

ARABIC POETRY

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Modern Arabic Poetry

The period of “decadence”. Accounts of the rise of modern Arabic literature often dismiss the writings that immediately preceded it as inferior and completely uninteresting. Pre-modern times were, according to the modern view, a dark age sandwiched in between the heyday of Arabic literary production and the rise of dynamic, educated, and savvy moderns who would revolutionize all aspects of Arab cultural life. In the view of the proponents of the *Nahdah*, cultural production was closely tied to political power: as long as Arabs did not rule themselves, then they would produce inferior literature. This view, echoed by Jayyusi in the introduction to the anthology we will read this week, is not entirely fair or accurate. The centuries between the twelfth and the nineteenth witnessed many interesting experiments and developments in Arabic literature, including the invention and spread of new poetic forms such as the “seven arts” of colloquial poetry, which included strophic poetry quite distinct from the classical *qasidah* and related genres. Poetry of all kinds remained extremely popular, and several large poetic anthologies arranged by regions of the Islamic world were compiled in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The literature of the pre-modern period awaits serious investigation, so it should not be dismissed out of hand; we are not paying considerable attention to it in this course only for the practical reason that very little of it has been translated into English.

Neo-classical poetry. The development of modern poetry differs from that of the play, an obvious foreign implant, in that it was not viewed as a new, foreign form. Arabic boasted an extremely long-lived, continuous, and remarkably stable tradition of poetry dating back to the sixth century, if not earlier, and the same forms, particularly the *qasidah*, continued to be written in the nineteenth century and served the same stereotypical functions, including praise of rulers and patrons. The beginnings of modern Arabic poetry may be located in the neo-classical style of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poets such as Lebanese Nasif al-Yaziji (1800-1871) and Egyptian Mahmoud Sami al-Barudi (1839-1904)—omitted from Jayyusi’s anthology on account of their early dates—who used traditional forms and conventions but were concerned to portray the realities and events of the contemporary world rather than stylized miniatures of life in the desert haunts of the Bedouin. They strove to eschew the elaborate conceits and stereotyped images and ideas of late medieval poetry and to recapture the force and directness of classical poets such as al-Mutanabbi. The chief neo-classical poet after al-Barudi was Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932), whom Egyptians dubbed “the Prince of the Poets” on account of his elite upbringing. Other prominent poets in this school were the Egyptian Hafiz Ibrahim (1872-1932), dubbed “the Poet of the Nile”, the Syrian Badawi al-Jabal (Muhammad Sulayman al-Ahmad, 1905-1981), and the Iraqi Ma`ruf al-Rusafi (1875-1945) and Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri (1899-1997). The neo-classicists’ involvement in the political events of the day may be seen in Shawqi’s *Wada` al-Lord Cromer* (Bidding Farewell to Lord Cromer) and his lament on the fall of Macedonia in 1912, or Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri’s political poems *Atbiq Duja* (Descend, Darkness) and *Tanwimat al-Jiya`* (Lullaby for the Hungry).

Romanticism. In the early twentieth century, the *Mahjar* (literally, “place of emigration”) poets, a group of writers living abroad in both North and South America, exerted a profound influence on the development of Arabic poetry. Chief among these were Lebanese Christian writers living in the United States, including Kahlil Gibran (Jibran Khalil Jibran, 1883-1931), Amin al-Rihani (1876-1940), Elia (Ilya) Abu Madi (1889-1957), and Mikhail Nu`aima (1889-1988). Influenced by Walt Whitman, Thoreau, and other English and American romantic poets, they wrote works in a romantic and mystical vein, experimenting with new forms such as the prose poem. Their bold breaks with standard poetic conventions, both in form and content, met with approval, and their new, romantic mode spread in the Arab world. The romantics had their heyday in the period between the two world wars; their number included Egyptians Ibrahim Nagi (1898-1953), Ahmad Zaki Abu-Shadi (1892-1955), Ali Mahmud Taha (1901-1949); Tunisian Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi (1901-1934); and Lebanese al-Akhtal al-Saghir (1885-1968) and Khalil Hawi (1919-1982). The romantics focused on the relationship between nature and one’s inner psychology, mystical knowledge, and spiritual enlightenment through introspection. Their poetry was populated by figures and

images from Greek and Ancient Near Eastern mythology, particularly that of Tammuz, as well as from the Bible and world literature.

Commitment and political poetry. Since World War II, Arabic poetry has witnessed many developments. A major debate was sparked in the 1950s over the issue of *iltizam* (political commitment), and many Arab poets clung to the view that poetry had to serve political goals, since it was the duty of writers and intellectuals to mobilize the masses and to change political realities. A great deal of poetry was written decrying Arab regimes' violence and stifling restrictions on civil liberties, freedom of expression, and political activism. In addition, Palestinian poets both in Palestine and elsewhere, as well as Arabs from many other nations, addressed the Israeli occupation of Palestine and lamented the defeat of Arab forces in 1948 and 1967. These include in particular Samih al-Qasim (b. 1939) and Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008).

Modernism. This period saw the birth of modernism and realism: the modernist poets rejected romanticism as a flight from reality into nature and illusory dreams and sought to address contemporary concerns more directly. Prominent modernists include Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-1964), Nazik al-Mala'ika (1923-2007), Salah Abd al-Sabur (1931-1981), Ahmad Abd al-Mu'ti Higazi (b. 1935), Amal Dunqul (1940-1983), and others. One of the modernists' crucial innovations was formal. Beginning with her 1947 poem *Cholera*, Nazik al-Mala'ika pioneered what became known as "free verse" (*al-shi'r al-hurr*), a form of poetry that involved the repetition of a metrical foot (*taf'ilah*, pl. *tafa'il*) without keeping to a set number of feet in each line and without following the strict classical meters. This form became extremely popular with the "New Poets" or modernists; al-Sayyab adopted it from the beginning, Salah Abd al-Sabur introduced it to Egypt in his collection *al-Nas fi biladi* (*The People in My Country*, 1956), and it has since become the most common mode of poetic expression in Arabic.

Recent trends. Over the last five decades, poets in the Arab world have adopted many different ideologies and modes of poetic discourse. Arabic poetry continues to be heavily influenced by English and French poetry and to react to European literary and critical fashions such as surrealism and deconstruction. Significant developments include the increasing number of women poets and the increased publication of colloquial poetry by writers such as Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm (b. 1929). An extremely popular figure of the late twentieth century was the versatile and prolific Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998), whose youthful works reflected the sensual musings of a talented playboy poet, but later turned to political poetry and championed women's rights. Deceptively simple and direct in style, many of his poems have been set to music. Perhaps the most important Arab poet alive today is Adunis (Ali Ahmad Sa'id, b. 1930), a Syrian who lived for many years in Lebanon, where he founded *Majallat Shi'r* (*Poetry Journal*) together with Yusuf al-Khal (1917-1987) and later established another literary periodical titled *Mawaqif* (*Stances*) in which he regularly published experimental poetry. Living in Paris since 1980, he continues to write poetry that draws on many aspects of classical Arabic and European literatures and adopts many different forms and styles.

Reading

Jayyusi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Poetry*, introduction and pp. 45-488.

Further Reading

Badawi, M.M. *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*. 1976.

Adonis. *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*. London: Saqi Books, 2003.

Adonis. *A Time Between Ashes and Roses*. Trans. Shawkat Toorawa. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004.

Jayyusi, Salma. *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1977.

Jayyusi, Lena. *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*. Dearborn, Michigan: Interlink Publishing Group, 2000.

Qabbani, Nizar. *One Entering the Sea: The Erotic and Other Poetry of Nizar Qabbani*. Trans.

Handal, Nathalie. Dearborn, Michigan: Interlink Publishing Group, 2013.

Radwan, Noha M. *Egyptian Colloquial Poetry in the Modern Arabic Canon: New Readings of Shi'r al-'Ammiyya*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Questions:

Analyze any neo-classical poem in detail.

Analyze Hafiz Ibrahim's poem "The Suit". Which elements of this poem might be called "classical" and which not?

Analyze any romantic poem in detail.

Discuss the form of a poem and its effect on the meaning the poem conveys.

Compare and contrast any two poems that focus on a similar theme.

Discuss a common theme that appears in a number of poems.

Discuss the relationship between form and meaning in the poetry of Nazik al-Mala'ika or Badr Shakir al-Sayyab.

Discuss the relationship between form and meaning in poems by other authors.

Compare and contrast any two poems that focus on a similar theme.

Discuss a common theme that appears in a number of poems.