient unto itself as an alternative to the corrupt world.[919] This with the caveat that, as Barut notes, al-Asadi's language usage is at times outlandish, full of obsolete words and odd

[917] Ibid., 6.
[918] In the *EI2* entry on Ghazal, Bustani helpfully distinguishes between the ghazal as a genre evolving from the *tashbīb* part of the qasida's *nasīb* and its technical aspect perfected by Neo-Persian poets in the 13th-16th centuries with the supreme examples of Hafez and Saᶜdi. In Blachère's part of the article, the evolution of the ghazal as an autonomous genre in Arabic poetry is comprehensively described. See "Ghazal," *EI2*, vol. 5 (1963-1965), 1028-1036.
[919] The fact that the numbers fall short of 28 might indicate that al-Asadi wants to break the holistic order that the "right" number would have suggested.

neologisms. Even though the poems are couched in Islamic traditionalism, they seismically register the agitation of the world from which they come and alter this traditionalism from within. The qualitative leap from Gibran's romanticism to the modern visionary idiom has to do, per Barut, with this insertion of crisis into the poem's language to "implode" it. Though Al-Asadi's wayward excesses of love treat the Arabic language warmly as opposed to Adonis' frosty intellectual dissections, they share similar shapes of response to the legitimation crisis that runs deep in this transitional period.

An eclectic devotional text, *Songs of the Shrine* cuts and pastes elements from Sufi tradition, canonical Islamic texts, and al-Asadi's own syncretistic beliefs. It is difficult to extract and translate passages from this collagist assemblage, since the language is both very idiosyncratic and organically embedded in its sources. The motif of homoerotic desire – a kind of unleashing of the Freudian *Trieb* which Muyassar's Surrealism did not touch on – can serve as an accessible point of connection. Barut observes that the wavering between transcendent pure love and the libidinal impulse is both fraught and fecund and not as simple as al-Asadi puts it, namely, a preference for the immaculate heavenly over muddy terrestrial love. In fact, the passionate pursuit of the Absolute, once pitted against societal and religious conventions, resorts to poetic tropes regarded by contemporary social mores as sexually deviant. It expresses itself most conspicuously in the turn towards homoerotic desire as conduit to the religiously sublime. Medieval Sufi poetry had sublimated pederasty into spiritual love, elusive in terms of the beloved's gender and number, but by al-Asadi's time this corpus had been safely stowed away in the past. It is a whole other matter to bring male homoeroticism – however metaphoric – into original composition of a 20th century poem in Arabic. That al-Asadi writes as if shut off from the present in bygone eras and devotionally engrosses himself in Hafez legitimizes the conflation

between extremities of profane and sacred love. Yet there had constantly been whispering around al-Asadi that his religious *hartaqa* (hereticism) was aggravated by a sexual one. Because his physical deformity left him an undesirable bachelor who never married, he was looked upon as *shāzz*, 'sexually deviant'.[920]

This rumor might well have been reinforced by an overly corporeal reading of the poems. The conflation of sacred and profane occurs prominently in "Surat Iyaz," sura number nine in the collection and one of its high points.[921] Iyaz (also known as Ayaz), as indicated by the glossary, is a Turkish slave-boy with whom the Sultan Mahmoud – founder of the Ghaznavid Empire – was infatuated, a legend that became part of Islamic lore and a potent symbol of perfect love, particularly in the non-Arab Islamic traditions of Sufi poetry.[922] Iyaz's charms call forth exuberance that rises above the flesh-spirit dichotomy and is consecrated in the *ṭarab*, dance, and song which true devotion requires: "let fragments of beauty dance with fragments of song, for how delightful is the face of Iyaz swaying among sublime melodies."[923] As per a commonly emphasized feature of the story, Iyaz – the lowly slave – is *maᶜbūd al-sulṭān*, a force enslaving the Sultan – the mightiest political power on earth – with his ravishing beauty.[924] "Who can steal the globe's grace from you?" the poet rhetorically asks, suggesting that the realm of love is superior to the political realm.[925]

Avowing strong Persianite literary affinities in an increasingly Arabo-Syrian national literary sphere, this verse hints that the dominance of national-literary ideology is bound to

[920] Riyad Naᶜsan Agha, *Sarih fi Makan*, 16.
[921] In his recent anthology, Salih Diab chooses this sura as one of three representatives from *Aghani al-Qubba*. See Diab, *Poésie Syrienne Contemporaine*, 26-29.
[922] In Saᶜdi's *Bustan*, Ayaz appears as a symbol of true love and in Rumi's *Mathnawi* he appears as analogous to Ibn ᶜArabi's *al-Insan al-Kamil* [Perfect Man]. See Hardy, P. "Ayāz," in *EI2*. consulted online September 30, 2018.
[923] Al-Asadi, *Aghani al-Qubba*, 67.
[924] In fact, tradition has it that Ayaz's physical features were not at all that striking. According to one account, "Ayaz was not remarkably handsome, but possessed a sweet expression and olive complexion, and was greatly endowed with the arts of pleasing." Cited in: Hardy, "Ayāz."
[925] Al-Asadi, *Aghani al-Qubba*, 68.

decline, whereas the love consecrated by the transnational, trans-historical association of Sufis and dedicated to Iyaz is permanent. "al-Asadi's metaphysical alienation in the Arab 1940s, the years of national awakening," writes Barut, "is to be ascribed to the fact that he does not take part in this awakening."[926] The unity folded within Iyaz is not even tied to the Arabic language as it is to the Arabic script: "Iyaz! You supple consonantal [*mahmūza*] Alif! The goal of precious spirits is to drink in gulps from the basin of your beauty."[927] After this highly abstract representation of Iyaz as commensurable with the totality of the language-system, he is immediately brought down to concrete sensual terms rife with sexuality:

> Tilt the cap on your head. Yes, like that. Hold your shirt tightly on your body. O, light of the drunkard's eye!
> You, my here! My here! You, little friends of our private assembly! You, trading in bags of musk! May you receive good tidings: the arrival of a gazelle from the deserts of Khotan.[928]
> Fragrant tree [*rand*] of love-fever! Morning rose! The provisions of passion! Vendor of sweets! The throne of my splendor lies at the dust of your thresholds!
> O, emaciation of the spirit! I'm struck down with ardor, lighted by a candle from Turkistan; will union enfold us? Will passion blaze up on our lips' embers?
> […]
> Iyaz! Seesaw of desires! A parched sigh of thirst [*hahhat ẓamaʾi al-talaẓẓī*]! Jets of fervent waters! the rubies of my eyes I will scatter along the path of your boyish coquetry.
> *aghyad! aghyad! ya ghundur!*[929] I drank the poetry of your breaths in a cup of rising sun, and the shadows of my visions grew longer.[930]

As long as the heart is in the right place, all seeming deviations are sanctioned: "*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar*," the speaker addresses Iyaz, "prayer in the direction of your brow's mihrab is not allowed unless ablution is performed in the heart's blood."[931] Barut concisely states that "the Absolute is an intensifying given shaping the beauty of the sensual world rather than a

[926] Barut, *al-Shiᶜr Yaktubu Ismahu*, 24.
[927] Al-Asadi, *Aghani al-Qubba*, 68.
[928] A major oasis city in Xinjiang province in modern China's southwest known for its production of jade, and an important commercial center for the export of goods westward along the Silk Road.
[929]This exclamation is impossible to translate satisfactorily because it has the evocative power of calling out a personal name. *Aghyad* means having the slender shapeliness of a young woman. *Ghundur* means plump in a voluptuous way or also dandyish like the modern Hebrew word *megundar* both of which derive from Aramaic.
[930] Ibid., 68-69.
[931] Ibid., 70.

metaphysical given."[932] He means that the absolute is determined by the libidinal overflow as much as it enables the passions to be translated and expressed. The givens of the sensual world are couched in the particulars of the Aleppine souk (bags of musk, vendor of sweets) and the global network extending along its trade-routes as well as in ideals of beauty and spiritual refinement cultivated in literary centers to Aleppo's north and east. Iyaz, for whom prominent phallic imagery is used (the *alif*, the candle), wears a Muslim cap (*qalanswa*) that replicates the shape of a shrine's dome (*qubba*) in an Islamic cityscape but also looks like the tip of the male member. He comes from the Turkish tribes of Central Asia or, as a gazelle, from the deserts of Khotan, a commercial center in Muslim China, at the far southeast of the Silk Road. As an intoxicating inspiration, he is a sun rising in the east that determines the angles at which the shadowings of poetic imagination fall, as al-Asadi faces east for poetic influence. The erotic excitement of the poem culminates in the last two versets cited which – with the water-jets and the onomatopoeic neologism *hahha* – appear orgasmic yet are enfolded within the piety of the *basmala* which opens the poem and the platonic verset that concludes it: "come near […] I send forth from my eye […] a ray of lust to kiss your handsomely spotted forehead."[933]

III The Critics

Alongside debating Adonis and transmitting the recent achievements of *shafawiyya*, the critics of the University Forum dug up these unfamiliar modern experiences from Aleppo to set a precedence of creative non-conformity. The tradition of Arab modernism was re-examined, and new orientations were made possible. Indeed, the literary critics were the undisputed propelling force behind the organization of the Forum and the measure of coherence it gave to the recent

[932] Barut, *al-Shi^{c}r Yaktubu Ismah*, 21.
[933] Al-Asadi, *Aghani al-Qubba*, 70.

history of Arabic poetry and to meta-literary thinking. While there had been intergenerational tensions in terms of literary tastes, the poets needed the knowledge transmitted to them by the older professors who had far greater exposure to books. Aleppo had been staggeringly behind in terms of literacy and book circulation, and much of what was published in Damascus did not make it up north. Belonging to a generation that had experienced the relative openness of the state, the critics went to universities in Beirut, Moscow or Paris, accumulated substantial private collections, and could read in a foreign language or two. The aspiring Aleppine writers, on the other hand, had to subsist on scraps and random finds. "We read the poetry of the previous generation [the *shafawiyya* poets] and 'resistance' poetry," reports Saleh Diab in an interview, "we didn't even have a library to borrow books. The first time I came across *Shiᶜr* magazine was in a library in France." Poetry translations, according to him, were entirely absent from the repertoire of reading, but were discussed in the Forum. Only after reading a French translation of Yannis Ritsos' poems in Paris, for example, did Diab realize to what degree the Arab poets of the seventies had plundered his work. Beforehand, they were the only modernists he knew, and thus the authoritative models for contemporary writing.[934]

Jamal Barut was the leading critical beacon. An intellectual powerhouse possessing an independent mind and a high absorptive capacity, Barut was always welling with nuanced knowledge that branched out into various fields and delivered with humor and acuity. He was found to be an indefatigable organizer with a can-do enterprising spirit whose connections in the Baath party were shrewdly used to carve out spaces of intellectual freedom. His voice as poetry critic with a broad socio-cultural vision was forged in the short-lived but impactful platform of

[934] *Whatsapp* interview with Saleh Diab, May 29, 2018. Barut confirms that Syrian intellectuals had very limited access to *Shiᶜr* from the 1970s onwards. The magazine was banned in Syria at the time of the UAR and was thus already in shortage at its peak of activity. See Barut's interview for *Fushat Fikr*, an Al-Araby network program hosted by Malik al-Treiki. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSFCC3nGeME&t=2106s, 20:55 and onwards.

al-Thawra cultural supplement run by the poet Muhammad ᶜUmran in collaboration with Adonis and Kamal Abu Deeb between 1976-1978. As the state-sponsored magazines grew thicker with official discourse, vigorous new voices emigrated to the ephemeral format of the daily newspaper and its literary section. According to Barut, publishing an article in those years in *al-Thawra* cultural supplement meant immediate recognition and consecration, and ᶜUmran gave Barut's first 1976 feature a full page out of a slender supplement consisting of four or five.[935]

By the early 1980s, Barut had clearly broken out on his own to establish a different ethical practice of literary and socio-cultural criticism. In addition to the re-assessment of the *Shiᶜr* corpus, the Forum critics began engaging in *naqd al-naqd* [meta-criticism], a large-scale reckoning with the trends of literary theorizing in Syria and the Arab world. In some sense this was a counter-response to Adonis' influential role as critical trend-setter through his journal *Mawaqif*. Adonis in particular was regarded with the respect due to a rival of comparable magnitude whose elusive ideological underpinnings Barut constantly tries to expose. Barut's 1982 "Structuralist Poetics and Structuralist Approaches in Arab Critical Thought" does so by revealing that a theory of structuralist correspondences is the hidden discourse underwriting the critical direction of *Mawaqif*. Barut's essay maintains a delicate balance of recognizing the productivity of internalizing structuralist discourse in Arab poetics and pinpointing exactly where fruitful *muthāqafa* (transculturation) becomes disruptive *mumāthala*, assimilation into Western critical paradigms.[936] The article, however, goes beyond Adonis and tackles the work of other prominent Arab critics whose authority stems from mastery of metropolitan discourses:

[935] On the *mulhaq* see Najm al-Din Samman, "al-Multaqa al-Adabi li-Jamiᶜat Halab Namudhajan." Barut mentions it briefly in the televised interview referenced before (Part 1, 34:17-35:12).
[936] "al-Shiᶜriyya al-Bunyawiyya wa-l-Muqarabat al-Bunyawiyya fi al-Fikr al-Naqdi al-Arabi [Struturalist Poetics and Structuralist Approaches in Arab Critical Thought]," in: *Al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 131 (March 1982), 41. For full article see 40-57.

The Syrians Kamal Abu Deeb and Khalida Sa^{c}id, The Lebanese Elias Khoury and Yumna al-^{c}Id, and the Moroccan poet and poetry theorist Muhammad Bennis.

The crux of the argument is that the various offshoots of Arab structuralism, by focusing on the text as an ontological totality, repress the socio-cultural and political concerns particular to the modern Arab intelligentsia and their shapes of consciousness and thus ignore a crucial point of origination. It is hard to blame al-^{c}Id and Khoury, for example, for ignoring societal implications of literary texts, yet Barut's thesis is that, after 1967, structuralist critics had instinctively fused their textualism with Marxist dialectics to create a neat system of correspondence between societies and texts and thereby eliding the complexities of both. Adonis' oft-repeated claim that the poem is a "revolution" in language is a case in point. Dimensions of political and social history, as well as the literary texts themselves, were thus subjected to an overly stratified scheme whose connected layers remained static. Even Khoury, who was drawn to decentered post-modern models of interpretation taken over from the *Tel Quel* theorists, attached his mode of reading to the dogma of an infinitely open textual structure, occasionally to the detriment of the texts themselves and their definitive determinations.[937] The process of signification in a given poem, states Barut, cannot be followed with reference only to itself and its edifice. Semantics always play on multiple frames of reference, chief among which are the socio-cultural and political ones distinct to the consciousness of the Arab intelligentsia. He then gives an example of a brief poem by Lebanese poet-translator Paul Chaoul whose understanding calls for attention to the ways in which poetic structure is dynamically subverted.[938] Structuralist attitudes thus fall behind the dynamism of actual poetic production by

[937] "Elias Khoury's critical apparatus derives from the theories of Derrida and Kristeva with respect to the infinite centers we can project onto the texts, and thus the infinite ways of reading." Ibid., 45. Barut then commends Khoury's practice of reading the same poem by Darwish or Adonis multiple times in different ways, but hints that a political sensibility is lost in the artificial separation between textual levels that may interminably extend and multiply.
[938] Ibid., 51-52.

being caught up in a loop of self-perpetuating methods and terminologies and isolating poetry from its belonging in a wider socio-cultural consciousness. Barut thus recommends a loose method of healthy eclecticism combining objectivism, ideological criticism, and structuralist rigor.[939]

His vision is clearly informed by the inadequacy of the current critical discourse to address the *shafawiyya* poets he came to write about. For the Forum poets listening in on these incisive remarks, this would be a profoundly liberating message, a license as it were to explore the realism stemming from the fringes of everyday perceptions as opposed to creating total esthetic artifices.

Barut is puzzled by the fascination with structuralist and post-structuralist theories and attributes it to a slightly distorted postcolonial center-periphery relationship, whereby bitterly marginalized Arab intellectuals – whose fundamental experience is of broken and chaotic societies – crave the order and solid structure embedded in the technology of writing. He coins a term for this socio-cultural psychological complex: *al-muthaqqaf al-maḍbuʿ*, "the hyena-like intellectual," a scavenger-intellectual feeding on remains discarded by the metropole: "The transferal of concepts thrown down by the metropole to the Arab critical field, and the easiness with which they are merged into the Arab cultural project, can be understood in terms of center-periphery relations yet they also reveal features of the 'hyena-like intellectual' pillaged by anything spat out by the metropole."[940] The phrasing is richer than merely likening Arab critics to scavengers since it also connotes being devoured by the metropole: in Arab folklore, Barut explains, the hyena can cast a spell on its prey and cause it to be eaten up voluntarily. By no means a prescription to abstain from theorizing, Barut's recommendation is to go about it

[939] Ibid., 49.
[940] Ibid., 41-42

differently: slightly more attentiveness to their close historical and literary surroundings would empower Arab critics to wolf down the metropole instead of being charmed and eaten up by it.[941]

The effort to seize distance from a hegemonic meta-literary discourse to make room for local literary practice was also needed vis-à-vis Soviet-oriented thinking. This effort was largely conducted by Barut's associate Fuʾad Mirᶜi, an Aleppo-based professor who obtained his PhD in literature from Lomonosov Moscow State University.[942] A sanguine and lucid thinker, Mirᶜi is said to have spread his naturally optimistic disposition among the *shabāb* and fulfilled a quasi-pastoral role, shepherding them into al-Qasr café, and encouraging them to write and participate in the Forum's activities.[943] After returning from Moscow, Mirᶜi practiced translation from Eastern Bloc literary criticism, yet kept a vigilant distance from the bolshevized literary discourse galvanized by the influx of translations from Lenin, Trotsky and Lukács after 1967.[944] This discourse was transparently co-opted by the Baathist state to promote its agendas of revolution from above and secular modernization. It precipitated the climate from which sprang Yasin and Sulayman's *Al-Idiyulujiya wa-l-Adab fi Suriya* (1974), an influential work of Marxist ideological criticism that classified Syrian authors by their class origins, denouncing most of them as representatives of petite bourgeois concerns.

Two of Mirᶜi's important translational interventions are Horst Redeker's *Abbildung und Aktion* (trans. 1976) and a collection of selected essays by the 19th century Russian critic Vissarion Belinski (trans. 1982). The former is a work by a contemporary GDR literary critic

[941] See previous reference to the *Manifesto Antropófago* in the context of Urkhan Muyassar's Surrealism.
[942] Mirᶜi recounts that when he came back to receive his university appointment in Aleppo in 1973, he held a diploma in Russian with a title translated into English as "Doctor of Philosophy in Philology," which an inept administrator translated to Arabic as "Doctor of *fiqh al-lugha,*" an archaic term for lexicography. As Mirᶜi's specialization was supposed to have been literary criticism, the Aleppo Faculty of Letters winced at this title. His appointment was almost revoked because of bad translation. Mirᶜi, *al-Lugha wa-l-Tafkir*, 21-22.
[943] Dayraki, "Maqha al-Qasr – Rijal Tahta al-Mirwaha."
[944] Mirᶜi's periodization of translation in Syria is the following: French (and American) Existentialism in the 1950s, Marxist-Leninism after 1967, and structuralism from the early-mid 1970s. He mostly examines the pitfalls and shortcomings of each stage but nevertheless has good words to say about the quality of translations produced by the Syrian Ministry of Culture. Mirᶜi, *fi al-Lugha wa-l-Tafkir*, 35-46.

who re-calibrated theories of socialist realism and Lukács' stern ideological writings to accommodate subjective energies and individualism.[945] Belinski, in turn, is known for being the founding father of pre-Soviet Russian literary criticism as a mode of social and political thought, "the most passionate and influential voice of his generation," per Isaiah Berlin.[946] This particular translation may indicate that the function of the Forum was imagined along lines of comparison with literary thought in Czarist Russian, where political and social discourse migrated to literary debates because of the state's intolerance for direct critique.[947]

Mirᶜi would try to re-think esthetic categories beyond cultural bipolarity and situate them, like Barut, on a continuum with other social practices as stemming from a need to humanize history.[948] Also important was Mirᶜi's personal writing style, a clear and honest critical idiom couched in ecumenical impartiality whose target audience seems to have been of a college student's age like some of the Forum's poets. The democratic spirit of his writing, setting a base-line of questions and axioms about literature as an art, cleared out much of the rubble of politicized literary debates and focused on bare necessities of reading literature and its historically recurring questions.

It is this kind of hands-on pragmatic approach that gained a favorable reception in the Forum, also in terms of works of literary criticism in translation. Alongside the reckoning with the metropoles in Paris and Moscow, Syrian critics were also busy translating and debating works from the Anglo-American literary centers in London and New York. The key names in

[945] On Redeker see Colin B. Grant, *Literary Communication from Consensus to Rupture: Practice and Theory in Honecker's GDR*, 16-19.
[946] "Poor, consumptive, ill-born, ill-educated, a man of incorruptible sincerity and great strength of character, he became the Savonarola of his generation – a burning moralist who preached the unity of theory and practice, of literature and life." Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 304.
[947] For this celebrated thesis see Isaiah Berlin, "Russia and 1848," in: *Russian Thinkers*, 1-23.
[948] See *al-Maᶜrifa* essay and *Muqaddima fi ᶜIlm al-Adab* [Introduction to the Science of Literature, 1981]. Many of Mirᶜi's original works and translations are unavailable since they were published in small Aleppine presses, like the University of Aleppo Press, and in few copies that did not travel outside Syria.

this area are Khaldun al-Shamᶜa and Muhyi al-Din Subhi, both a generation older than the Forum members, and associated with the old guard of the literary establishment.

We have encountered al-Shamᶜa as a translator of American and British poetry, but his major contributions were in the field of literary criticism. These works are steeped in the formalistic terminology of genre criticism. Barut classifies al-Shamᶜa as a major proponent of the objectivist approach and criticizes him for the reactionary impulse underlying the unbending genre theory imposed indiscriminately on all texts.[949]Subhi al-Hadidi, another of the emergent critical voices, is even harsher towards al-Shamᶜa, parsing his text with scrutiny and claiming that he causes colossal terminological confusion, does subservient disservice to the tradition he transmits, and uses it to lift himself above, and condescend to, current literary production in Syria.[950] Leaving aside Hadidi's strident polemical tones, there seems to be agreement that al-Shamᶜa crumbles the terms learned from the New Critics into the soup of the Syrian status quo. In al-Shamᶜa's defense, engaging in critical transmission from Anglo-American literary traditions may have become risky for his position at the heart of the institutional mainstream in light of the 1967 explosion of the *Hiwar* scandal, involving a Beirut-based literary journal discovered to have been funded by the CIA-endorsed Congress for Cultural Freedom.[951]

This form of old criticism masking as new is neglected in Barut's article because his interlocutors are the avant-garde critics on a par with him. The Forum did not entirely do away with critical conservatism. The only written record of the Forum's activity shows how the parameters of literary conversation are being strenuously redrawn out of a struggle with the thick

[949] Barut, "al-Shiᶜriyya al-Bunyawiyya," 56.
[950] Subhi Hadidi, "Fi Naqd al-Aristuqrati al-Rumantiki [On the Criticism of the Romantic Aristocra]," in: *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 131 (March 1982), 25-39.
[951] On the unfolding of this affair see Elizabeth Holt, "'Bread or Freedom': The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA, and the Literary Journal Ḥiwār (1962-1967)," in: *JAL* 44 (2013), 83-102. For a detailed account of the climate in which the CCF and *Hiwar* operated in Beirut see Creswell's *City of Beginnings*, 32-43.

crusting of the old. A transcription of a discussion panel held on the occasion of the Arab Writers Union visit to the University of Aleppo, this record is filtered through the lens of the conservative Union and its home journal, *al-Mawqif al-Adabi*. The visit takes place apropos the publication of Barut's *Poetry Writes Its Name* (1982) printed with the Union press. The book is the main topic for discussion. The participants are all recognizable Forum members. The person who occupies center stage of the panel is Fayiz Daya, a professor of classical Arabic poetry with a linguistic interest in semantics and one of the Forum founders. Following in al-Shamᶜa's footsteps, Daya ornaments his studies of pre-Islamic poetry with terms borrowed from the lexicon of New Criticism, especially the concept of *al-ṣūra al-faniyya* [artistic image]. Daya is chosen to give the introductory remarks about Barut's book, and embarks on a drawn-out monologue suggesting that he fundamentally disagrees with Barut's premise that Arabic poetry is being re-written by *qasidat al-nathr*. He is clearly averse to the idea that poetry is genuinely changing, and the most he is willing to concede is that Barut points to a "possible development in prosaic writing."[952] In truly Aleppine manner, this argument draws analogies between classical Arabic music and poetry as a uniquely inviolable artistic genre. As Daya drones on for over thirty minutes, Najm al-Din Samman, one of the Forum's scrappy young writers, finally loses patience and jumps in: "thirty-two minutes and Dr. Fayiz Daya is saying the same things we've heard him say in dozens of sessions at the University of Aleppo and in most of his lectures. I came to listen to a panel on the book *Poetry Writes Its Name*, not to a general introduction to poetry."[953] One gets a sense of the intellectual fatigue from spending accumulated hours with the same all-too-familiar discussants. The irritation, expressed by others as well, is directed at the

[952] "Nadwa Hawla Kitab al-Shiᶜr Yaktubu Ismahu, Matbuᶜat Ittihad al-Kuttab al-ᶜArab [A Session Revolving around the Book *Poetry Writes Its Name* Printed by the Arab Writers Union]," in: *Al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 144-146 (April-June 1983), 277.
[953] Ibid., 280.

way by which formalistic generalities obscure the concrete details of Barut's thesis and dismiss it at once. "No doubt the book presents an honorable defense of modernity," ironically responds the novelist Muhammad Abu Maᶜtuq, "and Dr. Daya's lecture also defends something honorably – the fundamentalist [*salafī*] element in writing."[954] It is only ironic that these young writers – otherwise excluded or self-removed from the Damascus-based official platforms – appear in the Union's journal in the form of hecklers interrupting the pontifications of a senior critic.

By contrast to al-Shamᶜa, Muhyi al-Din Subhi principally left his mark as a translator. Among his translations are René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (orig. 1948 trans. 1972), Graham Hough's *An Essay on Criticism* (orig. 1966 trans.1973), William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks' *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (orig. 1957 trans.1973-1974),[955] and the lecture "Novel and Narrative" by Frank Kermode (orig. 1972 trans.1977).[956] Some of these items, especially the Wellek-Warren and Wimsatt-Brooks translations, often turn up in bibliographies of literary studies and article citations, indicating that they were extensively used.[957] That both Daya and Mirᶜi reference them indicates that they were circulating in Aleppo. Discrediting the Syrian critics derivative of New Criticism presented an opportunity of a fresh return to the sources, namely, the Arabic translations of the works. Subhi's translations were endorsed by the well-endowed High Council for Literature, the Arts, and the Social Sciences which in the early 1970s inaugurated a prestigious series of literary criticism in translation with items mostly chosen from English-language criticism.[958]

[954] Ibid., 281.
[955] The Wimsatt-Brooks "short" history runs for about 800 pages and appeared in Damascus in two volumes.
[956] The latter was translated in magazine form for *al-Adab al-Ajnabiya* no. 1-3 (August 1977), 154-173.
[957] See for example Faʾiz Daya, *Jamaliyat al-Uslub: al-Sura al-Fanniya fi al-Adab al-ʿArabi* and ᶜInad Ghazwan, *al-Tahlil al-Naqdi wa-l-Jamali li-l-Adab*.
[958] A.D. Hifnawi, *Masarat al-Naqd wa-Madarat ma baʿda al-Hadatha*, 46.

The interest in meta-criticism did not lead to greater sophistication in the sense of expanding the theoretical jargon and its mazes of refinement. On the contrary, parallel to the work of the poetry of austerity, this critical work was one of paring down and thus in great measure para-theoretical. A scholar-poet and professor of English at Darwin College, Graham Hough outright declares in his *Essay on Criticism* that the book is short, bare and schematic in order to elucidate the principles of literary criticism and point in multiple directions without getting mired in theoretical intricacies.[959] Mirʿi's publications from the late 1970s are comparably designed as introductions and student primers on literature, just as Wellek and Warren's book served as a student handbook in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in US graduate programs. Some of the books circulating were not produced in Syria in the 1970s yet were embraced for these very same reasons of brevity and clarity.

A translation of George Watson's history of English literary criticism from Dryden to New Criticism was published 1979 by the Iraqi Ministry of Culture press. A frequent contributor to *Encounter* and professor of English at St. John's College, the Australian-born Watson was a fervently polemical Cold Warrior aligned with the political outlook of anti-Communist liberalism.[960] The book – titled *The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism* (1962 orig. 1964 2nd ed.) – argues at length for the conceptual coherence of the term "descriptive criticism" to analyze the distinct achievement of the English critics as "great revolutionary individuals." It is haunted by the specters of both the New Critics' scientific impersonality and the Hegelian abstract idea in its Marxist-Leninist applications. The historical English distaste for jargon, the impoverished terminology, and the conservative unoriginality of critical

[959] Hough, *An Essay on Criticism*, vi. Despite its conservative tempermant, the book includes a careful consideration of several critical approaches and at least attempts to be non-partisan. It takes a critical stance on I.A. Richards and the New Critics for their suppression of historically informed readings.
[960] Watson was an active member of the Liberal Party and stood for election in Cheltenham in 1959. At his death in 2013 he bequeathed the Liberal Democrats a hefty sum of £950,000. See https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-30034887. Last visited March 26, 2019.

descriptiveness are all held as points of impregnable strength in building great individual critics like Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.[961] The critical task as descriptive is defined from the beginning as antithetical to the reigning order in Stalinist countries. In the first paragraph of chapter one, the Hungarian poet Miklos Gimes is quoted as saying: "if the criterion of truth is political expediency, then even a lie can be 'true'; … and so we arrive at the outlook which infected not only those who thought up the faked political trials, but often infected even the victims: the outlook which poisoned our whole public life... and finally rendered many of us incapable of simply sensing or apprehending truth."[962] Watson boasts that England has not been subjected to such "ruthless authoritarianism" and states that criticism "pre-supposes an open society, and it is one of the conditions by which such a society survives."[963]Read in Iraq and Syria, this political anti-authoritarian stance traveled in the guise of a harmless work of literary criticism in translation, to a large degree stripped of its markers as liberalist partisanship. The prescription would have made sense in its economy: one need not have extensive libraries and master difficult vocabulary, only minimally cling to methodical clarity and individual-based particularities that can shed light on existing texts. This mode is also very close to orality, or what is known in the English tradition as "table-talk": "Descriptive criticism […] begins as talk and survives as talk that someone has thought worth writing down." Dryden's great discovery, according to Watson, was "not that plays and poems are worth discussing, but that they are worth discussing in print."[964]

In the context of Cold War cultural politics, one particularly interesting slew of revisited translations was part of an existing library of works that went back to Beirut of the early 1960s

[961] Watson, *The Literary Critics*, 15-19.
[962] Ibid., 11
[963] Ibid.
[964] Ibid., 16.

and the climate in which the CCF emerged. At least three translated books with similar provenance were found in the library of Salih Diab, one of the Forum's poets: Elizabeth Drew's *Poetry: A Modern Guide to Its Understanding and Enjoyment* (orig. 1959; trans. Muhammad Ibrahim al-Shush, 1961), Louise Bogan's *Poetry* (no original;[965] trans. Salma Khadra al-Jayyusi, 1961), and Archibald Macleish's *Poetry and Experience* (orig. 1960; trans. Salma Khadra al-Jayyusi, 1964). All three are labeled as Beirut-New York co-productions sponsored by the Franklin Book Program, an American non-profit formed under the aegis of powerful US institutions to assist developing countries – initially in the Middle East – in building publishing capacity in their local languages.[966] Founded in 1952 and active for over twenty years, Franklin was an organization of soft hegemonic power-wielding through culture. It promoted translations mainly from American books. As is suggested by the Arabic title page, its main function was to negotiate and pay for publication rights. Presuming protocols elsewhere were followed in Beirut, it held offices staffed by locals and was occasionally involved in selecting what would be translated.

That these books were kept in circulation for extended periods of time suggests that their local uses went beyond Cold War cultural propaganda. Diab particularly cherished Jayyusi's translation of *Poetry and Experience* as a guide to poetry comparable to the role played by

[965] The American poet Louise Bogan (1897-1970) wrote several books of criticism but none of them is titled *Poetry*. The Arabic book thus appears to be a collection of essays culled from her other works or from her writings as poetry critic for the *New Yorker* (1931-1969), a high institutional position which would have made her appealing for translation. Extrapolating from the character of critical works preferred in Aleppo, it may be in similar format to Bogan's *A Poet's Alphabet: Reflections on the Literary Art and Vocation* (1970), where Bogan's criticism is arranged by poets, novelists and critics she writes about, and thus projects an entire library of American and European modern poetry, prose and criticism.

[966] On the Franklin Program see a helpful entry in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (the project was especially extensive in Teheran) http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/franklin-book-program (Last visited March 26, 2019) See also: Esmaeil Haddadian Moghaddam, "The Cultural Cold War and the Circulation of World Literature: Insights from Franklin Book Programs in Tehran," *Journal of World Literature* 2016 1(3), 371-390. Moghaddam broadly argues that "although Franklin men were engaged in a soft mode of promoting American culture and values, they were not simply Cold War warriors nor was the program a pure propaganda project. The complexity of obtaining and negotiating copyright, the various roles of the local Franklin men and the program's impact on translation and on publishing contest a propagandist reading." Though in the early years 35% of the budget came from the American government by 1974-75 only 10% of a 14-million-dollar budget came from government funding. Ibid., 374; For Franklin's activity in the domain of children's literature and school textbooks see Victoria M. Grieve, "The Accidental Political Advantages of a Nonpolitical Book Program," in: *Little Cold Warriors* (2018).

Suzanne Bernard's *Le Poème en prose* in the *Shiʿr* generation. The reasons for cherishing them have to do with the state of material deprivation already described, but also with the horizons opened by the Forum's creative energies and ground-clearing. Drew's book, for example, fits the description of a para-theoretical primer, and is of exceptionally good value, full of pithy discerning statements about poetic practice. It is also full of quotations from poems deftly woven into the body of the text and explicated with commanding brevity. In the absence of poetry translations, the latter would be rapaciously seized upon. It leads poetry beginners with the self-assured steps of British common sense and love for empirical observation of particulars: "Poetry comes from a twofold source – a mysterious inner compulsion and a fully conscious technical discipline; it is a process in which both living and language mingle, in which both meaning and method marry, and in which both visions and revisions play their parts."[967] The happy message of a marriage between life and language would be re-assuring, as would be the directive that a poem must simply "interest us."[968]Backed by a long tradition of articulating the pleasures of reading, Drew's invitation to read and enjoy poems would hardly qualify as American propaganda.

Poetry and Experience emerged out of lecture notes for seminars that MacLeish gave over the course of his tenure as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard. In the fall semester of 1959 he turned these lecture notes into public lectures. The lectures were meant to be held in the seminar-sized Lamont Forum Room, but due to overcrowding moved twice, first to a large lecture hall in Emerson Hall and then to the even more capacious Sanders Theatre.[969] The students are often addressed directly, and MacLeish's insights are said to come

[967] Drew, *Poetry: A Modern Guide*, 21.
[968] Ibid., 86.
[969] See article in the *Harvard Crimson*, October 27, 1959: https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1959/10/27/macleish-lectures-pfuture-lectures-in-the/."Future Lectures in the Poetry and Experience series will be held in Sanders Theatre, it was announced yesterday. […] The move to Sanders

out of interactions with students. Students' remarks about poems and poets are also selectively quoted in a sympathetic tone very unlike that of I.A. Richards (to whom MacLeish's book is dedicated) in *Practical Criticism*. The connection between MacLeish and Arab modernism was forged in the inaugural 1957 issue of *Shiᶜr* magazine which opens with an Arabic text attributed to MacLeish with indication of neither source nor translator. Creswell dubs this text a manifesto for the art of poetry as granting "individual access to un-standardized, personal experience"[970] and thus a credo for the magazine's ideology of literary autonomy drawing on MacLeish's institutional power in the US. The text is likely to have come out of a cache of letters received from prominent international modernists in *Shiᶜr*'s editorial room, and translated by one of the members of the board.[971] Salma al-Jayyusi, the translator of *Poetry and Experience*, was in Beirut at the time and closely affiliated with the *Shiᶜr* group, and it was probably her choice to translate this book with help from the Franklin Program. Upon publication it was favorably reviewed in *Shiᶜr* by Yusuf al-Khal.[972]

By the time this book was received by the "small-scale prophets" of Aleppo, MacLeish's role as "tutelary spirit" had changed. Rather than harnessing MacLeish to a foundational ideological project, the book's value resided in the concrete "how-to" knowledge it imparts in readily intelligible language. This practical orientation – cherished in Syria as an invaluable rarity – was leveraged to shake off the pernicious aspects of modernistic ideologies now associated with the bigoted secular project of the state. This reception highlighted MacLeish's dexterity in recasting Pound's *ABC of Reading* in a critical idiom suited to the American Vital

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resulted from overcrowding in Emerson D last week. Originally scheduled in the Lamont Forum Room, the lecture was moved to Emerson to accommodate a capacity turn-out of 900." Last visited March 26, 2019.

[970] Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 107.

[971] Most probably Yusuf al-Khal. This speculation is founded on a comment regarding the existence of this cache in a recently published interview with the Iraqi poet Sargon Boulus. According to Boulus, the archive included a personal letter addressed to the board from Ezra Pound allowing Yusuf al-Khal to translate his first Canto. Thus, by inference, it might have included personal letters from MacLeish as well. Bulus, *Safartu Mulahiqa Khayalati*, 237-238.

[972] *Shiᶜr* 8 , 29-30. See also Creswell, *Tradition and Translation*, 107 (n. 215).

Center, i.e., mellowing down Pound's cryptic crankiness to maintain his teachings in the mainstream of classroom curriculum.[973] As opposed to Drew's book, the scope of MacLeish's ABC of reading poetry extends beyond English-language originals. The first section introduces four basic elements of poetic language with a sub-chapter devoted to each: words as sounds, words as signs, images, and metaphor. Its underlying theory is explicitly derived from ancient Chinese poetry implicated in Neo-Daoist (*Xuanxue*) thought, and implicitly goes back to Pound's modernistic experiment in translation from Chinese. The main figure providing MacLeish with his critical vocabulary is the Chinese poet-critic Lu Chi (261-303) whose *Wen fu* [*The Poetic Exposition on Literature*] is a classical touchstone of Chinese poetry criticism.[974] MacLeish became familiar with Lu through the translation of his Harvard colleague Achilles Fang, whose 1951 annotated interlinear translation anglicizes the term Fu as "rhymeprose."[975] "Far more than either Aristotle or Horace," claims MacLeish, "Lu Chi speaks to our condition as contemporary men."[976] MacLeish proceeds to cast Lu Chi in the role of antagonist to the inward-looking, solipsistic romanticism of western poetry: "To Lu Chi the begetting of a poem involves not a single eccentric pole thrust deep into the acids of the self but a pair of poles – a man and the world opposite. A poem begins, in the Wen Fu, not in isolation but in relationship."[977] MacLeish then advocates a poetics of return to empiric observation and the mimetic as the "means to meaning," and packages this program in universal significance using a line from Lu Chi's essay-

[973] Pound's status in the modernist mainstream was famously contested because of his Fascist politics, and much of MacLeish's arguments on separating poetry and politics were used to defend Pound's heritage against politicized detractors. See Creswell, 109 (n. 218).
[974] Christopher Leigh Connery, "Sao, Fu, Parallel Prose, and Related Genres," in: *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, 223-247. On Lu Chi see ibid., 239. As a poet, Lu was considered an important consolidator and codifier in the Fu tradition, enabling its ornate style of parallel prose to expound on philosophy and historical narrative. As a poetry critic, his work originally developed new theoretical questions about the writing process never addressed before. This particular work is original in blending a topic usually discussed discursively with the form of poetic exposition. See Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, 73-74.
[975] See Achilles Fang, "Rhymeprose on Literature: The Wên-Fu of Lu Chi (A.D. 261-303)," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 14 (1951), 527–566. Fang was a wide-ranging comparative scholar who held personal correspondence with Ezra Pound and assisted him in understanding Chinese poetry.
[976] MacLeish, *Poetry and Experience*, 4.
[977] Ibid., 6.

poem – "Taking his position at the hub of things [the poet] contemplates the mystery of the universe." "The hub of things" is construed to mean a heightened "center of receptivity" that sees ordinary things in a meaningful light and is compared to Keats' "negative capability." The poem as mold for experience "traffics" between man and world, and the poet is not an "exuberant fountain" of free forms but, in a direct quotation from Lu, one who "traps Heaven and Earth in the cage of form." The poet's "net" is used to capture "the whole of experience, and experience as a whole." The language here, though it is MacLeish's rather than Lu's, is informed by Master Zhuang's metaphysics by which words as images function as vehicles towards numinous non-verbal meaning. The orientation towards Chinese philosophies of poetry is well reflected in the chapter about techniques of image-making, which deals exclusively with poems in translation by Tang poets Du Fu and Li Bai. MacLeish summarizes the point in the following programmatic statement:

> Lu Chi's poem *captures whole*. It cages the world with all its complexities upon it. It takes experience as experience stands there. It closes the cage of form on heaven and earth and makes them *mean* – makes them mean not in other terms but on their own.[978]

This gigantic task to capture the world "whole" is oppositely reflected in the miniature form assigned to the poem, again with a quotation from Lu:

> We poets struggle with Non-being to force it to yield Being; we knock upon silence for an answering music.
> We enclose boundless space in a square foot of paper; we pour out a deluge from the inch space of the heart.[979]

This notion of poetry is presented in non-political terms, yet the ambition of capturing the world whole with the help of Chinese ink rings with soft imperialism, the kind MacLeish would cultivate in the Celestial Kingdoms of Harvard and the Library of Congress.[980] MacLeish notes

[978] Ibid., 8. Italics in original.
[979] Ibid.
[980] MacLeish's personal remarks about the emergence of the book reveal an attitude of imperious nonchalance. The public lectures were recycled well in advance from his old seminar materials. He claims to have taken Harry Levin's advice that Harvard professors can do what they want and announced public lectures. "I decided I ran Harvard," he half-ironically brags. MacLeish reports that, as Emerson Hall was overfilled, his wife

that Lu Chi had been a failed general executed for a lost battle, but he fails to mention that his text was likely produced for the imperial court of the Chin dynasty (266-420) capital Lo-yang under literary and political patronage of its aristocratic elite. "Moving along with the seasons" – as Lu is quoted to have advised writers – meant a profoundly political ritualistic affirmation of the ruling order.

These political underpinnings did not matter much to the poets from Aleppo, who were interested in creative origins, along the Neo-Daoist theories of mind, in a world-microcosm encountered in the mind.[981] The construction of "experience" and "world" around a centered point of condensed energy was affected by the bleak disintegrated world that was generated by politics but that bracketed it out. The call for greater empiricism, observation of detail, and minimal form to maximal representation held promise of a fresh start in terms of a battle waged against grand prophecies in both poetic and political worlds. Brevity, clarity, and descriptiveness are all salient features of the direction they took. Brevity, as suggested, did not mean minor-key humility; clarity did not mean directness; and descriptiveness was carried to the edges of the descriptive where personal autobiography and the esthetics of prosified reality transform into the highly suggestive. Like the *shafawi* poets, their voice was historically situated and close to their empirical selves. Yet they did more to avoid the excesses of confessional self-involved expressiveness like that of Abu ᶜAfsh and al-Husayn and to break the limits of surface directness in the manner of ᶜAbd al-Hamid. This was by no means a "poetic revolution" but a mild reform moving towards even greater poetic minimalism. It was to a large extent continuous with the *shafawi* legacy as transmitted by the Forum's critics.

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overheard students remark that the scene is as apocalyptic as "the second coming" with MacLeish himself cast in the role of the savior no doubt. MacLeish, *Reflections*, 183-184.

[981] Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, 74.

IV The Poets

Consume not many words
lest you require many
lines. Write just two three four
lines – bow and pass on.

Avot Yeshurun[982]

A man
Suffice him to see the train
For him
To visit
All the world's cities.

Husayn Bin Hamza (from the cycle "Wahda [Solitutde]")[983]

Minimalism is not a unified poetic mold but is itself embedded in cultural specificities, which especially with modernity, are determined by intra- and intercultural transmission and nationally grounded political circumstances. While the Hebrew poet Avot Yeshurun is in direct dialogue with the Biblical sage Koheleth – "of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Ecclesiastes 12:12, KJV) – The Syrian Bin Hamza folds the minimalist message within a realistic image more or less in step with MacLeish's recommendation to visualize the poem as a minituarizing "cage" that captures the whole world. For Bin Hamza, as well as other Forum poets, the image regained prominence after absorbing and contracting the *shafawi* garoulous style. Its return was divested of mythic grandeur and sharpened with the kind of exactitude prescribed by Muyassar's scientific fastidiousness. Speaking about the Forum poets as the final transformative stage in the progression of Syrian poetry, Salih Diab divides their practice in three major strands:

> La poésie resultant de ces experiences s'incarne soit dans une langue proche de la parole, soit dant une langue limpide au sein de laquelle l'image joue un role important, soit encore dans uns langue épique où se rejoignent les éléments naturels, l'histoire

[982] Cited in Zach, *Ha-Shira she-Me'ever la-Milim* (2011), title-page. Translation from the Hebrew my own.
[983] Husayn Bin Hamza, *Rajul Na'im fi Thiyab al-Ahad* [Man Sleeping in Sunday Clothes], 38.

> humaine et l'histoire individuelle. La clarté de la vision esthétique requiert un langage simple, d'où le recours à une forme brève, aboutissement de recherches formelles.[984]

In rough translation, they consisted of three schools: oralists, imagists and visionaries. In the first category belong those who were content with the *shafawi* template and only carried it a few steps further. The second category, which Diab considers as the more innovative one, is the one to which clarity of vision, brief forms, and formal research apply. Its principles have much in common with Muyassar's introduction to *Siryal*, but also with the notion of the image as propounded by MacLeish in his analysis of Tang poetry.[985] The third category builds on Khayr al-Din al-Asadi's Aleppine visionary idiom yet modernizes it further. Interestingly, it is in this latter strand that the most politically charged messages of the Forum poets snuck through under heavy camouflage of mythopoeic language, especially in the work of ʿAbd al-Latif Khattab (1959-2006) to be addressed later on.

In a slightly more specified introduction to an Arabic-language anthology of Syrian poetry, Diab classifies in the first category the work of Luqman Derki and Fuʾad Muhammad Fuʾad, and in the second category the work of ʿUmar Qaddur, Husayn Bin Hamza, and himself.[986] Most of them had their first collections published in the 1990s but rarely in Damascus. Diab and Bin Hamza had theirs published with Dar al-Jadid in Beirut, where they had immigrated to work in the journalism industry. Derki and Qaddur first published in Aleppo. All of these poets, and others I have not named, hailed from the Syrian north. This geographical

[984] "The poetry emerging from these experiences is embodied either in a language close to everyday speech, or in a limpid language in which the image plays an important role, or still in an epic language where the natural elements, human history and individual story come together. The clarity of aesthetic vision requires simple language, hence the use of brief forms, the culmination of formal research." Taken from the foreword to Diab's bilingual Arabic-French anthology of Syrian poetry. Diab, *Poésie syrienne contemporaine*, 17-18.

[985] It is in that chapter that MacLeish strikes his most universalizing tone, ending by a comparison with the English poem "O Westron Wind…" to prove the universal suggestiveness of poetry working through images. "As in those old Chinese poems," he writes, "the emotion, somehow contained in the poem, is an emotion which words cannot come at directly […]. *How* will you describe in words the poignancy of the recognition of the *obstacle* of time? […] By not speaking of it at all. By speaking of something else […]. By speaking of two things which, like parentheses, can include between them what neither of them says. By leaving a space between one sensed image and another where what cannot be said can *be*." MacLeish, *Poetry and Experience*, 62-63.

[986] Diab, *Nawaris Sawdaʾ*, 12-13. This anthology is significantly dedicated to "the founding fathers" from Aleppo: Urkhan Muyassar, ʿAli Nasir, and Khayr al-Din al-Asadi.

designation is important for the socio-cultural implications: the north was characterized by Sunni Muslim dominance yet populated with Kurds, Turkomans, Armenians, and Assyrians of various religious denominations and thus more ethnically diverse than Damascus or the Latakiyan coast. Indeed, the Forum is credited for having afforded poets of minority ethnicities both room for self-expression and the distance of professional affiliation from which these ethnic identities could be re-inspected.[987]

Luqman Derki (1966-) is a poet, actor and comedian of Kurdish origin born in the town of Dirbasiya in the far Syrian northeast on the border with Turkey. In his late teens, Derki moved to Aleppo to study French literature and joined the University Forum. As a writer, his early Arabic style was laden with Kurdish indigenous culture. In this domain, the only viable role-model had been the older Kurdish Syrian poet Salim Barakat (1951-) who developed a highly ornate modernistic idiom in the visionary-prophetic vein. The scale of Barakat's vision is gigantic and, despite its modernist difficulty, bespeaks a sense of epic heroism keyed to the manly ideals of the rugged Kurdish warrior. Barakat's is a minor literature par excellence, in the sense of having a strong minority language-consciousness seeking to surpass the loftiest register of Arabic elevation and thus subvert the majority's claim on "national" language.[988] The Forum helped Derki liberate himself from this type of identitarian Kurdish writing and develop in the direction of a more urbane and dynamic poetic identity. His debut volume – *Guests Raising a Dust* (1994) – shows a mix of the first two trends classified by Diab, with a strong tendency towards *shafawiyya*-like humorous simplicity. In a poem from his second volume, minority

[987] See Samman, "al-Multaqa al-Adabi li-Jamiᶜat Halab Namudhajan."
[988] And also surpass the Arab modernists' visionary thickness and breadth and the claim to modernism founded thereupon. In this Barakat shows clear similarities with Anton Shammas and his arabesque-like Hebrew literary style that wants to prove to Israeli Jews, and fiction writers like A.B. Yehoshua in particular, that they have no claim on Hebrew. Shammas has himself shown great appreciation of Salim Barakat's work out of this meeting of minority writing identities. "Barakat's masterly Arabic style," claims Shammas, "has brought back to the modern Arabic language the grandeur of its classical past in a totally unprecedented manner." See https://arablit.org/2016/01/08/finnegans-list-2016-anton-shammas-and-sinan-antoon-on-what-we-should-translate-now/ Last visited February 27, 2019.

feeling is expressed by means of a mundane image taken from the global vocabulary of the sports arena, and minority is not ethnically defined, but is imagined as the individual fan rooting for his team from the midst of the opponent's bleachers:

> **Forty Thousand Spectators**
> Forty thousand spectators are rooting for the red team
> And I alone am rooting for the green team
> Forty thousand
> Gasping, screaming, roaring
> Every time a ball strikes my team's goalpost
> Or the keeper collects the ball
> Every time there is a scoring chance or a counterattack.
> I alone cannot jump up
> Every time we have a dangerous freekick
> I cannot applaud
> For an elegant attack performed by my team.
> Then my team scores a goal
> I neither jump up nor scream out of fear of them
> And my team scores again
> I show no excitement
> Because they are forty thousand
> and can crush me in a moment of anger.
> The game ends
> The forty thousand leave the stadium in a ruckus
> Swearing at everything
> Kicking stones on the way back home
> And I cry
> They pat on my shoulder
> Thinking that I
> Am more loyal than they to their losing team.[989]

The minority's *taqiyya* (vigilant dissemblance) receives an irreverently secular treatment stripped of minoritarian anxious secrecy. Derki's poem is not only immediately intelligible to millions of football spectators around the world but also leaves itself open to be interpreted as applying to many other national, ethnic, and religious minorities by relieving itself of Kurdish specificity.

Unlike Barakat, Derki doesn't assert Kurdish cultural difference, but takes it as grounds for esthetic universalization. As he gravitates towards metropolitan global identities, he

[989] Quoted in Diab, *Poésie syrienne contemporaine*, 334. For some reason this poem is absent from Derki's *al-Aʿmal al-Kamila* [Collected Poems].

movingly reflects on the collective bonds from which he extricated himself but doesn't strongly mark these bonds as Kurdish:

> **Cold Tables**
> Those who would bid us well
> Ask us about our health, family and school
> Shake our hands with both palms
> and deep cordiality on their lips
> who would stand at the village thresholds
> waving warm goodbyes to us
> we ignored them in big cities
> and hid from them in crowds
> […]
> Those who hung our pictures
> On the fronts of their houses
> And stashed shreds from our letters and flowers
> In their children's school-books
> Whose fingertips were blistered from noting down our virtues
> Those whose blood went straight to their heads
> And broke chairs on top of heads of others who slandered us in our absence
> How did we forget them like this?
> Drying up in derelict cafes
> Sitting behind cold, dark tables.
> […]
> The young woman
> Over whom we fought for long
> And punched one another
> Until our noses bled
> The woman on whose house's doorstep we would sleep time and again
> To catch a glimpse of her morning appearance
> That same young woman
> after ten years
> passed us by and we took no notice
> […]
> O you narrow streets of Bab Touma
> O you stone steps leading to my room
> O you church on the street corner
> O you bells
> I can't press my back against the wall anymore
> Every time a car passes in the narrow alleyway;
> I can't wake up Sunday mornings
> To the sound of bells
> I can't promise little Miryana a picture-book
> And she can't throw her cigarette butts into my room
> I am sad, my dear room
> And the saddest thing inside me is my key-chain
> After losing your golden key.
>
> Damascus, June 1990[990]

[990] Dayraki, *al-Aʿmal al-Shiʿriyya*, 47-54.

This poem was written after Derki moved to Damascus to start his acting career. It is in dialogue with al-Maghut's Bab Touma sadness, with Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn's "chamber" poems, and with Munzir Masri's fictional diary entries. Both the cold tables and the key-chains are constructed as quotidian figurative high points encapsulating the story Derki's poem is intent on telling in the *shafawi* manner. The key-chain – *ʿilāqat al-mafātīḥ* – in particular rings strongly with all the *ʿalāqāt* – relationships and attachments – the writer rues leaving behind. It is a remarkable way to end a poem contrasting the former life of tight-knit community with the current one of cramped room-size existence and individual freedom. In Derki's poetry, modernity is not attained by adopting a technology of writing, but by coming to terms with a world in which the closest intimate attachments are no longer taken for granted and are in a sense fungible. Over and again, the poems brood on failed modern relationships, as the speaker is abandoned by women and becomes obsessively engrossed in their absence.[991] The terms of this broken-hearted lyric are very mundane yet also captivating in the self-reflective everyday details of love-pangs they allow him to capture. Like the football poem, they strive for general human recognizability based on a vulnerability stemming from Derki's marginalized origins, even as he strives to transcend them. They are also performances of a skilled actor who thrives on the intensity of strong emotions for his livelihood.

Fuʾad Muhammad Fuʾad (1961-)[992] is a doctor and surgeon by training, currently holding a position of Assistant Research Professor of Health Sciences at AUB after fleeing to Beirut with the onslaught of the Syrian war. The most pronouncedly Aleppine of the lot, he recently

[991] See for instance the cycle "Fi Shariʿ Tawil [On a Long Street]" and the poem "Fi Yawm al-Masrah al-ʿAlami [On International Theatre Day]." An extract from the former: "The street where I live is sick of me / so is the balcony / and the flowers on the sides of the stairs / The sun too is sick of me / I am the clothespin / forked since this morning on your drying blouse." The image is nice for bringing out the similarity of the clothespin to a human figure. Ibid., 67-78; 27-30.

[992] His name sometimes appears simply as Muhammad Fuʾad, as in both of Diab's anthologies, or Fuʾad M. Fuʾad. See article on *ArabLit* blog, from which other biographical details are drawn. https://arablit.org/2015/11/20/londons-poetry-translation-centre-takes-on-syrian-poet-fouad-mohammad-fouad/ Last visited March 26, 2019.

published a collection titled *Hadatha Dhata Marratin fi Halab* [It Happened Once Upon a Time in Aleppo, 2017] with poems in memory of his native city. Aleppo's modern history is a painful one, Fuʾad says, and poetry and medicine ideally overlap in their ability to diagnose pain based on up-close familiarity.[993] Before that, he composed a unique collection titled *Ajzaʾ al-Hayawan* [*Animal Parts*, 2011][994] after Aristotle's *History of Animals*. Its focus isn't on animals per se but on worlds of the interior biologically defined. The inner body organs – some of whose biology is shared between humans and animals – are playfully personified in poetic form. Fuʾad's "Spleen" – unlike Baudelaire's famous poems by that name – dramatizes a conversation with the abdominal organ constructed anti-poetically, namely, anatomically from a doctor's viewpoint cognizant of health risks rather than symbolically from a poet sensing the crisis of modernity: "you silent one / cooking up secrets in a remote corner / what schemes are you devising in the dark? / with what are you preparing to kill me? / Think of the liver / your reddish-brown twin / think what it means to be isolated / no way into you / no way out / a graveyard of blood / […] as if you were coagulated oblivion / not seeing yourself / but in the countenance of a killed animal."[995] Though mutually dependent, the liver and the spleen are played off against one another: the former is a major dominant organ more prone to self-inflicted human damage, while the latter is a marginal silent actor only felt when enlarged by mysterious circumstances.

Another one of Fuʾad's volumes is called *Thus Spoke Baydaba* (2004) with the judicious Brahmin philosopher and presumed author of the original *Kalila wa-Dimna* as Fuʾad's avatar in place of Nietzsche's hysterical, romantically self-aggrandizing Zarathustra. The sobriety of this persona has a delightful ironic side very remote from al-Maghut's dark sarcasm. Continuous with

[993] See interview upon release of his recent collection *Hadatha Dhata Marratin fi Halab*. https://alqabas.com/341123/ Last visited October 12, 2018
[994] Muhammad Fuʾad, *Ajzaʾ al-Hayawan* (Damascus: Dar al-Takwin, 2011).
[995] *Nawaris Sawdaʾ*, 288.

the recent *shafawi* tradition, Fuʾad parodies the poems-from-my-room prototype by overplaying his part as sovereign of his little kingdom:

> **The King**
> I am king of the room
> My crown – the morning's dust
> The floor – my palace
> I am king of the room
> The Benefactor – books do not keep up with me
> The Upright – unlike a clothes hanger
> The Eternal – like the dampness on my wall
> Windows are my days
> And the chair is my lame horse
>
> King of Kings – That's who I am
> Nothing but a desk
> with notebooks on it
> nothing but fingers slipping into their smoothness.
> [...][996]

The poetic voice closest to Fuʾad's is not Arab but Czech: the Prague-based poet and immunologist Miroslav Holub (1923-1998) who also straddled scientific research and health care with studious poetic pursuits and argued eloquently for the similarities between scientific method and poetic making: "the emotional, aesthetic and existential value is the same…when looking into the microscope and seeing the expected (or at times the unexpected but meaningful) and when looking at the nascent organism of a poem."[997] "In the Microscope" is the title of a programmatic poem he wrote in the 1950s in resistance to Stalinist ideological verse and by manner of establishing the Czech Poetry of the Everyday.[998] Commenting on the poetry of William Carlos Williams – another fellow doctor-poet – Holub writes: "The foundation of such poetry is therefore no longer the traditionally lyrical or magically illogical, but the energy,

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[996] Quoted from Diab, *Poésie syrienne contemporaine*, 300.
[997] Miroslav Holub, *Poems Before & After*, 13. In the West, Holub became primarily known through a 1967 translation (by Ian Milner and George Theiner) in the *Penguin Modern European Poets* series directed by A. Alvarez, who also wrote the introduction. See Holub, *Selected Poems* (1967). For Holub's theory of correspondence between poetry and medicine in detail see his "Poetry and Science," in: Holub, *The Dimension of the Present Moment*, 122-146.
[998] Holub, *Poems Before & After*, 435. On the move towards prosaics of everyday life in Czech poetry as response to Stalinism see Valdimir Karfik, "The Face of Contemporary Czech Poetry" in: *Books Abroad* 44:3 (1970), 411-415, and Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 111-122. For a discussion of how these claims relate to Holub's translatability see Quinn's chapter and my explication in the introduction.

tension, and illumination contained within the fact itself."[999] This statement neatly dovetails with the ones made in *Poetry and Experience*. Holub's early poem "Casualty" remains a milestone for the successful fusion between austere poetic language, the language of the medical profession, and stark political critique. Here is Ewald Osers' translation from the Czech:

> They bring us crushed fingers
> *mend it, doctor.*
> They bring burnt-out eyes,
> hounded owls of hearts,
> they bring a hundred white bodies,
> a hundred red bodies,
> a hundred black bodies,
> *mend it, doctor,*
> on the dishes of ambulances they bring
> the madness of blood
> the scream of flesh,
> the silence of charring,
> *mend it, doctor.*
>
> And while we are suturing
> inch after inch
> night after night,
> nerve to nerve,
> muscle to muscle,
> eyes to sight,
> they bring in
> even longer daggers,
> even more thunderous bombs,
> even more glorious victories,
>
> idiots.[1000]

Fuʾad himself did not write politically charged poetry in this vein, nor did he aspire to microscopic form but mostly stuck with the intelligibility of poetic diaries.[1001] Husayn Bin Hamza, ʿUmar Qaddur and Salih Diab went further in trying to find "something more concrete beyond the personal," as Holub recommends.[1002] According to Diab, these poets believed that "a poet can write only one book of poetry in his lifetime, or even one poem that carries his language

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[999] *Poems Before & After*, 13.
[1000] Ibid., 30. The poems was written at least a decade before the tanks of the 1968 Prague Spring.
[1001] I could not trace direct lines of influence between Fuʾad and Holub yet am quite certain that Fuʾad is aware of his Czech counterpart. A mini-anthology of Czech poetry translated by (who else but) Ahmad Suleiman al-Ahmad appeared in *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 2:2 (April 1975), 5-26. Holub is not represented in this anthology. Several of Holub's lean poems have been introduced into Arabic in ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Jannabi's cheeky Paris-based journal *Faradis*. *Faradis* 4-5 (August 1992), 138-141.
[1002] Holub, *Poems Before & After*, 436.

and particular esthetic stamp."[1003] They took upon themselves imagistic concision as a personal challenge to transform *shafawiyya* into a more crystalized and thus lasting artistic testament. Like their English counterparts in the 1910s, the Syrian imagists wanted to do away with the clutter of previous poetic generations. In their case, this was not Victorian overwrought verse, but the verbose tendencies of *shafawiyya* in addition to the *khaṭāba* which has consistently remained part of the poetic landscape.

A major incentive for this search was found through oral discussions among Forum members regarding the possible uses of the Japanese Haiku in Arabic in light of its impact on poets in the West.[1004] Even though the details of the conversations are impossible to reconstruct, those critics with sufficient knowledge in French, Spanish and American poetries could not have missed the residues of *Japonisme* in modern French poetry, nor the rewriting of Haiku in the poetry of Antonio Machado, Ezra Pound or Gary Snyder. There was also a short history of Haiku reception in Syria via Arabic translation done from the English and French. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, ᶜAdnan Baghjati published piecemeal Haiku selections in *al-Maᶜrifa*, *al-Mawqif al-Adabi*, and *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya*[1005] translated from Peter Beilensonʾs 1962 *Haiku Harvest*.[1006] These were initially collected in a 1974 volume published in Baghdad and titled *Ruʾya Sahrqiyya* [Oriental Sight].[1007]Another line of transmission was carried by ᶜAbd al-Karim Kasid, Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn's Iraqi friend and one of Jacques Prévert's translators, who translated selections from a French anthology of classical Japanese poetry for *al-Karmil*.[1008]

[1003] See interview with Diab on *ArabLit* blog. https://arablit.org/2018/05/16/saleh-diab-on-crafting-a-bilingual-anthology-of-syrian-poetry/ Last visited October 12, 2018.
[1004] Samman, e-mail interview, September 21, 2018.
[1005] See *al-Maᶜrifa* 134 (April 1973), 84-89; *al-Maᶜrifa* 137 (July 1973), 149-154; *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 22 (October 1979), 80-91; *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 27 (July 1981), 50-74.
[1006] This book was published in the small Peter Pauper New York press owned by Beilenson "with an eye to creating a beautiful and accessible introduction to haiku." The translations were completed by Harry Behn upon Beilenson's death.
[1007] ᶜAdnan Baghjati, *Ruʾya Sharqiyya*. Baghdad: Wizarat al-Iᶜlam, 1974.
[1008] *Al-Karmil* 8 (April 1983), 104-125.

Related or not to the Forum's activities, *al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* came out with a January 1983 issue devoted solely to Japanese literature.[1009]

With its soft-spokennnes and understated intertextuality, the Haiku was at the antipodal end to stern rhetoric of resistance, and beneficially neutralized fraught East-West binaries. Najm al-Din Samman remarks that for the Forum members, the Haiku tradition was taken as a blueprint for creating *munamnamāt muktaniza* – firm, compact miniatures – with nothing but a minimum of flitting images.[1010] Husayn Bin Hamza seems to have taken the extreme concision of the Haiku most seriously, as suggested by the blurb on the back cover to his debut collection. *Fī ithriki / shatātu rajulin* [on your heels / shambles of a man] it reads, two lines excerpted from a longer poem. The word *shatāt* – dispersed parts or miscellany – sticks out in its importance. The cycle "Solitude," from which a poem was introduced in the opening to this section, consists of five such scattered "flash" poems. Though never as formally rigorous as their *haikai* predecessors containing 17 syllables arranged in 5-7-5 sequence,[1011] they are meant to be measured by syllables and are conceived as a sequence of "dispersed parts."[1012] Like the *haikai*, they combine levity and tender suggestiveness, while staying within bounds of reference to recognizable phenomena. Some contain ironic or allegorical seasonal references.[1013] The following poem – a loving poem to Bin Hamza's daughter – even functions with a *kireji* (cutting word) connecting two images:

> Gazelles wander astray in your sleep
> Not minding
> The tigers drawn on your bedsheets[1014]

[1009] *Al-Adab al-Ajnabiyya* 34 (January 1983). Chief editor Husam al-Khatib explains that in order to include a broad repertoire of genres and styles, the editorial board chose the works and assigned them to translators. It also included an essay about the history of Japanese literature.
[1010] Samman, e-mail interview, September 21, 2018.
[1011] *Haikai* (meaning "comic") is the original term for a number of poetic forms that emerged in early modern period Japan as humorous group compositions, interludes to the orthodox, decorous *renga* group composition. Hokku, a later development, is an autonomous form composed by a poet working alone that opens a sequence of comic linked verse. See PEPP, "Haikai," 592-593.
[1012] Baghjati's translation, in case it was consulted, does not follow Beilenson's English "original" which kept the syllable count at seventeen. The Arabic may have as many as sixteen syllables in one line out of three.
[1013] See poem no. 4 in the cycle "Solitude": "when snow reveals / its love for the sun / it melts / from / shame." Bin Hamza, *Rajul Naʾim*, 41
[1014] *Nawaris Sawdaʾ*, 68.

This brief exercise is part of a three-part sequence thematizing a lover's wakeful eye tending to his loved one's sleep. All three fuse together dream fantasy and realism in a compassionate moment of insight: "your foot / slipping outside the covers / does not follow / into your dream," and finally, "in the morning / angels / in working clothes / cut the grass / that grew / on your side of the bed."[1015] Here the cutting line that gives the sequence (titled "Grass") its pointedness is literalized with the grass-cutting. Bin Hamza has stood by tactful brevity and while nowadays traveling between England and Germany, continues to post short Haiku-like poems on his Facebook wall. These poems can be dedicated to Bin Hamza's wife, share a linguistic pun, be a "seasonal" comment on English bad weather, or deliver a meta-poetic statement. The first and last kinds merge in the following poem, posted October 3, 2018: "I prefer her like you / slender / and tending to shortness / the prose poem." Until this year (2019) when he published his second poery collection, Bin Hamza took self-depricating pride in being a poet of one collection only.

The dominant mood of these poems, if personalized, is softly elegiac, a mood well-captured in ʿUmar Qaddur's 1992 collection title *Idahat Khasir*, translatable as either A Loser's Clarifications or A Loser's Illuminations. Salih Diab (1967-), who hailed from Aleppo's countryside, started out as a *tafʿila* poet and changed to *qasidat al-nathr* after being exposed to translations through the Forum's activities. In his first 1998 collection – *A Dry Moon Tending to My Life* – he more decidedly adopts an objectivized impersonal mode of observation clearly in the vein of poetic austerity. The syntax of images in "White Air" is subordinated to the predicate *hunaka* [there is] and is thus pervaded by the luminous mystery of fact:

> There are lilies
> Frequented by rain and stars

[1015] Ibid.

White air
A forest renewing with trees

Love
O Sunday
Humming in the mirror
O Snow
Listening to snow[1016]

Though by nature a warm-toned poet, Diab entered – under the strong influence of MacLeish's book – a climate of dry impersonality. Earth and sky, rain and forest are lured by the beauty of small lilies, a metaphoric substitute for Lu Chi's "cage of Heaven and Earth." The hum in the mirror directs attention to the possibility of sameness and infinity, emptiness and inexhaustible connections, like Claude Monet's painted lilies that sought to encompass the whole visible world and beyond. The poem moves from white burdening silence (blank page) to richer, numinous silence ("snow listening to snow"). This latter image is suspiciously similar to some of the language in *Haiku Harvest*, and as Diab's native climate usually lacks snow, it is very likely a literary reference.[1017]

Limpid, laconic and graceful, the poems in *A Dry Moon…* represent the epitome of the Syrian austere mode "miniaturized" with imagistic aesthetic precision. One poem written in Beirut – during Diab's shorter exile from Syria, and before the greater exile in France – prefigures the theme of homesickness in contemporary Syrian poetry, sculpting it however in a language of distanced images adequate to the theme of distance from home:

Embroidery

We have a country
where we left our friends
tangled together in sorrows
picturing snow
hoping for the hilltops of their solitude to whiten

[1016] Diab, *J'ai visité ma vie,* 52.
[1017] *Haiku Harvest* is too artistically precious to have pagination, yet already the first poem by Joso possesses a striking similarity to Diab's image: "snow whispering down / all day long / earth has vanished / leaving only sky." Though this specific Haiku is not in Baghjati's journal selections, it might have been included in the published volume.

What can we do
underneath a foreign sky
but listen to forgetfulness
as it embroiders our lives
like lace;
but regret adequately
in the open air
and dry up
reading books.[1018]

In later poems, starting with the second book *Greek Summer* (2006), the pay-off from this stern analytic practice is re-examined. The image is seen as antithetical to life and demands too much self-control. Now begins a hesitant return to the summer of the personal, concrete places, specified times and the hub of life. Once the material and political conditions for austerity were lifted, the lean mode was to a large degree discarded. After several years in Beirut, Diab fled the Levant for Paris in 2000, where he became a "translated man"[1019] in a precarious state of an illegal immigrant living at times the reduced existence of a vagrant. Following Salman Rushdie's use of the phrase, Diab's work gained from this "translation." A man then in his mid-thirties then, Diab counted on his personal charm to establish relationships with women in the way of gaining both warmth and social mobility. Once he mastered the language, he had also gained access to world poetry in French translation, a change that confronted him with the narrowness of his reading experiences in the Arab world. When seeking poetic models that would be adequate to both hardship and dynamism in his new life, he discovered the American short-story writer Raymond Carver as a poet in French translation. Carver's art of guileless self-portraiture immediately appealed to Diab, who wanted to leave concealment and austerity behind and find ways to come out of hiding and squander his gifts in the "now."

[1018] Diab, *J'ai visité ma vie*, 66.
[1019] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), 17.

The poems included in the section "Une coupe à la tondeuse [Number Zero Haircut]" in Diab's bilingual *J'ai visité ma vie* [*I Visited My Life*, 2013] are all written in the mode of spacious autobiographical form, a domestic realism similar to Carver's that knows no boundaries between poetry and prose. They are made to appear like unmediated apprehensions of Diab's raw life happenings, with a degree of artifice-dismantling unprecedented in Syrian poetry.[1020] The following poem originates in Diab's spirited quarrels with his foreign wife:

In commemoration of our first plate-smashing

You smash all the plates
Then retreat to the bathroom
We'll get the champagne open
And celebrate our first thorough smashing
Of plates and glasses
This is the ideal moment
For you to make a wish
It's bound to come true

We'll visit your mother in the capital
We'll bathe in the river
Where you used to feed the ducks
And we'll bring toys
For your aunt in the asylum
And on the way back,
We'll go for a walk in the woods
And you'll point out the squirrels

You know
I really liked
The lines you wrote about the butterfly
Which fluttered into the house.
I came across it in your underwear drawer
As I was looking for my left sock
Ever since I've been overjoyed

Come out of the bathroom, would you
I feel both happy and sad
It's taken us forever
To get to this commemoration[1021]

[1020] I borrow this vocabulary from Tess Gallagher's description of Carver's last poems. See Tess Gallagher, "Yet Why Not Say What Happened? Raymond Carver's Last Poems, A New Path to the Waterfall," in: *The American Poetry Review* 18:3 (1989), 43-46.
[1021] Diab, *J'ai visité ma vie*, 186-188. Trans. Paul Roddie from unpublished manuscript. Though possibly true to fact, the opening of champagne can also be a literary borrowing. It appears in Carver's poem describing the decision to marry Tess Gallagher in Reno shortly before his death. See "Proposal" in Carver, *All of Us*, 290-291.

In *shafawiyya*'s "poems from the room," the setting was domestic but inhabited either by the poet's weighed-down solitude or by the male friend-group. The libidinal energies were kept at bay as politics dictated inhibition, fear and existential anguish. Set in France, the domestic space is invigorated by a close relationship with a woman as both sexual partner and intellectual peer. Energies run free and turn into a scene from a romantic comedy (or a Greek wedding) combining fury and joy. When Syrian poetry of the everyday travels outside Syria, the confined indoor space is no longer shut off from the modern world, depressed and enervated. It is one in which its mixtures are stirred, differences are bluntly encountered, and intimacy is not self-generated but bilateral and problematically reaches one another's underwear drawers.

That Diab's lover is also a writer is an important piece of information, since it is part of a relationship profile constructed across several poems. It is a very rocky relationship that makes Diab behave like an addict, running high on adrenaline then falling low into dejection. We never learn her name or her exact national identity, yet it is transparent that she is not Arab, and that in reliving their heated exchanges through the poems, boundaries between life and literature constantly collapse. Upon one of their many break-ups, Diab obsessively reads her favorite novel, then the novelist's complete works, and then calls up the novelist to ask him about a minor character liked by his ex. "I pore over your vocabulary lists," he writes in "I Call Up the Novelist," "look for the paths you opened up in the forest / the various flowers you dried / to serve as bookmarks / your lost rings behind the commode / your favorite brand of ball-point pens / your preferred movie theater / the champagne brand you bought to celebrate / the return of the swallows in peace / from their journeys across Africa and the Middle East […] / your silence and anger / I'm torn up like autumn / and launched forward / at full speed / towards glory."[1022] The

[1022]Diab, *J'ai visité ma vie*, 222.

love-sick frenzy becomes a trope for multiple border-crossings: genre, reading, writing, and living; and geography like the swallows.

These poems re-configure the parameters of speech transmissions we came to know from Syrian orality: the oral sources are now French and new technologies of writing change ways of oral communication. Whenever his wife is quoted verbatim, the French "translation" in the bilingual edition takes precedence over the original in terms of truthfulness to source. Mobile phones, in turn, allow Diab to express himself in text-messages without making errors in French pronunciation. Here is a sample report on an oral exchange figuring as knives and daggers and very different from the ones of the *shafawiyya* poets:

> **The Blade Whetters**
> You go for me with a knife
> And I go for you with a dagger
> You go for me again with a dagger
> And I go for you again with a knife
> And once again
> We resume our exchanges
> With renewed passion
> I go for you with a knife
> And you go for me with a dagger
> I go for you again with a knife
> And you go for me again with a dagger
> You go for me and I go for you
> I go for you and you go for me
>
> And so on
> With renewed enthusiasm
> Renewed passion
> Renewed ardour
> You go for me and I go for you
> And the blood drips down
> The length of memories
> The length of pledges
> The length of sweet nothings
> The length of all the dreams
> Of childhood and adolescence
> The length of those dreams
> Which will soon give life
> The length of the couplings
> Either at home
> Or in the open air
> With a condom
> Or without

And with flying colours
We reach the end
An incomparable triumph
In less than twenty-four hours
We finish each other off
Until there is no hope left
Of rediscovering
On the field of battle
The slightest sign
Of a beating
A pulsating
A trembling
A twitching
Nothing[1023]

The open conflict not only whets the intellect and the verbal skills but also opens up the poem to experiences Arabic poetry had been traditionally shy about: condoms and outdoor sex, or true-to-life domestic strife and ardor. It would be unthinkable for Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid, Muhammad al-Maghut or Adonis to write such a poem about their wives and girlfriends. By its sheer linguistic distance from the events described, Arabic in exile becomes a vehicle of private reflection, as it was for Kamal Kheir Beik. Yet now it is allowed to be nourished from the secrets and energies of private life which Kheir Beik for political reasons still kept hidden. Trying to find a practical use for his former concision, Diab self-ironically incorporates the mode of microscopic poems he outgrew in the genre-bending spacious form developed out of his mad love:

[…]
You throw me out the door and I can't
Return through the window
I call you
I call your best friend
I call your boss at work
You colleagues
Your hairdresser, the guardian of your secrets
All this leads to nothing
Moves neither forwards nor backwards

I send you e-mails
I send you file-attachments
Short poems

[1023] Ibid., 234-236. Trans. Paul Roddie from an unpublished manuscript. In private conversation, Diab revealed that his now ex-wife is an observing Jewish-French woman whose insults over text-messages were often spruced up with Talmudic references.

Long unending poems
Haikus like a poet *à la mode*
Excerpts from the Song of Songs
Pictures of myself where you can find me
In the state you left me
Until all my e-mails
Are returned to their sender.[1024]

With similar persistence he then texts her on his mobile phone, which with the old character-limit would truly require Haiku concision. She, however, had already changed her number.

In both subject and form, Diab's poetry is of the twenty-first century and has few national or culturally specific markers. His Arabness as a poet lies primarily with his major theme of choice, the theme of erotic love whose traditional prescriptions he casts aside sovereignly. Diab is by no means a Francophone and shows defiant disinterest in French culture and letters except as a gateway to world literature in translation. By contrast to Adonis and his generation, he is free of this particular center-periphery complex. On the level of the texts, Paris is often depicted as a rough place of gruff strangers, economic brutality (rising living costs) and harsh weather. Though no doubt written out of spiritual necessity and not for profit, the poems will be readily understood by global audiences and are designed to travel well in translation. Having left the Arab world and settled in France since 2000, Diab heavily depends on translation for his poetic career. Thus, from a market viewpoint, the French book industry – in some form of bilingual format – is his surest portal into world literature.[1025]

At the opposite extreme to Diab's experience is that of ᶜAbd al-Latif Khattab (1959-2006), the last Forum poet I will address. Khattab hailed from a Bedouin settlement in the eastern provinces of the Syrian desert near al-Raqqa. One foot of his cultural formation was

[1024] Ibid., 210.
[1025] About types of "global writing" and its predicaments and potentials see David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature*, 157-180. Of the categories developed there, Diab most closely belongs to the "glocalist" writers yet is further removed from a native locality than Derek Walcott (one of Damrosch's case-studies) is from St. Lusia.

planted in Quran, hadith, and Islamic historical texts; another foot in Bedouin folklore and traditions of storytelling. He came to awareness as a modern poet while attending the Forum sessions as a student of economics at the University of Aleppo. *Zawl Amir Sharqi* (Specter of an Eastern Prince, 1991) is his only poetry collection. Its title is bedeviling to translate given the range of meanings denoted in the archaic word *zawl*: positively, it means a courageous, witty man or a wonder; neutrally, it means a person or a phantom; to a modern reader, it negatively rings with *zawāl*, passing away. Khattab's publisher – the London-based Riyad El-Rayyes – renders the title simply as *Eastern Prince*, omitting *zawl* altogether. The word is impenetrable enough to qualify as a personal name: Zawl, an Eastern Prince. In any case, the slim volume is composed of six expansive prose poems written between 1980-1984. Some were previously published in magazine form in the London-based *al-Naqid*.[1026]

As Diab notes, Khattab's poetry is of macrocosmic scale rather than microscopic scale, and the lumps of dense prose paragraphs suggest analogies with al-Asadi, Salim Barakat and Mahmud al-Sayyid's epic registers rather than Muyassar's minimalism.[1027] With Khattab, however, the political subject matter is much closer to the surface of the poem's knotted texture. Specifically, it is politics in the form of state violence, victimized minority counterviolence, and endless cycles of bloodshed generated between them. The archaisms, rare lexicon items, and illogical nightmarish fantasies are part of an exercise in esoteric writing disguising a moral response of horror and disgust at what was taking place in Aleppo and Hama in those days. While Diab's subjectivity seems to have skipped lightly over the contingencies of the Syrian

[1026] See "Salahiyyat Wali al-ᶜAhd [The Heir's Legitimacy]," *al-Naqid* 2 (August 1988), 46; "Mawt al-Shaᶜir [Death of the Poet]," *Al-Naqid* 11 (May 1989), 44

[1027] Nevertheless, Khattab had also tried his hand in Bedouin-style Haiku poems. See "Hayiku Sahara al-Junun [Haikus of Deserts Madness]," in: *al-Bayan al-Kuwaytiyya* 370 (May 2001), 99-102.

situation to find a mode of "glocalized" writing outside Syria, Khattab travels deeper into the circles of hell in Syria's insides, which are also his own interior.

The poems of the eastern prince cut across Khattab's biography as well. The first poem, "Death of the Poet," draws heavily on his early reading in ancient poetry and religious texts as well as his exposure to oral storytelling. The second poem, "Death of the Good God," paints a picture of his teenage-self set in his native Bedouin community, a picture disfigured through the eye of a persecuted poetic imagination. In "Death of the Poet," a speaker addresses an unidentified man in the second person, constantly rephrasing the formulas "you passed before them" and "you lived among them" as either statements or questions. As a form of inner dialogue this address hints that Khattab will attach the grisly matters of Syrian politics – the substance of what his mental traveler will witness as monstrous fantasy and reality – to a poetic "subaltern" consciousness originating from an extremely marginalized Bedouin social group invisible in the modern Syrian state.

In a deeply ironic manner, this visionary vagrant character is designated as an eastern "prince." The designation chiefly alludes to Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, whose imbecilic guilelessness holds up a mirror to the hypocrisies of Russian society, as Khattab wants to reflect to Syrians the extent of phantasmagorical horrors registered in these years. The 'I' of the second poem indeed mentions the act of mirroring, an intertextual reference to Socrates' dialogue with Glaucon in the *Republic*, in which the theory of art as second-rate imitation of the Ideas is set forth: "how will you ever reflect sensation? Your concave mirror doesn't reflect trees, no, neither does it reflect the folds of your brain; how will you agree to bestow upon your god third-world medals?"[1028] This good god is by no means the monotheistic One, who by mere omission is

[1028] Khattab, *Zawl Amir Sharqi*, 22.

implied to be bad. It is a syncretistic desert god, half-dog half-child born in the imagination of a shepherd boy guarding the flocks. It belongs outside the boundaries of socially sanctioned religions and represents a life-ethos at odds with both law and common custom and regarded as inalterably backward and uncivilized, unqualified even for the distinction of third-world.

Myshkin's aristocratic pedigree is thus ironically reversed to represent the nomadic have-nots of Bedouin stock in the modern Syrian state. Though Khattab was not epileptic like Myshkin, he suffered from acute heart weakness that was ill-treated in the far provinces of the East and led to his early death. According to Husayn Bin Hamza, this physical weakness made Khattab exceptionally morally sensitive and thus an abrasive participant in the Forum.[1029] The disease is also inserted at the beginning of "Death of the Poet," when the poet's persona is merged with that of the Russian prince:

> You passed before them…
> The black flags flapping, not the flags of Khorasan, not those of Abu ʿAbbas and the Abbasids,
> Their shiny white teeth, blackened from behind, blackened from media noise.
>
> And you passed before them..
> […]
> You passed by way of Uways al-Qarani[1030] and your mother circled around the shrine in submissive reverence, and you would gaze with the mindlessness of Prince Myshkin towards the high dome and the green muslin covering the wall; the gatekeeper anointed your head with oil, anointed your hands as well, prayed to God that you may be healed, and you got sick.[1031]

The failed anointment not only undermines his supposed princely title but also the poetic-prophetic one to which Khattab yet feels accountable: "If only you hadn't read […] the forbidden books / if only you hadn't read *qasidat al-nathr* / you went and hung prose poems on your walls

[1029] Husayn Bin Hamza, "Wadaʿan ʿAbd al-Latif Khattab," *al-Akhbar* October 28, 2006. See https://al-akhbar.com/Culture_People/208185. Last visited March 26, 2019.
[1030] A semi-legendary historical figure of Yemenite origin who is said to have died fighting on ʿAli's side in the Battle of Siffin (657 AD). Medieval Sufis re-fashioned his legacy as a proto-*zahid* and an intuitively wise madman. *Sahih Muslim* includes a tradition in which the Prophet alludes to him as a man who loved his mother excessively and was cured of leprosy after devoutly praying to God. God left one white spot on his body as a reminder of divine grace. There is a line of Uwaysi Sufis and a famous shrine in his honor in al-Raqqa, where the locals come to pray for good health. See A.S. Hussaini, "Uways al-Qarani and the Uwaysi Sufis," in: *Muslim World* 57 (2), April 1967, 103-113.
[1031] Khattab, *Zawl Amir Sharqi*, 9.

like sacred verses[1032] / and discarded Khalil[1033] / - 'My, my, who goes and butchers a cow in India?'"[1034] The poem then takes us through Khattab's other formative childhood experiences, most of which involve books and stories: Bedouin folktales, Plato, Imru al-Qays and Adonis, who is said to have "made us dizzy with onion smell."[1035] He also mentions masturbating while flipping through porn magazines, and claims to have thus discovered the Freudian *Trieb*. He was told about hellfire and the beauties of paradise among whom he would hold a beauty contest in his fantasies. He was told about the Buraq – The horse-like godly creature on whose back Muhammad ascended to Heaven – and was instructed to turn away from cars so that the Buraq's image will not diminish in comparison to the machine's velocity. He projects himself into the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, drinks a cup from Siduri's hand, and avidly watches from the side as Enkidu sleeps with Shamhat. This immersion in classics of world literature, alas, "did not transform [him] into a human being in the records of the United Nations." The poem concludes with a page-long one-sentence paragraph enumerating the trials and tribulations the prince went through until finally when he wanted to scream he found himself tongue-tied.

Like the first and second poems, the third and fourth are also thematically connected: they were written in al-Raqqa over the span of two months in 1982, within several weeks of the Hama massacre. In these poems, the prince changes his valence into a farcical monster, a brutalized mockery of the honorary title *amīr al-muʾminīn*[1036] reserved for the Caliphs. The capital of the Jazira province and Syria's so-called "breadbasket," al-Raqqa lies in the prosperous inland "island" between the Tigris and Euphrates in which the most powerful Arab tribes settled

[1032] Allusion to the myth according to which the *Muʿallaqat* (Hanging Odes) were embroidered and hung on the Kaʿba walls to be revered by all, as later the Quran verses would be.
[1033] The Khalilean classical Arabic meters.
[1034] Khattab, *Zawl Amir Sharqi*, 10.
[1035] Ibid., 16.
[1036] Usually rendered in English *Commander of the Faithful*. Literally, Prince of the Believers.

after the seventh-century conquests. It later became a sumptuous Abbasid city where Harun al-Rashid built multiple palatial residences. The location would explain the reference in the first poem's opening to the flapping of black, non-Abbasid flags, an image uncannily presaging of al-Raqqa's future as the temporary capital of ISIS.

The prince as ruler is poetically developed under the aspect of a dictator, an illegitimate, self-appointed heir to the throne turned usurper and rogue.[1037] In "The Dictator's Declining Star," the decline of the dictator results in a grisly spawning of skulls, scalps and crushed brains. These remains are then incorporated in what resembles a satanic ritual held "so that we can symbolize the international reconciliation between us and the reptiles inside [our swamp's] stagnant water, as the latter take caution from our young state."[1038] This ceremony devolves into a macabre and decadent feast for which the prince "appeared with an unsettling laugh, greeted the dead, and sat on his tail like a dog who lost out in the contest for a female."[1039] The speaker, who is a guest at this feast, describes the circling of trays and clinking of dishes as skulls and human hearts are served to the ravenous eaters alongside the *tharīd*, a dish of bread-pieces crumbled in broth said by the Prophet to be the most excellent of Arab foods. The eating is accompanied by rhymed *tarānīm* (chants) of praise to the prince along the lines of Sirees' description in the *Silence and the Roar*. Like a true sovereign, the dictator is never encountered in person but is known by his bestowing of lavish favors and by his entourage – vipers, two children resembling death angels, and a risible court jester "with an artificial tail imitating a zoo-

[1037] For a novelistic companion to Khattab's dictator poem see Faysal Khartash, *Mujaz Tarikh al-Basha al-Saghir* [The Concise History of the Little Basha, 1991], a novel refuting Mahmoud Darwish's opinion that no strong depictions of dictators exist in Arabic fiction. See Darwish and al-Qasim, *Bein Shnei Hazaei ha-Tapuz*, 79.
[1038] Khattab, *Zawl Amir Sharqi*, 25.
[1039] Ibid., 26.

monkey."[1040] The ruler's visage, as in real life, is visible only through mass-reproduced media, and principally through television screens:

> In his early days he would be like a lustful mare and could sweeten up to his subjects to build a palace of skulls like a clay-jar; at the minimum, he would produce a supple noose to trap his killing alive, like a child playing with kittens […] but now the crimes grow and we are pointed at with crude sticks: "we will shoot you down like birds." The screen would register a deep smile letting up a tooth-revealing laugh, whence we saw with our own eyes stadiums filled with corpses like firewood of cotton stalks, lines like the patterns in a monkey's brain […] the ring has completed its human cycle filled with yellow plague; it is said that Gog and Magog spread in the land, that vipers ask for mercy among them, that eggs eat men to reproduce.[1041]

The sinking of the tyrant thus spells cruder, more gruesome violence and an apocalyptic overturning of culture and nature, all divined through scrutinization of a smile projected from the television screen. What appears like cryptic *outré* visions presents, in fact, a modern notion of politics as spectacle, and specifically Syrian politics as perceived in the dictator's face. In the next poem – "The Jurisdiction of the Heir to the Throne" – the decline of the ruler's star is paralleled with the rising star of the *ṭawāʾif*, the sects, a change of fate bringing more mayhem and bloodshed: "they [the sects] deposited their goods with the president's calculations, and opened their shameful parts to the hawks of the palaces to be turned over like a promiscuous body, and when the glory of the *amīr* faded, when his shine dimmed, another night of spilling began […]"[1042] The gory description is suggestive of both blood and sperm being spilled, an ironizing allusion to a connection first made in Quranic myths of the creation of man from both *ʿalaqa* [blood-clot] and *nuṭfa* [drop of sperm]. As oblique archaisms mix with the daily press, dirty magazines, and TV screens and as Sufi sainthood blends with Prince Myshkin, Khattab's language stiches together the hieratic and profane. In this respect, Khattab had made himself into an Aleppine modern poet in a more palpable sense than his visionary precursors. The refrain of

[1040] Ibid., 28. Very possibly an allegorical representation of Mustafa Tlas (1932-2017), the notoriously uncouth Syrian Minister of Defense (1972-2004) and close personal friend of Hafiz al-Assad.
[1041] Ibid., 29.
[1042] Ibid., 31.

"The Jurisdiction…" – *yā amīra al-muʾminīna, mā bālu al-ṭawāʾifu tanbajisu ka-l-samādi al-mutahayyili* – is stylized in high literary register not immediately decipherable except with the help of dictionaries. A look in the dictionary would reveal how far from the celestial its plain meaning is: "Commander of the Faithful, why is it that these sects spill over like piles of manure?" The image is couched in Khattab's personal experience as a young Bedouin collecting animals' droppings to be used as manure by his clan.

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Considering the changes in Syrian writing in the 21st century under the impact of war and displacement, Diab's and Khattab's experiences establish divergent coordinates for how to blend personal experience with socio-political concern and esthetic pursuits. Diab's form of autobiographical documentation constructs a profile of a global citizen whose life-events, though enveloped by a political fate and concretely set in France, may well be anyone's. It is a writing outside Syria in both literal and metaphoric senses, since it refuses to be Syria-directed even in exile. It does not have any political humanitarian relation to refugee existence, nor does it seek to please expectations that poetry be high-minded and experimental. Its levity is that of being able to write joyful, energy-filled poems anywhere irrespective of politics and nation. Though belonging to Arabic, it belongs in no place, and its translatability is both by necessity and choice. In addition to being tailored for a French poetry market, it signals an aspiration to belong in a transnational family of world authors, like Raymond Carver, who have lifted the microscopic areas of the private to a universal level. Khattab's poetry, on the other hand, is anything but translatable. It is a writing from inside Syria in its darkest corners of the phantasmagorical and grotesque. Its subject matter is political through and through, though its form of expression inwardly expansive and knotted in the manner of the Sufi Aleppine modernism.

What both poets share is their dedication to the literary as an inclusive and autonomous category that cannot be collapsed by other public discourses: political rhetoric, human rights discourse, journalistic jargons, and the repeatable banalities of stories, no matter how humanly tragic. As the genres of Syrian writing become growingly indistinct, the reading-equipment of the Forum and its critical perspectives become a prized possession. When the boundaries between literature, journalism, witness-account documentation, editorializing, and sentimental moralizing are increasingly fudged, the skepticism with regard to the value of "pure" literary writing is augmented. Both Diab and Khattab can serve as benchmark examples for poets whose life bled into their work in existential ways, and whose experiences were formed by the seriousness with which they came to regard writing poetry. This seriousness was enabled by the Forum's activities which made literature as such seem important when collective life around it seemed caught up in irremediable cycles of violence, or in Khattab's coarse imagery, surrounded by over-spilling heaps of dung.

EPILOGUE: THE AFTERLIVES OF SHAFAWIYYA

I The Cultural Salons: A Lasting Form of Counterculture

After the death of Hafiz al-Assad and the transfer of rule to Bashar al-Assad in 2000, Syrian intellectuals hoped that the Western-educated ophthalmologist would open up Syria to democratizing reforms and renewal of the public sphere. A political movement from below was set in motion and called for building up *al-mujtamaᶜ al-madani* [civil society], a term that soon became a contested battlefield between its promoters and regime loyalists who warned that it is a foreign import. The political profile and intellectual formation of the leaders of this movement greatly resembles the youth of the Aleppo Forum, and at least one of the regular members – ᶜAbd al-Razzaq ᶜId – was among its strongest voices.[1043] The movement came to be called "The Damascus Spring." In July 2000, it released the "Ninety-Nine Declaration" named for the 99 signatures of leading Syrian public figures. This declaration was one of the founding documents of the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society, a loose organization composed of several factions united by the demand for political reform. It called for ending the state of emergency status in place since 1963, amnesty for political prisoners, political pluralism, establishing the rule of law and granting political and civic freedoms.[1044] Importantly, the calls for reform at that point in time did not outright declare the illegitimacy of al-Assad's rule.

The literary circles of Aleppine Surrealism, *shafawiyya*, and the University Forum anticipate the dominant social form taken by the movement for civil society: the *muntadayat* or discussion forums. These cultural salons, as Miriam Cooke calls them, reached their peak in

[1043] For an authoritative socio-political account of these years in Syria – "the last decade in Syria's history" – see Barut, *al-ᶜAqd al-Akhir*, 22-52. The research for this book was conducted in the institutional framework of ᶜAzmi Bishara's Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha. For an insider's engaged perspective see ᶜId, *Yasᵓalunaka ᶜan al-Mujtamaᶜ al-Madani*, 17-40.
[1044] See Cooke, *Dancing in Damascus*, 24-26; ᶜId, *Yasᵓalunaka*, 127-133.

Bashar's first year as president, when it appeared as if he was about to live up to the promise of democratization. They mushroomed all over Syria and numbered up to 170.[1045] Barut remarks that these forums had a large impact on young men and women who had never before been politically involved, spurring them to take political stands and refine their opinions on matters of public opinion. They provided a workshop setting for pluralism and proto-democratic dialogue which would precede the hoped-for institutional reform.[1046]

This amorphous constellation of free spaces did not last long. Under the pretext of an impending *jazʾara* [Algeriafication] of Syrian society,[1047] the old-guard political powers working behind Bashar al-Assad moved to restrict the *muntadayat*. Within the first year of activity, the vast majority of forums were forced to shut down, with active members viciously intimidated or sent to jail. One of the few exceptions was the Damascus-based Jamal al-Atassi Forum, which, due to the high profile of its members, operated freely well into 2002. From this platform ʿAbd al-Razzaq ʿId delivered public lecture "Thaqafat al-Khawf [The Culture of Fear]" in March 2001, later published in several major Arab newspapers. Much of what was circumvented or expressed with Aesopian language in Syrian literature – from Muhammad al-Maghut through Zakariyya Tamir to ʿAbd al-Latif Khattab – was stated boldly in ʿId's straightforward style.

ʿId's lecture is a tour de force of culturally informed political argumentation. Ideas from Plato, Thomas Hobbes, Hannah Arendt and George Orwell are seamlessly interwoven with medieval Arab history and classical *adab*. ʿId also relies on the work of contemporary home-grown authors, citing at length Yassin al-Hafez's remarks on the wide divergence in individual

[1045] Cooke, *Dancing in Damascus*, 26.
[1046] Barut, al-*ʿAqd al-Akhir*, 33-34.
[1047] ʿAbd al-Halim Khaddam – al-Assad's Vice President who would gradually lose sway in Syrian politics, resign and flee to France – wrote a response article to ʿId's lecture in one of the Forum's sessions, arguing that even though the regime has made some mistakes, using the notion of "civil society" to undermine its legitimacy would draw Syria into a bloody religious war with the Brotherhood, along similar lines to what had happened in Algeria. See ʿId, *Yasʾalunaka*, 180-188.

strength between subjects in Western democracies and the Arab world ("there the individual is a rooster, here a worm"). A play by Sa^{c}dallah Wannus is adduced to exemplify the paralysis of Syrian self-undermining "double thinking," and a segment from Nizar Qabbani's poem "Al-Mumaththilun [The Actors, 1974]" provides the rhetorically forceful conclusion:

> When city dwellers are made,
> Like eye-gouged frogs,
> Not to rise up and not to complain,
> Not to sing and not to cry
> Not to live and not to die,
> Then forests burn, children burn, flowers burn,
> The fruit of men's labor burns,
> And man in his dwelling place becomes
> lowlier than a cockroach[1048]

^{c}Id re-situates this poem – originally written as part of a series of poetic commentaries on the 1967 loss – in a context of the humiliation caused by thirty years of tyranny that began in the aftermath of that war. Without so much as naming al-Assad, his political critique of authoritarian systems is unequivocally aimed at Syrian forms of government. He ironically refers to the "abodes of Arabness (*diyār al-^{c}urūba*)" as a space where "the absence of state-legitimacy and rule of law and the personification of authority are the salient characteristics of current Arab regimes. How then – in this state of affairs – will the culture of fear *not* be the greatest unifier between ruler and ruled?"[1049] As soon as these forums began calling for dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime closed down the last ones and penalized its members. The novelist Nihad Sirees held his own *muntada* in Aleppo. In 2003, a government official threatened to shut down Sirees' engineering firm if sessions were to continue.[1050] It was then, when the Damascus Spring seemed to have been successfully crushed as a political movement that Sirees returned to his desk, pulled down the blinds, and wrote his *The Silence and the Roar*. His title

[1048] Ibid., 69-70.
[1049] Ibid., 59. The last turn of phrase ironizes a Quranic reference (21:33) to the beatific celestial spheres where angels dwell.
[1050] Cooke, *Dancing in Damascus*, 39-40.

reflects the indignation felt at the return of the mass rallies aggressively instigated by the regime, a phenomenon many had thought Bashar's rule would finally do away with: "the *Silence and the Roar*," says Sirees in an interview, "means the silence for us and the roar for them."[1051]

The rhythms of alternation between fiction and non-fictional writing in relation to political events brings up an interesting question: does stifling directly political voices, as exemplified in ʿId's lecture, have a salubrious effect on literary writing with its traditional artifices of metaphor, allegory, and subtle suggestiveness? On the surface level, it appears that once the politically-minded *muntadayat* were permitted to discuss what is required to build civil society in Syria, the primarily literary conversations that characterized the Aleppo Forum were, if not completely set aside, then relegated to a lower position on the agenda. Conversely, as it became clear that the regime did not intend to follow through on the prospects of reform, intellectuals fell back on literary writing to retaliate against the breaking of a promise while keeping themselves out of harm's way. They no doubt also returned to fiction, as Sirees did, in order to enlist the reserves of individual fortitude in what was sure to be a collective time-bomb.

The Damascus Spring was the regime's missed opportunity, claims Barut, to peacefully resolve the disputes with the fragmented society created by the years of sect-based authoritarian rule. In mid-March 2011, as the Arab world was overtaken by successive waves of popular revolts and uprisings, a civil protest was set off in Syria by the return of the mutilated corpses of two young boys from Darʿa who had sprayed anti-Bashar graffiti. The enormous magnitude of what was to unravel was hard to guess, but the response to the forums ten years earlier was an ominous sign that even if a protest movement would persist in demanding change, the regime would "Algerify" the conflict from above to protect its interests and status as "defender of

[1051] Quoted in the *ArabLit* blog, March 25, 2015. https://arablit.org/2015/03/25/nihad-sirees/. Last visited March 26, 2019.

minorities." The fate of Libyan President Gaddafi later that year must have alarmed Bashar and his associates and strengthened their resolve to survive by any means necessary. The 2011 uprising thus gradually turned from a protest movement with a mission similar to that of the Damascus Spring to a violent open violent conflict between the regime and various warring parties, devolving in the end into a war of all-against-all with massive casualties and displacement, and sustained by constant tugs and pulls from regional and international powers.

II Writing Revolution, Writing Disaster

The question of what form literary writing can take in response to the enormity of these events remains an open one. The parameters of the question are not any different from the ones raised by the reflections above. Under surveillance and random censorship, politics as alluring taboo inspired artistic treatment of its opaque and often gruesome subject matter. Once the valve for debating politics is removed, as has occurred since 2011, what becomes of the function of fiction? Is there even a need for autonomous aesthetic pursuit, when reading is engulfed by the urgency of day-to-day news and writing by the immediacy of social media? Not to mention the human non-literary needs that arise in a state of collective affliction.

The prominent Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Hajj Salih consistently argues that the Syrian "revolution" has engendered a change of sensibility among Syrians writers, prompting them to anchor their intellectual debates in personal experience, in defiance of previous styles of political discourse where the personal was concealed by generalities and phraseology. In his view, the event of the Syrian uprising was itself sufficient to launch into writing a variety of young Syrians who were less beholden to the dictates of discursive propriety. They were partly spared the indoctrination of official literacy with its harmful euphemisms and could write "raw" while also

taking an active role in the protests. The major generic trait of this kind of writing seems to be a loose form of autobiographical narration with political subject matter, and it often takes the rhetorical form of diary writing, suitable for evoking prison experience and closed isolated spaces but also for reporting on the day-to-day struggles of activism. Salih detects a metaphorical exodus in the new writing from the hemmed-in subject to the world at large, a transition from monologue to dialogue, and from passivity and fear to personal responsibility. Both men and women are empowered through it to reclaim speech from its monopolization by the authorities. As a result, writing circles welcomed more women into their ranks as political agents.[1052] An apt illustration for this kind of writing is Samar Yazbek's *Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of a Syrian Revolution* (2012), which shores up Yazbek's personal testimony of the hardships she and her daughter endured in the first four months of the uprising by combining it with hard-nosed reportage of the regime's strategic choice for violence, together with fanciful descriptive passages showcasing her literary talents. With each passing day, Yazbek grows in determination to testify to the reality of a non-violent, democratic protest movement that is bound to be brutalized by security forces and swept away by armed conflict.[1053]

In itself, the inclusion of lived experience and vocabularies of the personal in writing is not innately revolutionary and can serve reactionary goals just as well. The *shafawiyya* poets, who were in no sense revolutionary, had long before protested the generalities of political rhetoric and pitted them against the concrete details of living. What Salih's thesis illustrates is that this tendency, because of the watershed events, has become the mainstream of intellectual non-fictional discourse. Yet because "writing" for Saleh is bound to be a mouthpiece for a

[1052] Yasin al-Hajj Salih, "al-Kitaba bi-l-ᶜAyn wa-l-Kitaba bi-l-ᶜAynayn [Writing with One Eye, Writing with Two Eyes]," in: *Al-Nahar* May 3, 2014. https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/130332. Last visited March 26, 2019.
[1053] See for example a passage where Yazbek casts herself in a heroic role of standing on the side of the weak and romanticizes her mission with a quote from Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*. Yazbek, *Woman in the Crossfire* (trans. Max Weiss), 13.

democratic revolution in letters and thinking, he negates the "oral (*shafāhī*)" as a circumscribed category belonging to the close-knit intimate circle rather than the noble-minded liberation project.[1054] This move betrays a bias against personal experiences that run counter to the desired progressive objective. Out of a perceived revolutionary necessity, his way of thinking also refuses to draw lines of distinction between the literary and the non-literary. In that sense, there is no genuine "writing" outside the activism of the revolution and its cultural dimensions.

In her book *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution* (2016), Miriam Cooke focuses primarily on contemporary works of Syrian visual culture, which, she convincingly argues, have flourished in numbers since 2011. She presents and interprets a varied array of artists and artworks that have responded to Bashar's renewal of oppressive policies. She also calls attention to the fact that the physical *muntadayat* have largely relocated to social media "e-collectives."[1055] Running through her argument about the use of aesthetics in times of violence is a similar assumption about the revolutionary value of culture and the arts. She thus purposely conflates politics and aesthetics by naming the subjects of her book "artist-activists" and concluding somewhat bombastically that these artists "have documented and mobilized political action," that "the revolution survives in the production of words and images that express resilience and refusal to give up" and that "Syrian artist-activists have captured the core meaning of their people's revolution."[1056] But by restricting revolution to the realm of culture – that revolution as an idea cannot be defeated – there is already an admission that it failed on the ground, which puts into question the very use of the term.

[1054] Yasin al-Hajj Salih, "Mulahazat bi-Khusus al-Shafahi wa-l-Kitabi fi Sury [Remarks on the Oral and Written in Syria]," in: *Al-Jumhuriya*, September 18, 2018. https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/content/ملاحظات-بخصوص-الكتابي-والشفاهي-في-سورية
Last visited March 26, 2019.
[1055] Cooke, 18. She fails to note the detrimental impact of social networks in spreading propaganda and false information to incite violence, an aspect which today seems increasingly relevant.
[1056] Cooke, 117-120.

It is possible, however, to construe Cooke's celebration of creativity more narrowly as showcasing a creative "protest culture," an independent field of artistic production with its own gestures and inventions. In this respect, her monograph is a rich and valuable work in close dialogue with a successful online project run by Sana Yazigi called *The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution* (creativememory.org). The website, which began running in May 2013, has become an archive of thousands of audio-visual documents and testimonies bearing witness to the many styles of protest in Syria: films, caricatures, short videos, graffiti, songs, and more. Each item is carefully categorized and assigned a time, place, and author if possible though many are anonymous or have playful pseudonyms like the graffiti artist Masha^{c}ir Jidar, i.e., "A Wall's Feelings." In most items, Arabic texts are translated into English, signaling that the Syrian archive now belongs in a nebulous global sphere. As archives tend to be, the collection is undiscriminating and can record brief and unoriginal speech acts such as the graffiti "GAZA FUCK ISR," "Down with ISIS" or simply "Freedom," "Staying," "Coming Back." But there are also more elaborate poetic pronouncements such as

> Love me, away from the land of oppression and frustration
> Away from our city that has had enough death
> Besieged Aleppo / The last day[1057]

The only interesting lacuna in this all-inclusive archive is the probable existence of pro-regime counter-records of graffiti, banners, caricatures and so forth. Would those be considered as creative as the documents of the Syrian revolution? This partisanship shows the disadvantage of recording history at zero temporal distance from an ongoing and very emotionally charged struggle.

[1057] https://creativememory.org/en/archives/148994/love-me-away-from-the-land-of-oppression-and-frustration-away-from-our-city-that-has-had-enough-death/ Last visted March 26, 2019.

The underlying basis for pinning large hopes on *thaqafa* and waging a battle for collective memory resembles the basis for the poetic ideas expressed by Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh in the late 1970s, namely, that lyric poetry is charged with fashioning memory under political duress and testifying to the existence of the singular individual.[1058] Yet Abu ᶜAfsh's agenda was professedly anti-revolutionary because the regime had officially co-opted radicalism as a means of sowing discord, whereas Cooke situates herself in a space of theoretical discourse – going back to Paris of 1968 – that lauds revolutions, and particularly ones projected in textual spheres. There is thus a strong idealistic strain in Cooke's chosen artist-activists and in her own wishful thinking about activism and art. This idealism turns a blind eye to the possible tensions between art and revolution when art comes to serve a political or humanitarian cause, no matter how just or benevolent. This predicament is further complicated by the fact that the existential and the political have become indistinguishable in Syria to a degree that stance-taking is obscured by humanitarian concern.

Salih views culture as a strong unifying and civilizing element, both borderless and self-fortifying, key to political liberation and identity-making. In the far background of these beliefs there seem to lurk French enlightenment values, notions of citizenship as predicated on cultural institutions, and ideas of German *Bildung*. Neither Salih nor Cooke cast a skeptical light on this vision by calling attention to the fraught mistrust for culture as a potentially deceitful façade of symbols covering up dubious behaviors or rendering enormous pains too immediately legible. From the 1970s onwards, ever since the Ministry of Culture was handed to Najah al-ᶜAttar, the Baath regime actively fostered cultural activity which did little to interfere with its policies. As I have tried to show throughout this thesis, forty years of dictatorship and social disintegration

[1058] See corresponding claim in Cooke, 113.

cannot but have led to a certain disintegration of ideas of culture. It is precisely the anti-literary and anti-progressive impulses of *shafawiyya* that kept it, to varying degrees, at a distance from the sly double-faced nature of official culture. There is thus a paradox at the heart of writing revolution as *thaqafa*.

In his lecture "Ruins and Poetry," Czesław Miłosz – thinking of poetry in war-time and post-war Poland – has argued that in times of great historical catastrophe a hierarchy of needs is set in place, whereby food, shelter and the fates of people and cities occupy the center of attention. The function of language changes as well, but contrary to what Salih claims, it can return to a kind of school-notebook simplicity, becoming an instrument of communication that names realities "terrifying in concreteness" in tangible ways.[1059] The content of "personal experience" matters less, since the reality of collective cataclysm breeds repeatable story patterns and banalities. What effectively matters for art is that it would critically grapple with heroicized idealistic projections, restore humble acts of mimesis, and put culture on trial for its fraudulent tendencies. Miłosz points out that colossal historical events sometimes require years of processing before they can be addressed from a sensible distance, since those who survive them are most vulnerable to banalities and sentimental placeholders in order to psychologically keep afloat.[1060]

Cooke's bottom line is that creativity is vital for the revolution – a fine message for the noble intents of protest culture and the political battles for collective memory – but less so for artists who want to do justice to "pains greater than words"[1061] or who think that art should be silent about that of which it cannot speak. In other words, there is sure to be tension among

[1059] Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 80.
[1060] Ibid., 83-84.
[1061] A graffito written during the massive Russian and Syrian airstrikes on Eastern Ghouta that lasted for many weeks beginning in February 2018. https://creativememory.org/en/archives/177660/no-words-can-describe-pain/ Last visted March 26, 2019.

individual authors (and even within individual writers themselves) between writing "revolution" and writing "disaster," since these are not one and the same, and can come at the expense of one another. Both present serious ethical dilemmas and require at times different sensibilities and different modalities of writing.

Cooke's formulation implies that the constructed political future which might never materialize *should* take precedence over the scars of trauma and the dark matter of grief, but also over the quizzical everyday occurrences that a state of war produces and are not ideologically classifiable. Two dominant modes of response to the crisis by younger Syrian poets have been either to write "from within" as activists with romantic self-heroizing projections or to write "from without" as worried exiles and then find recourse in refined literariness to compensate for the lack of close experience of the war.[1062] Both tend to instrumentalize or overlook the zone of the pre-ideological everyday as subject matter for representation.

That Syria has become the focus of global attention has, in fact, underscored the marginal status of poetry as an expressive vehicle on a grand scale. Artists working in other media – with greater stakes in global circulation – have been quicker and more adept in providing devices to combine documentation with aesthetic play for the 21st century. The film collective Abounaddara, for instance, has sought to counter the barrage of grisly images coming out of Syria with a mode of self-reflexive filmmaking that would reorient the position of the viewer with respect to the reality viewed. Under the premise that the sensationalism of violence and death in media coverage of the war is deeply dehumanizing, the collective produced hundreds of short videos (archived on Vimeo) where, as Robyn Creswell observes, "the everyday is rendered

[1062] Two paradigmatic cases are the widely received works of ʿArif Hamza (1974-) and Nada Menzalji. The former's experience in *I Don't Want Anyone to Save Me* (2014) is colored by activism and daily encounters with violence and misery. The latter is a woman poet residing in London since the late 1990s. The opening two poems in her collection *Plagiarisms of a Novice Poet* (2014) conspicuously "steal" from well-knows titles by Mahmoud Darwish and Adonis.

strange by war, yet war itself takes place among the stubborn routines of daily life."[1063] By throwing the viewer into fragments of carefully arranged footage with little indication of place and time, these films demand active interpreting and are tempting to watch in sequence to find possibilities of interrelations. They are not universalizable by the comfortable coordinates of pathos for the misfortunate, nor can they be indexed to any one political worldview. Universalizability is enabled on the more complex terms of an artistic perspective with its shifting games of hide and seek.[1064] The rare footage of Abounaddara could only be obtained by maintaining the anonymity of the filmmakers as a collective. There are forms of continuity between this collective organization and the makeshift cooperative of *shafawiyya* as a group of minor stuck-together prophets. In its ripe form the poetics of the commonplace may well have become common property.

III Rewriting Pasts, Rewriting Contemporaries

A different set of questions pertains to reading practices after 2011, with the great open question being how the events can be productively projected backwards to reshape literary history in Syria. The reissuing of Riyad al-Salih al-Husayn's collected poems in Milan was propelled by the rising prominence of his writings on social media. His witty lines from "Moon" – "I have but one dream or slightly more: that I will wrap my left arm around your shoulder and my right arm around the world and ask the moon: 'take a picture'" – were sprayed as grafitto on a city wall.[1065] Two of Riyad's poems were especially venerated. The first is "Syria":

[1063] Robyn Creswell, "Voices from a Different Syria," in *NYRB* March 21, 2016. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/03/21/voices-from-different-syria-abounaddara-films/ Last visited March 14, 2019.

[1064] Creswell rightly stresses their conscious withholding of information as central to the project and relates it to the meta-cinematic aspects. In an interview, Charif Kiwan explains their modus opernadi thus: "We don't give any information about place. The idea here is also to confuse people. We want the universal viewer to recognize himself, his place, his country in this Syrian place and voice. We want him to imagine that he could be there." Ibid.

[1065] https://www.facebook.com/mohammad.z.turk/posts/1927282077343504. Last visited March 26, 2019.

Oh, Syria, the beautiful, the happy
as a furnace in January
Syria, the wretched
as a bone between a dog's teeth
Syria, the brutal
as a scalpel in a surgeon's hand
we are your good sons
we ate your bread, your olives, and your whips
we will lead you to our springs
we will dry off your blood with our olive-colored fingers
and your tears with our parched lips
we will forever open up roads ahead before you
we will not let you dissipate
like a song in the desert.[1066]

Riyad's Syria is couched in the affective images of Muhammad al-Maghut's vacillation between attraction and repulsion: the furance, the parched lips, blotting paper drying off blood. It is revolutionary in a negative sense of eating up her own, and the idea of patriotism permeating this poem is predicated on Maghutian extremes of compassion offsetting extremes of destruction, violence and pain. The opening up of roads suggests cultivation and constructiveness to oppose the country's continuous self-cannibalization, but takes both as matter-of-fact and eternal, locked in an exhausting race between ruin and construction. When appropriated as a sentimental blueprint for peaceful non-violent protest, the poem allows for a complex stance of critical patriotism to be taken. The second poem is dated as Riyad's last complete piece of writing before his death:

Daily Ritual
I made you a cup of coffee
A warm cup of coffee
It went cold
And you didn't come.

I put a red rose in a glass of water
A red-red rose
The rose wilted
And you did not come.

Every day I open the window
I see leaves falling
Rain pouring

[1066] Al-Husayn, *al-Aʿmal*, 140.

Birds sighing
And I don't see you.

I've become used
To prepare coffee for two every morning
To put a red rose in a glass of water
To open my window to wind, rain, and sun
I've become used
To waiting for you, revolution.[1067]

The ironic twist is that the appropriation of this poem by the 2011 activists strips it of irony: when it was written in the early 1980s, "revolution" was an empty signifier cynically imposed by the Baath regime as a vehicle of legitimation. This is the impetus for the slight mockery in the poet's tone as it depicts the paralysis underlying the dominance of "revolution" as a discursive reality present in its absence. However, with its re-emergence after 2011, the word is taken at face value to represent the protest of Syria's "good sons" and daughters against the reactionary socialism of the Baath, and is retrospectively seen to prophesy the uprising. Its re-emergence thus involves an act of willful and creative misreading of the poet's original intentions. What this goes to show is that not only habits of writing but also habits of reading have changed in light of the events.

The seduction of silence about the tragedies of Syrians also lies in an awareness that, with the non-stop global coverage, writing about Syria outside Syria may become a literary industry that prizes mediocre examples of topicality. In this sense, considerations of profit-making, the global book market, and literary climbing cannot be left out of the equation. The turn towards Syria as a hot news item is far from universal. Of the poets I have discussed, only two have programmatically taken up the war in poetic form: Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh and Muhammad Fuᵓad. The latter, as I have mentioned, wrote a series of low-key prose poems diagnosing the pains of Aleppo from Beirut. Abu ᶜAfsh, whose work I will shortly address, wrote vocal anti-Spring

[1067] Ibid., 262.

poems and is now as despised in revolutionary circles as is Adonis.[1068] ᶜAdil Mahmud and Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid – both of whom have stayed in Damascus all throughout the war – have mostly kept silent.

Bandar ᶜAbd al-Hamid composed one long and rancorous poem apropos the Syrian war. It is titled "The Spring of Blood and Ashes" and is characterized by an attitude of a plague-on-all-your-houses, opening with the motif of coffee-drinking under bombardments taken from Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness*:

> In the early morning
> Before the stars disappeared
> I asked my coffee cup about the latest news
> Weather and massacres
> Here and in remote cities and villages
> Boom boom boom
> Fighter jets bombing the city's outskirts
> rockets fired from neighboring parks
> Barrel bombs toppling houses on their inhabitants
> Killers here and there
> Playing with iron and fire
> Over our disaster-prone heads.
> In the earthquake caused by barrel bombs
> My table shook
> The pen fell from my hand
> And the coffee cup shattered on the floor
> Drawing the pattern of a ruined city
> An Oriental Guernica with a black river
> A mural of blood and ashes
> In the painting there are beautiful sleeping families
> Dying in silence
> By force of hatred and poisonous gas
> Was it mustard gas or sarin? […][1069]

In terms of workmanship, this is a very unassuming piece of prose poetry continuous with ᶜAbd al-Hamid's idiom of plainness and his fondness for the casual literary and artistic reference. Later on, we have references to T.S. Eliot's Prufrock measuring his life in coffee spoons, to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and to Muhammad al-Maghut's *Sadness in the*

[1068] For Adonis's slighting reception of the Syrian uprising see Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 190-192, 200-201 and his "Syria's Lost Spring" in *NYRB* February 16, 2015 https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2015/02/16/syria-lost-spring/ Last visited March 14, 2019.
[1069] ᶜAbd al-Hamid, "Rabiᶜ al-Dam wa-l-Ramad," in *al-Sabah al-Jadid*, April 20, 2015. https://newsabah.com/newspaper/45522. Lat visited March 26, 2019.

Moonlight. The poem's force stems from ᶜAbd al-Hamid's nearness to the events reported, the appearance of raw gut-response treatment, and the aptness of the realistic image. Judging by this poem, his stance is that the situation is no longer a revolutionary one but an unmitigated human catastrophe with no prospects of spring revival from the ashes. For the present discussion, the point to make – obvious and yet worth re-iterating – is that creativity and pro-revolutionary stances do not comfortably align even in historical situations that appear clear-cut.

A stronger illustration for this point is to be found in Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh's post-2011 poems. Abu ᶜAfsh had always tended to *taṭarruf* (extremism) and provocation, and his histrionics are inseparable from his poetic talent. As of 2011, Abu ᶜAfsh has been infuriating Syrian intellectuals by taking outrageous and deplorable moral positions. He has consistently been posting unabashed items of praise for Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin. One of these postings consists of a short segment translated from Putin's 2015 speech relating to his so-called war on ISIS. On Abu ᶜAfsh's timeline, it is ascribed to the persona "Vladimir Putin Abu ᶜAfsh" and is dubbed "the most beautiful poem": "To forgive murderers is God's responsibility; sending them to God – that responsibility is mine."[1070]

Yet there is more to Abu ᶜAfsh's war poetry than "trolling" and fawning over self-stylized strongmen. His poems have been much more effective when turning to laments for the dead and the collective Syrian disaster, genres long favored by Abu ᶜAfsh and in which he excels. These poems have been appearing regularly in the Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar*, a far from innocent literary platform affiliated with the interests of Hezbollah, the pro-Bashar Shiite militias in Lebanon. A poem dated April 12, 2011 was quick to cast the revolution in the frame of a collective funeral ceremony, prophesizing that "life in its entirety will now walk in the

[1070] Quoted in Rashid ᶜIsa's article "Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh, Shaᶜir li-l-Harb [Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh, a Poet for the War]," in *Al-Modon* online newspaper, August 31, 2018. https://www.almodon.com/culture/2018/8/31/نزيه-أبو-عفش-شاعر-للحرب . Last visited March 26, 2019.

procession of the dead's coffins."[1071] Is this a cynical or hypocritical response by a poet who supports the status quo of al-Assad's rule? A realistic assessment and genuine foreknowledge of the tragedy to come?

A later poem concentrates with no seeming partisan biases on the horror of civilian life plagued by everyday "accidental" killings. The implication that these killings occur by some force majeure would not be acceptable to the intellectual opposition, yet it does afford Abu ᶜAfsh a framework to hold off representations of martyrdom for a supposed revolution and delve deep into a mode of impartial grief and lament. Not to mention that the poem lends itself to an ironic counter-reading, by which the discourse of accidental killings is denounced as such. A significant drawback of pro-revolution intellectual discourse – especially as the war progresses with no end in sight – has been that the firm belief in its own justice lays taboos on the impulsive human reaction of asking "what was it all good for?" or wishing it had never come to be.[1072] The blind side of holding on to the discourse of revolution in art is that it involves turning one's back on the suffering of ordinary individuals and families who were not necessarily committed to its vision. In this context, Abu ᶜAfsh casts his own heroism in the guise of being able to lament on his own without leaning on idealistic projections or belonging in an organized group:

> **Place of Refuge**
> If you see a group of people agree on the Word of Truth,
> know for sure that you – second person singular – will be the scapegoat.
> Hence: do not agree to less than being all alone.
>
> Be alone
> alone with no support, no doctrine, no companion:
> that will be your heroism.
>
> The worst thing a ewe can do
> is seek refuge inside the herd.

[1071] From the poem "Rabiᶜ al-Maʾatim [Spring of Funerals]." Quoted in *Poésie syrienne contemporaine*, 178.
[1072] In August 2016, Munzir Masri wrote a column titled "Laytaha Lam Takun [Wishing It Hadn't Happened]" in response to his encounter with a woman who had lost her husband and two sons in the war. This stance was received with shock and reproach among his intellectual friends, who told him that it stems from his "private pains" and should be kept out of public discourse. Masri then conducts a horrible tally of the costs of the war to Syrian collective life, and re-affirms his commitment to a free, just and prosperous Syria which would need no revolutions while remarking that this dream has become impossibly remote. https://hunasotak.com/article/25536 Last visited March 26, 2019.

February 2, 2011 (published in *al-Akhbar*, January 3, 2013)[1073]

In a sense, this poem highlights the fact that the disaster has shifted the hierarchy of needs and made individual action more significant for preserving life. As poetry was said in the 1978 manifesto to cry on its own account, the human disaster – all political uses and abuses notwithstanding – will cry on its account and will do so on an individual basis. Abu ᶜAfsh's otherwise repellent cheering for Putin and al-Assad is somewhat mitigated by the fact that he leans on nothing but his own personal idiosyncrasies.

Other poets have more rigorously compartmentalized their literary and non-literary pursuits. ᶜUmar Qaddur has ceased writing poems and changed to novelistic writing. Qaddur addresses the situation only as a political commentator from his observant op-ed columns for *al-Hayat* and *al-Modon* newspapers, the mode of writing most suited to political themes. Munzir Masri has made a similar choice, though his running commentary is generically closer to his diary-poems – recording day-to-day life in war-time Latakia – than to the newspaper column. Like ᶜAbd al-Hamid, Masri has the virtue of remaining in Syria and following its daily occurrences close on the ground from a non-partisan perspective. Salih Diab has avoided writing about the war but has amplified his dedication to the spread of Syrian poetry outside Syria by translating, doing scholarly work and publishing anthologies in France. In an interview upon publication of his bi-lingual *Poésie syrienne contemporaine* (2018), Diab states that he began working on the anthology before the war broke out, yet the magnitude of savagery on the one hand, and opportunist greed on behalf of hack-writers on the other hand, had strengthened his resolve to present the aesthetic achievements of Syrian poets. He does so on a highly selective personal basis, to conserve a certain poetics he holds dear and to which he refers by the name of

[1073] *Poésie syrienne contemporaine*, 180.

"dynamic models for identity." He has no pretense of representing Syrian poetry at large. Diab thus typifies a path of adamant clinging to aesthetic rigor in response to common demands of Syrians to "represent" their homeland and comment on topical matters. The purpose is to show that, as an art form, Arabic poetry from Syria is universal, "belongs in human time" and should be measured by the yardstick of world poetry rather than by its ability to depict a historically limited crisis. His style of anthologizing (he also produced a monolingual anthology of Syrian poetry published 2007) has proved polemical. The anthologies have been criticized for being overly selective, leaving out major voices and not including a sufficient number of women poets. Diab has replied by saying that the selection presents his own hand-picked bouquet of flowers – the etymological meaning of anthology – as if dedicated to his singular beloved, and no one can interfere with it unless they offer their own alternative bouquets.[1074]

None of the responses described above is as inclusive and generous as the stance taken by Munzir Masri in his writing and publication endeavors since 2011. First of all, Masri has ruled out migration and made a clear ethical choice of remaining in Syria: "I stayed. At first, to be part of the change I had longed for and dreamed of realizing, to see it with my own eyes, live it, celebrate it. But then, the goal of my staying became to be part of the remaining parts, of the people who are staying despite everything. It may baffle you to hear me say that I feel myself belonging more to my people and more attached to my Syria in the course of these seven years than ever before in my life."[1075] One hears in these words a faint echo of Emile Habibi's gravestone epitaph "I stayed in Haifa," where staying is a small triumph in defiance of both the Jewish state's dispossession of Arabs and the Palestinian intellectuals – like Mahmoud Darwish

[1074] For the interview see *ArabLit* blog "Belonging to Human Time: A Syrian Contribution to Arab Poetics" in: https://arablit.org/2018/05/16/saleh-diab-on-crafting-a-bilingual-anthology-of-syrian-poetry/. Last visited March 26, 2019.
[1075] Interview with Tahama al-Jundi published July 24, 2018 on *Geroun*, an independent Syrian media network. 2018.https://geiroon.net/archives/12210. Last visited March 26, 2019.

– who could not stick it out in the *waṭan*. Masri's enhanced sense of belonging is expressed in a turn to socially engaged essayistic writing, which he had never before practiced. In this mode of writing, he critically reflects on the concrete ways in which the war has changed the human landscape in his native Latakia and the social relations of its population. For its strategic geo-political location on the Alawite coast, Latakia has remained in nearly full government control throughout the war and has thus enjoyed relative peace. Masri no doubt owes the luxury of writing from within to this political reality, yet since he is familiar with the place inside-out – it is after all the Syria he knows – he can also detect the hidden effects of war underneath the semblance of peace.

For instance, on his frequent walks through the city streets he notices that there is a recent surfeit of creativity in street art, especially graffiti, some of which, by contrast with what gets noted in Yazigi's archive, has little affinity with conventional political and humanitarian slogans. "I love your eyes and Bayern Munich," runs a colloquial one using a zeugma and rhyming a dialect word with global English, continuing "and your dimples are another branch of Nutella."[1076] For Masri, this type of nonchalant humorous writing exemplifies Syrian creativity *tout court* rather than the creative memory harnessed to the cause of the revolution. In a similar vein, Masri transcribes brief interviews conducted on the street with young men and women between the ages of 14 and 28. Here the practice of transmission from historical speakers is not processed into a poem but into social commentary. The interviewees all repeat in different forms the same four platitudes: I don't follow the news, I am not interested in politics, I want to live, I dream of going away. Masri interprets this repetitiveness as indicating that Latakia, despite being

[1076] For the article in full see "Ba-hibb ʿAyunek wa-Bayirn Munikh [I Love Your Eyes and Bayern Munich]," on *Huna Sotak*, September 2, 2018. *Huna Sotak* is an on-line news platform in Arabic for which Masri writes a regular column. It belongs in the conglomerate of the Dutch multimedia non-profit *RNW Media* based in Hilversum and aimed at international audiences in places where freedom of speech is curtailed. See https://hunasotak.com/article/27446. Last visited March 26, 2019.

removed from the bloody war zones of Syria, is also a disaster-struck place, only that its wounds bleed inwards and are not immediately visible.[1077]

Running parallel to this form of writing, Masri's yield of poetry publications has risen significantly since some of the internal and external obstacles for publication were lifted. Before the year 2000, Masri had only three individual volumes to stand for twenty-five years of work, and one co-authored anthology. This was not due to skimpy writing or trepidation of publishing. In 1989, Masri submitted to the Ministry's Directorate for Composition a manuscript titled *Dakin* [Dark] that included the explicitly erotic cycle "Saqa al-Shahwa [The Two Legs of Desire]". The manuscript was approved by all the relevant authorities, sent to the press, and 2,000 copies were issued. Then, by force of an arbitrary bureaucratic decision, all 2,000 copies were seized and destroyed.[1078] *Ṣadara wa-sūdira* [published and confiscated], Masri pithily puns on his misfortune, lamenting that the Ministry could not salvage for him even one copy for remembrance.[1079]

As of 2002, Masri has experienced an outpouring of publications whose materials are mostly dated to the 20th century, as the date and place of each poem are still faithfully recorded. The majority of these books were printed in Beirut, yet there are several interesting exceptions. His volume of collected poems – which in addition to *People, Dates, and Places* (1979) and *Hard Labor* (1978) included two entire books never published before – was printed with Dar al-Amisa, a small publisher owned by the novelist and Aleppo Forum member Khaled Khalifa.[1080]

[1077] "Istamirra fi al-Dahk sa-Tamutu Qariban [Go On Laughing, You Will Die Soon]," *Huna Sotak*, August 1, 2018. https://hunasotak.com/article/27353. Last visited March 26, 2019.

[1078] This inexplicable decision can be partly explained by the fact that it came at an especially anxiety-ridden transitional time for the regime, as the Soviet order that provided political and economic backing was disintegrating. The reserves of the Syrian Commercial Bank were virtually depleted, and grain and flour were in significant shortage. There was thus a climate of panic predicting the regime's collapse. In the second half of the 1980s, per capita income in Syria fell by 15%. This period exposed the fragility of the artificial economic leap of the 1970s. See Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 128-131.

[1079] For a short summary of the happenings see Misri, *Dakin* (2014), 163-164. For a longer version, see Masri's telling of the story in a special dossier on censorship in Syria prepared for *al-Adab* magazine. *Al-Adab* 50 2002 (7/8, July-August), 82-85.

[1080] In its short history, Dar al-Amisa printed four titles: three by Khalifa and Masri's collected works.

The second exception is a 2014 re-print of *Dakin* with a small press in the city of Tartous. After its censoring, the forbidden poem was published in parts in magazines and selections outside Syria. The 2014 collection casts this poem in a new mold out of consideration for the twenty-five years that have elapsed since its original publication and out of respect for the imperative that a poem, at least from poet's viewpoint, must constantly change.

"The Two Legs of Desire" is now given a fictional historical attribution to an unknown ancient Syrian poet by the name of Munzerius Masriam. In his own person, Masri writes a long introduction to explain the significance of this anonymous poet while also addressing the historical sources by which he reconstructs the poems and the biography. A contemporary of the apostle Paul, Masriam is a native of Laodicea (modern Latakia), an important port city and Roman colony in the 1st century CE. Though Masri is unsure whether the two "historical" figures, Paul and Munzerius, had actually met, he suggests that they might have, and that in any case Masriam was well-acquainted with Paul's radical teachings. Though his community of faith is disputed in the historical sources (he was almost certainly a pagan), Masriam is reported to have been passionately involved in the religious controversies raised by Paul's ideas in his native city but kept away from bigotry. He is known to have written three epistles of his own as a polemical rebuttal of Paul's *Epistle to the Galatians*, yet these letters are lost except in textual fragments quoted in other sources. The main point of contention lies in Paul's denunciation of acts of the flesh in chapter five of *Galatians* and his admonition to be led by "fruits of the Spirit." Masriam regards this hostility to bodily appetites as setting Paul on the side of vague transcendence against the concrete human needs to procreate and take pleasure in the here and now; he re-interprets some of the sayings in the gospels to refute Paul's re-shaping of Jesus' message to suit his other-worldly conception of the Christian faith. Masri then interprets

Masriam as positing a horizontal terrestrial trinity of "life, death, and sex" rather than the vertical trinity of Paul's Christology. He recognizes in Masriam's corpus an affirmation of the unchanging essence of art in answering human needs and in sanctifying human desire as the ineradicable element of creative fertility. Like the indivisible continuum of history, he says, art has not developed or progressed since the Epic of Gilgamesh, and Masriam's poetry is truly universal in its unoriginality, i.e., non-avant-garde qualities. It takes us into the labyrinthine texture of art where times and places are made and re-made.

As his thinly disguised name indicates, the figure of this ancient Syrian poet and the historical sources that attest to his existence are entirely fabricated. Masri has created a fictional historical persona supported by an elaborate critical edifice as a way out of what seems like an impasse in both history and creative writing. The technique could have been learned from Constantine Cavafy, Zbigniew Herbert, or Jorge Luis Borges, and indeed Masri's build-up to Masriam's poems has affinities with all of the above. These hypothetical poetic lineages (Borges seems to have been of special importance for Masri in this volume)[1081] validate Masri's point that while art must change on the personal, micro scale, and artists continue to learn from predecessors to avoid stylistic reification, on the macro scale, there is no real development in art, since its new techniques are ingeniously used to go farther back in time and retrieve more crystallized forms of human expression.

To pull off this feat, Masri invents the character of a British Orientalist by the name of Samuel R. Benjamin (1836-1910) who is said to have produced an annotated selection of religious texts originating from the Syrian provinces in the Roman era. Benjamin's fictitious book includes translations from Greek, Syriac, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin. Yet Masriam's

[1081] See the poem "La Ahsuduka Ayyuha al-Aʿma [I Don't Envy You, Blind Man]," dedicated to Borges. *Dakin*, 46-47.

poems are sadly left with no indication as to their original language. Masri conjectures that Benjamin had before him a Latin text which was itself translated from Aramaic (with all likelihood, the native language of historical Jesus), a fictitious fact which makes his own Arabic version of the text a third-hand translation. Masri remarks that the English translation is exceptionally competent, and that it perfectly solves all the common problems of poetry translation – and especially poetry written in so-called "dead" languages – with no apparent difficulty. This remark is a broad hint that such a perfect translation does not actually exist.

Yet now that censorship is no longer an obstacle, what would justify the fictional apparatus set between Masri and his own re-published text from the 1980s? One answer would be that there is at work here what Miłosz identifies in Cavafy's and Herbert's poetry, i.e., a need to find in the historical past a home for poetry and a horizon for collective hope. The answer Masri provides is along those lines but is expressed through the counterintuitive conviction that "poetry, like any other genre of literature or the creative arts, can be translated from any language into any other language […] while losing but little of its value, or rather, while losing nothing of its value whatsoever."[1082] This outrageous claim for the complete translatability of poetry is founded on the following assumption: "that a text lends itself to translation without losing anything of its creative 'goods': this is the true criterion, the essential if not absolute criterion for its value."[1083] With this claim, Masri consciously sets himself in opposition to a large group of his poet friends who hold that the value of poetry, or of any work of art, resides in its innate untranslatability. The intelligibility of a poem's meanings is what his exercise in historical fiction is meant to prove.

[1082] Misri, *Dakin*, 152.
[1083] Ibid., 152-153.

The "translatable" poem is, for Masri, a distinct category initially defined by elimination: it is not accepted truths "dressed-up" in fancy formal garments, not a "semi-laboratorial" exercise in measuring and mixing word sounds, and not witty language games. "The essential in poetry is meaning […] refreshing, discovered, startling, strange and shocking meaning, meaning in which sense and idea are fused together to become inseparably one."[1084] To be a creator of meaning means something other than craftily re-arranging book knowledge; it entails bringing poetry closer to non-poetic spheres of life meanings. The scholastic package enveloping Masriam's poem drives home the point that poetry belongs in a trans-historical human domain, that it can be explicated and communicate across centuries by means of interpretation, even when it goes through multiple transformations of time, place, and language. Indeed, the history of permutations and mediations accrued to it are part of what makes a poem worth "peeling."

Masriam's "Two Legs of Desire" stakes a claim to human form by analogy with the human body: it is sculpted out of two long poetic segments – the two legs – with a short poem wedged in between and set in place of female genitals: "It was a brief moment of dozing off / no longer maybe / than a blink of an eyelid / in which I dreamed that I saw the poem // O, the madness of what I am about to say: / I swear that / I nursed her in my lap / she was / the pubic area of a naked woman."[1085] The first leg sets out from an image of a rusty iron pole, a *qaḍīb* which in Arabic denotes the male member:

> Like an iron pole
> Cast on the shore
> Of which you can see only an inch
> Because the rest
> is covered in sand.
> \
> It bathes each time in the waves
> And instead of becoming bare
> The sea

[1084] Ibid., 153.
[1085] Ibid., 169.

Day after day
Tosses on it
Shirt upon shirt, adding layer upon layer
Of rust.[1086]

The erotic image turns into a metaphor for the passing of time, the day-in, day-out wearing of shirts that slowly saps a man's vital energy. What regenerates life in the rusting pole is the sexual responsiveness of the woman addressee who strips him bare again, and thus transports him outside time to revitalize him. The second leg embeds this revitalization in figures of resurrection taken from the Jesus story, and particularly from Lazarus' return from the dead. This allusion is meant to plant Masriam in his historical time and place, but in doing so is strikingly anachronistic since the New Testament is not yet codified and canonized in the period when Masriam is supposed to have lived.[1087]

Erotics and poetics converge at this point: the self-incarnation in a mask of bygone eras brings about the intensification of consciousness, as does erotic love. In looking for a principle of hope in twentieth-century poetry, Miłosz singles out the work of Constantine Cavafy as exemplary. To avoid the gloomy apocalyptic tones of *fin-de-siècle* poetry, writes Miłosz, Cafavy exploited Hellenic history to "penetrate the curtain of time" and acquire additional human dimensions in what was felt like an advanced state of civilizational disintegration.[1088] Given the realities of the twentieth century, Miłosz thus locates the utopain element in poetry not in the imaginary future but in the accessibility of the past as a field of exploration, a field opened up by new technologies and methods of investigation. That Masri decides to appear in the mask of a first-century poet as his country is torn apart by war and animosity goes in an opposite direction to the moralism of much "revolutionary" art. Masri's belonging in that extraterritorial fictional

[1086] Ibid., 165-166.
[1087] One may conjecture that the fictitious Masriam is working off of an oral account of Jesus's Lazarus story, yet Masri seems to be using the motif precisely for its figurative reverberations through the ages, and most proximately in the Lebanese poet Khalil Hawi's well-known take on the myth.
[1088] Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 111-112.

zone affords him the distance to observe his time and place as if past, even if its circumstances are extremely adverse.

The concern of his non-fiction writing lies not with defending principles and ideas but with describing real life situations in which people who remained "inside" are caught. Most of the time, these experiences cannot be made legible by the categories of activism and revolution. Disaster and tragedy are the more common case, but also present, for lack of a better generic term, is the deep laughter of comedy. Such, for example, is the case when Masri tries to decode the mysterious logic of the power outages initiated by the regime in Latakia throughout the war.[1089] Here is something so factual, elementary, and non-poetic that it takes a realistic poet to notice it. Since the beginning of "the crisis," writes Masri, the Syrian people have become known worldwide for their improvised electricity solutions: they are the number-one importers and consumers of electric generators, and they are specialists in batteries, adapters and chargers. This is a classic war industry developed in response both to the regime's use of electricity distribution to penalize civilians, and to gas and oil pipes being blown up by ISIS saboteurs. In any case, a pattern regulating everyone's goings-on is interrupted and renewed at varying intervals with no word from the authorities and a whole industry steps in to allow routine life to continue. Then, out of the blue, electricity is no longer rationed, and millions of ugly and cumbersome generators – bought on the black market for exorbitant prices – fall into disuse, lose their market value, and occupy valuable storage space. The political message folded within the arbitrary return of power, speculates Masri, is that the regime is capable of restoring the normal flow of life at any moment. That this message is delivered as the power-balance in the war tilts towards Bashar and his allies is no coincidence. And the people, Masri utters as if with a sigh, buy into it. In these essays,

[1089]Mundhir Misri, "Al-Risala al-Khafiyya li-l-Saʿqa al-Kahrabaʾiyya [The Hidden Message of Electric Power]," in: *Huna Sotak*, March 11, 2017. https://hunasotak.com/article/27086. Last visited March 26, 2019.

Masri shows how trivial life-details can be more illuminating than historical and political analyses, and defends the idea of a mildly functional, livable common realm where all Syrians can still belong regardless of political convictions.

Like Diab, Masri has worked to conserve a distinctly Syrian brand of contemporary Arabic poetry by anthologizing. By contrast to Diab's anthologizing style – which is selective, lean, and esthetically fastidious – Masri's anthologizing is encyclopedic and people-based. It has a remote family resemblance to the venerated tradition of *tabaqat* literature, biographical dictionaries whose function, according to Dwight Reynolds, is to provide a " collective and contrastive self-definition through biography."[1090] When Damascus was chosen as the Arab Capital of Culture for 2008, the state's cultural institutions funded a massive project of assembling a historical anthology of Syrian poetry that would represent the poetic output of Syrians from 1947 to the present. Masri agreed to serve as editor-in-chief of volume three, dedicated to the poets of the seventies. In the introduction, Masri presents his thoughts on the "turn" of the seventies towards the prosaic, as well as his reservations about Barut's terms *shafawiyya* and the "everyday." Beyond the introduction and the inclusive number of poets represented, the great merit of this volume is the short biographical notes Masri appends to each and every poet. These notes include humorous anecdotes and valuable gossip but also a serious poetic appreciation of otherwise obscure figures unknown outside Syria, or even outside Masri's poetic circles. It is a charitable tribute that claims professional respectability for the class of "modern Syrian poets."

Meanwhile, Masri kept on expanding the repertoire of personal anthologizing in his own original work and searching for ways of making room for fellow poets in his own collections.

[1090] Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self*, 39-40.

The poems in *A Private Invitation to All* (one of the books included in Dar al-Amisa's 2006 publication) are each dedicated to poets from Syria, both male and female, and attempt to capture an aspect of each poet's personality or poetic style that Masri finds illuminating. In the 2011 collection *Munzir Masri and His Associates* published in Beirut, Masri moves beyond dedication to include other poets as co-authors, framing each poem as a collaborative composition between himself and a chosen poet and arranging the poems thematically as in an anthology. Masri's method is to piece together lines and phrases underlined while he was reading, his own reading notes taken on first reading, thoughts upon rereading the reading notes, and biographical touchstones that make his co-author recognizable. Formally, this method of composition is inspired by an ancient genre from the region: the Hellenistic practice of *centos*, where a new poetic work is composed out of pre-existing lines of a classic. The only difference is that Masri's "classics" are the works of his contemporaries and impurely mix with own subjective thoughts. A poem written in correspondence with ʿUmar Qaddur tries to capture in three quick brush strokes the character of Qaddur as an inadequate lover in *A Loser's Clarifications*:

> **Shirt with Coat Hanger Marks (ʿUmar Qaddur – Munzir Masri)**
> Get up then from your chair
> Vacate it for a worthier lover
> Who will not be too distracted
> To let the jasmine fall on the floor.
> \
> Like a shirt marked by the shape of a coat-hanger
> You are so addicted to routine
> That you don't know
> How to call her anymore: hey… woman?
> \
> Even though you don't know how to name
> Those things that are always bound
> To happen
> Still, you are – like a loser
> and as early as you can –
> well-stocked with clarifications.[1091]

[1091] *Mundhir Misri wa-Shurakah*, 64.

By arresting a key image to explicate the whole book, Masri plays the role of comprehending reader but also offers an insider's sympathetic relation. His sympathy for Qaddur's inadequacy stems from a shared predicament of writers too absorbed in working routines to pay attention to other people yet also well-stocked with phrases to excuse their behavior. By exposing the tensions and the interplay between life exigencies and professional devotion, Masri – in Qaddur's skin – points to the basic indecency (but also truancy) of writing as self-making when more pressing demands abound.

Reading and recording a reader's memory of contemporary Syrian poetry is nevertheless an imperative felt strongly by Masri, for reasons explained throughout this thesis. It is the attentive reader who redeems these poets from anonymity and validates the sphere of values they create. As noted before, one of the salubrious effects of post-2011 written testimonials, according to Yassin al-Hajj Salih, is that women's voices figure more prominently in them. This poses a challenge to the male-dominated histories of the prose poem in Syria, including my own. Holding an inclusive position towards the poetic profession, Masri has undertaken the task of recovering the human variety of Syrian poetry and carrying it collectively into the 21st century. This project cannot afford overlooking questions of minority representation and opens our view onto prose poetry written by Syrian women. The opening section in *Munzir Masri and his Associates* has twelve collaborations with contemporary female poets, who, according to Masri, sprang from the strange and wounded poetry of Daʿd Haddad (1937-1991) and imitate the stylized sadness of Haddad's *Tashih Khataʾ al-Mawt* [Correcting the Error of Death, 1981]. Even though her books were published the same years as the *shafawiyya* collections, Haddad belongs to a different lineage and a different tonality of inwardness. Framing the anthology in this way indicates that poetry production in Syria was again more varied than previously thought,

even after *shafawiyya* gains its proper place of prominence. In a poem co-authored with the poet and filmmaker Hala Muhammad, Masri casts her in the figure of the unlikely winner contrasting with Qaddur's loser:

> **The Just Idea (Hala Muhammad – Munzir Masri)**
> Is for truth to stand firm in its place
> In compliance with your request
> While you are the one moving away
> \
> You love him just like you are
> And like a window grown familiar with walls
> What you have adjusted to, you have become.
> Colors are, to you,
> A pre-ordained fate and decree.
> \
> A just idea
> Is for you to win in the end
> To plant your flag
> On top of a remote, bare hill
> That needs
> No liberation.[1092]

The images here are all found, hand-picked from Muhammad's collection and arranged as a reflection on her voice. If *shafawiyya*'s mimetic project was summarized in ᶜAbd al-Hamid's aspiration to collect words from everyday life, Masri has moved beyond this trope to reassert the plurality in difference generated by the Syrian prose poem as an art form, a crucible for singular lyric voices whose accents and inflections matter more than their subject matter. Paradoxically, the means suited to this task entail confining originality to selecting and arranging other poets' lines. Recomposing Muhammad's poems in his own stanza forms, Masri creates a one-time engagement between his subjectivity and hers. Taken in its entirety, his book demonstrates that the dynamism of Syrian poetry is created by such reiterative one-time engagements between poets and readers rather than by a certain subject matter (the visionary, the everyday, the political). The bare hill Muhammad conquers, her "just idea," is neither her

[1092] *Mundhir Misri wa-Shurakah*, 24. The poem's components are taken from Muhammad's *Qalil min al-Hayat* (A Little of Life. Beirut: Riyad el-Rayyes, 2001). Lines and images are borrowed from poems (untitled and numbered) no. 16, 25, 53, 56, 57, 62 (pp. 29, 41, 75, 79-81, 89).

possession nor his. Nor is it the pathos-filled human justice identified with poetry by Nazih Abu ᶜAfsh. It comes to be through the strange self-conscious wakefulness of poetry as distant form solidarity in adversity. Muhammad conquers her hill not with banners of solidarity with the plight of women but in defiance of the decree to comply with an imposed agenda. Her decree commands her own arrangement of colors and frames of looking. No longer a stentorian prophecy but a homely *Grenzfall* (borderline case), poetry secures a suspiciously removed liminal area from which entangled human affairs can be clearly seen and named beyond moral praise and reprimand. This is a reiteration of the idea of troubled distance aptly described by Czesław Miłosz in his 1980 Nobel Lecture, and inspired by Simone Weil's aphorism "distance is the soul of beauty":

> An insoluble contradiction appears, a terribly real one, giving no peace of mind either day or night, whatever we call it, it is the contradiction between being and action, or, on another level, a contradiction between art and solidarity with one's fellow men. Reality calls for a name, for words, but it is unbearable and if it is touched, if it draws very close, the poet's mouth cannot even utter a complaint of Job: all art proves to be nothing compared with action. Yet, to embrace reality in such a manner that it is preserved in all its old tangle of good and evil, of despair and hope, is possible only thanks to a distance, only by soaring *above* it – but this in turn seems then a moral treason.
> […]
> And yet, in a precarious balance of opposites, a certain equilibrium can be achieved thanks to a distance introduced by the flow of time. "To see" means not only to have before one's eyes. It may mean also to preserve in memory. "To see and to describe" may also mean to reconstruct in imagination. A distance achieved, thanks to the mystery of time, must not change events, landscapes, human figures into a tangle of shadows growing paler and paler. On the contrary, it can show them in full light, so that every event, every date becomes expressive and persists as an eternal reminder of human depravity and human greatness.[1093]

As of the 1970s, the Syrian poetry collective travelled as a group to find that distance and construct it at the same time as it is sought after. The effort is still ongoing when concern with a growing collective plight and a collective drive to liberation blurs the existence of remote hills that need no liberation.

[1093] Quoted from https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1980/Miłosz/lecture/. Last visited March 18, 2019.

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