The City in Arabic Literature

Classical and Modern Perspectives

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Against Cities: On *Hijā' al-Mudun* in Arabic Poetry

Huda Fakhreddine and Bilal Orfali

CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVES

Beautifying and Uglifying the Homeland

In the premodern Muslim world, it was customary for a poet to praise his homeland. The definition of home, however, and the poet's relation to it, developed with the changing topography of organized social and political life. In a chapter titled "The Poet in the City" in his *Poetique arabe*, Jamal Eddine Bencheikh traces this development in the Arabic tradition from what he describes as a "biological" connection between the poet and his tribe to a less natural and more contrived relationship between the poet and the larger Islamic community, and after that to the select family or individuals (especially at the height of the Abbasid Empire) who claimed to be embodiments of the entire larger community. The pre-Islamic poet's relationship to his tribe was the direct source of the sociological, religious, moral and linguistic parameters of his role. These parameters were expanded and abstracted in the later period of the Islamic caliphate, becoming not necessarily more fragile, but of a more deliberate and complex politics.[1]

Regardless of the nature of the poet's homeland, its praise utilized themes of nostalgia (*ḥanīn*), alienation and/or estrangement (*ghurba*), and lament (*rithā'*).[2] Anthologies of *al-ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān* (yearning for the homeland) are replete with such motifs. Indeed, one finds in these anthologies chapters such as *ḥubb al-waṭan* (love of one's homeland), *al-tagharrub*

(emigration), *al-safar wa-l-ightirāb* (travel and emigration), *dhikr al-ayyām al-sālifa* (remembering the past days), etc.[3] The objects of nostalgia here are the family, tribe, clan, comrades, and beloved. There is usually an emphasis on the ties that bind the poet to his homeland, his youth, the land's milk, food, drinks, soil, rain, dew, and trees. The traveler or wanderer is sad, worried, distressed, sleepless, lonely, and filled with longing. These feelings are manifestations of the poet's rootedness, loyalty, and nobility. The longing for the homeland connects to the formulaic *wuqūf ʿalā l-aṭlāl* (the conventional scene of the ruined abodes) in the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* which continued to be popular in later times. The ruined abode, the *ṭalal*, is the lost home, the reminder of times past.

Some poets, however, did the opposite – they attacked their homelands or the cities in which they dwelled. This negative attitude to the homeland was often the flip side of praising a certain place. Praising or longing for the past place would be coupled with a shunning of the present place where the poet or littérateur is unfortunate, unhappy, and feels like an alien or a stranger. In fact praise and censure are frequently joined in Arabic literature, evident in the surviving Arabic compilations of *al-maḥāsin wa-l-masāwiʾ* (merits and faults).[4] These compilations naturally couple censure with praise. Some of the books of *al-ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān* do the same by including chapters such as *madḥ al-firāq* (praise of separation) along with *dhamm al-firāq* (censure of separation), *taḥsīn al-ghurba* (beautifying alienation) along with *taqbīḥ al-ghurba* (uglifying alienation). In these chapters where the act of leaving a place is praised, the homeland is redefined as "the place where you land."[5] This naturally challenges the idea that departure from the place of birth rids one of his family and friends. All friends, neighbors, lovers, and towns are replaceable. Lands are equal and the same and it is the seeking of livelihood, profit, money, fortune, success, riches, and abundance that is encouraged. Travel brings renewal, "*fa-ightarib tatajaddadi*", to use the words of Abū Tammām (d. 231/845),[6] while remaining in one's homeland becomes a sign of laziness. Travel is a means of escaping debasement, humiliation, hardship, oppression, and tyranny. It is freedom, a way to pursue virtue and to satisfy curiosity.[7]

Poets utilized these ready motifs for various purposes in their poems. The same idea can be looked at in opposing ways depending on the context. Beatrice Gruendler follows the historical development of the genre and illustrates some of the themes and attitudes found in anthologies of *al-ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān*. She focuses on the divided and shifting positions on geographical

origin as they manifest in the shape of the home, the changing home, the choice to leave home, the idea of the universal home, freedom and ambivalence, as well as mobility and exile.[8]

The City as Patron

The notion of home as a poet's place of birth, his tribal ground, or the tribal ground of his beloved was expanded in the Umayyad period to include cities in response to the recent sociopolitical changes seen throughout the Islamic world. The poet in the high courts of the Abbasid caliphs played a double role: he was a public figure – the caliph's council, boon companion, and mouthpiece on one hand – and a private persona for whom the poet himself was solely responsible, on the other. The two were not always reconciled. A city like Baghdad was the stage upon which poets proved themselves professionally, the craft of poetry at this point becoming more clearly a profession fraught with politics, competitiveness, and rivalry. The city in this dynamic was largely equivalent to the patron, the caliph or the emir himself. Entry and exit to and from the city were basically entry and exit to and from the patron's presence and favors. A poet's relationship to the city was therefore scripted and restrained by the etiquette of the court. Poets walked a tightrope in their relationship with patrons and their cities, careful to make amends if necessary, as we see in Abū Tammām's incident with the *qāḍī* of Baghdād, Ibn Abī Duʾād. Inadvertently insulting the *qāḍī's* tribe, Abū Tammām composed two poems in order to re-enter the favor of the slighted patron and reconcile himself with the city of Baghdād.[9]

أتاني عائرُ الأنباءِ تَسْري
عقاربه بداهية نآدِ
...
بأنّي نلتُ من مضر وخبّت
إليك شكيّتي خببَ الجَوادِ

وما ربعُ القطيعةِ لي برَبعٍ
ولا نادي الأذى منّي بنادي

وأين يجورُ عن قَصْدٍ لساني
وقلبي رائحٌ برضاكَ غادي[10]

Stray news came to me creeping like scorpions
warning of great calamity,
...

That I had marred the reputation of Muḍar and that my accusation
galloped to you with the speed of a swift steed.

I am not of those who seek rifts,
nor do I frequent the circles of harm.

How could my tongue do wrong intentionally,
when my heart sets out, night and day, seeking your consent?[11]

A city was not a home, rather it was a stage upon which the poet either succeeded or failed. It held the potential of both protection and estrangement.

In Search of a Living

With the weakening of the Abbasid Empire, poets' connections – nearly equivalent to bondage – to the centers of caliphal power such as Baghdād began to weaken. The proliferation of courts in the fourth and fifth century of Islam and the rise of the phenomenon of the career poet are factors that made the relationship of poets to the cities they visited transitory. Exiting a city and its court was no longer as perilous or as consequential as exiting the court of the great caliphs.[12] The itinerant poet was expected to travel among different courts and did not feel compelled by loyalty or a sense of belonging that would have prevented him from lampooning the city he left. The biography of al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) illustrates this continuous travel in search of patronage and glory. The theme of rejection of a home occurs frequently in his poetry. In an ode sent from Egypt to his Ḥamdānid patron, Sayf al-Dawla (r. 333–56/944–67) in Aleppo, he says:

بِمَ التَّعَلّلُ لا أهْلٌ وَلا وَطَنُ
وَلا نَديمٌ وَلا كأسٌ وَلا سَكَنُ

أُريدُ مِنْ زَمَني ذا أنْ يُبَلّغَني
مَا لَيسَ يبْلُغُهُ من نَفسِهِ الزّمَنُ

لا تَلْقَ دَهْرَكَ إلاّ غَيرَ مُكتَرِثٍ
ما دامَ يَصْحَبُ فيهِ رُوحَكَ البَدنُ

فَمَا يُديمُ سُرُورٌ ما سُرِرْتَ بِهِ
وَلا يَرُدّ عَلَيكَ الفَائِتَ الحَزَنُ[13]

What to hold on to? There is no kin, no home,
no companion, no goblet, and no refuge.

> I want this time of mine to make me achieve
> what time itself has not achieved.
>
> As long as the body accompanies your soul,
> prepare to meet your destiny with nonchalance
>
> Your joy in things does not make them persist
> nor does your sorrow bring back that which has passed.

Al-Mutanabbī eventually found shelter in Egypt in the Ikshided court of Kāfūr (r. 334–57/946–68) and, when he fled, his poem attacking Kāfūr was also an attack on Egypt and its people. He says:

أَكُلَّمَا اغتَالَ عَبدُ السَّوْءِ سَيِّدَهُ
أوْ خَانَهُ فَلَهُ في مصرَ تَمْهِيدُ

صَارَ الخَصِيّ إمَامَ الآبِقِينَ بِهَا
فالحُرّ مُسْتَعْبَدٌ وَالعَبْدُ مَعْبُودُ

نَامَتْ نَوَاطِيرُ مصرَ عَنْ ثَعَالِبِها
فَقَدْ بَشِمْنَ وَما تَفنى العَنَاقِيدُ[14]

> Whenever a wicked slave assassinates his master
> or betrays him, has he to get his training in Egypt?
>
> There, the eunuch has become the chieftain of the runaway slaves.
> The free man is enslaved, and the slave is obeyed.
>
> The gardeners of Egypt are asleep to the tricks of its foxes,
> which have gotten bloated, and yet the grape-clusters are not at an end.

When al-Mutanabbī found refuge in Bawwān, a valley near Shīrāz, he still found himself a stranger:

وَلَكِنّ الفَتى العَرَبيّ فِيهَا
غَرِيبُ الوَجْهِ وَاليَدِ وَاللّسَانِ[15]

> The Arab finds himself a stranger [in Bawwān]
> in features, actions, and speech.

The City and its People

Natives of cities define their cities in many ways and visitors experience a city or a region not only by sightseeing or benefiting from the generosity of its ruler, but also by interacting with its inhabitants. The judge

Abū ʿAlī al-Musabbikhī/Musabbiḥī (d. before fifth/eleventh century) did not enjoy his tenure in Sijistān and composed a few lines describing his feelings:

حُلولي سِجستان إحدى النّوبْ
وكوني بها من عجيب العَجبْ

وما بسجستان من طائلٍ
سوى حُسن نرجسها والرُّطَبْ[16]

My arrival in Sijistān is a misfortune
And my stay in it is the strangest of things.

Sijistān is of no avail
Except for its narcissus and ripe dates

Al-Musabbikhī/al-Musabbiḥī interestingly excludes the *amīr* from this attack:

يا سجستان قد بَلوناكِ دهرًا
في حراميك من كلا طَرَفيكِ

أنتِ لولا الأمير فينا لقُلنا:
لعنَ اللهُ من يَصيرُ إليكِ[17]

Sijistān, we have long been afflicted

by the protection of your spaces from one end to the other
Had the *amīr* not been with [amongst] us,
we would have cursed everyone who dwells in you

The Andalusian poet Ibn Bāqī (d. 545/1150) says, describing the city of Sevilla (Ishbīlya):

أَقَمْتُ فِيكُمْ عَلَى الإِقْتَارِ وَالعَدَمِ
لَوْ كُنْتُ حُرًّا أَبِيَّ النَّفْسِ لَمْ أُقِمِ

فَلاَ حَدِيقَتُكُمْ يُجْنَى لَهَا ثَمَرٌ
وَلاَ سَمَاءُكُمْ تَنْهَلّ بِالدِّيَمِ

أَنَا امْرُؤٌ إِنْ نَبَتْ بِي أَرْضُ أَنْدَلُسٍ
جِئْتُ العِرَاقَ فَقَامَتْ لِي عَلَى قَدَمِ

مَا العَيْشُ بِالعِلْمِ إِلاَّ حِيلَةٌ ضَعُفَتْ
وَحِرْفَةٌ وُكِلَتْ بِالقُعْدُدِ البَرِمِ[18]

I stayed in your midst for want and destitution.
Had I been wellborn and self-respecting, I would not have stayed
Your gardens yield no fruit;
your skies pour no rain

Yet, I have merit, and if al-Andalus turns me out,
Iraq will embrace me.

Prospering here by one's intellectual abilities has become a base practice,
a craft entrusted to miserly upstarts.

Similarly Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 984/1577), in his travelogue about his journey from Damascus to Istanbul, describes in a few epigrams the inhospitality of the inhabitants of the city of Baᶜlabakk: they have denied him any food to break his fast in the holy month of Ramaḍān:

شهر الصيام كريم
والبخل فيكم سجيّه

هبنا نصوم نهارًا
أليس تأتي العشيّه[19]

Generous is the month of fasting,
miserliness is a nature in you.

Suppose we fast the day.
Isn't there an evening?

A city can also be attacked for the corruption of its people. Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī quotes the following lines in description of the Syrian city of Ḥamā:

عمّ الفساد حمى حماة فمردها
ورجالها ونسائهنّ جميعا

شبه النواعير التي يهوونها
من مسّه العاصي يدور سريعا[20]

Corruption has prevailed in Ḥamā.
Its adolescents, men, and women
are just like the noria they love.
Touched by the Orontes, they are fast to spin.

A humorous account is that of Abū Nukhayla (d. 145/762) who attacked the people of Yemen for being ugly, finding himself the most handsome amongst them despite his well-known ugliness:

لم أرَ غيري حسنا
منذ دخلت اليمنا

فيا شقاء بلدةٍ
أحسنُ من فيها أنا![21]

I have not seen a good looking person
since I entered Yemen.

How wretched is a city
in which I am the most handsome!

In Search of an Etymology

The attack on cities can take the form of humorous caricatures that play on ethnic political and social stereotypes and can become a poetic exercise for poets. Not only does an invective as such announce a poet's moving on and journeying away, it also allows him a space to perform his abilities in portraying the flaws (*masāwiʾ*) as much as he probably would have portrayed the beauties (*maḥāsin*) of a city and its court. In their attacks on cities, poets often used puns or forged etymologies that play with the city's name. The new name or the forged etymology defined the nature of the city. Bukhārā was a common target, the result of the pun on the trilateral root *kha-ra-ya* which the name of the city shares with the word *kharā* (excretion/shit). Consider for example the three lines by the Khorasanian Abū l-Ṭayyib al-Ṭāhirī (d. *ca.* 321/933), who served the Sāmānid in public and disparaged them in private, mentioned in *Yatīmat al-dahr* of al-Thaᶜālibī:

بخارى من خَرًى لا شكّ فيه
يَعِزُّ بربعِها الشيءُ النظيفُ

فإن قُلْتَ: الأميرُ بها مقيمٌ
فذا من فَخْرِ مُفتَخِرٍ ضَعيفُ

إذا كان الأميرُ خَرًا فقل لي
أليسَ الخُرءُ موضِعُه الكنيفُ[22]

Bukhārā is derived from shit, no doubt.
Clean things are scarce in its quarters.

If you say: The *amīr* resides in it,
this boast is weak.

For if the *amīr* is shit then tell me:
Isn't the toilet the proper place for shit?

According to al-Thaᶜālibī, the motif was then picked up by Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr, who composed two lines attacking Bukhārā, saying:

لو الفرسُ العتيقُ أتى بخارى
لصارَ بطبعِه فيها حمارا

فلم تَرَ مِثلَها عيني كَنيفًا
تبوّأه أميرُ الشرقِ دارا[23]

If the noble horse visits Bukhārā,
his nature will become that of a donkey.

My eyes have never seen a toilet
become the mansion of the *amīr* of the east.

As an anthologist, al-Thaᶜālibī seems to have found these examples funny and he quotes several others including al-Gharbyāmī's (d. fifth/eleventh-century) lines:

ما بلدة منتنة من خرا
وأهلها في جوفها دود

تلك بخارى من بخار الخرى
يضيع فيها النَدّ والعود[24]

There is no other stinking town made of shit (*kharā*).
Its people are worms.

Bukhārā, the name is derived from the vapor of shit.
Lost in it are [the scents of] incense and agar wood.

And these lines by the Sāmānid poet Abū ᶜAlī al-Sājī (d. before 430/1038):

باءُ بخارى فاعلمنَ زائده
والألفُ الأولى بلا فائده

فهي خرًا محضٌ وسكّانُها
كالطيرِ في أقفاصِها آبده[25]

The "b" in Bukhārā is superfluous
and the first alif has no function.

It is pure shit (*kharā*).
Its people are birds sitting in cages all year round.

Bukhārā was unfortunate with its name but other poets had more things to say about it beyond these puns. Al-Thaᶜālibī includes a number of these epigrams:

Al-Mutanabbī says:

بخارى كلّ شيء منك
يا شوهاء مقلوب

قضاة الناس ركّاب
فلم قاضيك مركوب[26]

Bukhāra, everything in you
is deformed and inverted.

Judges normally ride.
Why is your judge ridden?

While the Sāmānid poet Abū Manṣūr al-ᶜAbdūnī (d. before 430/1038) says:

إذا ما بلاد الله طاب نسيمها
وفاحت لدى الأسحار ريح البنفسج

رأيت بخارى جيفة الأرض كلّها
كأنّك منها قاعد وسط مخرج

فيا رب أصلح أهلها وانف نتنها
وإلّا فعنها ربّ حوّل وفرّج[27]

When the fresh air of God's land carries the good smell,
the scent of violet spreads at the early mornings.

I see Bukhārā's land all a corpse,
as if one is sitting in the middle of a way out ,

Oh Lord, amend its people and clean its rot.
Otherwise, Oh Lord, turn me away from it and set me free

This search for a new etymology was not restricted to Bukhārā. Consider the following epigram by physician Muḥammad b. ᶜAlī b. Rifāᶜā (d. seventh/thirteenth century) attacking the city of Sharīsh in al-Andalus (Jerez de la Frontera)

شريش ما أنت إلّا
تصحيف شرّ يبين

فارحل فديتك عنها
إن كنت ممن تدين

فقلّما ساد فيها
حرّ ولا من يُعين[28]

Sharīsh, you are nothing
but a distortion of *sharr yabīn* (evident evil)

Leave it! I would sacrifice myself for you
if you were one who believes.

For rarely it is ruled by a free man
or anyone of any use.

The scathing attacks on cities, as we see above, reveal what one might describe as a rivalry between poets and cities. A poet would relate to a city on an individual level, and as such, it was possible to triumph over a city. This is also why attacking a city, or even insulting it, would carry a direct and almost personal tone. The poet here still envisions his persona and that of the city as equals. That relationship, however, dramatically changes with time. The poet's persona shrinks in comparison to that of the city, which transforms from a situation that can be entered and exited into a prevailing state of mind, persistent and insurmountable.

MODERN PERSPECTIVES

The Urban Scene: From Freedom to Exile

The relative freedom poets enjoyed in the premodern period resulting from the availability of options develops into something less like freedom and more like exile in the modern era. Twentieth-century modernism in the Arabic tradition, as is the case in other traditions, exhibited a continued, likely

now more urgent, questioning of the poet's role and status in society and the world. This self-interrogation posed fundamental questions that afflicted great modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens,[29] as it did Arab modernist poets such as Adūnīs (b. 1930), Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926–64), ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī (1926–99), Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr (1931–81) and others. The urban scene, with all its contradictions and possibilities, provided the perfect landscape for this quest for variance, for voice, and for poetry in a now "deeply *unpoetical* age."[30]

Scholars have often pointed to the centrality of the city in the formulation of a modernist poetic aesthetic.[31] The urban scene provided a space fitting for the modernist project's quest of reformulating the past and shaping it anew. The international modernist movement, whose influences on the Arab modernist experience have been extensively studied,[32] was rooted in cities,[33] in a landscape that defied the ideals of beauty and inspiration in the traditional sense. In its response to the changing cosmography of the post-industrial revolution city, the modern poetic aesthetic broke away from traditionally accepted ideals and expectations. Wordsworth bemoans this fact in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, when he describes as "generally evil" the poetry resulting from the "increasing accumulation of men in cities" and their "craving for the extraordinary incident" and the "degrading thirst for outrageous stimulation."[34] "Modernism" in literature is overwhelmingly of an urban aesthetic and the modern poet, as Santilli puts it, becomes "a participant and a protagonist in the ongoing work of constructing and deconstructing the city."[35] In the Arabic context, poetic modernism was part of a larger socio-political, intellectual, and aesthetic movement that emanated out of major urban centers such as Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdād.[36]

The city, thus, features as one of the prominent themes of modern poetry[37] as well as a formal or architectural model upon which the modern poem is built.[38] The city, with its streets "that follow like tedious argument,"[39] its windows, the "black or luminous squares"[40] where life is lived, its comings and goings, its interplay of private and public, of old and new, provides a structural example for the modernist poem. The maze of the urban landscape, which is in constant flux, is a reflection of and an inspiration for the new forms of modernist poetry which are always in the making, as well. In that sense, the city is not only an inspiration for modern poetry, it is a manifestation of its aesthetic; an aesthetic that emerges from the ordinary, the mundane, and the man-made.

The Poet against the Corrupt City

Despite the debt the modern poem owes to the city, the relationship of the modern poet to the city is not always one of gratitude. On the contrary, the modern poets often position themselves "against" the city. The urban landscape, its noise, and its web of relationships, is the necessary backdrop against which the poets find a voice, which they then often use to attack the city, bemoaning its tyranny and complaining of its apathy. In the Arabic free verse movement, and especially in its Tammūzī[41] dimension, a poetic project that drew on ancient Near Eastern mythology to signal the urgent need for a regeneration of Arab culture, poets engaged the city as the site of the anticipated rebirth. The city therefore became a metaphor for the oppressive and corrupt world order that has to be destroyed and overcome. Al-Sayyāb expresses his loathing for the city which only suffocates him and intensifies his nostalgia for the city's Other, his childhood village, Jaykūr:

وتلتفّ حولي دروب المدينة
حبالا من الطين يمضغن قلبي
ويعطين عن جمرة فيه طينة
حبالا من النار يجلدن عرى الحقول الحزينة
يحرقن جيكور في قاع روحي
ويزرعن فيها رماد الضغينة.[42]

The streets of the city coil around me,
ropes of mud chewing on my heart,
rendering its coals into mud,
ropes of fire that whip the seams of
grieving fields,
scorching Jaykūr in the depth of my soul
planting there only ashes and rancor.

Al-Sayyāb is a poet who never abandoned his childhood yearnings, remaining forever a stranger in the urban scene. His view is therefore fraught with nostalgia and a sense of loss. The city to him is a monster, a noose, a burning fire:

هنا لا طير في الأغصان تشدو غير أطيار
من الفولاذ تهدر أو تحمحم دونما خوف من المطر
و لا أزهار إلا خلف واجهة زجاجيّة
يراح إلى المقابر والسجون بهنّ والمستشفيات.[43]

Here, no birds sing in trees.
Here, only steel birds roar and snicker, fearless of rain.
Here flowers are only
in shop windows;
only flowers to be carried to graveyards, prisons,
and hospitals.

Nevertheless the awaited rebirth could only take place in the wasteland of the city. There is no road to a better world, no road to Jaykūr, that does not pass through the city, the site upon which the poet and his people will endure the pain of deliverance. The opening of al-Sayyāb's poem "*Al-masīḥ baʿd al-ṣalb*" (Christ after the Crucifixion), delineates the poet's unavoidable relationship to the oblivious apathetic city:

بعدما أنزلوني سمعت الرياح
في نواح طويل تسف النخيل
والخطى وهي تنأى إذن فالجراح
والصليب الذي سمّروني عليه طوال الأصيل
لم تمتني وأنصتّ كان العويل
يعبر السهل بيني وبين المدينة
مثل حبل يشدّ السفينة
وهي تهوي إلى القاع كان النواح
مثل خيط من النور بين الصباح
والدجى في سماء الشتاء الحزينة
ثم تغفو على ما تحسّ المدينة. [44]

After they brought me down, I heard the winds
in a lengthy wail, lashing the palm trees,
and steps fading away. So then, my wounds,
And the cross upon which they nailed me all afternoon and evening,
did not kill me. I listened. The wailing
crossed the plain between me and the city
like a rope pulling at a ship
as it sinks to the bottom. The wailing
was a thread of light between dawn and midnight,
in the grieving winter sky.
And the city sleeps on what she senses.

The modern poet no longer inhabits the city, the city inhabits him, and it becomes an extension of his phobias and his frustrations. Robyn Creswell

notes that "avoidance of the city is as characteristic of Arabic modernism as the immersion into urban life is to so many of its precursors."[45] Despite its overwhelming presence in the poems of the Arab modernist, the city is unreal, its objects are absent, and its landscape is missing. This is especially true in the poetry of Khalīl Ḥāwī, who had a propensity for the abstract and the allegorical. Beirut to Ḥāwī is "the swamp,"[46] "the whorehouse,"[47] the "bier of the drunk,"[48] "cold hell,"[49] the existentially taunting other:

نحن لم نخلع ولم نلبس وجوه
نحن من بيروت، مأساة ولدنا
بوجوه وعقول مستعاره
تولد الفكرة في السوق بغيًا
ثم تقضي العمر في لفق البكارة.[50]

We did not take off or put on faces.
We are from Beirut. We were born
a tragedy with fake faces and minds.
The idea is born a whore in the market,
then wastes her life faking virginity.

The City as Metaphor

It is worth noting here that the city in much of al-Sayyāb's work is an abstract unnamed city, a stand-in for all cities, Arab and non-Arab. It is the city as metaphor for all the dilemmas a modernist poet faces, among them his problematic place in society, his relationship with the tradition and his language's poetic memory, and his quest for a "new" poetic voice. Other modernist Arab poets have addressed specific cities by name, presenting scathing descriptions of them and expressing an overwhelming frustration with them as adversaries. The city becomes the poet's adversary, his nemesis almost. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī Ḥijāzī's (b. 1935) entire collection *Madīna bilā qalb* (A Heartless City) is a case in point. In a poem titled *Al-ṭarīq ilā al-sayyida* (The Road to al-Sayyida), the poet resents Cairo, which reduces him to "nothing." Similar to al-Sayyāb in the quotations above, Ḥijāzī seeks deliverance from the city. The poem ends with a prayer-like repetition, insisting on the direction and destination of this city stroll, the mausoleum of al-Sayyida Zaynab.[51]

يا قاهرة
أيا قبابًا متخمات قاعدة
يا مئذنات ملحدة

يا كافرة
أنا هنا، لا شيء كالموتى، كرؤيا عابرة
أجرّ ساقي المجهدة
للسيده
للسيده.[52]

O Cairo!
Your overstuffed heavy domes,
your heretic minarets,
you blasphemer.
I, here, am nothing,
like the dead, like a passing vision.
I drag my tired feet
towards *al-sayyida,*
towards *al-sayyida.*

Nevertheless, escaping the city proves impossible. To be delivered from the city, the poet must ensure its deliverance as well. The city is thus no longer a physical place that the poet cannot leave but rather a metaphor that haunts the poet and travels with him. The modern poet is the seer, the prophet, the Christ-like figure, and the political activist who is no longer capable of absolving himself of the ills of the city. Its sins are his and he is on a mission to change the world or simply dream of a better one. In a poem titled "*ᶜUyūn*" (Eyes), Ḥijāzī turns the openness of a port city into a prison. The noise renders him voiceless; the masses only exaggerate his loneliness. He resigns to dreaming of life instead of living it, or envisioning a city instead of engaging with it:

لأنني أعيش في ميناء
أحار من تعدد الأجناس واللغات والأزياء
فأرقب الحياة صامتا
مكبل الحنين
كأنني بيني وبين الناس قضبان
كأني سجين
أشير، أحلم الحياة لأعيشها.[53]

Because I live in a port,
the many races, languages and fashions, confuse me.
Silently I watch life.
My nostalgia fettered,
as if iron bars keep me from others,

like a prisoner.
I point to life, I dream it
in order to live it.

Even though Ḥijāzī addresses Cairo by name, it is not only Cairo with which he is concerned. He addresses the abstract allegorical city that is at the center of his poetic experience. In fact, the city in the works of most modern Arab poets is the dream of the city. It is the hope of the city which forever clashes with its reality. This is why a poet like Adūnīs finds himself in perpetual exile. In his poem "Rīshat al-ghurāb" (The Crow's Feather), Adūnīs walks the city streets but it does not acknowledge him. He remains alone and it remains elusive and inaccessible:

من مغرب الشمس إلى ضُحاها
أعبر بيروتَ ولا أراها
أسكن بيروت ولا أراها
وحدي أنا والحبّ والثمارْ
نمضي مع النهارْ
نمضي إلى سواها.[54]

From sunset to sunrise,
I cross Beirut and I do not see it,
I inhabit Beirut and I do not see it.
Alone, with love and fruit.
We pass along with the day.
We move on to another.

The aloof and inaccessible Beirut that Adūnīs portrays above is exaggerated and allegorized in Khalīl Ḥāwī's (1919–82) poem "*Layālī Beirut*" (Beirut Nights). Beirut in Ḥāwī's poetic world is Eliot's London, Baudelaire's Paris, Sayyāb's Baghdad, and Ḥijāzī's Cairo. It is also Babel, Sodom, Rome; it is the abstract city; it is every city in its alienating effect on the poet:

"إنّ في بيروتَ دنيا غيرَ دنيا"
"الكَدحِ والمَوتِ الرتيبْ"
"إنّ فيها حانةً مسحورةً،"
"خمرًا، سريرًا مِن طيوبْ"
"للحيارى"
في متاهات الصحارَى،
في الدهاليزِ اللعينَهْ

ومواخيرِ المدينَةْ
(...)
مَن يقوِّينا على حملِ الصليبْ
كيف نَنجُو مِن غِواياتِ الذنوبْ
والجَريمَةْ؟[55]

"In Beirut there is a world that is not the world,
toil and monotonous death.
There are enchanted taverns,
wine, and a bed of flavors,
for the confused"
In the mazes of the deserts,
in the cursed corridors
and the whorehouses of the city,
... who will give us strength to bear the cross,
Who will save us from the temptation of sin and crime?

As much as the city allows the poet freedom, anonymity, and inspiration, it also threatens and ostracizes him. The city, as Joyce puts it, is where "no-one is anything."[56] It is where the coming together of opposites, no matter how exhilarating, constantly confronts the poet with his indispensability and with the fragility and fortuity of his connection with his surroundings. In a poem titled "*Maqhā fī Bayrūt*" (A Café in Beirut), Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ (1934–2006) states: "Nothing connects me to this land but the shoe."[57] And there is no poet better at embracing the oppressive presence of the city than al-Māghūṭ. His poetic persona is the *flâneur* par excellence, the loiterer, the city hobo. In al-Māghūṭ's work the city does not offer the poet much more than the asphalt of sidewalks (*al-raṣīf)* and does not allow him the freedom to do more than loiter (*al-tasakkuʿ*). Damascus, "the rosy caravan of women taken captive,"[58] was the homeland with which al-Māghūṭ struggled, and ultimately rejected. And, although Beirut was his exile and his haven, he was not blind to its ugly face. Both Beirut and Damascus are but two manifestations of the same abstract city with which his contemporaries were preoccupied. Despite the specific street names, a walk in Beirut is the same as a walk in any other city. It is a metaphor for the poet's perpetual marginality:

من «بلس إلى جان دارك
من «جان دارك إلى بلس»
رفعت يدي مئات المرات

محيّيًا مئات الأشخاص
باليد التي تكتب
والتي تجوع.
...
من «جان دارك إلى بلس»
ومن بلس إلى جان دارك»
سرت ملايين الكيلومترات المرصوفة فوق بعضها
رأيت أطنانا من النساء والخادمات
تأملت النقود البرية
والحلوة الهادرة تحت الجسور
تأملت أصابع النادل الرفيعة
وهي تمسح دموعي عن الطاولة كالحساء.[59]

> From Bliss to Jeanne d 'Arc,
> from Jeanne d 'Arc to Bliss,
> I raise my hand hundreds of times
> to greet hundreds of people
> with the same hand that eats
> and writes
> and goes hungry
> ...
> From Jeanne d'Arc to Bliss
> and from Bliss to Jeanne d' Arc,
> I have walked for thousands of paved kilometers
> and seen tons of women and maids.
> I have stared at wild currencies
> and candy roaring under bridges.
> I have watched the slender fingers of a waiter
> as he wiped my tears off the table like soup.

Poets' relationship with the city and their perception of that relationship develop in ways that reflect their changing perception of their role and place in society. It is role that develops from that of the hero, to the group's voice and representative, to the career poet resigned to playing a circumscribed role in the social and political system, and finally to the alienated outsider looking in. The city itself, in light of this evolving perception, transforms into an ethos. The city is no longer a situation or a relationship that the poet can choose to leave. It becomes an embodiment of the modern poet's anxieties and frustrations with the world.

Notes

The decision to format the references as they appear throughout this chapter is solely that of the editors and the publishers.

1. Bencheikh (1975: 24–5). Tarif Khalidi surveys a wide spectrum of views of the Islamic city drawing from Qurʾānic and prophetic tradition material, works of geography, *adab*, philosophy, and history (1981: 265–76).
2. For the theme of lamenting cities in pre-modern Arabic literature, see Bāshā (2003) and al-Sūdānī (1999: 15–120).
3. Check, for example, al-Thaʿālibī (2011: 2–3).
4. A model example is *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-masāwiʾ* (The Book of Beauties and Imperfections) of Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Bayhaqī (d. fourth/tenth century). Al-Thaʿālibī's *Taḥsīn al-qabīḥ wa-taqbīḥ al-ḥasan* (Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful), *al-Yawāqīt fī baʿḍ al-mawāqīt* (The Book of the Precious Stones on Some Fixed Times and Places), and *al-Ẓarāʾif wa-l-laṭāʾif* (The Book of Amusing and Curious Stories Concerning the Praise of Things and Their Opposites) similarly treat the same topic. On this genre, see van Gelder (2003: 321–51).
5. See for example the epigrams cited in Ibn al-Marzubān (1987: 59–61).
6. Al-Thaʿālibī (2011: 80).
7. For *al-Ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān*, see Qadi (1999: 3–31); Müller (1999: 33–58); Arazi (1993: 287–327); Rosenthal (1997: 35–75); Bauer (2001: 85–105). For a list of chapters and anthologies of *al-Ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān* with a more comprehensive list of secondary sources, see the editor's introduction of al-Thaʿālibī (2011).
8. See Gruendler (2016: 1–41).
9. Al-Ṣūlī (1937: 146). Also see Raymond Farrin's reading of Abū Tammām's poem No. 37 and the complicated politics of apology, supplication, and praise. Farrin (2003: 221–51).
10. Abū Tammām (1997: 1: 215).
11. Based on a translation by Farrin (2003: 224).
12. See Orfali (forthcoming).
13. Al-Mutanabbī (1936: 4: 233–9). Quoted by Gruendler (2016: 20). See the same page for more examples on rejecting homeland in al-Mutanabbī's poetry.
14. Al-Mutanabbī (1936: 2: 42–3).
15. Ibid. (4: 251).
16. Al-Thaʿālibī (1956: 4: 147).
17. Ibid. (4: 147).

18. Quoted and translated (with modification) in Farrin (2011: 216).
19. Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (n. d.: 30).
20. Ibid. (40).
21. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (1962: 6: 449).
22. Al-Thaʿālibī (1956: 4: 70).
23. Ibid. (4: 70).
24. Ibid. (4: 71).
25. Ibid. (4: 71).
26. Ibid. (4: 71).
27. Ibid. (4: 71).
28. Ṣafadī (2000: 4: 115). See also, Ibn Saʿīd al-Maghribī (1964: 306).
29. See Baker (1986: 3) and Wellek (1971: 261–3).
30. "Reflect too, as I cannot but do here more and more, in spite of all the nonsense people say, how deeply *unpoetical* the age and all of one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving: *unpoetical.*" Matthew Arnold (1993: 52).
31. It is worth noting here that the modernist movements in Arabic poetry, both that of the twentieth century (The Free Verse movement) and that of the ninth century (the Abbasid *muḥdath* project), are urban phenomena closely tied to and rooted in urban centers: twentieth-century Beirut and ninth-century Baghdad. For more on the urban sensibility of the Abbasid *muḥdath* poet see: Ḍayf (n. d.: 9–88) and the section titled: "L'attriance bagdadienne" (The Attraction of Baghdad) in Bencheikh (1975: 19–24). For more on the centrality of Beirut to the twentieth-century modernist movement in Arabic poetry, see for example: Creswell (2013).
32. Many studies have focused on the centrality of the Western influence on the modernist movement in Arabic literature. Here are a few examples: Azouqa (2008: 38–71); Faḍḍūl (1992); Shāhīn (1991); Moreh (1976); Abdel-Hai (1972: 72–89); El-Azma (1968: 671–8).
33. Harding (2003: x).
34. Wordsworth (1957: 117).
35. Santilli (2002: 182).
36. Shboul (2005: 61).
37. Ismāʿīl (1967: 326).
38. Santilli (2002: 183).
39. Eliot (1954: 11).
40. Baudelaire (2009: 74).
41. For more on the ethos of this movement and its cultural project see: El-Azma (1968: 671–8).
42. al-Sayyāb (1971: 1: 41).

43. Ibid. (255).
44. Khalidi (2016: 117–19).
45. Creswell (2013: 101).
46. Ḥāwī (1972: 64).
47. Ibid. (24).
48. Ibid. (37).
49. Ibid. (43).
50. Ibid. (112–13).
51. *Al-Sayyida* is a reference to the Mosque of al-Sayyida Zaynab, named for the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad. The mosque and the mausoleum are located in the square in the heart of Cairo.
52. Ḥijāzī (1959: 118).
53. Ibid. (231–2).
54. Adūnīs (1970: 193).
55. Joyce (1993: 157).
56. Al-Māghūṭ (1964: 56).
57. Al-Maghūt (1959: 30).
58. Al-Māghūṭ (1964: 56–63).

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