

THE CONCEPTION OF THE *POÈME EN PROSE* IN MODERN ARABIC POETRY: NATIVE TRADITION AND FRENCH INFLUENCE

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174 The *poème en prose* is lexically defined as follows:

A composition able to have any or all features of the lyric, except that it is put on the page—though not conceived of—as prose. It differs from poetic prose in that it is short and compact, from free verse in that it has no line breaks, from a short prose passage in that it has, usually, more pronounced rhythm, sonorous effects, imagery and, density of expression. It may contain even inner rhyme and metrical runs. Its length, generally, if from half a page (one or two paragraphs) to three or four pages, i.e., that of the average lyrical poem. If it is any longer, the tensions and impact are forfeited, and it becomes more or less poetic—prose (*Princeton Encyclopedia* 664).

Much has been written about the genre in French, English and other literatures in European languages. For our purposes, of special importance is the description offered by Unsi al-Hājj in *Lan*. In view of the historical importance of the way al-Hājj has presented the *poème en prose* in the Introduction to *Lan*, I shall proceed to give summary of his formulations with some comments.

Al-Hājj begins his discussion of the genre by posing the question whether or not it is possible to make a poem out of prose.¹ He answers the question in the affirmative on the ground that verse (*nazm*) is not the real distinction between prose and poetry. He, further, argues that all living literary traditions have produced great poetry in prose. Insofar as poetry is not defined in terms of metre and rhyme, nothing, in al-Hājj's opinion, would preclude forming poetry from prose, or *poème en prose* from prose poetry.

This does not mean that prose poetry (*al-Shi'r al-manthūr*), and poetic prose (*al-Nathr al-shi'ri*) are equated with *poème en prose*. But these forms, especially the rhythmic poetic prose, are primary elements in what is termed as "the lyrical *poème en prose*" in which rhythmic prose is indispensable. The *poème en prose*, however,

does not have to be exclusively lyrical because there are *poèmes en prose* that resemble tales, and ordinary *poèmes en prose* devoid of rhythm. Al-Hājj cites, as examples for the latter, the Song of Songs and the poetry of Saint-John Perse. Rhythm (*al-tawqī*) is replaced in the *poème en prose* by the "closed unified entity" (*al-kiyān al-wāhid al-mughlaq*), the poet's vision or the profundity of the unique experience, i.e., through the illumination that emanates from the structure of the poem, be it a circle or square, and not from isolated phrases or sentences, or from the clustering of radiant pleasant words.

Perhaps when one reads aloud a poem of this kind (by Henri Michaux, Antonin Artaud) "for the sake of pleasure and ecstasy" (*lil-iltidhād wal-tarannuh*), one may be dismayed and lose confidence as one will not find any magic or entertainment (Introduction 10). The impact of the poem materializes when the poem attains its completion in the reader as a coherent unity, free from schisms amongst its parts—its impact occurs as a totality, not as parts, lines, or words. Hence, Edgar Allan Poe's recommendation that a person be short. This is all the more applicable to prose because the *poème en prose* needs more coherence than the metrical poem, otherwise it relapses into its matrix, i.e., prose, and such prose ramifications as the essay, story, novel and reflective writing (Introduction 10).

Al-Hājj wonders whether or not it is possible to establish a poem on the basis of prose without using the tools of prose; then, he proceeds to state that the *poème en prose* may have recourse to such tools of prose as narration, digression, and description, but, as Suzanne Bernard says, "the *poème en prose* must elevate these elements, and make them 'function' collectively and for poetic ends and nothing else" (514). This means that the narrative and descriptive lose in the *poème en prose* their "temporal end." These prose elements merge into an "atemporal block," namely, the *poème en prose*, thus shedding their earlier functions.

Al-Hājj lists the following among the factors that pave the way for the emergence of the *poème en prose*:

- I. The improvement of prose and elevation of its standard
- II. The weakness and decline of traditional poetry
- III. The consciousness of a different world commanding a different attitude, an attitude that imposes, in turn, form on the poet
- IV. The free rhythm, based on the principle of the foot (*taf'ila*) not the verse-line (*bayt*) has been instrumental in the last ten years in bringing poetry and prose closer together.² This phenomenon is more pronounced among Communist and Realist Arab poets who moved closer to prose, not only in their style and diction, but also in the atmosphere and manner of expression. Al-Hājj also observes the standard poets' (*shu'arā al-mustawā*) closeness to prose through simplification of vocabulary and sentence structure. As for their experience or attitude, it remains intact behind its hard artistic "immunity." The two diametrically opposed exponents are 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayyati representing the Arab Communists, and Yūsuf al-Khāl representing the other group.

V. Translations, especially from Western poetry.
(Introduction 11)

These factors, among other considerations in al-Hājj's opinion, have paved the way somewhat for the emergence of this new genre, at least from the viewpoint of form, but the literary taste was not yet naturally disposed for it.

Al-Hājj suggests that any attempt to explain fully the essence of the *poème en prose* would require more room and go beyond the scope of his "Introduction." He finds it convenient, however, to borrow whatever suits his purpose from Suzanne Bernard's important book, *Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu'à nos jours*. Although al-Hājj and Adonis ('Ali Ahmad Sa'id) admit, in a general way,³ that they have used Bernard's study as their main source of information on the genre, al-Hājj, much more than Adonis, tends to translate almost literally whole passages from the French author without giving her due credit, thus leaving Arab readers with the impression that the thoughts and conclusions included in the Introduction are entirely his own. To 176 illustrate this point, I shall quote below parallel passages from al-Hājj and Bernard on the essential characteristics of the *poème en prose*. Al-Hājj delineates the genre in this fashion:

Litakuna qasīdat al-nathr qasīdat nathr, ay qasīdatan haqqan, al qit'ata nathrin fanniyya, aw muhammalatan bil-shi'r, shurūtun thathātha: al-ijāz (aw al-ikrtisār), al-tawahhuj, wal-majjāniyya; fal-qasīda, ay qasīda...la yumkinu an takūna an takūna tawīla, wama al-ashyā al ukhrā, kama yaqūl Poe, siwa majmū'a min al-mutanāqidāt. Yajibu an takūna qasīdat al-nathr qasīra lituwaffira 'unsur al-ishrāq, wanatijāt al-ta'thīr al-kulliyy al-munba'ith min wahda 'udwiyya rāsikha (Introduction 12).⁴

In order for the *poème en prose* to be a *poème en prose*, i.e., a real poem, not merely a piece of artistic prose, or a piece of prose loaded with poetry, three conditions (should be met and these are): brevity, intensity, and gratuity, for it is not possible for the poem, any poem...to be long; the other superfluities being, according to Poe, no more than a mass of contradictions. The *poème en prose* should be short so as to augment the element of illumination and the total effect resulting from the (poem's) firm organic unity.

This closely echoes Bernard's conclusion:

J'ai tenté d'indiquer...les conditions nécessaires pour que le poème en prose atteigne sa beauté propre, c'est-à-dire soit vraiment un «poème» et non un morceau de prose plus ou moins travaillé: brièveté, intensité, gratuité sont pour lui, nous l'avons vu, non des éléments de beauté possibles, mais vraiment des éléments constitutifs sans lesquels il n'existe pas. (763)

Suzanne Bernard's book has manifestly influenced Adonis and al-Hājj in different ways, which is only natural. It is to be noted that Adonis is able in most cases to transform his borrowings from Bernard into something plausibly fresh. Al-Hājj takes Bernard's formulations at their face value. A good case in point is the two writers' Arabic rendering of the essential characteristics of the *poème en prose*: *brièveté*, *intensité*, and *gratuité*, for whereas al-Hājj translates them as *al-ijāz*, *al-tawahhuj*

and *al-majjāniyya* (Introduction 12). Adonis seems to interpret them as *al-kathāfa'* *wal-balwara* (density and crystallization), *al-wahda al-'udwiyya* (organic unity) and *al-ishrāq* (illumination) (1960, 81-82). The technical terms Adonis prefers, however, are not entirely his own, as Bernard uses them in several places, especially in Chapters III and IV of her book, namely, "L'Esthétique du poème en prose," and "Conclusion" (408-65, 763-73). I hope it is not too presumptuous to suggest that, instead of reading Bernard's sizable book in its entirety, the two Arab writers have found in sufficient to derive their information on the genre from two different chapters, i.e., Chapters III and IV.

Our assumption about al-Hājj's partial or selective reading of Bernard may help us to understand his confusion and self-contradiction on the question of length in the *poème en prose*. As indicated above, al-Hājj rules out length in poetry, and particularly in the *poème en prose*. It is likely that he would have qualified his position had he read carefully Bernard's discussion of the structure of the narrative *poème en prose* in *Les Chants de Maldoror*, which is noted for its length (220-46). The masters 177 of the genre in French literature, whom al-Hājj admires and cites quite often, such as Rimbaud, Michaux, Artaud, and Saint-John Perse, write at will short and long *poèmes en prose*. *Lan* itself brings al-Hājj's self contradiction into sharp focus, for although the majority of the poems are comparatively short, the last poem in the collection, *al-hubb wal-dhi'b*, *al-hubb wa ghayri* runs up to twenty-six pages (77-204). Furthermore, al-Hājj published in 1975 his fifth volume, *al-Rasūla bisha'riha al-tawīl hattā al-yanābī'* (*The Inspiration of the Flowing-Hair Prophetess*), which consists of one long poem of eighty-eight pages.

With regard to the genesis of the *poème en prose*, al-Hājj makes the assertion that the genre appeared as a rebellion against austerity and bondage. The *poème en prose* is still what Rimbaud asked for when he sought

Al-'uthūr 'alā lughā...takhtasīr kulla shay': al-'utūr, wal-aswāt, wal-alwān (12)

A phrase that parallels the italicized portion of the statement Rimbaud made in 1871:

Cette langue sera de l'âme pour l'âme, résumant tout, parfums, sons, couleurs, de la pensée accrochant de la pensée et tirant (270).

It is also what Baudelaire demanded when he found it necessary to use a form:

assez souple et assez heurtée, pour s'adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l'âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience. (146)

marīn wa mutalatīm bihayth yatawāfaq ma'a taharrukat al-nafs al-ghinā'iyya, wa tamawwujāt al-hulm, wa intifādāt al-wudjān. (Introduction 12)⁵

The revolutionary character of the *poème en prose* and the way Suzanne Bernard has presented it seem to have touched the right chord and fallen into line with the attempts of the *Shi'r Cénacle* to create a new poetics on the debris of classical Arabic

literary conventions. Of particular appeal to both al-Hājj and Adonis is Bernard's identification of the genre's two-fold thrust as

une force anarchique, destructrice, qui porte à nier les formes existantes, et une force organisatrice, qui tend à construire un "tout" poétique; et le terme même de *poème en prose* souligne cette dualité: qui écrit en prose se revolte contre les conventions métriques et stylistiques; qui écrit un *poème* vise à créer une forme organisée, fermée sur soi, soustraite au temps. (444)

It is necessary for our study to see how the duality of the *poème en prose* is reflected in al-Hājj's and Adonis' conceptualization of the genre. In both writers, the concept of duality is thus paraphrased:

Al-Hājj:

Fī kulli qasīdat nathr taltaqī ma'an daf'atun fawdawīyya haddāma, wa quwwat tanzīm handasiyya: laqad naha't qasīdat al-nathr intifādan 'ala al-sarāma wal-qayd.

178

Wamin al-jam' bayn al-fawdawīyya lijiha, wal-tanzim al-fanniyy lijiha ukhrā, min al-wahda bayn al-naqīdayn tanfajiru daynāmikiyyat qasīdat al-nathr al-khāsa. (Introduction 12-13)

There are two forces that converge in the *poème en prose*: an anarchic destructive force, and a geometrical organizing force. The *poème en prose* originated as an insurrection against austerity and bondage.

From the synthesis of anarchy, on the one hand, and artistic organization, on the other; from the union of the two opposites bursts forth the special dynamism of the *poème en prose*.

Adonis:

Tatadamman qasīdat al-nathr mabda'an muzdawījan: al-hadm li'anahā walīdat al-tamarrud, wal-binā' li'anna kulla tamarrud didd al-qawānin al-qā'ima, mujbarun bibadāha, idhā arāda an yubdi'a atharan yabqā, an yu'awwida 'an tilka al-qawānin bi qawānina ukhrā kay la yasila ilā alla'udwiyya wal-lashakl, famin khasā'is al-shi'r an ya'rida dhātahu fī shaklin ma, an yunazzim al-'ālam idh yu'abbiru 'anhu. (1960, 78)

The *poème en prose* has a two-fold principle: destruction because it [the genre] is the product of rebellion, and construction because any rebellion against existing laws is forced naturally to substitute these laws with new ones lest the durable literature it seeks to create lapse into the inorganic and the lack of form, for it is characteristic of poetry to present itself in some form, to organize the world, and to formulate an expression of it.

It is obvious that the two writers follow closely Bernard's text and render the substance of the stated principle into Arabic, but they differ appreciably in their diction as well as in their emphases. Of the two, Adonis would appear to exercise moderation, use factual vocabulary, and set much store by the positive character of the *poème en prose*, and its function according to a new set of laws. Al-Hājj, in contrast, uses

somewhat provocative vocabulary and places his prime emphasis on the anarchic nature of the genre.

Al-Hājj, then, proceeds to argue that the already outlined characteristics do not only help in identifying the new genre, but also in eschewing what is not *poème en prose*. In keeping with the force of evolution there appear, however, changing characteristics. This metamorphosis in the character of the *poème en prose* is an integral part of the vast freedom and unlimited potential the genre provides in the process of creation, and "its quest of the infinite and the absolute" (Introduction 13).

In his theorization about the *poème en prose*, al-Hājj expresses his aversion against the ready-made forms in this fashion:

We do not escape from the ready-made to make ready other forms, and we do not deplore the rigid classification to eventually fall into it. All that which we seek is to give the *poème en prose* its due: the distinction of an independent genre. (Introduction 13)

In as much as there are such literary genres as the novel, the tale, the traditional metrical poem and the "free-verse" form, there is a *poème en prose* and it has equally the right to exist. It is neither desirable nor congruous, in al-Hājj's opinion, to put any constraints on the *poème en prose*; it is impossible to fetter the new genre with "mummified definitions": lā nuridu, walā iumkinu an nuqayyida qasīdat al-nathr bitahdīdātīn muhannatah (Introduction 13)

179

The new genre, according to al-Hājj, is the broadest form the modern poet has arrived at from the viewpoints of theme and technique. It has abandoned whatever falls outside the concerns of the modern poet, and done so without pretences or superficial preoccupations which sap the energy of the poem. The *poème en prose*, in keeping with its creative force, has rejected the distractions that turn the poet away from poetry, only to place the poet well before his experience, and hold him responsible for his literary creation. Al-Hājj concludes that, in this light, the poet can no longer use the familiar excuses: the rigidity of metre, the domination and tyranny of rhyme. Al-Hājj sums up these interrelated features as *al-qānūn al-hurr liqasīdat al-nathr* (the free law of the *poème en prose*) (Introduction 13).

In this respect al-Hājj hastens to defend the three aspects of the genre; namely, brevity, intensity, and gratuity, on the grounds that they are not negative laws intended to disable writers, nor are they ready-made forms in which any trivial material would be poured to make a *poème en prose*; rather, they are the framework for the most fundamental poetic aspect: the poet's talent, his internal experience and his attitude towards the world and humanity. Al-Hājj waxes quite poetic in his defence when he adds that

These laws, it would seem to me, stem from the poet's very soul. They are derived from the experience of those who have achieved excellent *poèmes en prose*. They are, in the last analysis, visions, concomitant elements proper to a successful *poème en prose*, not elements invented to guarantee the success of the genre. (Introduction 13-14)

Classical Arabic aesthetics has lent itself to many negative interpretations, prominent among which is that it is remote, rigid, and unchangeable. Against this background, al-Hājj, much like Adonis before him, tries to establish one of the basic premises about art in general, and poetry in particular. He maintains that there is no finality in poetry (*laysa fī al-shi'r mā huwa nihā'iyy*), and that, insofar as the poet's creation reflects his internal experience, it is impossible to believe that "any circumstances, conditions, laws, or formal principles are eternal" (Introduction 14). Al-Hājj goes on to refute the old maxim that the world does not change. This leads al-Hājj to discuss the question of language once more, still inspired by Rimbaud's ideas and phraseology. In view of the changing world, in which the poet lives, he is to seek a new language to render fully his new attitude.

Lughatun jadīdatun "takhtasīru kulla shay," wa tusāyiruhu fī wathbihi al-khāriq al-wasf ilā al-mutlag wal-majhūl

180

[inn al-shā'ir] fī hājatīn dā'imatin ilā khalqīn dā'imīn lahā. Lughat al-shā'ir tajhal al-istiqrār li'anna 'ālamahu kutlatūn t alī'iyyatun. (Introduction 14)

A new language above all, must be [able] to keep up with [the poet] in his extraordinary leap into the absolute and the unknown

[The poet] needs constantly to create his language. The language of the poet knows not – stability because his world is a pioneering block.

Al-Hājj regards the inherited literary tradition as the most dangerous obstacle that impedes the poet's free progress and diverts his direction because the tradition is ready-made and time-honoured, and consequently, all the more able to snare the poet. Al-Hājj also singles out for special attention other snares (*habā'il*) inherent in the classical Arabic tradition: (a) the temptation of comfort (*ighrā' al-rāha*) and (b) the long-standing authority (*sultān al-turāth al-tawīl*), which have quite a sway on the Arab poet with regard to rhyme, rhythm, and the alluring example of classical poetry (Introduction 14). It is necessary, therefore, to make a considerable effort not only for the theoretical rejection of the tradition, but also for the sake of purging the new poetic experience of formal and thematic residues.

Al-Hājj's offers probably a fresh insight into the concept of "les temps modernes." He sees in it "a divorce from the time of well-being and harmony, and a completion of an endeavour begun a century ago, not for the emancipation of poetry alone, but primarily for the emancipation of the poet" (Introduction 15).

Al-Hājj's "Introduction" begins with the definition of the *poème en prose* as an independent genre quite distinct from the classical conventions of Arabic poetry, and concludes with a few highly rhetorical assertions about the *poème en prose* and its general practitioners. He claims that, if indeed every poet has within himself an inventor of language, then the *poème en prose* is the last language on the ladder of his ambition, as it were. This language is not definitive, for the poet will invariably continue to invent new languages.⁶

Al-Hājj's approach to the genre concludes with a striking, though not untypical, assumption that the *poème en prose* is the product of the accursed poet and the cancer-ridden era.

Yajibu an aqūla inna qasīdat al-nathr—wa hādha imānun shakhsiyyun qad yabdū i'tibatiyyan—'amalū shā'irin mal'ūn. Al-mal'ūn fī jasadīhi wa wujdānih.

Qasīdat al-nathr, allatī hiya natāju malā'in, la tanhasīru bihim, ahamiyyatuhā annaha tattasī'u lijāmī' al-ākharīn...al-jamī' ya'burūn 'ala zahri mal'ūn. Nahnu fī zaman al-saratān...hunā wa fī al-dākhil. Wal-musābūn hum alladhīn Khalaqū al-shi'r al-jadīd: hīna naqūlu "Rimbaud," nushīru ilā 'ā'ilatin min al-mardā. Qasīdat al-nathr bint hādhihi al-'ā ila.

Nahnu fī zaman al-saratān...qasīdat al-nathr Khalīgat hādha al-zaman, halīfatuh, wa masīruh. (Introduction 15)

I must say...that the *poème en prose*—and this is a personal belief that may sound haphazard—is the work of a cursed poet, cursed in body and in heart.

The *poème en prose*, which is the product of the accursed, is not, however, circumscribed by them; its signification is that it is broad enough to accommodate all others... All cross on the back of the cursed poet. We are in the age of cancer...here and within, and those who are cancer-ridden are they who have created the world of new poetry. When one says "Rimbaud," one points to a family of patients, and the *poème en prose* is the offspring of this family. We are in the age of Cancer...[and] the *poème en prose* is the creation of this age, its ally, and its destiny.

181

The frequent references to Rimbaud both as an inventor of language and form, and as a representative of an ailing family that had created the *poème en prose* confirms our belief that al-Hājj somehow identifies himself with Rimbaud. Despite his characteristic objection to both explicit and implicit external influences, al-Hājj's use of the phrase *shā'ir mal'ūn* (*poète maudit*) and elaboration on it suggest strongly that he is influenced in some form or another also by Verlaine's concept of the "poètes maudits."

Al-Hājj raises in the "Introduction" the central aesthetic questions that have preoccupied the *Shi'r Cénacle* in its formative years (1957-60). It is to be acknowledged, however, that, of all members of the *Cénacle*, Adonis stands as the most dynamic and productive figure both on the level of poetry and of literary criticism. His writings on the poetics, old and new, have undoubtedly helped to articulate, in the 1950's and later, the aims and the direction of the *Shi'r* movement. We tend to believe that al-Hājj must have found in Adonis timely inspiration and support at least at the first stages of his literary career.

With respect to the *poème en prose* as one of the main achievements of the *Shi'r* movement, Adonis would seem to have provided the Arab reader for the first time with a fairly adequate, if derivative, survey of the theory, technique and salient characteristics of the *poème en prose*. Al-Hājj, on the other hand, proceeds from

the assumption that the *poème en prose* is an entirely new genre in Arabic literature. Whereas Adonis, in his innovation, is firmly anchored in the native tradition, al-Hājj's break with it is absolute.

A major force in modern Arabic poetry in the last four decades of this century has been "strangling the swan," to borrow a now famous expression which begins a poem published in 1905 by the Mexican Enrique González Martínez—a poem deciding for the owl of Athene's darkness, unquiet, its eyes boring into the gloom, against the traditional swan, which only shows off its grace, and feels nothing of nature or interior swan, which only shows off its grace, and feels nothing of nature or interior wisdom, a poem which asks that life should be greatly worshipped and that forms and language out of harmony with life should be discarded (Beckett 160-61). "Strangling the swan," or breaking up the antique dealer's mirror-image of the spurious and irrelevant, has produced much stylistic discontinuity.

182 As stressed before, the *Shi'r* generation, in the 1950s, keenly realized the effectiveness of the poetic language and suffered the bondage of traditional form. The Introduction of the *poème en prose* in 1960 in the pages of the *Shi'r Review* marks a radical departure from Arabic literary tradition and ushers in a new, if controversial, phase in modern Arabic poetry.

The question of what provided the decisive impetus for the *poème en prose* in al-Hājj in particular and in modern Arabic poetry in general is somewhat complicated by declarations made by al-Hājj himself and by Adonis. As noted elsewhere in this study, both writers take great pains to deny that their experimentation with, and introduction of, the *poème en prose* into Arabic literature were occasioned by the French model of the new genre. Adonis tends to view the question of influence in general terms, and consequently "acknowledges his indebtedness to the general movement of poetry and thought in the world" (1974, 164-65). Al-Hājj's denial of foreign influence is categorical: "I had not read any poetry before I wrote *Lan*. I wrote *Lan* as a spontaneous outcry both in content and form; I write in a personal manner that had no relation to any external poetic or cultural source" ("Interview"). Nevertheless, the burden of evidence seems to point in the other direction. There are, first of all, other autobiographical revelations by al-Hājj, such as his admission of having read Jacques Prévert immediately after high school.⁷ There are then his writings which are marked by admiration and doctrinal adherence, on Artaud, Breton, Prévert, and Michaux as well as his translations from these poets. Last but not least, there is the nature of his poetry which is the best testimony. All these facts bear abundant evidence of the strong French influence on him.

The two writers' rejection of specific foreign influences as a major factor in the introduction of the *poème en prose* in Arabic is paralleled by their assertion that the genre originated in the Sūfī writings. We feel that this two-fold attitude has to be taken, especially at the early phases of the genre, in the context of an apologia which stresses the continuity of an Arabic cultural and literary tradition instead of a political and culturally unpalatable influence.

We will have also to ask ourselves the legitimate general question whether or not the *poème en prose* is a native genre in Arabic literature. Opinions are quite divided on the question. Those who answer in the affirmative trace the ancestry of the genre to early literary forms such as *saḥ* ("rhymed prose") and accordingly to the poetic prose of the Qur'an which is marked by a fairly consistent rhyme, especially in the short *suras*, the *saḥ* of the *maqamas*, and the poetic prose used in the translation of western poetry. All such examples are adduced either as precursory forms of, or preparatory phases for, the *poème en prose*.

Some, among the avant-gardes, who either by conviction or by their tactical willingness to appease the conservatives and ward off their accusations, tended to relate the *poème en prose* to a native Arabic matrix. In this contest, the most important statements were made by Adonis, Yūsuf al-Khāl and al-Hājj.

Adonis wrote the first essay on the *poème en prose* in 1960, and argued among other things that the genre existed in Arabic literature, especially in the prose writings of the Sūfīs (Muslim mystics). To place Adonis' argument in the proper perspective, it should be borne in mind that Adonis launched his essay in defence of the new genre against the background of the frequent claims that the *poème en prose* was anti-Arabic, and, as such, detrimental to the Arabic poetic tradition.

The climate in 1960 may be said to have prompted Adonis to invoke the classical heritage and establish some cautionary linkage between the new genre and Arabic literature. It is certain, however, that Adonis did not ingratiate himself with the conservatives at the expense of his literary integrity and place as an historian and theoretician of Arabic poetics. To illustrate Adonis' unequivocal position on the genre, the following passage, published in 1974, will have to be quoted in full.

What I had struggled to establish was not that this form of expression was a European import, as we were accused, but to link it directly with Arabic Sūfī writings. Today, I am more convinced of [the soundness] of my earlier position, even though it was not clear enough at the time. I can now defend it in its entirety on the ground that this species of writing was known in Arabic literature; it had been known in Arabic literature before any foreign literature without exception because Arabic literature is older than known European literatures. ("Interview")

Adonis' unflagging efforts to revive Sūfī literature and harness it to avant-garde poetry have forcefully influenced the direction of Arabic poetry and the literary harvest of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Yūsuf al-Khāl's position on this question is somewhat qualified. He maintains that this form existed in all literatures, but was never theorized, articulated and practised as literary genre outside French literature ("Interview").

Al-Hājj is evidently self-contradictory, for whereas he follows Adonis' argument that the *poème en prose* has its native beginnings in Arabic literature and that the Sūfī prose writings provide the best examples of it, he emphasizes that the genre is "the product of those who are afflicted with sickness and madness; the product of the poets maudits": *Qasīdat al-nathr...ʿamalu shāʾirin malʾūn fī jasadīhi wa wujdānīhi*

(Introduction 15). Furthermore, al-Hājj associates the *poème en prose*, not with Arabic literature and the Sūfī prosaists, but with French literature and more specifically with the undisputed technicians of the genre: Baudelaire and Rimbaud (Introduction 6).

Any flaws in al-Hājj's early thinking about the *poème en prose* are quite understandable when examined against available data of his biography. Al-Hājj's first volume was published in 1960 when he was barely twenty-three, equipped only with high school education and a few years of journalistic experience.⁸ It is not too presumptuous to assume that al-Hājj, at this impressionable age, would subscribe to Adonis' premises on the genre with little or no reservation as the latter was already an accomplished poet, critic and formidable force in Syro-Lebanese letters. Al-Hājj at best was guided in his formulations on the genre more by his talent as a creative poet-rebel than by formal knowledge of literary theory, let alone the prose writing of the Sūfis. Whereas al-Hājj evinces a measure of competence in his writings about, and translations from, the French Surrealists and practitioners of the *poème en prose*, his familiarity with the Sūfis and Sūfī literature is, by his own admission, non-existent: "I am not well versed in the Sūfist lore, and if you ask me to name a Sūfist poet I would barely mention one" ("Interview").

The contribution of the Sūfī writings to the genesis of the *poème en prose* in the early 1960s is of little consequence, if at all. Adonis, as stated earlier, tries merely to confirm the existence of this form of expression in Sūfī literature, but nowhere does he claim that Sūfī literature gave rise to the new genre. There is ample evidence, however, to suggest that the Sūfī factor comes into play at a later stage in the development of the genre, when Adonis launches his "cultural view," *Mawākif*, in 1968. In a four-part essay, Adonis calls for a new style of writing, and advances the style of the tenth-century Sūfī, Niffārī, as an "old" example for a "new" writing (1971b, 6-10). Adonis notes that the astonishing characteristic of Niffārī's writing is his form of expression and that at the time of the supremacy of classical formalism, Naffārī was trying to establish another principle for another form (1971b, 7). To underscore Niffārī's relevance to the experiment of the *poème en prose* and new poetry as a whole, Adonis sheds further light on Niffārī's style.

Laysa al-shakl 'ind al-Niffārī sīghata Kitābah, wa innamā huwa sīghatu wujūd. A'nī annahu wa'dun bibidāyatin dāimah. Wa min huna la yantaliqu al-Niffārī min awwalāniyyatin shakliyya, bal yantaligu, 'ala al-'aksi, min awwalāniyyati al-lashakl. Kitābatu al-Niffārī tasduru, dimna al-turāth al-'Arabiyy, 'an asālatin shakhsiyyatin mutlaqah... la athar fihā li'ayyi namūdhajin sābiq, wa la athara fihā lil-dhākirati al-jamāliyyati. (1971b, 2, 10)

Naffārī's form is not a version of writing; rather, it is a version of existence; that is to say, it is a promise of a permanent beginning. Therefore, Naffārī's writing emanates, while still within Arabic tradition, from absolute personal originality, free of all traces of prior models and aesthetic memory.

Both from the technical and thematic viewpoints, Niffārī means for the *Shi'r* and *Mawākif* generations far more than a chance discovery.⁹ His literary paradigm synthesizes rejection of ready-made forms, exploration of the unknown, absolute originality and metaphysical sensibility—cherished ideals new Arab poets have set out to accomplish.¹⁰

It has been our purpose in this study to emphasize that what in fact matters is not that the *poème en prose* is not predated by viable examples from Sūfī literature—as these have existed for centuries in Arabic and Islamic literature without giving rise to an independent literary genre—but that the introduction of the new genre occurred in the 1950s, as a consequence of two inter-related factors: (a) the inadequacy of the classical *qasīda* to render the spirit and concerns of the modern age, and (b) the external stimulus of the *poème en prose* as a *bona fide* genre in contemporary French poetry.

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ENDNOTES

186

1. The tenor of this section on al-Hājj's conception of the *poème en prose* in particular, and his poetics in general, is largely inspired by al-Hājj's formulations in the *muqaddimah* (Introduction) to his first volume of Poetry, *Lan*. References will be made henceforth to Introduction.
2. Though never the mainstream in modern Arabic poetry, this technique was unevenly adopted by Arab poets between the 1950s and 1960s, and was dubbed the "Free Verse Movement." In spite of its limited success in relaxing the austerity of classical prosody, it may well be seen in retrospect as an extension of, or variation on, the classical metric technique, not as an emancipation from it.
3. Al-Hājj acknowledges his debt to Suzanne Bernard's book as follows: "Innani asta'iru bitalkhisin kulliyyin [tahdid mahiyyati qasidati al-nathr] min ahdathi kitabin fi hādha al-mawdū' bi'unwāni' qasidat al-nathr min Baudelaire ilā ayyāminā lil-Kātibati al-faransiyyati, Suzanne Bernard (I borrow, in a general synoptic way, [the definition of the *poème en prose*] from the most recent book on the subject by the French writer, Suzanne Bernard) (Introduction 11-12). Adonis appends this footnote to his essay on the *poème en prose*: "T'amadthu fi kitabati hādhihi al-dirāsati, bishaklin Khāssin, 'alā hādha al-Kitab" (I especially have depended in the writing of this study) and then he quotes the book and all bibliographical particulars in French (1960, 75-83).
4. Al-Hājj renders closely, in this quotation, a segment of Poe's "The Poetic Principle," namely, "a 'long poem' is simply a flat contradiction" (33). On grounds of textual evidence as well as al-Hājj's limited knowledge of English, we are led to believe that he did not check Poe's "The Poetic Principle" in English or even in French, but relied exclusively on Bernard (439).
5. The Arabic translation of Baudelaire's description of the *poème en prose* is al-Hājj's.
6. This recurrent idea of the continuous invention of poetic languages and forms owes much, in our opinion, to Adonis' essay "Muhāwala fi ta'rīf al-shi'r al-hadith" ("Towards the Definition of Modern [Arabic] Poetry"), in which Adonis discusses the question of artistic creation in general, and the kind of poetry, the Shi'r generation set out to achieve. The same essay is revised in his book *Zaman al-Shi'r* and given the new title "Al-Kashf 'an 'ālamīn yazallu fī hājatin ilā al-Kashf" ("Exploring a world that remains in need of exploration"), admittedly after René Char.
7. Al-Hājj's article on Prévert, entitled "Fi Ghurfat Jacques Prévert" appeared in *Shi'r* in the summer of 1967. See also al-Hājj, in collaboration with F. Trābulsi.
8. See al-Khāl's promotional note on the back cover of *Lan*. See also al-Khāl 138.
9. Adonis came across Niffari's *Mawakif* and *Mukhatabat* in 1965 by sheer accident in the library of the American University in Beirut (1971b, 6). Please note that the proper spelling is *Mawaqif* (Arabic for "positions"); however, Adonis uses, on the back of his cultural review, the spelling of *Mawakif*. Wherever reference is made to Adonis' review, we shall adopt his spelling.

10. Adonis made in 1960 the observation that, with the exception of the Sūfi poetry and a few poems of Abu'l-I-‘Ala', classical Arabic poetry lacks the "metaphysical sensibility," which he regarded as the principal characteristic of modern Arabic poetry (1960, 15). See Adonis also on the concept of poetry and the form-content controversy (1971a, 11, 8-27 and 1972, 282-84).

187