The Arab Poet
From the Spokesman of the Tribe to a Tribune of the Dispossessed

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From earliest times and in all cultures, not just Arab culture, the poet was considered a charmer in the etymological sense of the word, someone who charms, a wielder of "rhythmic words which exerted magical powers".[1] In Arabian folklore there are many legends about the inspiration of poets by supernatural beings, the *jinns*, who frequented the valley of ʿAbqar and thus the word for a genius in Arabic is *ʿabqarī*, he who is from ʿAbqar. There had to be magic in any exceptional performance; and in extempore verbal eloquence the ancient Arabs saw demonic or divine possession, certainly beyond the capacity of ordinary mortals.

As the population of Arabia was made up of different tribes, there were collective markets accompanied by festivities, as in Sūq ʿUkāz and al-Marbid, in which each tribe showed off its genius, that is its outstanding poet. Poetic tournaments were scheduled to coincide with such fairs or during the season of pilgrimage to pre-Islamic Mecca. The poets, thus, were the most articulate and the most visible cultural icons in a tribe or a kingdom. They were sought after and were inspiring, just as nations now aspire to have their own Nobel Laureate or Olympic champion.

Petty kingdoms and small sheikhdoms in the ancient Arab Near East vied with each other for cultural prestige, as they continue to do today. Courts of chiefs in Arabia and courts of kings of Hīra and Ghassān patronized poets and bragged about them. The verbal prowess of poets added to the ranking of the tribe and its leader. It is not surprising that there were actual competitions set to see who is the best poet in the area. Winning poets were rewarded with material possessions, including camels or money. In turn, the poet had "to play up to the tribal sense of pride or to his patron's self-importance".[2]

But who decides who is the best poet? The early Arabs did not have an official jury as the Swedish Academy does today. It was all left to the audience enamored by poetry, and clearly to those in the audience who were known for their astute judgment in poetic issues. The poet necessarily strove to please his audience and above all to appeal to them and thus referred to literary topoi, to literary motifs, with which they were familiar and to which they could respond.[3] Furthermore, a form of competitive intertextuality developed to highlight who was the better poet. Poets would use the same theme and the same meter of another poet and then try to write a poem that would surpass it. This was called *muʿāraḍa*, i.e. oppositional imitation. The audience then would discuss the im-

1 Hamilton Gibb, *Arabic Literature*, Oxford: University Press 1963, 18.
2 Ibid., 19.
3 Ibid.

agery of both, compare the poetic diction, and judge who was superior to the other and why.

Venerating listeners and aspiring poets gathered around the famous poet of the tribe to learn from his extraordinary talents. Many of these acolytes became reciters of the poems of their favored poet, usually their own tribal spokesman. Since the culture was still oral, even though writing was known and used, it was necessary to commit these poems to memory and disseminate them through word of mouth. This led to the creation of *rāwī*s, those who knew by heart the poems of celebrated poets.

The greatest of these poetic odes were committed to writing in gold threads and hung on the sacred Kaaba of pre-Islamic Arabia. This was the equivalent of a prestigious anthology or our best-sellers which go into many printings. The famous collection of these poetic masterpieces included seven then another three were added, so all in all they were ten, and that corresponds to what we call today the literary canon. Among these masterful poets were Zuhayr whose poetry revolved around the praise of two chiefs. Another tribesman, Nābigha, addressed his panegyric to Hīra's Arab king, and he became something of a court poet.[4]

Perhaps you can appreciate the sense of tribal pride in another poet, ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm, spokesman of the tribe of Taghlīb:

> Our spearshafts, O ʿAmr, are tough, and have foiled the efforts
> Of enemies ere your time to cause them to bend.
> [...]
> To us belongs the earth and all who dwell thereon;
> When we despoil, resistless is our swoop
> The mainland grows too narrow for our swelling hosts,
> The sea is ours, we fill it with our ships.[5]

Needless to say pre-Islamic poetry was not all in praise of the tribe and its chiefs. We come across motifs of love and self-praise as well as wisdom and realistic description of the landscape. There were also the so-called "outlaw poets" (*al-shuʿarāʾ al-ṣaʿālik*), sort of angry young men of the time who rebelled against tribal norms as they were poor and non-conformist, but they remained marginalized.

The mainstream, on the other hand, was exemplified by the poet as the eloquent spokesman of the tribe, with his ability to move people and mobilize them. He was the equivalent of the orator in ancient Greece and the charismatic spokesman for a political party or institution today. Such an exceptional poet, writes H.A.R. Gibb, "was not merely lauded as an artist but venerated as the protector and guarantor of the honour of the tribe and a potent weapon against its enemies."[6]

Contrast this with the act of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, the Egyptian progressive novelist, who recently rejected publicly and dramatically, the prestigious prize of Arab Fiction. The award was offered to him on October 22, 2003 at the end of an international con-

4 Ibid., 22.
5 Ibid., 23.
6 Ibid., 29.

ference on the Arab Novel, organized by the Higher Council of Culture under the auspices of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. In rejecting the prize, the writer explained he could not take it from a Government that has done nothing to Culture except festivities, a government that stands silent while the Palestinians are slaughtered and Iraq is invaded and occupied.[7]

Here, the creative writer, unlike his pre-Islamic counterpart, has become a tribune of the dispossessed rather than a spokesman for the tribe and its rulers. I say *a* tribune and I don't say *the* tribune (using the indefinite article rather than the definite article), because the Arab creative writer today is not the only spokesman as he used to be in ancient Arabia. He is one of many who speak, for there are other modes of public articulation in our modern communities besides the gifted writer of days of yore who was the public speaker par excellence – and the only one at that. There are now intellectuals and professors writing in different fields of knowledge – sociologists, historians, political scientists, etc. – and there are journalists and media pundits; there are official spokesmen, including those in the ministries of Information and Culture. So there is no shortage of channels for public speaking, one way or the other. The monopoly of the creative writer on public discourse in past times is lost. Ancient Arabic poetry was a repository of knowledge as well as aesthetics. In contrast, in our age of specialization, there are so many branches of knowledge and so many genres of literature that none is supreme.

Thus poetry, in its Aristotelian sense, that is creative composition, is no more the only mode of recording a position or taking a stance. I believe, because there are so many channels of expression, the creative writer is not always listened to. His audience is not necessarily the public at large, especially if he is writing against the grain. Often his voice is submerged by the loud voice of the Establishment and its many spokesmen acting very much like the African *griot* of West Africa, the professional spokesman of authority and the human loudspeaker of the chief. It is in this light that we can understand why a writer's voice might be lost in the brouhaha of the Establishment. Thus we can understand why Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm chose to deliver his iconoclastic message on stage when the Minister of Culture himself was handing him the award, rather than quietly rejecting it before hand.

Nor is Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm the only spokesman for the dispossessed: there are thousands like him who have written poetry or novels, plays or short stories, in which they attacked, satirized, or laid bare the hopelessness of the status quo and said in nuanced ways that 'the king has no clothes'. The names are many and so are the kings though the king of kings in our age of global empire is one and only. We can mention randomly a long list of contemporary prominent Arab poets: Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb and Saʿdī Yūsuf, Nāzik al-Malāʾika and Amal al-Jubūrī, Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī and Muẓaffar al-Nawwāb, Maḥmūd Darwīsh and Adūnīs, Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabbūr and Amal Dunqul, Muḥammad ʿAfīfī Maṭar and Ḥasab al-Shaykh Jaʿfar, and so on and so forth. In examining this long list, we find all of them oppositional poets whose poetry reveals

7 Ferial Ghazoul, "Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm wa-jamāliyyat al-irbāk", in: *Akhbār al-Adab* 539, Nov. 9, 2003, 35.

dispossession, whether this dispossession is the outcome of colonial conquests, of neo-colonial encroachments, or of local injustice.

But before I unfold the richness of the poetry that sides with the dispossessed, let me pose a literary-historical question. What happened in Arab culture in the last fifteen centuries that reversed the role of the poet, from being the spokesman of the tribe to becoming a tribune of the dispossessed? Here is a sketch of the dialectical moves in the cultural history of the Arabs that led to the drastic change in the role of the poet in his or her community.

With the advent of Islam, the treasury of knowledge and aesthetics, of the good and the beautiful, became the sacred text. The source of knowledge, truth, and beauty became the Koran, and thus poetry – traditionally known as *dīwān al-ʿarab*, the archive of the Arabs – was no more the only source of knowledge nor for that matter a reliable one. Furthermore, the Koranic verses, with their sublime beauty known as *iʿjāz* (inimitability) set new models for verbal excellence that did not partake in the dominant model of the *qaṣīda* (ode) in particular and Arabic poetry in general. The exclusive aesthetic model of the Arabian ode was implicitly challenged in the divine discourse of the Koran. Also some post-Islamic poets such as Ḥasān ibn Thābit, deserted the thematic concerns dear to pre-Islamic poets and set out to write about the new Islamic values, sometimes in poems sounding like sermons.[8] This changed somehow the exclusive hegemony of the *qaṣīda* model, though it did not displace the structure of the *qaṣīda* in poetry – be it religious or secular in content. The formal aspects of the poem continued to be based on the *qaṣīda*.

The Koran condemns poetry in *Sūrat al-shuʿarāʾ* (The Poets' Surah):

> Shall I tell you in whom the Satans come down?
> They come down on every guilty imposter.
> They give ear, but most of them are liars.
> And the poets – the perverse follow them;
> hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley
> and how they say that which they do not?
> Save those that believe, and do righteous deeds,
> and remember God oft,
> and help themselves after being wronged; and
> those who do wrong shall surely know by what
> overturning they will be overturned.[9]

Though such condemnation did not stop poets from declaiming in verse and composing poems, still we have a situation where poetry is not privileged unquestionably. Lovers of poetry, everywhere, tend to defend it against its critics or re-interpret religious, ethical, or philosophical critiques and disparagement so that poetry is somehow saved and

8 Midhat al-Jayyār, *al-Shāʿir wa-l-turāth*, Alexandria: Dār al-Wafāʾ 1999, 126.

9 Surah 26: 221-27 in Arthur Arberry's translation: *The Koran Interpreted*, New York: Macmillan 1955, vol. ii, 75.

looked up to. Shelley did so in his famous *Defense of Poetry*[10] and more recently Julius Elias did the same with Plato in his *Plato's Defence of Poetry*,[11] even though we all know that Plato banished poets from his Republic. So did Islamic apologists of poetry, who read in the Koranic displeasure with poets a reference to a certain kind of poetry that distracts people from their religion and not to all poetry.

Post-Islamic poets expressed their reservations about hegemony indirectly. Marginalized poets, poets distant from the centers of power – be it political power or religious power – sublimated their frustration with the central government and their opposition to the ruling ideology. The Tunisian sociologist of literature Tahar Labib, shows in his study of ʿUdhrī poetry how the unrequited love of such poets in the Ummayad period is the aesthetic sublimation of their loss of standing as poets of marginalized tribes and communities.[12] Adūnīs has equally shown, in his *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, that Sufi poetry is a mode of ambiguous discourse in which critical views of religious orthodoxy can be aired.[13] In other words, the expression of dissent is camouflaged consciously or unconsciously in a poetic discourse that does not openly challenge the social order.

When we move forward historically, another aspect of resistance to established norms occurs. Andras Hamori in his book *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* points out an important example – the excesses of poets like Abū Nuwās in the Abbasid period. Not only did he sing of wine and the tavern, but he also asked to be publicly served forbidden intoxicating drinks in his poetry. His verse verges on blasphemy when he enunciates:

> My proud soul will not be content with nothing but the forbidden.
> I do not care when my cup of death will come; I have already had my fill of the joys of the wine cup.[14]

Furthermore, Abū Nuwās used sacred and religious terminology when referring to the rites of drinking, such as the *qibla* which is the direction of Mecca the believers face when praying, or the *adhān*, the call for prayer:

> When my drink is the daughter of the vine, and when beauty is the *qibla* of my face,
> I find safety in these two from the evil things that unfold with the passage of time.[15]

Or when he says:

> Give me a cup to distract me from the muezzin's call![16]

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10 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry", in: Hazard Adams (ed.), *Critical Theory Since Plato*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1971, 498-513.
11 Julius Elias, *Plato's Defense of Poetry*, London: Macmillan 1984.
12 Tahar Labib, *La poésie amoureuse des arabes*, Algier: SNED n.d.
13 Adonis, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, tr. Catherine Cobham, London: Saqi Books 1985.
14 Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature*, Princeton: University Press 1974, 52.
15 Ibid., 54.
16 Ibid., 55.

Abū Nuwās goes as far as denying afterlife (though others attribute this verse to Dīk al-Jinn al-Ḥumṣī):

> Life followed by death followed by resurrection – all that, O Umm
> ʿAmr, is an old wive's tale.[17]

But all these unconventional motifs that dismiss established values and invert the accepted norms are those of a ritual clown, as Hamori points out. Abū Nuwās was not put to death like al-Ḥallāj for what he said because he was viewed as clowning. He is seen as the king's jester was seen in European medieval courts. It is precisely his clowning that allows him to speak the unspeakable. This represents another step in making the poet something of a critic, tolerated by the Establishment, as he was viewed as having a harmless license.

When we move to later epochs, during periods of defeat and after the sack of Baghdad in the thirteenth century, Arabic poetry plays a minor role. In the period of the Mamluks and under Ottoman rule poetry became no more than aesthetic exercises and verbal play that had very little to do with real life and experience.[18] In other words, the poet retired from the stage and became an embroiderer of words, writing occasional poetry related to special events and complimentary poems. Though he toed the line of the rulers, he was not really a spokesman for them as the tribal poet was. He was simply there to embellish, not to express, the courtly scene.

During the Arab Renaissance known as *al-nahḍa* in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a neo-classical school of poetry sought to revive Arab culture. The poets of this revival movement used the classical model of the *qaṣīda*, the Arab ode of pre-Islamic and post-Islamic Arab culture, and particularly those poems that dealt with *ḥamāsa*, the mobilizing poetic genre in battles. Poets like al-Barūdī, Aḥmad Shawqī, and Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm were among them. These poets were respected and looked up too, but they did not succeed in going beyond reviving old forms. Thus they were completely constrained by the model of the tribal poets even though they were in fact addressing not the tribe but the nation. This neo-classical poetry was not very innovative but it did awaken Arabic poetics from its slumber and from the frivolity of the earlier periods of stagnation.

In the first half of the twentieth century the romantic poets succeeded the neo-classicists. They dropped the neo-classicist dependency on age-worn models. They stopped imitating classical poets and sought to express their own subjectivity – their emotions and their anxieties. They complained rather than boasted as the tribal poet did. Thus they opened a new site for complaints drawn from their own lived experiences. The personal concerns overwhelmed the collective ones, yet this romantic poetry provided for expressing the ills of a situation even if it only related to the poet himself or herself. But by opening the door for lived experience and the complaint about one's condition, it paved the way for concerns and complaints about the social, political, and cultural conditions. From the narrow optics of a romantic poet concerned with his own

17 Ibid., 57.
18 Jayyār, *al-Shāʿir wa-l-turāth*, 174-83.

self, was born the poet who is concerned with his own people and particularly those who are dispossessed among his people and in the world at large. Many a poet who became a tribune of the dispossessed was often a poet who went through a romantic phase, but commitment to the community and solidarity with the have-nots led him or her to move to collective concerns. Only in the light of this historical and cultural transformation, do we understand the unusual stance of a Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm who performs such a dramatic act in order to draw attention to the plight of the many.

A radical poetic movement took place in the late 1940s in Iraq known as *al-shiʿr al-ḥurr* (*vers libre*) in which the classical prosody of Arabic poetry was transformed without giving up on meter entirely. The verse lines however came to be less standardized in terms of number of feet per line and dropped the rigid mono-rhyme. This not only revolutionized poetry metrically, but also radicalized it in terms of themes and subject matter. One of the pioneers of this innovative poetry, the Iraqi poet Nāzik al-Malāʾika (born 1923), was only 23 years old when she launched her new poetics. She argued that the new themes required new prosody, that is a new poetic structure to accommodate new poetic subject matter. This kind of poetry, sometimes known as "*tafʿīla* poetry" (foot poetry), became very popular among poets in the Arab world. Part of the interest in it was its potential for expressing a new vision of the world focusing on resistance to injustice.

Nāzik al-Malāʾika wrote critically of society's treatment of women as well as poems on the tragedy of Palestinian refugees and the Egyptians threatened by the Cholera epidemic. Her poem *Washing Off Disgrace*, exposes the double standards of patriarchal society as it punishes the woman for the minutest suspicion about her chastity while men go around proudly harassing women sexually. The poem opens with the victim calling on her mother, when a kinsman stabs her to death: [19]

"Mother!"
A last gasp through her teeth and tears.
The vociferous moan of the night.
Blood gushed.
Her body stabbed staggered.
The waves of her hair
    swayed with crimson mud.
"Mother!"
Only heard by her man of blood.
At dawn
If her twenty years of forlorn hope should call
The meadows and the roseate buds shall echo:
She's gone
Washing off disgrace!

Neighborhood women would gossip her story.
The date palms would pass it on to the breeze.

19 I quote the English translation in Kamal Boullata (ed.), *Women of the Fertile Crescent*, Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press 1978, 20f.

It would be heard in the squeaking of every
weather-beaten door.
And the cobbled stones would whisper:
She's gone
Washing off disgrace!

Tomorrow
Wiping his dagger before his pals
The butcher bellows,
"Disgrace?
A mere stain on the forehead,
Now washed,"
At the tavern
Turning to the barman, he yells,
"More wine
And send me that lazy beauty of a nymphet
you got, the one with the mouth of myrrh."
One woman would pour wine
to a jubilant man
Another paid
Washing off disgrace!

Women of the neighborhood
Women of the village
We knead dough with our tears
that they may be well-fed
We loosen our braids
that they may be pleased
We peel the skin of our hands washing their clothes
that they may be spotless white
No smile
No joy
No rest
For the glitter of a dagger
of a father
of a brother
is all eyes.
Tomorrow who knows
What deserts may banish
You washing disgrace!

The repetition of the refrain "washing off disgrace!", while disturbing all along the poem, becomes ironic in the finale where the voice of collective women proclaims that they wash with their own blood the dirt of their kinsmen.

Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926-64) also uses refrain, such as one would encounter in folk songs particularly those that are chanted in order to get the rain pouring in a dry season. But the rain al-Sayyāb is praying for is a metaphoric rain that would wash away

the sterility of the land, the hunger of the people, and the ills of society. These excerpts are from al-Sayyāb's well-known poem *Unshūdat al-maṭar* (Rain Song): [20]

I can almost hear Iraq husbanding the thunder,
Storing lightning in the mountains and plains,
So that if the seal were broken by men
The winds would leave in the valley not a trace of Thamud.
I can almost hear the palmtrees drinking the rain,
Hear the villages moaning and emigrants
With oar and sail fighting the Gulf
Winds of storm and thunder, singing
"Rain . . . rain . . .
Drip, drop, the rain . . ."

And there is hunger in Iraq,
The harvest time scatters the grain in it,
That crows and locusts may gobble their fill,
Granaries and stones grind on and on,
Mills turn in the fields, with them men turning . . .
Drip, drop, the rain . . .
Drip . . .
Drop . . .

When came the night for leaving, how many tears we shed,
We made the rain a pretext, not wishing to be blamed
Drip, drop, the rain . . .
Drip, drop, the rain . . .
Since we had been children, the sky
Would be clouded in wintertime,
And down would pour the rain,
And every year when earth turned green the hunger struck us.
Not a year has passed without hunger in Iraq.
Rain . . .
Drip, drop, the rain . . .
Drip, drop . . .

In every drop of rain
A red or yellow color buds from the seeds of flowers,
Every tear wept by the hungry and naked people,
Every split drop of slaves' blood,
Is a smile aimed at a new dawn,
A nipple turning rosy in an infant's lips,
In the young world of tomorrow, bringer of life.
Drip. Drop, the rain . . .
Drip . . .
Drop . . . the rain . . .
Iraq will blossom one day in the rain.

20 I quote the English translation in Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Poetry*, New York: Columbia University Press 1987, 429-500.

Last but not least the national bard of the Arabs, the Palestinian poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh, has summed up the feelings and reflections of the oppressed millions in his poems. His poem *Earth Scrapes Us* is an example of both an aesthetic object and a *cri de cœur* on behalf of the dispossessed, trapped and nowhere to go:[21]

Earth scrapes us, pressing us into the last narrow passage, we have to
dismember ourselves to pass,
Earth squeezes us. Wish we were its wheat, to die and live again. Wish
it were our mother,
Our mother would be merciful to us. Wish we were images of stones
our dreams carry
Like mirrors. We have seen the faces of those who will be killed
defending the soul to the last one of us.
We wept for the birthday of their children. We have seen the faces of
those who will throw
Our children from the windows of this last space of ours. Mirrors that
our star will paste together.
Where shall we go, after the last frontier? Where will birds be flying,
after the last sky?
Where will plants find a place to rest, after the last expanse of air?
We will write our names in crimson vapor.
We will cut off the hand of song, so that our flesh can complete the
song.
Here we will die. Here in the last narrow passage. Or here our blood
will plant – its olive trees.

21 Ibid., 207f.