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When Poets Go to Sleep:  
An Anthropological Inquiry into  
Modernizing Arabic Poetic Forms

By

Khaled Furani

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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## **Abstract**

### **When Poets Go to Sleep: An Anthropological Inquiry into the Modernizing of Arabic Poetic Forms**

by

**Khaled Furani**

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This study ethnographically examines modern transformations of Arabic poetic forms, focusing on the scene of Palestinian poetry during the last seven decades. In their quest to modernize their poetic tradition, and in conjunction with wider Arabic poetic transformations, Palestinian poets deserted the traditional lyrical poetic form for the sake of “free” verse and prose poetry shortly after the 1948 destruction of Palestine. In ethnographic interviews, poets expressed the ways their abandonment and adoption of poetic forms were moral and political actions. Analyzing the poets’ words, works and literary criticism, this study argues that the modern desertion of metrical discipline is thoroughly, complexly social. Poets’ narratives about the modernization of “technical devices,” traditionally enabling metrical discipline, such as rhythm, rhyme and meter, point to a host of social formations intersecting with the production of sound in verse, including tradition, modernity, religion, secularism, nationalism, and globalization. Since the majority of poets interviewed in this study are Palestinian, occupation and the struggle against it figure centrally in their poetic experience.

Three chapters (song, picture and dream), are dedicated to the three forms of contemporary Arabic poetry (classical, “free” verse, and the prose poem); they form the

core narration of a socio-literary and linguistic transformation. Fieldwork was conducted mainly in Israel/Palestine, but also in neighboring countries between June 2001 and May, 2002. The analysis focuses primarily on interviews with Palestinian poets living in exile in the 1967 and 1948 occupied lands, as well as Arab poets from surrounding countries. This ethnography also draws on materials collected from archives, participant-observation of poetry gatherings, daily press outlets, literary periodicals, and poetic texts.

## **Epigraph**

Islam has arrived as a stranger and shall return to be a stranger; so blessed be the  
strangers.

From a *Hadith* by the Prophet Muhammad

## **Dedication**

For my elders

My illiterate grandmother Khadija, and my more literate parents Jamal and Jamila who taught me about *kinds* of knowing.

For my youngsters

Brother Salahuddin and my daughters Mysoon and Sukayna who are now teaching me that same lesson.

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Along with moments of elation and calm during writing this dissertation, there also were dark and turbulent ones. In those instances, light and hope came from my daughters, Mysoon and Sukayana. I cannot think of any dissertation that will give me more pride (and humility) than they do. Also, no words of thanks will suffice for my brother Fawzi who showed me, through our differences and commonalities, the beauty and travail of brotherhood at a time when even oil is more valued than the bond of blood. For her ceaseless efforts, thanks also from the depths of my heart to my sister, Khulud, who remains very close to it in spite of oceans and continents, separating us now. Here, I also

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For moral and monetary support, I thank the International Dissertation Research Fellowship program at the Social Science Research Council, the Palestinian-American Research Center, and the Committee for Educational Guidance for Arab Students in Haifa.

## A Note on Transliteration

A vast majority of the words I transliterated in this study were uttered in classical literary Arabic (Modern Standard Arabic) during interviews with poets of various regional dialects. Generally, I adhered to the transliteration system followed by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

ب	b	د	d
ت	t	ذ	z
ث	th	ج	gh
ح	h	ف	f
خ	kh	ق	q
د	d	ك	k
ذ	dh	ل	l
ر	r	م	m
ز	z	ن	n
س	s	ه	h
ش	sh	و	w
ص	ṣ	ي	y

### Long Vowels:

و	ū
ا	ā
ي	ī

I doubled letters when *shadda* occurred and I used the definite article (al-) so long that it did not assimilate with the consonant of the words it modified, as is the case with *al-huruf ash-shamsiyyah*.

## Contents

<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter Two: A Place of Poetry</b>	<b>10</b>
A Synoptic History of Modern Palestine	11
Poetry and Education	26
Contemporary Reading of Modern Palestinian Verse: Part I	34
Contemporary Reading of Modern Palestinian Verse: Part II	38
Contemporary Reading of Modern Palestinian Verse: Part III	43
<b>Chapter Three: Poetic Forms, Modernizing, and Tradition</b>	<b>50</b>
The Content of the Form	50
Abandoning Discipline, Modernizing the Self	63
In the Beginning was the Sound	70
<b>Chapter Four: Song</b>	<b>76</b>
Dangerous Weddings	79
Beginnings with Memory	91
Metrical Discipline and Mastery	96
Metrical Practice on the Periphery	110
Poets for "The People"	120
<b>Chapter Five: Picture</b>	<b>135</b>
The Abandonment of "Screaming"	138
Poets Searching for Freedom	142
"It is Internal": New Life, New Rhythm	160
The "Modern" and the "Conservative" People	168
<b>Chapter Six: Dream</b>	<b>179</b>
An Ideology of Prose: Salvation in Writing	183
When Meter no Longer Matters	200
People and Poets: An Escalating Estrangement	215
<b>Chapter Seven: Conclusion</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>258</b>

## List of Figures within the Chapters

Figure 1		
Palestinian Villages Depopulated in 1948 and 1967, and Razed by Israel	16	
Figure 2		
The West Bank and Gaza Strip, March 2000	23	
Figure 3		
<i>A Mountain with Fire on its Peak</i> by al-Khansa'a	102	
Figure 4		
Scansion of <i>A Mountain with Fire on its Peak</i>	103	
Figure 5		
<i>Ḥamza</i> by Fadwa Tuqan	158	
Figure 6		
Scansion of <i>Ḥamza</i>	159	
Figure 7		
<i>Horror</i> by Salwa an-Nu'aymi	214	
Figure 8		
Scansion of <i>Horror</i>	215	

## Chapter One: Introduction

This study examines modern transformations of Arab poetic forms over the last seven decades by conducting an ethnographic inquiry largely among Palestinian poets. Three poetic forms dominate in contemporary Arabic poetry: the classical, the “free” verse, and the prose poem. While they have come to co-exist in the course of the last century, they do so unequally. Throughout the vast history of Arabic poetry, the classical form of mono-rhymed and mono-metered composition reigned supreme until the middle of the Twentieth Century. The “free” verse and prose poem ascended to literary hegemony in Palestine, as they did in other parts of the Arab world, only after the classical form’s descent, shortly after the 1948 destruction of Palestine. Throughout the history of Arabic literary poetry, the historical reign of metrical discipline, which enabled the classical lyrical form, collapsed as modernizing poets, particularly in Iraq, iconoclastically rebelled against traditions “within” and “outside” poetry. The more that poets sought to be modern, the more their forms became irregular and undisciplined. For some poets, especially the prose poets, sound measurement (metrical composition) became obsolete. Unlike the poets who worked with the orotund classical form, theirs was, and continues to be, strikingly *quiet* poetry, to be *read* silently like novelistic prose.

Building primarily on interviews with poets affiliated with the various forms, this study traces the transformation of this seemingly linguistic-literary transformation in the Arab poetic scene, from one dominated by the traditionally lyrical form to the increasingly modern prosaic forms; it argues that the abandonment or adoption of forms is thoroughly

social. The poets' narratives demonstrate that the story of the modern expulsion of metrical discipline -- essential to transforming the sound structures of verse -- is part of other stories about the modernizing of Palestinian and the wider Arab societies. Poets reject and sustain their seemingly innocuous "technical devices" such as rhythm, meter and rhyme, in relation to moral, political, social powers that they either strive to realize or contest. Palestinian and Arab poets explain their deployment of certain poetic forms and abstinence of others by invoking occupation, colonialism, resistance, nationalism, secularism, modernity, tradition, religion, gender, globalization, the state, and society. Their words and lives are narrated in three core ethnographic chapters, each focusing on a single form: *The Song* on the classical; *The Picture* on the "free" verse; and *The Dream* on the prose poem.

Prior to delving into the main argument about the social salience of the erosion of a poetic discipline, I will introduce in Chapter Two a series of "background" presentations. Here, I provide a brief exposition of pivotal aspects of modern Palestinian history and society. Following this are two discussions: one on the relation between poetry and schooling; and the other on poetry readership. In Chapter Three, I elaborate on the conceptual grounding of my argument by first engaging with literature on poetic form within and outside anthropology. I then turn to anthropological literature on modernity asking how examination of the modernizing poetic literary forms in a local poetic scene contributes to this literature. I conclude this chapter by briefly introducing the Arab poetic literary tradition, as informed by my own fieldwork encounters.

The central narration of the study comprises chapters Four (*The Song*), Five (*The Picture*) and Six (*The Dream*). Together they ethnographically capture the societal context of a seemingly literary transformation that has radically altered the forms of Arabic verse. In each of these chapters, I pursue three themes, which repeatedly emerged during my ethnographic interviews: (1) the poet's approach to form; (2) the poet's approach to rhythm; and (3) the poet's relation with the audience. In examining them, I aim to contribute to inquiries about the contradictions and ambiguities of modern effects, manifested as they are here, in modernizing a local literary tradition over the last seven decades. In Chapter Seven, I conclude by discussing several ambiguities that I identify both in the modernization of Arabic poetry and in my argument about this modernization.

When I first conceived this ethnographic fieldwork, I wanted to interrogate the ways in which poets -- Palestinian poets, in particular -- contested power, specifically the power of Israeli occupation. Through a theistically and tragically rooted notion of power, Palestinian poets articulate a notion of *sumud* (persistence), which has permeated nationalistic Palestinian rhetoric in the face of occupation since 1948. Through their notion of *sumud* (persistence as distinct from resistance, *muqawamah*) poets present the weak as strong and the strong as weak, very much as in a multitude of classical traditions including ancient Egyptian prayers, the Sophoclean tragedies, the sermons of Christ and the verses of the Qur'an. So I wanted to analyze what was at stake in the "ideology" of *sumud* among poets, and what was at stake in the attention to notions of resistance, rather than persistence and patience, in social scientific theories of power relations.

I thereby entered the field with a conception of poets as Gramscian “organic intellectuals,” who could meditate on issues of power. However, their interests did not compel them to meditate on notions of power; so, my interviews ended shortly after they began. It was as if their best thoughts about contesting power were already recorded in their poems. I found instead poets, certain poets at least, who were compelled to complain about what they saw as the state of *fawda* (chaos) in Arabic poetry; poems were increasingly difficult to understand these days, they said. More specifically, they complained about prose poetry (*qasidat an-nathr*) that had recently become the subject of great controversy in the Arab poetic scene. In a customary ethnographic manner, I turned these statements (and counter-statement) about the current state of poetry into questions: Why and when did poets choose to write in certain forms and not others? What significance was there to rhythm, meter and rhyme, all fundamental to the making and unmaking of forms? How did one learn the craft of poetry? For whom was poetry produced and why?

Searching for answers in this ever-evasive pursuit called ethnographic fieldwork in an unrelenting reality of occupation, I had many jolting encounters. One of them refuses to settle down in the dark caves of memory. It was the shocking view of several poets that poetry, *shi'r*, was no more. It was arresting to hear this while working with an anthropological sensibility of immersing oneself in living and thriving traditions, not dying ones; central and significant ones, not marginalized and ridiculed ones. One poet swore to me, by God, that poetry had disappeared; he was convinced that nothing beautiful was left in what he saw as an age of defeat and destruction. This poet's

admission came right after Ramallah opened up following a period of tight closure ever since the massive Israeli siege and incursions that began on March 28, 2002. Others admitted to me that their poems were not poems at all when compared to the one written in the blood of the Palestinian martyr, the *shaheed* (for a man) and *shaheeda* (for a woman). As they saw it, the *shaheed/a* was the greatest poet, the one who sheds his or her blood for a world that is better and beyond, as did the first Palestinian martyr of ancient Nazareth, Christ. However, I did not come to study the much misunderstood or even more ignored phenomenon of martyrdom, as worthy as it may be of anthropological attention. I came to study poets and poetry.

I primarily conducted my fieldwork between July 2001 and June 2002 in three main cities within Israel/Palestine: Nazareth, Haifa and Ramallah. This fieldwork entailed movement within and between the laws of an occupier's sovereign state, Israel, and an occupied body, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) that had come into being on the West Bank and Gaza after the Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization were signed in 1993. While residing principally in Haifa, Israel, I regularly visited Ramallah on the West Bank. I rented a room just outside the military checkpoint in *al-Dahia* neighborhood. Under the Oslo Accords, *al-Dahia* falls into the designated Area B, unlike Ramallah and other major West Bank cities, which are designated as being in Area A. Area A is intended to fall under greater "control" of the PNA, whereas Area B is intended to have "shared control." Area C remains under complete Israeli authority. Beyond Israel/Palestine, I also twice visited neighboring countries; I took a three-

weeklong trip to Cairo, Egypt during its 34<sup>th</sup> International Book Fair, and a weekend trip to Amman, Jordan.

In pursuit of poets working in the three forms of Arabic poetry today (classical, free verse and prose poem), I gathered a total of fifty-eight interviews with forty-seven different poets, including six women. Their ages ranged from 18 to 84. While the majority were Palestinian (either living in the homeland or in exile), I also interviewed poets from other Arab countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Libya, and the United Arab Emirates. Except for two occasions in which I handrecorded interviews, I usually used a digital recorder. Interviews normally ranged from one to four hours.

Poets were not my sole interlocutors. I also interviewed a total of seven non-poets, including literary critics and poetry recipients. I further examined poetry reception by soliciting responses from a class of undergraduate students at the Arabic Department of Birzeit University on the West Bank. These students, attending a course on modern Palestinian literature, responded to three poetic samples that corresponded to the three poetic forms. I will present a selection of those student responses from a total of twelve in Chapter Two.

I also conducted observations of poetic receptions while attending nearly twenty-five poetry events. They were mainly in Arab locales within Israel, such as Nazareth and Tamra in the Galilee and at-Taybeh in the center of the country. In the first two locales I attended the Second Festival of Palestinian Poetry (*Mihrajan ash-Shi'r al-Filastini*); in

the latter, I attended regular meetings of the Cultural Association (*al-Muntada ath-Thaqafi*). I also attended poetry events held during the 34<sup>th</sup> Cairo International Book Fair and a poetry evening in Amman, Jordan.

My investigation involved examining archival and daily press accounts of activities in the poetic field. Along with reviewing reports on poetic activities in the local Palestinian and wider Arab scene, my archival work attended to poetic content and context, actual verse and literary criticism. Surveying contemporary and historic press enabled me to map the local literary terrain and its actors, past and present. One of my chief resources was, *al-Jadid* (The New, 1951-1991), a literary-political Arabic journal published by the Israeli Communist Party in Haifa. At the Public Library of Ramallah, I reviewed its holdings of *al-Karmel* (Carmel, 1982-present); and, at the Palestinian House of Poetry in al-Bireh, West Bank, I reviewed its two periodicals, *ash-Shu'ara* (The Poets, 1998-present) and *Aqwas* (Bows, 2001). I also reviewed newspapers of various political affiliations: the Haifean and only Arabic daily within Israel, *al-Ittihad* (The Union), published by the Israeli Communist Party; *al-Ayyam* (The Days), a daily newspaper reportedly affiliated with the PNA on the West Bank; *Fasl al-Maqal* (*The Discerning Speech*) of the Nationalist Assembly Party; and, *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya* (Voice of Justice and Freedom) of the Islamic Movement. Both of the latter are weekly newspapers within Israel.

I also had access to the world of poets through their works published in poetry collections or in the press. In fact, I made it a habit to read works by a poet whom I was going to

interview. My reading of the poet's work usually generated questions, which I then filtered and arranged for the interview. The substance of those interviews, along with field notes, animate my narration of transforming literary Arabic poetry during the last seven decades.

By narrating this poetic transformation and presenting it ethnographically in this dissertation, I strove to honor both the structure of the interview and poetic forms themselves. The titles of the three chapters dedicated to the poetic forms come from the parlance of poets. They point to my understanding of each form's underlying conception, "ideology," "grammar," "ideal type" or "episteme," if you will. It highlights what the poet is believed to be essentially doing in composing a poem: "singing" in the classical, "painting" in the "free" verse and "dreaming" in the prose poem. To be sure, no poet does just one thing in a poem. I am not implying that these actions are limited to each form or mutually exclusive. My naming of the chapters points to what seems as the most dominant way of conceiving the poem in the whole of its composition.

These chapters are narratives of ethnographic encounters with authors of diverse poetic forms and occasionally poetic performances. Within my narratives, other narrations come directly from the poets – about poet's approaches to form, rhythm, and audience. Attending to these themes in each chapter allows a presentation of the concepts and practices that underlie each form and its place in the transformation of modern Arabic verse. A driving force of this presentation is to reveal the social forces inherent in poetic forms, including its core elements of rhythm, meter and rhyme. Ethnographic attention to

poetic “devices” or “techniques” permits observations of the social in those forms, which outwardly appear merely linguistic or literary.

I must stress here that I attempt neither a history of each form, nor imply a historical narration positing those forms’ existence as sequential. As I have already indicated, all three forms co-exist, and sometimes even in the works of a single poet; yet they always exist in unequal conditions of power that carry particular social significance. To render more visible the social salience of all three forms and the transformation they comprise, I now want to place the poetic scene they inhabit in an animated matrix of histories, institutions, and practices. The next chapter will focus on modern Palestinian history, education and poetic readership.

## Chapter Two: A Place of Poetry

Recognizing the futility of ascribing geopolitical borders to a poetic tradition, I nonetheless attempt to place Palestinian poetry in wider processes of politics, nationalism, the educational system and student readership. A more ambitious and adequate placing than I can achieve would speak of the “places” of Palestinian poetry, a poetry that like Palestine, its place and its people, has been dispersed under different governments, countries, and continents. An even more satisfying mapping (satisfying for the particular needs of this study) would be, not that of Palestinian, but of Arabic poetry – to which the main argument of this study eventually relates. The fact that the majority of poets interviewed in this study are Palestinians, coupled with a traditional ethnographic disciplinary proclivity to work in a contained and containable locale, justify the limits by which I situate Palestinian poetry.

In the following section, I first provide a condensed tracing of modern, Palestinian history. Second, I juxtapose an assortment of materials pertinent to the teaching and learning of Arabic language and literature in Palestinian schools, largely under the jurisdiction of the Israeli education system. Third, I present and discuss a highly particular readership of contemporary Palestinian poetry. Besides affording a “background” to a local poetic scene, the following descriptive presentations should provide the reader a better position for relating to the concerns of this study with the modernization of a poetic tradition.

## A Synoptic History of Modern Palestine<sup>1</sup>

With effects on Palestinian demography, gender and class under its purview, the main aim of this discussion is to record major events and processes in the relations largely between the indigenous Arab Palestinian population and the Zionist colonial movement in the modern era. Cana'an is the ancient appellation of the land that is recognized today as Palestine or Israel, a corridor on the Western edge of Asia, stretching between Africa and Europe.<sup>2</sup> The people of Cana'an were a Semitic people who inhabited the land prior to the Hebrew conquest around 1000 BC and prior to the Greek Philistines who inhabited the southern coast of the country.<sup>3</sup> Since then the land has known a succession of conquests and rulers: Pharaonic, Greek, Roman, Byzantines, Muslim, British and Jewish.<sup>4</sup> The entry of the land to the modern era occurred under the last Muslim rule of the Ottomans.<sup>5</sup> Anticipating as well as arranging the death of the "Sick Man," as the Ottoman Empire was known during its final years, the British and the French struck an agreement by which they divided the Arab East into spheres of their domination. This accord was the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, named respectively after its British and French designers. Although it "internationalized" the administrative status of Palestine, this agreement is what ultimately placed Palestine under the "Mandate" of the British

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<sup>1</sup> Since the main aim of the essay is to present major conjunctions of modern Palestinian history, entangled as it has become with the history of the Zionist colonial project and modern Jewish history, there are severe reductions of events and process, which are, themselves, the subjects of entire literatures. I found those reductions necessary (I hope not unreasonably so) due to the rationale of this presentation, which is to render more intelligible, modern Palestinian poetry, not modern Palestinian history, intertwined as those too are as well. That modern Palestinian history and poetry are intertwined will become evident in the course of this study's narration, as poets are made to tell their own portions of Palestinian and Arab history.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Kayyali notes that the size of Palestine covers 27,009 km (1999: 11). Ruedy has a nearby figure of 26,300 km. The fact that the newly found Jewish state has not declared its borders is not irrelevant to the production of varied figures for the size of the country's lands.

<sup>3</sup> In the language of Palestinian peasants, there is a reference to a *ba'alite* land, a land of vegetation that grows on rain water alone, without human designs of irrigation. Ba'al is also the Canaanite god of fertility.

<sup>4</sup> The Arab-Muslim rule lasting for fourteen centuries included several dynasties: Umayyid, Abbasid, Fatimid, Mamlouk, and Ottoman.

who occupied it after World War I, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and in addition to their occupation of other countries of the region. A year later, on November 2, 1917 the active Zionist lobby in Britain reaped the success of its efforts when the British Foreign Minister, Lord Arthur Balfour, sent a letter to Baron Rothschild in which he stated:

His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and it will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious right of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.<sup>5</sup>

Five year after the Balfour Declaration and in spite of steady, yet fluctuating, European Jewish settlement, nearly 88% of the indigenous population of Palestine was Arab.<sup>6</sup> This declaration therefore was a major triumph for the Zionist movement of nationalist, socialist and largely secular European Jews. In the words of the leading Zionist Max Nordau, Palestine was “a land without a people for a people without a land.”<sup>7</sup> The Zionist colonization of Palestine actually began in 1882, with Baron Rothschild contributing 1.6 million English sterling, between 1883-1889.<sup>8</sup> In the first colonial census of 1922, the British found that 81% of the indigenous Arab population was living off the land and

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<sup>5</sup> In Smith (1988: 55).

<sup>6</sup> This is derived from J. Abu Lughod (1971: 142). The Arab population of Palestine is comprised of diverse religious communities, the largest is Muslim followed by Catholics, Greek Orthodox and then Druze.

<sup>7</sup> In Sayegh (1981: 188). Also, consider the post-Zionist work of Avi Shlaim who discusses statements by Jewish leaders in Israel towards Arabs and Palestinians made both in public and private. In this work, he refers to Golda Meir's statement in the *Sunday Times of 1969*: “It is as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them... [t]hey did not exist.” (In Shlaim, 2000: 311).

<sup>8</sup> Smith (ibid: 29).

until its destruction in 1948, two thirds of the Arab Palestinian population remained *fellaheen*, that is, peasants.<sup>9</sup>

In the early Twentieth Century a traditionally patriarchal Palestinian society was composed of a small but wealthy merchant, religious and landowning class along with a mass base of *fellaheen*, either as sharecroppers or small landowning peasants. Under British rule, and out of traditionally patrilineal extended households,<sup>10</sup> this largely agrarian society of *fellaheen* continued to cultivate traditional crops such as olives, cereals, figs, cotton, and citrus fruits. Yet their concept and practice of working the land was now under attack by both British and Zionist demands for “economic development.” First, in its patriarchal arrangements, Palestinian agrarian language so closely linked one’s land (*ard*) to one’s honor (‘*ard*); more than being a mere piece of “territory” (*manṭiqah*), land (*ard*) was part of the patriarchal clan politics of honor and dishonor just as it was with female sexuality.

The *fellaheen* did not “own” land in the individual, modern sense of private property. Instead they worked the land as *masha‘a*, a communal form of land tenure, which entailed regular re-divisions of the land among clans and families in a society whose political and social field was thoroughly kin-based. This communal tenure was an ancient adaptive way of redistributing both resources and poverty inherent in peasant life, a poverty that had intensified under an Ottoman land policy, which had been evolving

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<sup>9</sup>Sayegh (1979: 6). Ruedy, similarly notes that in 1922, 65% of the Arab Muslim population lived in rural areas.

<sup>10</sup>S. Haj (1992: 763) notes in her study of patriarchal relations in Palestinian society that while nuclearization of the family was more apparent in the urban areas among middle-class professionals, the kinship ties are still crucial in the regulations and negotiations of social ties.

towards a capitalist economy of land privatization.<sup>11</sup> A modern, and more disciplined British taxation system only accelerated the privatization process and menaced the *fellah* (sing., peasant) in a way that hardly would have been entertained earlier: namely, “legal” evictions from the land.

Indeed, under British rule in the 1920s and 1930s peasants began migrating to the city, not because of alluring wage labor but because of land taxes they could not pay. Landlessness was coupled with rising unemployment. After 1904, it became an established Zionist practice to insist on Hebrew labor, thus barring Arab workers from both city jobs or from employments on lands they previously had “possessed.” It was to those impoverished populations of peasants and city-dwellers, both employed or unemployed that *sheikh* ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam appealed – a figure of Syrian origin who continues to inspire to this day the Palestinian national struggle and its religious and secular narratives. With the peasantry and the urban poor, he mobilized a major opposition to the British and Zionists, one that was largely absent among the traditionally dominant families of Palestinian society.

In 1935 British troops killed al-Qassam and number of his fellow fighters in an ambush near a village in the vicinity of Jenin. His murder, marked as martyrdom in Palestinian history, instigated the “Great Revolt” of 1936, which lasted for three years and included a

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<sup>11</sup> According to Ruedy (1970: 23): “This system, called *masha‘a*, was seen by British and Zionist observers as economically unsound, for the reason that with only temporary possession of a given plot, families had little incentive to invest in permanent improvement or even fertilizers. From a social and psychological point of view, however, and as a reflection of the dependence of the individual upon the group for every securing during disorganized period of history, *masha‘a* represents an appropriate adaptation.”

wide strike that lasted a few months.<sup>12</sup> Pleading restraint and restoration of “order,” Palestinian elites and Arab kings called for a cessation of the strike. In particular, King ‘Abdallah of Transjordan, King Saud of Saudi Arabia and King Ghazi of Iraq called on the Arabs of Palestine to “trust the benevolent intentions of our friend Great Britain who declared her wish to bring justice.” (in al-Kayyali, 1999: 277).

Eventually, amidst escalating unrest and exchange of attacks between Jewish settlers and Arab natives, the British “Mandate” was terminated on May 15, 1948. On 4:00 pm of that day, from the Jewish enclave of Tel-Aviv, the would-be first Israeli prime-minister, Ben-Gurion, announced the creation of the Jewish State of Israel in Palestine. In that fateful year, Jewish inhabitants numbered 650,000, and Arab inhabitants, 1,400,000.<sup>13</sup> The state of the Jewish people was declared on a land in which Jews did not own more than 7% of the land.<sup>14</sup> Before that year ended, however, that Arab majority was reduced to 60,000 (comprising slightly less than 10% of Israel’s populations) living mostly in what is now Israel. Indeed, soon the name of Palestine itself began to disappear from maps designed for Western consumption (see figure 1). The defacement of Palestine was possible not only because there was a colonial Zionist project that sought to “purify” the lands of -- as the Balfour Declaration has it -- “non-Jewish” communities, but also

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<sup>12</sup> For an anthropological investigation of the revolt, see T. Swedenberg (1995) *Memories of the Revolt*. In this work, Swedenberg is particularly concerned with how Palestinians remember this first massive uprising of the 1930’s. Swedenberg refers to the failure of Israeli attempts to obliterate the memory of al-Qassam by attacking the cemetery in which he is buried and the forest in which they wrongly thought he was killed.

<sup>13</sup> The figure on Jewish inhabitants I take from Avi Shlaim (2000) while that on Arab inhabitants I take from Rashid Khalidi (1997:179).

<sup>14</sup> Ruedy (1970: 134).

# Palestinian Villages Depopulated in 1948 and 1967, and Razed by Israel

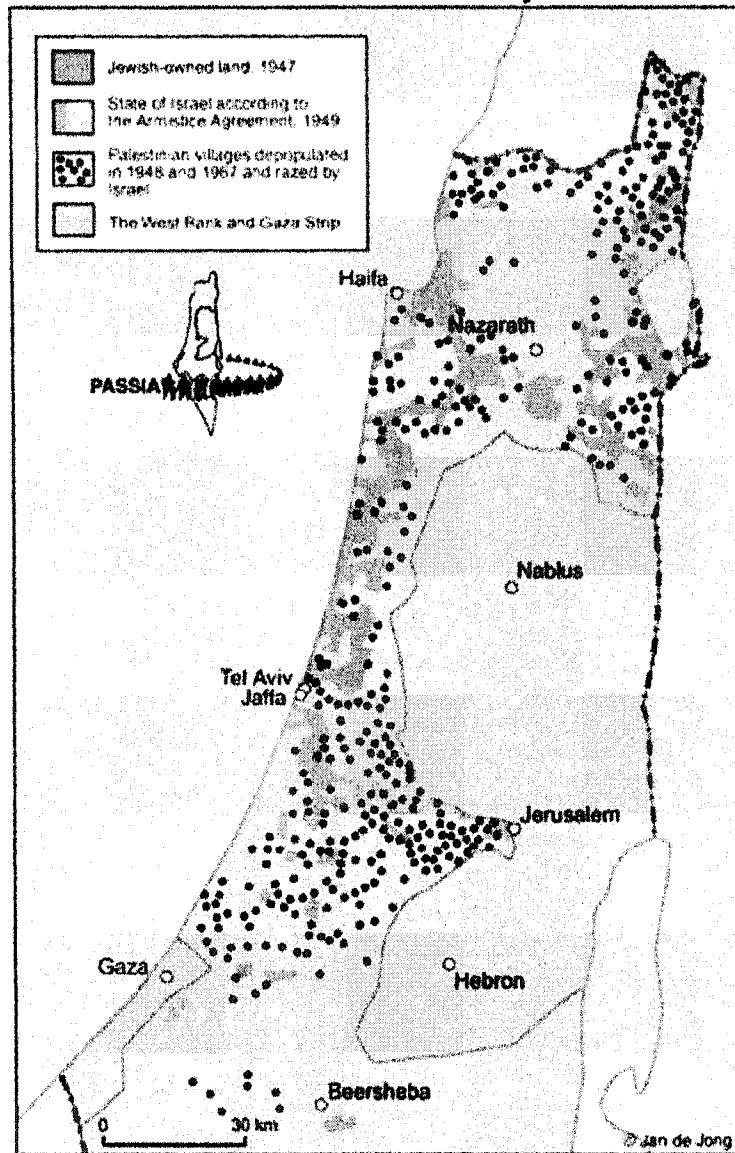


Figure 1

Source: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA)

[http://www.passia.org/palestine\\_facts/MAPS/Landownership.html](http://www.passia.org/palestine_facts/MAPS/Landownership.html)

(Retrieved on April 29, 2004)

because of systemic military offensive assaults to complete that project, even before declaring the State in May.<sup>15</sup>

Those organized assaults, now recognized as “Plan D” carried out by a military force named *Haganah*, entered the phase of execution in April 1948 and continued into May.<sup>16</sup>

These assaults constituted a systematic terrorization of Palestinian villagers through bombardment, massacres, burning, looting and psychological warfare, leading eventually to the collapse of whatever local Palestinian resistance there was and to the massive exodus of Palestinians to neighboring Arab countries.<sup>17</sup> Upon proclaiming Israel’s creation, those countries sent in an essentially impotent counter military offensive of regular forces, which shortly afterwards signed a truce with the newly founded Jewish state. And so the conqueror’s 1948 *war of independence* became the catastrophe of the conquered, or what Palestinians regard as *an-nakba* (*the catastrophe*).

Dispersed by the *an-nakba*, Palestinians have since lived mainly in three locales. There are the Palestinians who remained in what is now Israel and lived under its military Emergency Regulations extended from the time of British rule until 1966. By the late 1970s, this society was so proletarianized that 90% of village male workers were

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to imply that the Zionist response to Arab native existence on the land or that Zionism itself for that matter is uniform.

<sup>16</sup> *Haganah* is Hebrew for defense. For more on Plan D, see Benny Morris: “The Causes and Character of the Arab Exodus from Palestine: The Israel Defense Forces Intelligence Branch Analysis of June 1948,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, xxii, January 1986: 5-19. Also on this plan, see Walid Khalidi: “Plan D: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, special feature, *Plan Dalet Revisited*, vol 18, no. 1, Autumn 1988: 4-33.

<sup>17</sup> In Sayegh (1981: 74) there is a brief discussion of this plan as unearthed and examined by historian Walid Khalidi, already in mid 1970’s. Another brief discussion of it is available in the work of revisionist historian Avi Shlaim (2000: 33). Shlaim’s and Morris’ are instances of the works of Israelis identified as New Historians, which record and admits what Palestinians have been transmitting, about the horror of the expulsion since it occurred in 1948.

commuting for work in Jewish town and cities.<sup>18</sup> The second and largest group of nearly 600,000 Palestinians became refugees in the part of Palestine that remained unoccupied until 1967, that is Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>19</sup> The Gaza Strip fell under Egyptian control while the east central part of Palestine was annexed shortly after 1948 by King Abdullah of Jordan and since then has become known as the “West Bank.” A third main locale of Palestinian existence emerged in other Arab countries, mainly the bordering states including Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, and to a lesser extent the Gulf region. Besides a massive proletarianization of refugee camp dwellers, there emerged a middle and bourgeoisie class in the early sixties, especially in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. A 1975 survey in Kuwait shows that Palestinians comprised 30% of the teaching staff and 37% of the doctors and pharmacists in the country.<sup>20</sup> By the early 1980s an internationalized elite of Palestinian multimillionaires organized and established in Geneva the Palestinian Welfare Association, which plays a pivotal role in the national liberation and reconstruction movement. In those countries, as well as Jordan, Palestinian refugees numbering initially around 300,000 emerged over the next two decades as a force that Arab regimes felt they had either to co-opt or to crush. This largely depended, as it still does, on how well the politics of the Palestinian national struggle accommodated to the power of those Arab regimes who benefited in various ways from the fall of Palestine and the controlled mobilization of the refugees in their midst.<sup>21</sup> Although referring to the context of the Cold War, a certain Ahmad al-Kodsy offered an analysis of the emerging dynamic between Arab regimes, Palestinians and Israel, that remains highly pertinent:

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<sup>18</sup> Zureik (1979:131).

<sup>19</sup> Sayegh (1981: 99)

<sup>20</sup> (Farsoun & Zacharia, 1997: 150)

<sup>21</sup> See R. Khalidi (1997: 192)

Gradually a new status quo was established in the Arab East, a new "partition." The Russians dominated two or three states, while the Americans retained control of the economically important countries of the oil-bearing Arabian peninsula. Equilibrium was maintained by the *modus vivendi* between Israel and the Arab states: Israel supported by Western imperialism, was to refrain from aggression but in exchange the Arab states had to prevent the Palestinian people from challenging the Zionist colonization of their countries. [in Sayegh, 1979: 103].

The Arab regimes may have succeeded in various repressive ways to obstruct Palestinian challenges to Israel, but what they have not been able to obstruct let alone prepare for, was the Israeli aggression that manifested itself in the swift and crushing victory of Israel's 1967 war against the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian armies. In this attack, Israel added to its dominion the remaining 22% of historic Palestine, which it had not occupied in 1948: Egypt's Sinai, and Syria's Golan Heights. In this occupation lies not only a Zionist pursuit of Greater Israel, but also control over sources of water and cheap labor, as Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza flocked to undesired and low-paid jobs in the Israeli economy. Haj notes that under Jordanian rule (lasting until 1967), 50% of the labor force was employed in agriculture and by 1987 it had declined to 18.7 % in the West Bank and to 9.7% in Gaza. While men went to work in construction for a common wage of \$12 dollars per day, women worked in seasonal agriculture, food processing or in the garment industry within Israel. The garment industry was particularly widespread not only due to the sexual segregation that sustained a patriarchal arrangement, but also because of the ease of hiring. At the bottom part of a contracting chain, female workers in this industry can earn \$1.3 to \$2.5 per day; their days used to begin at five or six am and end twelve hours later.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I draw my materials on women's work condition under occupation from Haj's discussion of them (1992: 765-771)

If a larger segment of Palestinian labor, land and water resources fell under Israeli control following the 1967 occupation, there was also a larger segment of the population that joined what Palestinian nationalist narratives call the “Revolution,” starting in the mid 1960s. Based largely on a constituency of residents in refugee camps, it was led by the Fatah movement of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At first the PLO was established at the behest of the Arab League in 1965; later, it defined its struggle as part of Arab nationalism and part of a world-wide anti-imperialist struggle within the Third World. The PLO’s nationalist and secular ideologies increasingly appeared as alluring alternative to the clan-based (*hamula*) politics at the center of Palestinian society until then. The *hamula* (clan), which was integral part of peasant life in Palestine, sustained the refugees in the early years after the trauma, but began to give way to different political formations as wage labor, loss of land and nuclear kinds of families became the dominant facts of displaced refugee life. The PLO, especially after the withering of pan-Arab nationalism in the aftermath of the 1967 war, grew increasingly independent, provocative and threatening to Arab regimes that were closer to the United States the PLO. For example, after clashing with King Hussein in 1970, the PLO leadership relocated to Lebanon.<sup>23</sup>

The tension between the PLO and the Lebanese government was exploited fully by Israel when, under the pretext of retaliating for an assassination attempt on its ambassador in London, it invaded Lebanon in the summer of 1982. Its invasion of Lebanon titled “Peace

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<sup>23</sup> Most notable among the clashes between Arab regimes and Palestinian leadership was the “Black September,” in which King Hussein’s army shelled refugee camps, killing over three thousand and wounding eleven thousand from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of September, 1970. This was in retaliation for his humiliation at the hands of PLO factions that hijacked airplanes and landed them not too far from his palace in ‘Amman. (Smith, 1988: 223-4).

of the Galilee” aimed, as revealed later, to destroy the PLO and the Palestinian national movement that had found both strong friends and lethal foes in the landscape of Lebanese politics.<sup>24</sup> In a nine-week long siege of Beirut, Israeli forces killed from air, ground and sea nearly 19,000 persons and wounded around 30,000.<sup>25</sup> The siege ended with the PLO evacuating by sea across the Mediterranean on the Greek *Atlantis*, to Tunisia, the new location of the Palestinian National Council. After the PLO’s departure, militants from the Maronite Phalangists and from Israeli’s proxy army of Southern Lebanon entered the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, a zone sealed-off by the Israeli army, in the early evening of September 16. Their purpose was to eradicate what Israel claimed were the remaining “2000 terrorists.”<sup>26</sup> After the slaughter ended Saturday morning, hundreds and thousands of bodies either were recovered or left in mass graves, many of whom were children and women. Among those killed in the refugee camp massacre were undoubtedly some who had fled the massacres of 1948.<sup>27</sup>

After evacuating from Beirut, the PLO entered not only to another exile in Tunis, but also a period of marginality, which it faced for much of the 1980s. The fact that the Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) of 1987 erupted spontaneously within historic Palestine is a testimony to the significance of struggle from within the homeland, away from exiled

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<sup>24</sup> (Said et al, 1986: 47). Israel’s destruction of cultural and educational institutions and its assassination of figures working in PLO institutions in Lebanon point to a long-term goal, latter revealed in Israel, that Sharon’s goal of the invasion was the destruction of viable Palestinian existence.

<sup>25</sup> Khalidi (1997: 198). In Said (2003: 41) there is a count of 17,000 killed by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

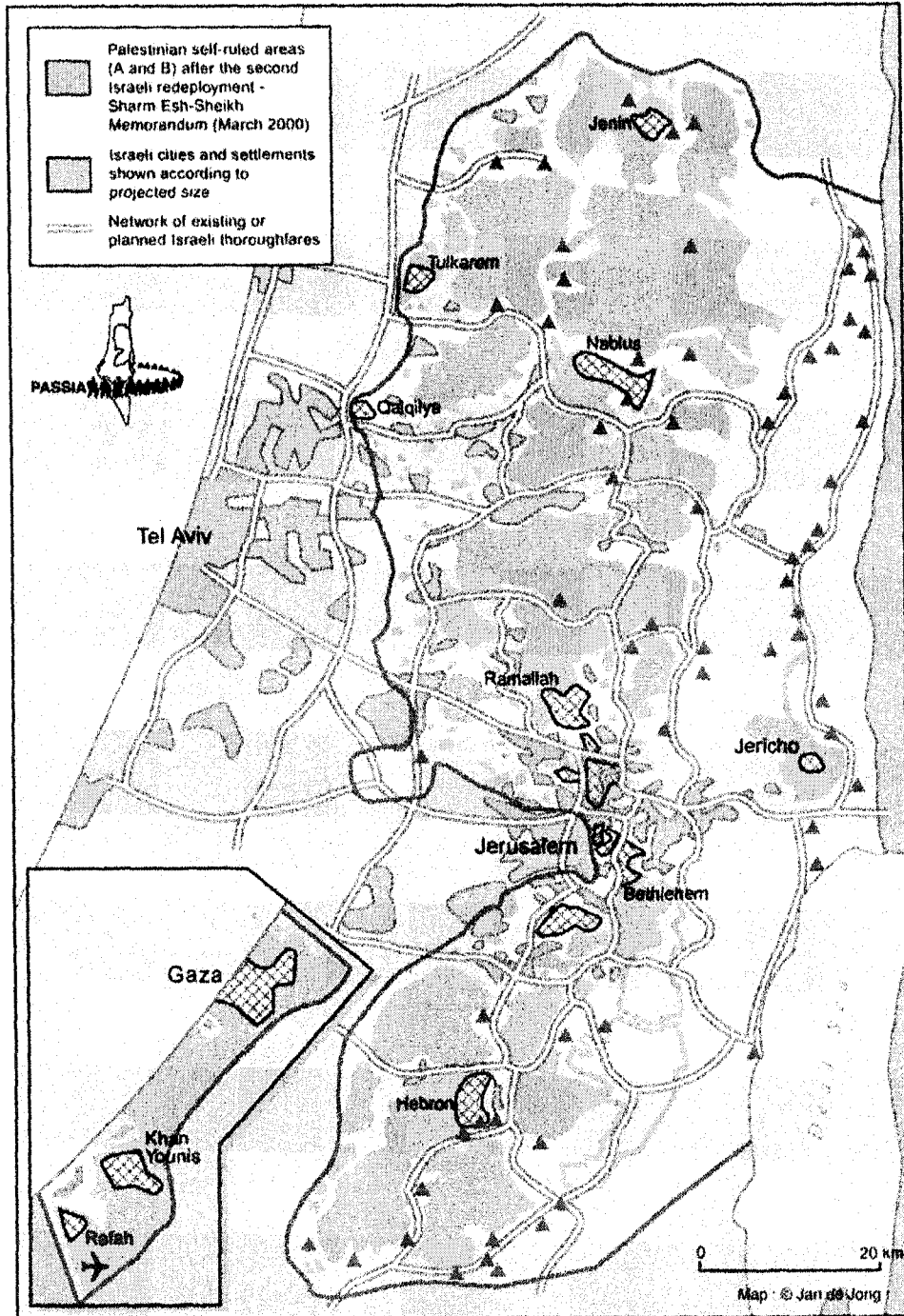
<sup>26</sup> “2000” was the number of “terrorists” Israel declared to be living in the camps (Chomsky, 1983: 369).

<sup>27</sup> Smith puts the number of those killed as “at least eight hundred” (1988: 272), which is close to the Israeli count between 700-600, (Chomsky, 1983: 369). The Lebanese authorities counted nearly 2000 dead (Chomsky, 1983: 370) while the International Committee of the Red Cross counts reaches 2,750 [see <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabra\\_and\\_Shatila\\_massacre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabra_and_Shatila_massacre)>] One journalist cites a figure of 3,000. See A. Kapeliouk, *Sabra and Shatila: Inquiry into a Massacre*. Belmont, MA: AAUG, 1984.

leadership. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War, the United States sponsored a Peace Conference in Madrid, Spain, for which there was an indirect Palestinian representation, tucked into the Jordanian delegation. Simultaneously and secretly, talks between the Israeli government and PLO officials began to take place in Oslo, Norway, . These talks led eventually to an historic handshake between Yasir Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, with Bill Clinton standing between them as they presented the Declarations of Principles in September, 1993.

Notwithstanding the mutual denial that was shattered by the Oslo accords in the official discourses of both the PLO and the Israeli government, occupation was repackaged for the purpose of its beautification, not termination by them. Since peace and occupation are essentially irreconcilable, it is not surprising that the Oslo accords are now considered dead. By the fiat of those accords, the PLO was able to translate itself into a Palestinian National Authority in the canton-split West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. This means co-existence with or next to occupation in areas that are split between them (see figure 2).

The West Bank and Gaza Strip, March 2000



**Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA)**

Figure 2

Source: [http://www.passia.org/palestine\\_facts/MAPS/wbgs1.html](http://www.passia.org/palestine_facts/MAPS/wbgs1.html) (Retrieved on April 29, 2004)

The first phase according to the accords was the interim phase lasting for five years.

During this period, Israel not only did not commit to dismantling Jewish settlements on lands it occupied in 1967;<sup>28</sup> rather, it fortified them by constructing bypassing connecting roads between them thus further dismembering Palestinian land and society. The second phase of the accord, the phase of permanent settlement was to deal with those issues that were more difficult for Israel to face, on whose terms the accords were largely designed. These issues included the status of Jerusalem, which Israel declared as its eternal capital, and the right of return, that is, a right granted to Jews anywhere in the world but not to Palestinians, not even those whose ancestral homes might be still standing.

The second ongoing *intifada*, often known as *al-Aqsa intifada* that began at the end of September 2000, is understood to be a Palestinian response to these accords, which sought to bolster an impotent national leadership and to manage more efficiently an increasingly costly occupation.<sup>29</sup> More militarized than the uprising of 1987, this ongoing *intifada* is a protest against not only occupation but also the Palestinian National Authority, which seemed to be willing to function as the occupation's maintenance force. Yet the attempts of Israeli and Palestinian officials to strike "peace agreements," the latest of which was the Geneva Accords, cannot be seen simply as attempts to end

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<sup>28</sup> After Oslo, especially under Netanyahu, in a long-standing tradition of Israeli governments to establish facts on the ground, settlements on confiscated Palestinian land nearly doubled. Whatever "control" may denote in this case, Israel at the present moment is reportedly controlling 75% of lands on the West Bank and 33% in the Gaza Strip (Shlaim, 2000: 530). Detailed reports on settlements and their expansions on Palestinian land can be found at: <<http://www.fmep.org/info.html>>

<sup>29</sup> As settlement, closure and curfews persist, and unemployment increases during the current uprising, a recent World Bank Report notes that the share of the Palestinian population living below the poverty line is estimated at almost 50%, double the figure in late 2000, while unemployment has tripled to nearly 30% of the labor force. (<<http://www.mees.com/postedarticles/finance/palestine/a45n14b02.htm>>, found on March 27, 2004)

occupation.<sup>30</sup> The Palestinian population has grown from 1.4 million in 1948 to 7.8 million worldwide at the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and as late as 1995 only 40% of Palestinians lived in historic Palestine (Gaza, West Bank and Israel).<sup>31</sup> The Geneva accords, as other treaties like them, are better understood as attempts to sustain a Jewish majority, whose sustainability is diminished by the day, as demographic trends point to a rising Palestinian majority by the year 2010.<sup>32</sup> Coursing towards such a demographic reality on the land opens up a question of longevity: for how long and by what means will an Arab majority be alienated in its homeland? Or as poets might wonder: what will be the cost of the lesson by which the land will learn to speak, once again, the language to which a majority of its denizens belong?

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<sup>30</sup> With Swiss moral and monetary support, Yossi Beilin and Yasir 'Abd Rabbuh are promoting their Geneva accords as an alternative to the now dead Oslo Accords. Among Palestinians, there is a strong opposition to this or any accords like it that deny the right of return to Palestinian refugees. Abraham Burg, a Labor Knesset Member and once its Speaker (1999-2003), who is reportedly one of the designers of the Geneva Accord plainly states his qualms about what is termed in Israel a demographic "threat": "I am not afraid of weapons and terrorism. I am afraid of the day that all of them will put their weapons down and say 'one man, one vote.'" (Jonathan Shainin, "Letter from Israel," *The Nation*, January 12/19, 2004: 26)

<sup>31</sup> (Farsoun & Zacharia, 1997: 140)

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps this is one reason that Palestinian and Jewish intellectuals, especially in the West, are considering the alternative of one bi-national state as opposed to the two-state solutions. (About the possibility of a bi-national state, Edward Said notes that: "Although it now seems like a totally long shot and completely utopian, not to say to many people a crazy idea, it is the one idea, a vision based on equality, that will allow people to live and not exterminate each other." (2003: 7). See also Tony Judt who declares: "Israel will be either a Jewish state (with an ever-larger majority of unenfranchised non-Jews) or it will be a democracy. But logically it cannot be both... The time has come to think the unthinkable. The two-state solution—the core of the Oslo process and the present "road map"—is probably already doomed." *The New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2003 ("Israel: The Alternative" <[www.nybooks.com/articles/16671](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/16671)> found on December 18, 2003)

## Poetry and Education

As different governments in modern Palestine emerged, so have different educational systems. The educational apparatus' relation to the poetic scene provides but one entry point into the complex of institutional forces that animate poetic production. Here, I will attempt a brief tracing of those aspects of schooling and nationalism pertinent to the production and circulation of poetic forms. The materials I draw upon come from an eclectic range of sources: historical and sociological writing, textbooks, curricular assessments, literary manifestos, and my field notes.

I begin with the historic juncture in which British schooling replaced the Ottoman in 1917. Under Ottoman rule in the early Twentieth Century, newly introduced secular public schools instructed in Turkish, while Christian missionary schools and Islamic *kuttabs* instructed in Arabic.<sup>33</sup> This arrangement was in accord with the *millet* system, which allowed a certain autonomy to the various religious communities of the empire. In a predominantly, poor, rural Muslim society, learning literary Arabic took place primarily among urban Christian populations in missionary schools. For this reason, there has been a disproportionate presence of Christian Arab men and women in the emergence of Arabic "literature" in the modern, secular sense of the word.<sup>34</sup>

With the British occupation of Palestine at the end of World War I, not only the sovereignty of the Ottoman caliphate was abolished, so was the sovereignty of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Kuttab*, the traditional form of schooling, now largely extinct, focused on the learning of Qur'an, Arabic language, and arithmetic.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Hajj (1995: 41). In Abu Hanna's (1994) book of collected essays [A Journey of the Search for Tradition] about the Palestinian "literary" tradition prior to 1948, five of the six literary figures he examined belong to various Christian Arab denominations, while only one was Muslim.

Turkish language. In the Arab public schools of British-ruled Palestine, Arabic became the new language of instruction. Yet, Arabic was installed paradoxically with another concurrent colonial mission to “internationalize” Palestine, as the Sykes-Picot accord of 1916 charged. With a more direct and controlled management of Arab compared to Jewish ones, this British “internationalizing” mission manifested itself particularly in the teaching of subjects such as geography and history. Palestinian history and geography were presented in their “international” aspects inviting accusations from Arab oppositional voices that British rule was suppressing the Arab-Muslim face of the country and inculcating, however tacitly, the notion of a Jewish “national home” among Arab pupils.<sup>35</sup>

Yet even if the official school curriculum did not cultivate Palestinian or Arab nationalism, students were nonetheless exposed to it. Their teachers’ resort to “extra-curricular” teaching materials, as well as the more overtly nationalist press that found its way into the classroom, particularly through the vehicle of poetry. In his fragmentary recollections of his reading of poetry prior to 1948, Hanna Abu Hanna, a leading Palestinian poet, recalled the poetry he read in and out of school. He read and memorized the works of nationalist Palestinian poets such as, Ibrahim Tuqan, ‘Abdul Rahim Mahmoud, and Abu Salma, famous in the history of Palestinian poetry for an early mobilization of poetic language against Zionist and British encroachments.<sup>36</sup> He also

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<sup>35</sup> On Arab education under British rule and its “internationalizing” mission see Tibawi (1956: 88). Other studies of education during British rule that also discuss the relation between British colonialism and local Arab-Palestinian nationalism include ‘Abdul Qadir (1962) and Abu Ghazalah (1973).

<sup>36</sup>The Tunisian poet Abul Qasim Ash-Shabbi (1909-1934)), Egyptian poet ‘Ali Mahmoud Taha (1901-1949), and Lebanese poet Ilyas Abu Shabaka (1903-1947) are identified with the Romantic trend at its height between the 1920’s and 1940s in modern literary Arabic poetry, and in whose formation poets in North America including Jibran Khalil Jibran (1883-1931) and Mikhail Nu‘aima. (1889-1988) were highly

named poets of the classical as well as the modern neo-classical and between-world-wars Romantic strands of Arabic poetry, which generally was available to his generation before the *nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 Abu Hanna recounted:<sup>37</sup>

We had in our literary horizon before the *nakba* a multitude of poetic colors. There was the tradition (*turath*) starting with Imru al-Qays to Ahmad Shawqi, on which we were raised in schools. There is also the Romantic poetry, the poetry of Northern migration (and especially) that of Ilyas Abu Shabka, 'Ali Mahmoud Taha, and ash-Shabbi. We adored their poetry through our reading and it opened our eyes to English Romantic poetry such as that of Wadsworth, Shelly, Keats, Byron and others... At the same time, we followed with interest what is published in the newspapers and magazines in terms of Palestinian poetry. We copied the poems of Ibrahim Tuqan and even memorized some of them at school. We would be musically elated (*natrabu*) by the poetry of Abi Salma and 'Abdul Rahim Mahmoud... We would also be ecstatic because of the velvet, winged, words of 'Ali Mahmoud Taha, and the whispering words of Jibran and Nu'aima... We saw poetry roaming in the skies intersecting with reality through its shades... After the *nakba* we stood facing its calamitous scope, asking, should we write? To whom do we write? And how do we write?

Abu Hanna's recollection brings to the fore the constructs of "Arabic" poetry read in schools and that of "Palestinian" poetry published in the press. While both of these poetic varieties belonged to the form of traditional Arabic verse, it was the Palestinian press poetry that he followed "with interest" (*bi-ihitimam*). This recollection goes beyond a statement about a single student's reading interests; rather, it reflects a lacuna between what poetry is admitted into official school curriculum and what appears in the

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influential. As for the Palestinian poets whose work Abu Hanna learned there was: Abu Salma (a.k.a Abdul Karim al-Karmi, 1907-1980)—born in Tulkarem, died in Damascus, nick-named *zaytoonat filasteen* (Palestine's olive tree) due to the attachment of his poetic work to the homeland. 'Abdul Rahim Mahmoud (1913-1948) was born in 'Anabta village near Tulkarem and called "the poet-martyr." He was killed on July 1948 during the Shajara battle near Tabariyya (Tiberius) while fighting Zionist forces. Ibrahim Tuqan (1905-1941), the brother and for a while the poetic mentor of his sister Fadwa Tuqan (1917-2003) was born and died in Nablus, and worked for four years before his death in the Arabic section of a British-run Jerusalem radio station. Prior to his death due to a body ailment, Tuqan acquired fame even outside Palestine for his comic-ironic, and poignantly satirical verse against Arab land brokers, as well as Zionist and British colonial designs. To the latter he said in a few lines "We witnessed justice in your era, we witnessed courage in your soldiers/ We found in you a loyal friend, how could we possibly forget your mandate and your occupation?/ So humbling your kindness was when you announced the fate of Balfour's promise to be inevitable execution." (Al-Kayyali, 1975: 96)

<sup>37</sup> Abu Hanna (1994: 106-7).

newspaper, as well as the kinds and extents of “nationalism” admitted by the school apparatus of a colonial state.

When the Jewish “national home” was established in 1948 upon the British departure, the suppression of a Palestinian-Arab nationalist narrative resumed and intensified immediately. For example, *al-Mushawwiq*, a Lebanese textbook that was used in teaching Arabic literature during the British era, was banned by the Israelis for its overtly “nationalist” content. It was replaced in the early 1950s by Arabic literary texts written by “safe” local Arabs or by Jews who had come from Arab countries.<sup>38</sup> Israeli educational authorities continued this practice of excluding and replacing textbooks in the land it occupied in 1967.<sup>39</sup> The textbook replacement can be understood as part of a sustained, comprehensive, educational policy towards the Palestinians who have been attending schools under Israeli sovereignty.<sup>40</sup> Following the 1967 defeat, an educator from the West Bank observed the state of Arabic textbooks in the Arab schools of Israel:<sup>41</sup>

After the service of a quarter century in education, I allow myself to say that the level of Arab schools in Israel is very low, and that the materials teachers

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<sup>38</sup> Al-Hajj (1995:124). In my fieldwork interview with Abu Hanna, he recalled an effort by the Israeli military authorities, spearheaded by Prime Minister Ben Gurion, to make Hebrew the language of instruction in Arab schools. According to Abu Hanna, Church strongly objected to this plan insisting on the continuation of the Muslim *millet* system implemented by the Ottomans.

<sup>39</sup> After the conquest of 1967, Israel as Britain before it, paid attention to geography and history textbooks. Among the textbooks circulating in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel banned several textbooks from the Palestinian curriculum (administered by Jordanian and Egyptian authorities) such as *My Little Homeland (Watani al-Shaqhir)* for the fourth grade and *The Palestinian Question (al-Qadiyya al-Filastiniyyah)* for the twelfth grade (Adnan ‘Abdul Rahim, 1986: 33).

<sup>40</sup> Favoring the assimilation of Arabs into Jewish schools, the Israeli superintendent of Arab schools, Blom, in a then secret document to the Minister of Education, is quoted saying: “In the field of education this might be reflected in giving the Arab schools the same structure which exists in the Hebrew schools, as far as possible, the same methods, the same class hours, the same atmosphere, and if possible also a similar curriculum... By this way we can hope not only to bring our Arabs closer to us but also to take them away from the Arab World surrounding us.” (in Hajj, 1995: 122).

<sup>41</sup> Kanafani (1987: 26).

inculcate students on is ludicrous. I asked a relative to bring me some of the books used in the Arab schools of Israel, and I reviewed some dossiers, and based on this I formed my opinion that what Arab students are taught is nothing but a means of keeping them ignorant (especially in Arabic literature and Arab history) and this will not be accepted by us here.

Twenty years or so into the second occupation and almost forty years into the first, an ignorance of Arab culture and literature as such is not what the 1987 Arabic curriculum of Arab secondary schools within Israel aims for on the whole.<sup>42</sup> For example, the curriculum allocates an annual total of 85 hours to ancient Arabic literature (including 10 to Qur'an and the Prophet's Tradition, that is, "hadith"), while 70 annual hours are given to modern literature. Clearly, a certain ignorance seems strived for, namely, an ignorance of modern Palestinian history, notwithstanding the fact that 13 of the 43 modern poets included in the curriculum are Palestinian. Also, of the 20 poets who became famous prior to 1948, before the destruction of Palestine and the subsequent establishment of Israel, only two are Palestinian (Fadwa Tuqan and her brother Ibrahim Tuqan). Moreover, a survey their titles suggests that common to all the works by Palestinian poets is a concern with anything but Palestine, although the fame of these authors was built on engagement with the Palestinian struggle. The poems obviously appear to be chosen around subjects other than occupation and resistance. The words "Palestine" or "Palestinian" do not occur once in the entire volume.

In addition to what this curriculum omits, it is interesting to note what it admits. I find intriguing its penchant for "the modern" in Arabic literature. The distinctly modern

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<sup>42</sup> *Minhaj Dirasi fil-Adab al-'Arabi lil-Marhala ath-Thanawiyyah fil Madaris al-'Arabiyyah* (The Curriculum of Arabic Literature for Secondary Education in Arab Schools), Ministry of Education and Culture, Jerusalem, first edition, 1981.

forms of “free” verse and prose poem in contemporary Arabic poetry have a notable presence in this curriculum. Comprised of two sections, ancient (*qadim*) and modern (*hadith*) literature, the Arabic curriculum allocates to verse, 45 hours in the “ancient” and 28 hours in the “modern.” Within the section on the “ancient” there are 30 hours allocated for prose (not including the 10 hours assigned for teaching the Qur’an and Prophetic Hadith), whereas the “modern” section allocates 45 to prose (for teaching essays, the novel, short stories, and plays). Therefore, while the section on ancient literature allocated 15 teaching hours beyond what was assigned to prose, the section on modern literature, inversely, assigned to prose 17 teaching hours more than it did to verse. Regarding the modern verse curriculum, there is a total of 43 poems whose form is detectible through the authors’ names: 19 are associated with the “neoclassical,” that is, rhythmical tradition form, nearly that much (18), with the “free” verse, and plus 6, with the prose poem.<sup>43</sup>

The content of the literature curriculum in Palestinian schools of the West Bank and Gaza was notably different, from the curriculum created by Israeli educational authorities for the schools of its Palestinian citizens. In an attempt to revive and improve an independent Palestinian curriculum after Oslo, a curricular review found the existing teaching material to be dissatisfactory on the grounds of either a regional bias favoring non-Palestinian works or a traditionalist bias favoring the old at the expense of the “modern.” The review of the literary section of this curriculum for Palestinian students noted that Arabic literature on the West Bank had a notable presence of Jordanian works, while that of

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<sup>43</sup> Due to my lack of access to the actual poems, I advisedly use the word “associated” as poets’ names alone are not a terribly reliable indicator of the selected verse form. This uncertainty has to do with the fact that in the modern scene of Arabic poetry, poets commonly work with more than one form.

Gaza Strip had Egyptian works. As for the era and form of literary choices, the review noted that texts in both locales lean towards the old, and the majority of poets introduced to students were pre-Twentieth Century. Literary poetic productions of the past three decades were absent (Kurdi, 1997: 390).

This apparent distribution of poetic forms was corroborated by my own examination of a textbook I encountered in the field. It was an introductory text for a course on modern Arabic literature at Birzeit University on the West Bank. There were several things to observe in this textbook. The primary and largest of the texts' three sections was, unsurprisingly, poetry. It included nineteen poems. The second section titled "rhetoric" included seven texts; and the third, titled "stories," includes nine texts. The poetry section has one poetess (the Palestinian, Fadwa Tuqan) while the rest are male. As for regional distributions of poets there were two Egyptians, two Palestinians, one Iraqi, and one Yemeni. In terms of form, ten poems belonged to the classical form, only six to the modern "free" verse form and none to the more iconoclastic, prose poem.

Palestinian institutions that teach Arabic and its literature seem particularly resistant to the new poetry. From the Palestinian House of Poetry, a product of the Palestinian National Authority that came into being under Oslo, Ghassan Zaqatan advocates teaching the "new" kind of poetry, while attempting to allay fears about the declining interest in poetry overall.<sup>44</sup>

As we continue to sit patiently since the 1960s trying to enter schools that have closed and are themselves surpassed by time, we have to consider a direction

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<sup>44</sup> *Shu'ara*(1998, Winter, vol. 3: 8-9).

other than writing. It is reading... and I mean the technique of reading itself, which is totally different from what was before it.

In addition to a relatively antiquated curriculum, poetry also seems largely taught in “antiquated” ways. The poet Hanna Abu Hanna told me he often receives several phone calls during exam periods from high school students who ask him to interpret or explain what he meant by certain lines in his poems, since they expect to be examined on them. Abu Hanna expressed his annoyance with teachers who do not teach their students to read in the “new” way in which readers are said to be “active” in producing meanings. Abu Hanna himself asks the students to return to the poems and reread them.

In modern poetry, poets will say, the distinction between “correct” and “incorrect” interpretations is obsolete. Each reader extracts the meaning that makes sense to her or him. This new approach raises the question, how do students actually read poems? How do they respond to different poetic forms? And how is the modernizing of poetic forms implicated in the production of their meanings? What might students have to say about the relations between poetry, its form and content, and their relations to the modern world?

## Contemporary Readings of Modern Palestinian Verse: Part I

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I engaged with the local poetic scene through an exercise of “practical criticism.”<sup>45</sup> In this exercise, I solicited written responses to selected poetic texts from students at the Arabic Department of Birzeit University on the West Bank. Uncertain what such responses would yield when I first arranged their solicitation, I could rely only on the conviction that something about the social salience of modern Arab literary forms would be illuminated further by paying attention to how they were being read.

I would not have even thought of this engagement were it not for my advisor, Talal Asad, who recommended that I consider I.A Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929). While finding this work stimulating, I am engaging here neither with Richards nor with the tradition of reader-response criticism in whose development his work is a landmark.<sup>46</sup> The tradition of reader-response criticism, from multiple theoretical formulations, has been generally concerned with unsettling the notion of a text’s objectivity and the locus of literary meanings.<sup>47</sup> In retrospect, I can say that my concern was different. When I administered the task to students, I was in a very general way concerned with how

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<sup>45</sup> I use the term “practical criticism” not without dissatisfaction with regard to what “practical” might presume about the relation between “theory” and “practice.” For example John Peck and Martin Coyle define practical criticism whose foundation they attribute to I. A. Richards, as one that “would concentrate on the text and its verbal nuances without preconceived ideas about the author. . . . [i]t centers on a personal engagement with the text; theoretical principles controlling the mode of analysis and interpretations are usually left implicit.” (1995: 4). I find unsustainable the notion that leaving theories implicit while engaging with texts renders such engagement any more practical than an engagement whose theoretical positions are explicit. Nor do I find convincing the notion that engagement with any text can occur without preconceived ideas about the authors.

<sup>46</sup> See Jane Thompson’s evaluation of I.A. Richards’ work (1980: 219-20).

<sup>47</sup> See Jane Thompson (1980). *Reader-Response Criticism: from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press

different readings might be implicated in different poetic forms and how in those forms there might also be different poet-audience relations at work.

Thus with the facilitation of my fieldwork “mentor” ‘Abdul Karim Abu Khashshan, a professor of modern Arabic literature on the faculty of the Arabic Department at Birzeit, I gave three poetic texts to undergraduate female and male students in his course on modern Palestinian poetry. The samples belonged to the three forms at the center of this study (classical, “free” verse, and the prose poem). Those texts are titled respectively: *The Morning Sun, We Have in this Galilee*, and *The Rhinoceros*. I selected the last two, that is, the “free” verse and prose poem entirely on my own. In deference to Professor Abu Khashshan I bid his assistance in selecting the classical sample. I made this decision not only because I had trouble selecting one myself, but also because I needed to obtain entry into his classroom.

While I did not have a prior familiarity with the author of the traditional sample, I happened to have interviewed the poets working with the other two forms, the free verse and prose poem. The authors of the three texts are all Palestinian male poets whose names we concealed from students. We wanted them to respond outside the classroom and record with utmost honesty and liberty whatever feelings or thoughts the poems evoked in them. Towards that end, we required that students not record their names, and all but three did not. The total of eleven responses ranged in length from four-sentences to two pages.

Before I present and discuss the student readings, a word is necessary on the “literary” merits of the selected texts, an issue with which I was least concerned. Yet in this regard, the three samples undeniably betray a discrepancy among them. For example when I presented the first sample (the traditional) to two other readers- both teachers of Arabic literature – they judged its “literary” merit to be so poor that they regarded it as a mere act of “ordering” (*nadh*m), without seeing in it even an intimation of poetic value. I projected, based on my fieldwork encounters with different poets, that this contemptuous descriptor (which “*nadh*m” is in this context) was likely to be the commonest reaction to the first poetic sample, which represented the traditional form. That of the three samples, the traditional would accrue such a response, notwithstanding all the contingencies and arbitrariness in my contribution to its selection, was perhaps, in a highly indirect but unsurprising way, a testimony to the standing today of this traditional form; after all, it has been deserted by poetic “talents” seeking investment in more “modern” forms.

In the most general terms, students wrote about what the poems meant to them and what associations the texts evoked; what bearings the poems had to the reality surrounding them; and occasionally about the linguistic, prosodic, and figurative properties of the poem. All these points are presented in the samples below. Whatever else might be said about this limited and highly particular readership comprised of Palestinian undergraduates in a university periodically assaulted by an American-financed Israeli occupation -- it enables an entry point into the local literary scene.<sup>48</sup> Above all, it opens up a space for questions. As this study will make evident, pursuing these questions about

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<sup>48</sup> In its multifaceted intrusion of Palestinian higher education, Israeli occupation asserts itself on the very road to Birzeit University, from Ramallah. This road is bulldozed at numerous points and soldiers are stationed at makeshift checkpoints.

the local Palestinian poetic scene or that of the wider Arab poetic present, will entail other questions about matters that are not quite literary, and not quite local.

I found several aspects of the respondents' reading that I find particularly remarkable. First, it was striking how a few readers related the form of a poem to its content. Also, from these readings, it is possible to ask, for example, why the subjects of heroism and martyrdom found expression in the traditional and highly lyrical *The Mourning Sun*, while the seemingly odd subject of a rhino's sole horn found expression in the highly prosaic *The Rhinoceros*? Second, nine of the eleven responses saw in *The Rhino*, a text engaged with the political realities they live, particularly the reality of Palestinian resistance and persistence in the face of Israeli occupation. All readers read the previous two samples texts engaging with the Palestinian struggle. Finally, the students' political reading of the last poem, *The Rhinoceros*, yielded diverse, indeed, oppositional interpretations and sometimes no interpretations whatever in ways, which students' readings of the previous two samples did not, and undoubtedly would have, produced.

This outcome was striking not only because students interpreted the rhinoceros in the poem bearing its name as a sign of antagonistic and diverse political forces – i.e, the Palestinian people, Israeli occupation, US hegemony – but also because a majority of the respondents saw in the poem a political manifesto; however, as I knew from an interview, the poet meant through his work only to talk about his loneliness as a poet. In this interview he told me about his sense of solitude, as a poet and as a human being, which, he declared, permeated his work; in this case, he allowed a rhinoceros to express that

solitude.<sup>49</sup> The students' association of the poem with a blatant political reality, insistently and divergently so in the case of *The Rhinoceros*, has great implications and I will turn to this point after presenting a sample of responses to each form.

## Contemporary Readings of Modern Palestinian Verse: Part II

### *The Morning Sun*

This poem was written in February, 1989 by the late 'Abdul Qadir al-'Azzah; it represents to the classical form of Arabic poetry in which the poet is committed to a regularity of one meter, one rhyme and a fixed number of "feet" in the entire verse construction. The modern Arabic appellation of this form is *al-'amoudi* (the pillar-based). Here is a sample comprising 22 verse lines of a poem, whereby each line is divided into two equal hemistiches. While it is thoroughly traditional as a metrical composition of high rigor, its themes and vocabulary are those of a thoroughly modern reality, which is the Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) that began in 1987 against the Israeli occupation (This sample, along with its English translation, is in Appendices A and B).

#### Respondent 1

*The Morning Sun* is a poem (*qasida*) that pictures the Palestinian scene during the *intifada* of the eighties through the *'amoudi* poem that is *still* capable of

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<sup>49</sup> In Zakariyya Muhammad's own words: "From the beginning when I started publishing in mid 1970s, I was against this heroic mood in Palestinian poetry. So I was the voice of dissent. This was why no one heard of me then, and sometimes I was embarrassed to publish it. And many did not accept it. People were fighting, tanks, killing and blood, but I wrote about other things. I don't know if this is good or ill—to make poetry for an elite group of people or not. It may not be a healthy approach, but I write for a small group of people and I think of them. They are poets of my generation, not necessarily in Palestine, they are Arabs and foreigners, dead or alive such Rilke, Ritsos Cafavy... The world appears for people far more complicated than what people thought in the 1970s and 1960s through the heroic, naïve and optimistic poetry. There is no room for the optimist spirit of that generation. Back then poetry was a mixture of romantic optimism, oratory, mass-oriented, and political. In the 1980s all this would change... Today, no one speaks about politics in Palestinian poetry in the sense of direct national poetry. Palestinian poets today write about everything [interviewed in Ramallah, January 9, 2002].

addressing certain contents in ways better than free poetry. All its vocabulary is the vocabulary of revolution: martyr, blood and persistence... the poem focuses on the role of the people who are making miracles and the role of the woman in the conflict and on extending the revolutionary act so it could reach its goal.

#### Respondent 2

Artistically, the words of this poem are easy, written for the public/populace (*'ammah*), not for a particular class. It is a populist poem (*sha 'abiyya*) by which the poet wanted to reach the largest possible segment of the Arab people, not only the Palestinians.

#### Respondent 3

This sample expressed the subject in a simple and clear way, without complications. Its words are comprehensible, and its images are taken from reality. The poetic images are clear, beautiful and expressive. For this kind of poetry fulfilled the goal of the poet and the goal of the audience; it succeeded in delivering the idea to the public (*jumhur*) in a simple and uncomplicated way. This poetry expresses the poetry of resistance. It is good and simple poetry.

#### Respondent 4

The issue that grabs my attention in this text is the issue of formation of poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This poem is based on the traditional form of Arabic poetry made of *ṣadr* and *'ajz* with a commitment of the poet to a uniform rhyme and fixed number of feet in each verse line.<sup>50</sup> And I think that this kind of poetic formation is surpassed by time. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the age whose hours pass as minutes does not permit the poet to sit and think in crafting rhymes. On the other hand, this poetry is emotional pulses that the poet has to follow, not submitting to the restriction of mind or art. I see that there is no stronger restriction than that of rhyme and fixed number of feet on the poet. This does not mean that the poet who follows this old formation is in vain. For there is abundance of beautiful traditional poetry... which even while succumbing to the rules of rhyme and traditional meters, it nonetheless springs from the souls of those poets, thus endowing them with a crisp, fresh poetry.

#### Respondent 5

I see an extreme beauty in this poetic text with regards to words, meanings, and treatment of the reality we live. It expresses the extent of the poet's bond with the Palestinian cause, his commitment to reality, although I see his reliance on normal speech somewhat repelling.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ṣadr* and *'ajz* are prosodic concepts that refer to sound arrangements in the poem. While *ṣadr* (meaning chest or front) refers in poetry to the first foot in the first hemistich, *'ajz* (meaning hinder part) refers in poetry to the last foot in the second hemistich of a verse line.

*We Have in this Galilee...*

This poem is in “free” verse, belonging to the *taf’ieela* (“foot”) poetry as it is commonly identified in contemporary literary Arab parlance. “Foot” here is a reference to the primary unit of versification in this form; it is no longer the verse line. In other words, the poet in this form may still be, and often is, committed to one meter (sometimes more); but the poet is also “free” to place different numbers of “feet” in different verse lines, unlike the poets working in the *al-‘amoudi* form, whereby all lines are of equal number of “feet.” Incidentally, one of the students below mistook this “free” verse poem for an *al-‘amoudi*. The poet himself, Hussein Muhanna is a retired teacher living in the village of Buqay’ah in the Galilee. I sought his view as a poet of “free” verse on the contemporary scene of a proliferating prosaic poetry and my interview with him appears in Chapter Six on prose poetry, (This sample, along with its English translation, is presented in Appendices C and D).

Respondent 1

This poem talks about the raping of the land of Palestine by the Zionists. They stole the Galilee on which we were born and expelled the Palestinian people... but we shall stay persistent on this land, steadfast resisting and not bending down to Zionism... this is from the resistance poetry that describes the persistence of our people and its resistance to occupation... it is clear in its constructions and phrases, beautiful and extracted from Palestinian reality and from the beauty of its natural landscape... this poem fulfilled the goal of the poem and the goal of the audience.

Respondent 2

This *‘amoudi* poem is a rich text thanks to its meanings and expressions, which are strongly connected with the life of the Palestinian people and the destruction to which they are exposed.

Respondent 3

We note that the poet is not committed to a uniform rhyme. The poem deviated from the patterns of old poetry and followed the patterns of modern poetry, facile meanings and phrases, and unity of theme about the Galilee.

Respondent 4

In this text, the poet affirms to us his direct bond with Palestine. He is part of her and she of him, not simply because he is part of a city but because his roots and spirit sprung from its soil and were nourished on it, along with other plants.

Respondent 5

This is a poem from the poetry of resistance and it, therefore, raises the important issue, of poetry's role in resistance and revolution. While poetry is a reflection of life, it is not only a mirror of life. It is also a means of discovering life. If the most important feature of Palestinian life during the past half century is its resistance for the sake of freedom, independence and identity, poetry must be that resistance. This poem is a fine example of resistant Palestinian poetry. It demonstrates our attachment to the land and that we shall continue to build despite the conquerors. We shall continue to live on this land.

*The Rhinoceros*

The poem is two pages long without any identifiable metrical regularity. It is a prose poem, locally called *qasidat an-nathr*. Although no student identified it as a prose poem, a few referred to it as "free" or "modern" poetry. The prose poem affords greater "freedom" than what is called "free" verse, for its poet is committed neither to meter, nor foot, nor rhyme. The author of this prose poem is Zakariyya Muhammad living in Ramallah, and working in the Palestinian Ministry of Culture and Education. My interview with him appears in Chapter Six on prose poetry (This sample, along with its English translation, appears in Appendices D and E).

Respondent 1

I apologize, I did not understand what this poem symbolizes, for the words are not comprehensible, nor are they clear about their meaning. There are many symbols, and I don't know what they are symbolizing; but I guess that the rhinoceros stands for the weak man.

#### Respondent 2

The poem represents the poetry of modernity in both content and form... the title is the key to the poem's signs, as poetry of modernity rests on the conviction of art for the sake of art. This poetry is closer to the poetry of Adonis and Yusif al-Khal and their followers who discuss philosophical issues in a modern, symbolic context. I am inclined to say that the author of this sample wanted to address the crisis of the human, in general, in the face of big questions or the crisis of the human within the group and the relations between both, that is, the crisis of the human with the Other.

#### Respondent 3

The writer/poet provides a disgraceful image of the enemy, in which he combined ugliness and weakness... he also gave an image of how even trees challenged this [enemy's] intrusion... he also pictured him [enemy] in an ugly thought of usurpation, wanting even to become something different, so he [enemy] could do another ugly thing, because in this horn of his, he was unable to face the persistence... thus revealing [the poet's] linguistic solidity, and mastered meter in the style of free verse with spiritual-linguistic wholesomeness...

#### Respondent 4

This sample is considered closer to the poetry of modernity. It is the expression of their [modern poets'] interior, their thoughts, in particular phrases and artistic images and their similes (*tashbihat*) that have no affinity to the thing being described. The distance between them is great. For when he says the 'wind is dough' how far is dough from wind? yet the poet wanted to express something in him. Also when he says: "if he were a billy-goat he would have knocked the clouds." How can a billy-goat knock the clouds? But the poet used this artistic image to express something in him. One of the features of this sample is employing symbols. Symbols abound in this poem. For example when he said 'zebra' this is a symbol for something. This kind of poetry meets the need of the poet, not the need of the audience; he cannot communicate his idea to the audience. So his ideas are his only and those like him in this verse.

#### Respondent 5

From my modest reading of this poem, I noticed that the poet is describing to us the United States of America. And there are numerous signs supporting this conclusion. The poem was written after Oslo and Madrid, both of which under the auspices of the United States are committing injustice towards the entire Arab people. He [the poet] describes it as a rhinoceros to signify through metonymy (*kinaya*) that she is the only superpower dominating the entire globe. Also, the two colors are a description (*kinaya*) of the colors of the American flag. Also, the "petrified forest" is the Arab countries known as the Third World, which the Americans succeeded in penetrating, especially after the Gulf War thus enabling them to have a presence larger than before. The final and important sign is that the next target of the rhinoceros is God. And this is evident in the experiments that

the United States is conducting in the outer space, fearing an attack from there. This poem goes along with free verse, which employs symbols in abundance. Additionally, it is shrouded with obscurity that is not absent in any free verse poem. Yet this one is clearer than the current poetry of Darwish, written for the specialists of the specialists (*khaṣṣah*).

#### Respondent 6

The poet in this poem talks about the brutality and injustice of the rapist enemy towards the land and the people. He therefore likened the Zionist enemy to an animal, namely, a rhino living in the jungle. And asks how can I resist this enemy? He expresses a few means of resistance against occupation, but he does so indirectly in the poem. At the end of the poem the poet explains that God alone is capable of solving those issues and it is in his providence to solve the problem and spread peace.

#### Respondent 7

This text can be seen as allusive, with symbolic words. Perhaps its writer is of the modernist school that is founded on allusion and symbol... The rhinoceros, in my opinion, is a symbol of the Palestinian cause, alone in its meager weapons in the face of a grand power supported by other enemies who seek to destroy it. This cause is lonely... There is a sign to the coloring of the enemies and their plots to terminate the cause, through the zebra. We note that the rhinoceros is perplexed again for he has no aim to strive for after this humiliation: the silence of his peers and the shrewdness of his enemies. But at the end he is guided to God, 'for God alone is a fitting goal for this lone horn of the rhinoceros.' This means that he must move forward with steady steps, fearing no one so long as his cause is noble... there is a nice sign from the poet to the enemies when he said "the wind is dough" that is, it is not solid, or coherent but going through it is difficult even if not impossible.

### **Contemporary Readings of Modern Palestinian Verse: Part III**

In the responses sampled above lie written testimonies to processes taking place within and beyond poetry. The value of these testimonies lies not in the answers they might offer, but more in questions they invite. Amateur and particular as the student responses may be, they are remarkable in several respects. First, it is striking that the student assign to Palestinian poetry a task that it has carried out for much of its modern history, it is the task which defined this poetry: "resistance." For this readership, the value of poetry is its relevance to the national struggle of salvaging an usurped homeland. That a poet might

be struggling for goals other than reclaiming a homeland scarcely grabs the students' attention. Yet what did not escape the attention of most was the idea that certain forms are more suitable to certain eras than others.

It was remarkable that students assigned "modernity" and "modern" mostly to the prose poem, *The Rhinoceros*. This reaction was in spite of the fact that "free" verse (*taf'ieela*), historically was the form that constituted Arabic poetry's the first encounter with modernity in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This response also resulted despite the fact that all three poems selected here are, in one way or another modern. *The Morning Sun*, the most traditional of the forms in its metrical structure is thoroughly modern when it comes to diction;<sup>51</sup> it directly emanated from a contemporary uprising against on-going occupation and corruption.

Nonetheless *The Rhinoceros* and its readings are set apart from the other two samples, thus showing, if only in a limited and indirect way, how in the different forms, there is the working of different relations between poetry and its readers. Although the respondents plainly and easily conveyed what they found the poets to have been saying in the first two poems, their responses showed a certain "fogginess," as one student put it. For them, it was a difficult text to understand. I myself recall reading it at least four times while in the field, before being able to relate to it in a meaningful way. While students assigned "popular," "populist" or "public" value to the classical and "free" verse forms, they relegated descriptors such as "symbolic," or "allusive" or "of the specialists"

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<sup>51</sup> I use the word diction here and throughout the dissertation to mean selection and use of words in poetry.

to the work which most saw in the quintessentially modern poetry manifested in *The Rhinoceros*.

*The Rhinoceros* clearly marks a culminating point in the process of modernizing Arabic verse. Discarding the regularity of rhyme and feet in the modern form of “free” verse led to its abandonment, sometimes entirely, in the prose poem, a form in which there is no identifiable regularity of sound measurement. In other words, modern poetry, especially prose poetry, exists upon the destruction of meter; it exists because and after the expulsion of meter. Yet modernity exacted more than dismantling the stability, regularity and rigor of measuring the sound of words; it also exacted something of what the words meant or were made to mean.

Traditionally, the difficulty of diction in classical verse sent its readers, actually listeners, back to dictionaries or to previously composed verses in the hopes of “opening up” initially “closed” meanings. Those meanings, inhabiting as they did a fundamentally oral world, were determined sometimes upon the pronunciation or utterance of a lone vowel or consonant. Yet, this cannot be the case in *The Rhinoceros*. No matter how many pronunciations one can utter, the word is deeply perplexing and in peculiarly modern ways. Its perplexity it is immensely pregnant with questions.

First many readers of *The Rhinoceros* insisted that the poem reflected a direct political reality, whereas the poet intended none. These responses raise questions about the gulf between a poet’s intention of composing “modern” poetry and a readership that

anticipates poetry for “the people;” clearly, there exists a gap between a poet who is writing to describe his or her solitude as a poet and a readership that finds the text highly engaged with global and local politics. The respondents’ readings of *The Rhinoceros* are telling of a poet and poetry that thrives on the notion of separation between poetry and politics or poetry and morality: when readers were asked to relate to the poem, they could relate only to its political-moral resonance, irrespective of how illusory, unintended, or feeble that connection might have been from the modernizing poet’s point of view.

*The Rhinoceros* is telling of a poetry that is not simply more specialized, but specialized in modern, peculiar ways. While veering away from the ancients’ seemingly foreign vocabulary, this poetry zestfully rooted its own words in daily modern life, only to reside in an unprecedented kind of obscurity. While veering away from the traditional, indeed, near sacral place accorded the Arab poet, those promoting the cause of Arab poetic modernity sought the words of their modern, urban, quotidian life away from the desert.

From this modern kind of obscurity emerged a paradox of this modernity: while the words of the modernizing poem were the words of common parlance, the meanings that emanated from the words’ congregations were hardly common, hardly accessible. The gap that existed between the poet and readers raised questions about the gap between what the poets sought in “advancing” poetry and the complex, contradictory, often unintended results of such modern “advancement,” as manifested here in the relation of poetry with audience.

The complexity of audience and poet relations manifested itself in the very approach a poet might sustain to poetry itself (and language by extension). Modern poets increasingly have found refuge in poetry or language - rendering them as conditions of their being. Thus, language or poetry become, as it were, the poet's dwelling. This new approach to language did not at all mean that suffering is escapable, but it meant that the only suffering worth enduring for poets was in language and poetry. Language and poetry become their redemption on earth. If composing poetry for earlier generations of poets, in both ancient and modern Arab history, served tribal, nationalist, socialist, religious, or any another variety of collective aspirations, the contemporary poets, after the withering of all sorts of attempts to rebuild their societies, found the task of writing to be the act of writing itself.

This redemptive role assigned to writing itself became more evident, especially after the *an-naksa*, the shocking defeat in the 1967 war in which the Israeli army defeated three Arab armies, and after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Besides revealing the military impotence of Arab regimes, the 1967 defeat and the 1982 invasion also revealed that the crisis of modern Arab societies is quite profound. It is more profound, poets will say, than the then dominant socialist and nationalist "ideologies" or "grand narratives" proposed in their contestation of traditional regimes. The retreat of secular ideologies and the increasing disillusionment with the post-colonial state, coupled with the rise in the contemporary Arab-Muslim world of Islamic awakening (*sahwah*), more commonly known as "fundamentalism," has been occurring in tandem with poets increasingly cloistered in a verse, replete with details of prosaic daily life and religious, mythological

vocabulary. The poets of prose, the focus of Chapter Six, will elaborate on how and when writing came to define who they were and what they did. In response to their detractors who accuse them of political detachment, poets of prose have proclaimed a need to redefine the very conditions of political involvement in Arab society. Their words were not to be recited aloud for crowds in city squares, but for individual, silent readers at home. This new way of transmitting verse is but one ostensible manifestation in the transformed relationship between a poet and his/her audience, and ultimately in the transformed place of the word in society.

In addition to the force of modern and ambiguous sense of specialization, the readings point to the force of fragmentation. In the acts of reading the poem, there were the oppositional meanings that readers, as well as poets, assign to the poems. In their modern form of “specialization,” in their escape from the repetition and symmetry of sounds, poems also faced the fragmentation and privatization of their semantics. When and if they were read, the interpretations of the poem, as its rhythms, were internal. The readership of *The Rhinoceros* read the poem, not only in unintended ways, but also in strikingly fragmented ways, much like the poem’s very sound patterns. *The Rhinoceros* is the Palestinian people for one reader, Israeli occupation for another, and a US global domination for yet another.

Were these readings of *The Rhinoceros* detached from the fact that there exists a globally dominant political discourse that evades a precise definition of “terrorism” as it commonly ascribes “violence” or “terrorism” to Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim subjects,

“security” to Israel, and “freedom” and “democracy” to the United States? Why was *The Rhinoceros* susceptible to such fragmented readings in ways that the more lyrical poems were not? And why was *The Rhinoceros* the subject of the prosaic form in the first place? Why was the prosaic form seen as that of specialists in spite of the commonality of its diction, while the more lyrical forms were regarded as more public and accessible? Further, why did poetry’s march into modernity mean forsaking the disciplining and ordering of its sound, when the modernity of other forms of social practice under the secular, modern state means unprecedented rigor, discipline and regulation? These are the questions about modernizing poetic forms that I want to pursue in my ethnographic investigation. The task ahead is to delineate the conceptual tools and foci of my main argument about a discipline’s modern erosion, specifically focusing on poetic form, modernizing literary forms, and the Arab poetic tradition.

## Chapter Three: Poetic Forms, Modernizing, and Tradition

### The Content of the Form

My focus on poetic form originally emerged from the poets' preoccupation with this topic. Throughout my fieldwork, I heard poets engaged in a polemic over various forms and specifically the form of prose poetry. It became clear to me that what was at stake was not merely a "literary" or "artistic" conflict. As I spoke to poets about the forms they adopted or abandoned, I heard about forms of selves they rejected or desired. Moreover, attention to the debates began to suggest that different social and moral formations inhabited various poetic forms. The contingencies of my fieldwork therefore evolved to become the foundational premises of this study. A central premise was that linguistic-literary artifice, of which the poetic form is an example, is also the enactment of a form of life and self.

I want to explain how I approached anthropologically the concept of poetic form. First, I will situate my study in relation to a tradition of mostly anthropological research on verse and "verbal arts," upon which my study builds and expands.<sup>1</sup> My aim here is not to offer a comprehensive assessment of anthropological literature on poetry or "verbal arts." Rather, my aim is to show how this study converges and diverges from specific lines of inquiry within and outside this anthropological literature.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms "verse" and "poetry" interchangeably here, although the former seems a preferred one for those attending to the "technical-material" aspects of poetry (e.g. Tynjanov, 1981).

To begin locally, while gender and religion remain the two quintessential subjects of interest to anthropologists studying Arab-Muslim societies (Abu-Lughod, 1987), poetry and “verbal arts” remain scarcely visited. This absence exists in spite of the centrality of poetic tradition in Arab-Muslim societies, on the ethnographic record for over a century (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Bailey, 1991; Caton, 1990; Joseph, 1980; Khalaf, 2000; Landberg, 1901; Meeker, 1979; Miller, 2001; Musil, 1928; Reynolds, 1995; Rodinov, 1996; Khalaf, 2000; Slymovics, 1998; Sawayan, 1985; Taminian, 2001; Zwettler, 1978).<sup>2</sup> Like the tradition it joins, my study is concerned with Arab-Muslim subjects as linguistic and literary agents.

Among the contributors to this tradition, Caton (1990) and Meeker (1979) have aimed to accomplish a project similar to my own: to examine the connection between poetic forms and forms of life. Caton’s was a pioneering ethnography because it presented the first ethnography of a poetic tradition, later to be followed by Miller (2001) and Taminian (2001). Having said that, the divergences remain multiple. Anthropologists studying poetry in Arab-Muslim societies almost universally (and expectedly) have studied oral (tribal and Bedouin) varieties of verse.<sup>3</sup> Almost all poetic traditions that came under

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<sup>2</sup> Meeker (1979) is an exception because his highly inventive but deeply questionable study builds on ethnographic material collected not by him but by Musil (1928). Since this is not the place to offer a thorough and fair assessment of Meeker’s general argument, I can only say that while his strategy of revealing political experience through poems’ prosodic structure is ingenious, it is hardly convincing how could a people with “beastly energy” (p. 134) and “moral inconsistencies” (p. 147), on his account of Rawala Bedouins, produce such precise and consistent metrical compositions. “Precise” is my word of reference to the Rawala prosody; Meeker commonly relies on hasty emotive projections such as “rigid” or “severe restrictions.” (p. 113). As some poets will convey in the first chapter of this study, poetic meters are rigid only if not mastered. Once poetic meters are mastered, rather than inhibiting, they enable the production of immensely varied and extremely precise (šārim)metrical configurations.

<sup>3</sup> To a great extent the work of Taminian (2001) and Slymovics (1998) and, to a lesser extent, Miller (2001) present a deviation from that tradition in that they worked on poetry that is written and inscribed. Taminian (2001) and Slymovics (1998), separately and in discrepant degrees, attend to the subject of “free” verse.

anthropological scrutiny were from the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Yemen.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, Arabic poetry of the classical literary register, the exclusive focus of this study, has been almost un-examined. However, beyond a divergence in geographical location and linguistic register, I want to discuss another divergence, which is in the conception of poetry as an anthropological subject.

First I want to note that a scarcity of anthropological attention to poetry – as distinct from poetics -- in Arab-Muslim societies appears far from being an anomaly when the discipline is considered as a whole. A tradition of anthropological research into verse in the Arab world, as elsewhere, may be marginal, but it is indeed a long-standing one, at least in American anthropology. As part of his general concern with the connections between linguistic and “ethnological phenomena,” Boas encouraged documentation and categorization of linguistic patterns.<sup>5</sup> Among his students, Sapir, at least, had an explicit interest in the study of verse, and once commented about a “complex psychology” associated with the phenomenon of rhyme.<sup>6</sup> Central to the mission of those early American anthropologists was a premise attributed to German Romanticism, in which verbal arts were the expression of the *volk*, the people. According to Bauman (1977:14), one exponent of that Romanticism, Herder, saw in verse “the archives of nationality” and the “imprints of its soul.”

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<sup>4</sup> The exceptions include Reynolds (1995) whose work was on Egyptian epic poetry, and Slymovics (1998) who worked on Palestinian poetry. Yet, Slymovics’s focus was not on poetry but on practices of memory in Palestinian poetry, specifically, “free” verse.

<sup>5</sup> Bauman (1977: 15).

<sup>6</sup> Sapir had a specific interest in the phenomenon of rhythm and its connection with cognition (1985: 35).

I suspect such a view of poetry was in keeping with a Kantian view of the arts as essentially inhabiting the realm of the Beautiful. Regardless of its philosophical underpinnings, this view of poetry as an *art*, and as one that is essentially expressing how a self, a people, a discourse, an experience or a tradition are constructed and contested, continues in later anthropological encounters with poetry, even as those encounters skillfully sought to ground this perceived artistic activity in political, economic and cultural settings (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Caton, 1990; Hymes, 1981; Meeker, 1979). Viewing poetry as an anthropological subject in this way (as expressing something about constructions of local cultures and subjects) has practical consequences for the kinds of questions to which anthropological research on poetry lends itself. What kind of standing can poetry have in an anthropological analysis?

The word for poetry in Arabic (*shi'r*) refers in one of its pre-modern senses to the act of *knowing* as distinct from *expressing*.<sup>7</sup> Hence the phrase *layta shi'ri* denotes the wish to know by a first pronoun. Yet it is precisely the conception of verse as expressing a construction (and contestation) of cultural reality that largely informs anthropological analyses of poetry, even when those analyses are not working with a definition of poetry as an expressive activity -- be it among Awlad 'Ali of the Western Desert, the Khawlanis of Yemen, the Rawala Bedouins of Arabia or the Native Americans of the Northwest Coast.<sup>8</sup> As such anthropologists set out to examine "local" discourses and traditions *as*

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<sup>7</sup> See entry of *shi'r* in *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Mandhour (1955, vol. 4: 409). *Shi'r* as *dirayah* (knowledge) is explicated before *shi'r* as *mandhoum al-qawl* (composed utterance).

<sup>8</sup> To approach poetry for the purposes of anthropological analysis as an expression of a local reality -- e.g. the construction of a tribal self -- does not preclude or inhibit working with a definition of poetic production itself as a communicative act (Burke, 1973) or a performative one (Austin, 1977 and later Bauman 2001). For example, Caton takes the composing of a poem to be "constitutive social practice" that signifies the ideology of "tribalism" (p. 22). He then states that he intends to "show how the act of

expressed in poetry. This study approaches verse not only as *expressing* a local Arab discourse but also as a site for *knowing and inquiring* about the global modern process, as encountered within a local poetic tradition. In keeping with an archaic sense of the word poetry (*shi'r*), it asks not what it expresses about local Arabs but rather, what can be learned from poetry about certain concepts of concern to anthropology, namely modernity.<sup>9</sup>

Inevitably, any inquiry into verse entails not only a conception of verse but also works with (and sometimes against) a certain conception of language. Anthropological interest in the verbal arts traditionally searched for the place of “culture” or “society” in language. Working against the dominant approach to language in the science of linguistics, anthropologists interested in linguistic form within verse saw the latter as culturally constituted.<sup>10</sup> The product was a research tradition, known at certain point of its unfolding during the 1960s and 1970s as the “ethnography of speaking.”

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composing a poem ... is also the act of constructing the self, an aim consonant with a larger purpose: to demonstrate that in the form and content of artistic --- specifically, poetic--- acts, the structures and meanings of society are created.” (p. 112). My point is that in taking poetry as a site of knowing, one can learn not only about social reality as “created” in poetry but also about categories of social analysis employed in the analysis of such reality.

<sup>9</sup> Others have made suggestions towards similar effects. Bauman and Briggs (1990: 61) suggest that native speakers engaged in meta-discourse be approached more than as sources of data, rather, as “intellectual partners” (1990: 61). Similarly, Paul Friedrich promotes poetry as “a privileged entry” into a culture for in poetry he sees “at once data for analysis and itself a body of generalization about social life that are at least as subtle as what the social scientists normally come up with.” (1986: 39).

<sup>10</sup> Largely influenced by the Prague School and Formalists, linguistic science searched for formal patterning in linguistic utterances. It is in opposition to universalism and formalism in linguistics, that the emergence of what is commonly known as the “ethnography of speaking” can be partly understood (Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Gumperz and Hymes 1964). Ascribing to interactionist sociology, anthropologists interested in verbal arts began to inquire into the occurrences of language through social interactions and events. Refusing to segregate the linguistic utterance, they insisted on inquiring into the sociocultural resources employed in the production of that utterance (Bauman, 1977: 20). Anthropologists working on the “ethnography of speaking,” focus on *speech*, speech events, and speech communities in their actual usage of language and not, as it were, on a language’s ideal state.

In a certain way, my study builds on that tradition, by exploring how language, more specifically verse, is socially and culturally constituted. Yet, there still remains a basic diversion of interests. My interest is in a poetry that is largely written not spoken. More specifically, I am interested how this literary poetic composition is conceived and practiced as revealed by my interviews with the poets.<sup>11</sup> Beyond locating poetic form in the pronouncements of poets, I also locate the form in its visualization. The poem's form is made apparent here in both its typographical appearance on the printed page and its prosodic structure rendered visible through scansion. Later, I shall elaborate on both.

Another distinction is the place of history. It has been noted that a singular focus on discrete speech events expels questions about history in studies of speech and its allied field of performance (Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 79). In order to address historical shifts, I examine the transformation of poetic forms by interviewing various cohorts of poets, some of whom began composing as long as seven decades ago. Some Palestinian poets interviewed in this work already were composing poetry in the mid 1940's under British-ruled Palestine.

From showing the centrality of society and culture in the production of linguistic utterances anthropologists by the mid 1980s shifted to the centrality of language, or more precisely, the verbal art in culture and society. This shift provided space for a proliferation of anthropological writing on poetics (Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 59). In the 1980s, as post-structuralist formulations of discourse enabled a challenge to the

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<sup>11</sup> An unwarranted severance between literacy and orality in poetry has been rightly challenged (e.g. Finnegan, 1977). However, the distinction is useful in so far that it enables attention to the peculiarities of each modality.

opposition between “the realistic” and “the fictional,” anthropologists began to write prolifically about the place of poetics –verbal arts-- in society (e.g. Feld, 1982; Herzfeld, 1985; Hymes, 1981; Lavie, 1990; Sherzer and Woodbury, 1987; Slymovics, 1998) and in discourses about society and culture (Tylor, 1984; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Sherzer, 1987). This literature usefully demonstrates that an “artistic” use of the language is not a peripheral component of speaking and writing; rather, it is central to the communicative function of language, and by extension, language itself is not a secondary social phenomenon. Poetics is therefore employed in order to analyze “local” discourses.

It is important here that I make the distinction between poetics employed in the analysis of a cultural reality and the ethnography of poetry. My concern is to inquire into the sociality within the materiality of the literary-linguistic utterance, even in its seemingly most innocuous manifestation: poetic form.<sup>12</sup> I am not embarking on a task of showing the significance of literary articulation or figurative language in the production of a certain reality as anthropological studies of poetic commonly do; although, of course, this would inevitably be a product of an ethnographic investigation of verse.

In light of these broad aspects of the anthropological attention to poetry, how did anthropologists approach poetic form? Often, it appears, they found inspiration in Roman Jakobson’s writings on poetics. Although Jakobson analyzed oral as well as written poetic forms, anthropological attendance has been largely to the linguistic and less to the literary material of mostly oral poetic form. Anthropologists attending to cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Caton (1990: 20) makes a similar distinction when he stated that he sought to “anthropologize poetics” as opposed to the reverse task of illuminating the ethnographic reality by means of poetics.

meaning in linguistic forms employed a variety of Jakobson's notions about poetics; prominent among these was his notion of parallelism (e.g. Gossen, 1974; Hymes, 1981; Fox, 1988; Urban, 1988; Caton, 1990). Jakobson formulated his concept of parallelism out of a general commitment to bring linguistic and literary inquiries closer to one another. In his quest for a general, universal theory of verse, Jakobson took parallelism as the primary "device" of poetry and saw it as a universally pervasive feature of oral verse. As a linguistic structure shaping the forms and meanings of poems, parallelism occurs, in Jakobson's account, when poets create regularity of identical or contrasting linguistic units.<sup>13</sup> Exploring Jakobson's notion of parallelism in a variety of ethnographic settings, anthropologists have sought to demonstrate local cultural significance, representations of social order, ideology, and mythology, in the linguistic constitution of forms such as in greetings, rituals, songs, poems and poetic dueling. Like Jakobson, they were analyzing meanings in the form of linguistic utterance and its constituents. Meter was one such constituent that Jakobson analyzed.

Meter, a central subject of this study, was for Jakobson a device of parallelism, itself the primary device of poetry (Caton, 1987: 239). Yet meter, Jakobson instructively observed, was not the only element of a poem's parallelism nor was meter reducible to a phonetic phenomenon. To do so, to see only sound in meter, was to commit what Jakobson called "phonetic isolationism." (1987: 81).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Jakobson held that parallelism occurs at

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<sup>13</sup> In the more specialized language of linguistics, parallelism occurs when a poet "selects from the paradigmatic axis items that are equivalent (similar or contrasting) and then projects them onto the syntagmatic axis in regular fashion" (Caton, 1987: 240).

<sup>14</sup> Inversely, Sapir warned in his study of sound in language against reducing it to a sensorimotoric phenomenon ("Sound Patterns in Language," *Language*, 1925, vol. 1: 37-51; Reprinted in *Selected Writings* 1985: 35). Although seeming to come from the opposite pole, Jakobson and Sapir had a common goal of showing the complex phenomenon comprising rhyme, meter and rhythm.

all “levels” of language – from discrete phonemic units to poems in their entirety (Caton, 1987: 240). All these “levels” make up what Jakobson calls the “architecture” of the poem, which in turn is the essence of its form (ibid, 246). In his typically technical language, Jakobson’s meter is:

Far from being an abstract theoretical scheme, meter – or in more explicit terms, verse design underlies the structure of any line- or in logical terminology, any single verse instance... [t]he verse design determines the invariant features of verse instances and sets up the limits of variation... poetic meter, however, has so many intrinsically linguistic peculiarities that it is most convenient to describe it from a purely linguistic point of view... [t]he verse design is embodied in verse instances (1987: 78-9).

Jakobson’s notion of parallelism, with its detailed yet multi-layered attention to the linguistic utterance in verse produces a fine-grained analysis of discourse. Yet I invoke Jakobson also in order to register dissatisfaction with his notion of parallelism. My dissatisfaction stems from the implicit position that a linguistic constitution is the mere execution of or deviation from linguistic rules; themselves governed by alleged cognitive, universal rules.<sup>15</sup> A linguistic analysis informed by a Jakobsonian formulation of parallelism is inclined to ignore the moral-political subjectivities operating in the production of parallelism itself. To address those subjectivities, I pursued an ethnography of the poetic form, asking the question: how is poetic form conceived and produced at a particular locale, and with what moral and political sensibilities?

Addressing the subjectivity of those engaged in so-called parallelism raises other questions about a variety of sensibilities, disciplines, regulations and power relations that

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<sup>15</sup> Jakobson agrees with Baudelaire that “regularity and symmetry... are among the primordial needs of the human mind.” (in Caton 1987: 246).

go into making what comes under the cognitive-sounding appellation of “parallelism.” In my first ethnographic chapter, I will focus on the traditional Arabic verse form commonly known as “*al-qasidah al-amoudiyyah*” (“the pillar-based poem”).<sup>16</sup> It is a verse in which there is a general regularity of one rhyme and one meter and might, therefore, be considered extremely “parallelistic.” However, my aim is not to demonstrate how this “linguistic” parallelism is ideologically constituted or culturally meaningful. My goal is to attend to the political sensibilities and moral subjectivities that produce or abstain from the so-called parallelism. I say abstain, because the more “modern” poets sought to become, the more “free” they sought to be from what had become for them the shackles of meter and rhyme. “Parallelism” appears therefore not as the manifestation of a cultural or ideological order in a linguistic structure but as a composite of cultural practices of historically transformed moral-political subjects. The cultivation of such a practices, as evident from poets’ accounts of how they learned their craft, makes clear that such work is simultaneously moral, political, and artistic discipline. The more modern the poems became, the more obsolete this discipline appeared.

Another source of formulation for poetic form is more sociological and mainly Marxist. While formalist poetics accords attention to the details of specific linguistic forms, such as rhyme, meter and rhythm, sociological poetics lends itself more towards an inquiry into the sociality of literary forms, or more precisely, genres, coming mainly from Marxist formulations. For Marxists, the analysis of form turns on the analysis of

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<sup>16</sup> Ihsan ‘Abbas (1992: 27) notes that this is a misnomer given to the traditional form by those who reject it. ‘*Amoud* is the singular form for “pillar” in Arabic. ‘*Amoudi* is used as an adjective here to identify the form of a poem. It derives from the traditional theory of the “pillar of poetry,” most notably formulated by al-Marzouqi (b. 421 h.). An ‘*amoudi* poem is one that is said to subscribe to the traditional pillars of verse. See more on the al-Marzouqi’s formation of the theory in Ihsan Abbass (1971:399-410).

“ideology.” In the works of Bakhtin and later Marxists attention is given to the historical, material, ideological and social formation of poetic language. In contrast to the poetics of “specifiers,” as Bakhtin refers to the formalists, his proposed sociological poetics seeks to demonstrate that “poetic language is social through and through.” (ibid. 1985: 36).

According to Bakhtin, poetic form is a “concrete ideological phenomenon, which is always material and historical” (ibid. 1985: 4). Furthermore, sound, which shapes poetic form according to Bakhtin “is not in the organism and not in nature but it is between people, socially organized people” (1985: 103). Raymond Williams continues to articulate, within this Marxist tradition, an approach to form in which the latter is “inevitably a relationship” (1977: 187). For Williams, the ultimately formative moment is the “material articulation, the activation and generation of shared sounds and words” (1977: 191). The utility of such Marxist formulations should be apparent in so far that they break away from the self-contained conception of poetry offered by the formalists; yet all too often they wed the analysis of form to that of ideology, as variously formulated within the Marxist tradition.

Regardless of the sources of attention to form (linguistic or literary, formalist, Marxist or post-structuralist), each approach insists on the form’s significance, as articulated in a critical notion of the “content of the form.” This notion is employed in different ways, in a variety of fields, and from a variety of positions (Bahrawi, 2001; Bakhtin, 1981, 1985; Chartier, 1995; Jameson, 1971; Lottman, 1976; Tynjanov, 1981; White, 1987; Williams, 1977, Zima 1978). Common to all these diverse modes of investigating the inseparability of form and content rests on an insistence on the form’s meaning. It is an insistence that

the materiality of the form is neither external nor superficial. It is an insistence that the form itself is the bearer and producer of a content (or ideology, in Marxist terms).

Examining the narrative form of historical representation, Hayden White, for example, holds that narrative “far from being merely a discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary, already possesses a content (1987:xi).<sup>17</sup>

In this ethnographic investigation, my primary mode of engagement was interviews with poets, not their poems. How then is the content of form pursued here? There are many ways to attend to the form of a poem. In this ethnographic investigation, two ways opened up. First and primarily, I identify the form in the narratives I collected from poets about their forms.<sup>18</sup> In those narratives, there is what I take to be an articulation of the form’s “grammar” in Wittgenstein’s words, or, as it were, its “ideology.” Second, I identify the form as it appears visually, in two distinct but related registers: the typographical and the prosodic. In the typographical register, what is apparent is the visual distribution of the poem’s words on the printed page, i.e., how the poem is formatted. In the prosodic register, the measurement of sound in the poem is captured. This is simply scansion, a visual analytical rendition of what is essentially an aural composition. To summarize, I want to examine what poets say about the poetic form and then how that form materializes.

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<sup>17</sup> Two other texts crucial to my understanding of poetic form are those of Baharwi (2001) and Lotman (1976). Both examine specifically the form of poetic texts; both locate the content of the form in eight registers of the poetic text. They both start with the typographical and phonological registers and then diverge by moving to other linguistic (e.g., morphemes, syntax, etc) and literary registers (e.g. tropes).

<sup>18</sup> Highly instructive to my thinking about poetic form in this way, as something that is beyond the poetic artifice itself, is Hanks’ discussion of text and textuality (Hanks, 1989).

To focus on the materiality of sound in poetry to the exclusion of other constituents might be arbitrary at first. Why should I exclude from the analysis other and just as significant aspects of the poem, such as grammar, syntax, style or figurative language? The contingencies of disciplinary training and requirements are only part of the answer. My ethnographic goal was to learn from poets what their texts could not teach me. Another factor had to do with the historical fact that sound (and sound measurement, to be precise) appears to be the crucial material for the making and unmaking of a poem's form. In other words, poems are classified as classical, free verse or prose based upon their metrical structure rather than tropes; although, of course, those two are always related in many complex ways. Rhyme, meter and rhythm are essential components of poetic forms. At least in the Arab poetic tradition, *shi'r* (poetry) has been defined canonically as "measured and rhyming utterance pointing to a meaning" (*qaulun mawzunun muqaffa yadullu 'ala ma'nān*).<sup>19</sup> The third factor has to do with a central question that I am pursuing in this study. In a technical sense my question is about sound; more specifically, it is about the fate of sound measurement in modern poetic composition. I want to know what ethnographic attention to sound and meter could tell us about modernity in which the sound of poems becomes increasingly irrelevant? What does it mean that measuring and disciplining of sound is increasingly obsolete in the modern era? And why in this modern era verse is approached like prose?

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<sup>19</sup> This is the definition with which Qudama ibn Ja'afar (d. after 932 A.D.) opens his *Naqd al-Shi'r* (Assaying of Poetry). See the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993: 83).

### **Abandoning Discipline, Modernizing the Self**

I have described a set of assumptions, procedures and preliminary arguments that lay the foundation for the main argument of this study. Now I want to elaborate on my primary argument. While demonstrating how in the course of its modernizing, Arabic poetry moved from a state of order to a state of disorder, from a largely complex and clearly organized tradition to a dismantled one, and above all, from the existence of a discipline towards the erosion of one, I argue, in accord with the poets, that in the poetic form there is always the enactment of a form of self and social structure. Therefore, the modernization of sound structures in forms of poetry is the modernization of political sensibilities, moral subjectivities and social structures.

I present the argument about moral-political subjectivities inhabiting the poetic forms, in three ethnographic chapters (*Song, Picture, and Dream*). Each chapter is dedicated to one of the forms in contemporary Arabic poetry (classical ode, “free” verse, and the prose poem respectively). This narrative argument principally traces the erosion of metrical discipline, both through the visual presentations of poetic forms (the poem and its scansion), and through the poets’ narratives about them. The value of these narratives does not rest in their linguistic-literary accuracy (or lack thereof) but in their assumptions and implications. The questions I presented to the poets over “techniques” and “devices” diverged to questions about political possibilities and limitations in Arab-Islamic history and present, Western hegemony, and Israeli occupation. Poets point to the implication of those wider forces in their aesthetic and political sensibilities, which animate their rhythmical practices.

The poets' pronouncements make it clear that the process of choosing metered or non-metered composition is not simply an aesthetic-phonetic choices, but an intricately moral and political act. Therefore, a critique of non-metered, prose poetry or the defense of metered one in the literary scene, are not manifestations of positions in "art." While poets working in the classical form viewed the modernizing poets, especially those working with prosaic forms as imitators of Western modernity, the modernizing poets saw traditional poets as the bearers of stifled Arab traditions whose authority had been surpassed by the modern present. Within the smaller scene of Palestinian poetry, occupation was invoked, both in defending and attacking poetic meter. Those who defended poetic meter saw in the prosaic form (notable for its total rejection of meter, its irregular rhythm and obscure diction) an aberration and abnormality very much like occupation itself. Those who abandoned meter to "freer" forms saw in poetic meter, a militaristic, oppressive tool restricting the freedom of the poet. Therefore, the poets' commentaries on the forms and devices of their craft enable exploring how the modern erosion of metrical discipline is the site of varied, indeed oppositional, positions towards modernizing both Arabic verse and society.

This argument about the abandonment of a poetic discipline and its societal implications should not be mistaken for an historically established anthropological desire to salvage the past and its traditions, or to reveal "resistance" of non-Western agents to Western hegemony. This study is an attempt to analyze the present, through a poetic tradition, while interrogating some of the current categories, which inform its comprehension and construction as "the real." Moreover, I must stress that in making an argument about

modernizing Arabic poetry, my main concern is the social salience of such modernizing as expressed primarily through my interviews with the poets. My concern with the modern process, which emerged from the poetic polemic about the modernization of Arabic poetry, led me to advance an argument in the form of a narrative that is developed in three ethnographic chapters. These chapters trace how Arab poets in their quest to be modern discarded poetic meter. The discarding of poetic meter is not strictly speaking the discarding of a linguistic-literary device, as the poets' narratives will reveal. These narratives reveal how new sensibilities are replacing old ones – not simply towards verse or art or creativity, but also towards notions of tradition, language, society, public, self and time.

To be sure, similar accounts of disappearance in modernity have been told elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

Here I will refer to two that have been highly instructive to me. Alasdair MacIntyre argues about the modern definition of virtue after the expulsion of Aristotelian and Christian teleologies: "It is not so much or at all the replacement of one set of criteria by another but rather a movement towards and into a situation where there are no longer any clear criteria." (1984: 236). Modernizing poets will, in this study, argue the same about the poetry they forge: they will reject, in the name of modernizing, any clear (or "strict" as they say) or practice-based criteria for verse. Talal Asad observes another dynamic of

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<sup>20</sup> It is largely because of these narratives, which repudiate assigning to art the task of "responding" to social conditions that I find it more useful to speak of modernity, not modernism. In those poetic narratives, modernizing poets are not simply responding to social conditions, they also are advocating them; and they are advocating them in the name of modernity (*hadātha*). Forces of disintegration and fragmentation in modern cultural reality are acknowledged in studies of modernism (as in modernism itself), whereby the latter ultimately is made to stand as an "artistic movement" or an "aesthetic response" to modern social conditions. For instance Harvey notes that modernism is "a complex and often contradictory affair" (1989: 24), whereby he sees in modernism "a troubled and fluctuating aesthetic response to conditions of modernity produced by a particular process of modernization." (ibid: 99).

disappearance within the modern period, revolving around the “religious” training that used to entail discipline: “Discipline (intellectual and social) would in this period, gradually abandon religious space, letting “belief,” “conscience” and “sensibility” take its place.” (1993a: 39). And so is the case, I want to demonstrate, with meter and rhythm in modern verse: it is no longer to be heard but “felt inside.” This is why poets and sympathetic literary critics commonly speak of “internal rhythm.” To become a poet, one no longer needs to master meters, but to “feel” poetry. And since uttering poetry no longer rests fundamentally on “measuring sounds” but on feeling them, poetry, poetic meters and its accompanying science of prosody might as well disappear.<sup>21</sup>

Since the late 1980s, ethnographic writings that addresses modernity, the concept and its reality, have proliferated. A prominent debate over the extent of its homogenizing effects has preoccupied anthropological studies of modernity. In opposition to the argument cultural differences are obliterated during the modernization process, anthropologists commonly document the persistence of such differences. Therefore, a frequent concern within the anthropological literature on modernity is the survival of cultural difference and resistance amidst or in spite of the modernizing process.<sup>22</sup> Such a concern has led to such concepts as “multiple modernities” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xi; Faubian, 1988: 374), “other” modernities (Rofel, 1999), “inflections of modernity” (Knauff, 2001:

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<sup>21</sup> I refer to prosody as science because in the Arab poetic tradition the knowledge of a poem’s metrical structure was formulated as a scientific endeavor (*ilm al-‘aurud*) by the Basran philologist al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. ca. 791). I introduce the al-Khalili prosodic system with more details in the chapter titled *The Song*.

<sup>22</sup> (E.g. Appadurai, 1996; Comaroffs, 1993; Faubian, 1988; Knauff 2001; Ong, 1997; Piot, 1999, Rofel, 1999).

3) and “vernacular modernities” (Piot, 1999: 187).<sup>23</sup> Yet, the presence of multiple, contradictory or even illusory features of modernity does not preclude the possibility (some will say fact) that modern effects everywhere must be dealt with in a world, where as Talal Asad notes, “only new (i.e. modern) choices can be made” (1992: 337). In other words, the fact that modernity is translated differently in different parts of the world does not preclude the fact that everywhere modernity *has had to be* translated.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to this concern over how modernity renders cultural reality around the globe to be similar or dissimilar, I am interested in opening up questions about *kinds of categories* that might (or might not) be employed in observations of modern cultural similarity or dissimilarity, specifically around the related realities of order and discipline.

Rather, I want to suggest an inquiry into kinds of disciplines, orders, or rationalities. It is precisely in attempting to think about kinds of disciplines, orders and regulations that I find it useful to consider the category of secularism in the analysis of modern Arabic verse. I will explore how “the secular” is a useful category in analyzing the modernity of a seemingly literary transformation. In tracing a transformation from regularity to irregularity, this study will explore how the shift from the classical ode to the prose poem and modern verse in general is (or is not) a shift to a secular kind of order. I will explore how “the secular” rearranges not only how Arabs define poetry and its public, but also how that poems are arranged materially on the page, and how their sounds are measured,

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<sup>23</sup> The Comaroffs do not think highly of the concept of modernity. They seem to suggest discarding it as when they speak of “mythic modernities”: “[l]ooked at up close, then, modernity itself all too often melts into air” as it does not allow, on their account, understanding the view of the colonized (1993: xii).

<sup>24</sup> Talal Asad makes a similar point (1993b: 36) when he says “to talk coherently of change one has to assume the existence of identity that is the subject of change... The European project requires not the production of uniform *culture* throughout the world but certain shared modalities of legal-moral behavior, forms of national-political structuration, and rhythms of progressive history.”

if at all. Poets' ambition to modernize poetic forms resounds with a secular ethos, not simply because they call for the reconfiguring the place of religion and religious reasoning in public life in accord with common secular sensibilities; rather, secularism, appears to be informing the tasks with which they charge their poetry in society. In their view, poetry is apparently "distinct" from politics, the public sphere, and from morality. The paramount moral imperative of the "true" poet, therefore, is to be a "poet," and "artist."

One might rightly ask: why should I invoke the "the secular" in the first place? In what ways is the great transformation from the classical lyrical to prosaic verse a secular one? What does the measuring or not measuring of sound in a poem's words have to do with the secular? These questions, I believe, rest in a fundamental way on how one registers the secular in poetic composition. Undeniably, identifying the secular can be done in more ways than one.<sup>25</sup> I invoke the secular, not simply because in my fieldwork I saw traditional verse (the classical ode) in the hands of "conservative," "religious" or "traditional" poets and the "free" verse and the prose poem in the hands of "modern" "secular" or "atheist" poets. Nor is it because I saw more headscarves and beards among those who attended the performances of "traditional" forms, and more tight clothes and

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<sup>25</sup> I am reminded here of two celebratory essays of secularism in literary studies, one of which identifies the secular in style and the other in genre. The first is Auerbach's study of Dante (and his style) whom Auerbach identifies as secular by the poet's virtue of discovering man "not as a remote legendary hero, not as an abstract anecdotal representation of an ethical type, but man as we know him in his living historical reality, the concrete individual in his unity and wholeness." (1969: 175). The second is Bakhtin's study of genres where he speaks of "novelization" whereupon according to Bakhtin: "It is impossible to explain the phenomenon of novelization purely by reference to the direct and unmediated influence of the novel itself... [t]he novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making (1981: 7). About this world of "novelized" present, Bakhtin goes on to say: "The world has become polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly... words and languages began to have a different feel to them; objectively they ceased to be what they had once been." (*ibid.*: 11)

shaven beards among those at the events of “free,” modern forms. This schematic division indexes the secular in the most superficial way. A careful examination would register the secular in the poem’s very formation. For relation between forms were more complex than allowed by this division between “traditional/religious” and “secular/modern,” whether discussing poets or audiences. I learned from my fieldwork errors not to consider the “religiosity” of the poet a faithful index of the poem’s traditional form. After all, during the fieldwork, I met “non-religious” (both Muslim and Christian) and even atheist poets who wrote in very traditional forms.

Nor do I identify the “secular” in the poets’ secularist positions about the reconfiguration of the role of religion in their quest to modernize poetry. Many of the modernizing poets were self-avowed secularists and wanted (in keeping with the “doctrine of secularism”) to see a limited role of religion and religious reasoning in society.<sup>26</sup> I submit, here too, that this ideological position might be necessary, but not at all sufficient to register “the secular” in poetic composition and poetic transformation. I therefore register the secular not in poets’ pronouncements about religion nor in sociological positions within secular or religious communities (with their corresponding learned codes of appearance and behaviors), but, rather, in the poets’ pronouncements about the intimate details and techniques that lead to the poem’s creation, such as rhythm, meter, and rhyme. I also considered the poets’ sense of hearing, writing and indeed defining language, their sense of a relation with poetry’s public, their sense of self and tradition, and their sense of living and dying. Above all, the secular in this study is a certain tension that enables

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<sup>26</sup> I take the phrase from Talal Asad who refers to secularism as a political and governmental doctrine (2003:24).

certain sensibilities necessary for secular poetic composition. Through poets' pronouncements on forms this study sheds light on the unstable and problematic relation between "the religious" and the "the secular." Whether through attention to a poet's working in the traditional form and employing modern socialist ideologies or to a secular prose poet abundantly evoking the eschatological, this inquiry serves as a reminder for questioning the separation between "the religious" and "the secular." Through ethnographic attention to these "technical" sensibilities, I will explore how secularism is pertinent to the manifestation of modernity in a local tradition of Arabic literary poetry. I will now turn to the historic standing of that very tradition and some of its central practices that I now turn.

### **In the Beginning Was the Sound**

In presenting Arabic literary poetry, I want to convey two aspects that I think will be useful towards a crucial, yet highly compressed, understanding of both the tradition itself and the argument I am advancing through it.<sup>27</sup> Those two aspects are the historic prominence of the tradition and the prominence of sound in this tradition. Below, I relate how my concern with these two aspects emerged from the ethnographic fieldwork.

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<sup>27</sup> The literature on the modernizing process of Arabic poetry is immense. Works that I found useful include the following: in English (Boullata, I., 1980; al-Jayyusi, 1977; Badawi, 1975, 1985; Moreh, 1976); in French, (Kheir Beik 1978) in Arabic ('Abbas, 1992; Ayyad, 1968; Bannis, 1990; Ismai'l, 1978; Shukri, 1968; al-Malai'ka, 1989; an-Nuwayhi, 1971). The engagement of Arabic poetry with Western poetry is the subject of a debate between two positions, one ascribing imitation (Moreh, 1976) and another creativity (Badawi, 1975); there appears in this literature, as in common modern poetic practice and conception, a dominant narrative of liberation accounting for the modernizing of Arabic poetry. Hence in these literary accounts, modern Arabic poetry emerges from a "state of atrophy" (e.g. Moreh, 1988: 116) through the "liberating influence" of Western poetry (e.g. Badawi, 1985: 117) towards "a greater affinity with world poetry." (e.g. al-Jayyusi, 1977: 748). In this study, I seek to present a narrative that deviates from the triumphalist tone of those stories.

While I withstood the temptation of analyzing the wonder of poets into acts of martyrdom, and the very fulfillments of those martyrdom acts by women and men who faced occupation, I succumbed to the pressure of poets (a few anyway) who insist that poetry is no more. I decided to dwell on this view and began seriously to entertain their thoughts. Perhaps these poets were right. Perhaps there is no poetry any more, at least in a certain sense. This proposition is why, in a certain sense, this entire dissertation is written with such doubt. It was this these doubts that enabled me at times to register the “poetic effect,” outside poetry per se, not only in martyrdom, as poets themselves do, but also in what is commonly referred to as “religious experience.” This is why I found myself during my fieldwork confronting the relationship between the Qur’an and poetry, between the “sacred” and the “aesthetic.” Of course this relationship is not at all the subject of this study. Nor should it be. At the same time, without understanding something about that weight of the Qur’an, one’s appreciation of poetry’s place in Arab-Muslim societies is bound to remain unduly limited.<sup>28</sup>

It was not doubt alone that compelled me to consider the relationship between the Qur’an and poetry as a way of introducing the Arab poetic tradition. It was also a disagreement. I could not agree with the many poets who attributed an “absent culture of reading” (*thaqafat al-qira’aa*) in Arab societies to the lack of interest in poetry in general, or their poetry, specifically. I could not agree because everywhere, or so it seemed, I saw people reading the Qur’an or listening to someone else reading, or rather, reciting it. I could not

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<sup>28</sup> In the matrix of complex relations that exist between poetry and the Qur’an, it should also be borne in mind that the understanding the Qur’an is aided by knowledge of Arabic poetry. This understanding is evident in a *hadith* (saying) by the Prophet Muhammad: “In poetry there is wisdom, so if something perplexed you in the Qur’an, seek knowledge of it in poetry.” (see *Lisan al-‘Arab* by Ibn Mandhour, 1955, vol. 4: 410).

say the same about poetry, certainly not modern poetry. So given the poets' doubts about the existence of poetry and the disagreements I had with some of their opinion, I chose to introduce the great tradition of Arabic poetry by way of the Qur'an. After all, all poets, I gather, want to accomplish precisely what the Qur'an is believed to accomplish: inspire a movement in the human heart.

Traversing the distances between the Qur'an and the poetry that is the subject of this study follows then a certain logic: Any understanding of the place of local Palestinian poetry in the modern world – which is the primary focus of this study – has to begin with an acknowledgment of its place in the larger Arab poetic tradition.<sup>29</sup> Any understanding of the Arab poetic tradition must begin with appreciating the place of the word in Arab history. Furthermore, any appreciating the place of the word (and sound) in Arab-Muslim societies will remain limited if it does not acknowledge in one way or another the standing of the Qur'an, the essential text in whose shade Arabic poetry has been operating for nearly a millennium and a half.

In conveying the Arabs' great awe of poets and poetry, it is common to hear stories of tribal feasts and festivities in honor of a rising poet or stories about dramatic encounters between poets and patrons throughout Arab history.<sup>30</sup> Yet the immense presence of the Arab poetic tradition also can be observed from that which is outside poetry. By this, I mean, of course, the Qur'an. More specifically, I am referring to the Qur'anic refutation of the accusation leveled against the Prophet Muhammad by some of those who first

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<sup>29</sup> Useful histories and anthologies of Palestinian poetry, which I relied on include ( al-Yaghi, 1981; al-Kayyali, 1975; Kanafani, 1968, al-Asad, 2000, al-Khattib, 1968 in Arabic and al-Jayyusi 1992 in English).

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Rashid, 1988; Ibn Qutaybah; 1972; Nicholson, 1969.

heard him.<sup>31</sup> The Prophet was accused of being a poet for who else could come up with such piercing, unusual words and sounds.<sup>32</sup> Repeatedly, however, the Qur'an objects to this accusation, insisting that the words of the Prophet are not from a *shytan* (a satan), as some disbelievers have thought (in keeping with the ancient Arab belief about the suprahuman source of poetry). The words of Muhammad, the Qur'an tells us, came from God. The Prophet is only a messenger of a divine writ.

The fact that disbelievers should deny the Prophet's prophethood, or seeing in him dismissively as only a poet (at times *majnun*, that is, insane) should itself confirm the awe that Arabs had or perhaps still have for poets. I draw attention to the link between poetry and the Qur'an as one way to help the foreign reader appreciate the historic respect bestowed upon Arab poets. Realizing the historic immanence of Arab poets in their societies will enable a better appreciation of the poets' narratives in this study, especially in the cases where this immanence becomes unsettling to modernizing poets.

Surely, the link between the Qur'an and poetry could have been established in other ways such as discussing the fact that one of the Qur'an's *suras* (chapters) carries the very title

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<sup>31</sup> See for example *sura* 36 (verse 69-70), *sura* 37 (verse 36), and *sura* 69 (verse 41-41) whereupon in the last instance cited here, the disbelievers are reminded in the Qur'an that: (40) Behold, this [Qur'an] is indeed the [inspired] word of a noble apostle, (41) and is not – however little you may [be prepared to] believe it – the word of a poet; (42) and neither is it – however little you may [be prepared to] take it to heart – the word of a soothsayer" (Trans. M. Asad) found at: <http://www.quran.org.uk/> on January 21, 2004 under "English Translations."

<sup>32</sup> For a narration of this encounter in English see Nicholson (1968: 74). The Prophet Muhammad was thought to deliver *saj'a* (un-metered rhyme). Identifying certain patterns in The Prophet's speech as *saj'a* is precisely what provides the more "technical" ground for refuting the accusation that he was a poet. The Arabs canonically considered an utterance poetic, only if it was metrical and rhyming.

of “Poets” (*al-Shu'ara*) and in fact goes on to condemn poets (not poetry).<sup>33</sup> Yet introducing the Arab poetic tradition via the Qur'an serves not only to show the sociological prominence of Arabic poetry but also points to another relation that exists between the Qur'an and poetry. This commonality is the shared valorization of sound. In addressing the human heart, the Qur'an, presumes a listening ear, just as much, if not more than, a seeing eye. For the meaning of the Qur'an's verses to be conveyed as perfectly as possible, it is essential for the verses to be heard. Therefore, upon reading the Qur'an, even if alone, one is encouraged to read it aloud in order to enable a fuller comprehension of its meanings.

Besides the Qur'an, the language itself testifies to the primacy of sound, especially in poetry. I am referring specifically to *shi'r*, the word for poetry in Arabic. This primacy can be demonstrated in two ways. First, phonetically *shi'r* points to related words in other Semitic languages. I am thinking of the word *shir* (such as in Akkadian, Aramaic and Hebrew), which can mean song as well as poem.<sup>34</sup> Second, that the Arabs in the poetic tradition maintained a primal affinity between poetry and song, between word and sound, as evident in numerous classical poems and in classical literary criticism. Due to this affinity, it is common to hear poets and literary critics throughout the history of Arabic poetry refer to poems as songs (sing. *nashid*; *anashid*, *pl.*) and to the act of composing or reciting a poem as singing (*inshad*).<sup>35</sup> As traditional poets pointed out to me during the

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<sup>33</sup> *Sura* 26 (verse 224-227). As for the Prophet himself, there is in the few hadiths (sayings) attributed to him about poetry, both condemning and condoning poetry and poets. Ibn Rashiq (1988: 85-93) records some of those sayings.

<sup>34</sup> See entry under *shi'r* in the *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language* (1987: 655) (Macmillan Publishing, Co. New York). Also consider, the biblical *Shir ha-Shirim* (Song of Songs).

<sup>35</sup> I invoke here, the Prophet's poet, Hassan bin Thabit's famous *bayt* (verse line): *iyaghanna fi kulli shi'rin anta qai'luhu/inna al-ghina'a li-hadha al-shi'ri midmaru* (Sing all the poetry you utter, for singing is the

fieldwork, composing a traditionally lyrical poem rests on a certain discipline, one that is geared towards cultivating a mastery over meters (*awzan*, sing. *wazn*). This mastery of meters enables the production of the hegemonic form of mono-rhymed and mono-metered *qasida* (ode/poem), which has largely dominated the historical record of Arabic poetry for the last fifteen centuries – from the pre-Islamic era until the middle of the twentieth century.

As Arab poets began fervently to relinquish the primacy of sound and music in poetry during the 1950s and 1960s they also started to produce prosodically simpler, and rhythmically un-disciplined verse, i.e., less measured or non-measured verse. Poets are increasingly encouraged to compose “silent” or “whispering” poetry, to be read mutely like a novel. Paradoxically, for the poets, they increasingly complain that no one reads them. Before one shows how poets arrived at this state, before one shows how poets became “silent” or unread and unheard in the present, one has to begin with a local time and place when they were heard, and heard very well.

Now I turn to Palestinian poetry in the early 1950s, shortly after the destruction of Palestine in 1948. The recording of the final hours of the classical form’s hegemony, as evident in a highly particular tradition of Palestinian poetry festivals that spread under Israeli military rule, is the focus of the next chapter. Paying attention to the poets who work with, or at least continue to advocate the case of, rigorous metrical measurement clarifies my argument about the modern erosion of discipline in poetic production.

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sphere of poetry). Or when Ibn Rashiq (1988: 79) describes the encounter between the poet Ka’ab bin Zuheir and the Prophet Muhammad by saying “*anshada ka’bun qasidatahu*” (Ka’ab sang his poem).

## Chapter Four: The Song

“Mount fetters atop fetters for feebler than my wrists is your fetter” were the words Tawfiq Zayyad “sang,” as one would say in the traditional way, one night in October, 1958.<sup>1</sup> He composed the verses while in prison a few months earlier and then “sang” them at a poetry festival in the village of Kufur Yasif in the Western Galilee; the site had become part of the State of Israel a decade earlier. Along with that village, many other locations in the part of Palestine occupied in 1948 hosted a short-lived, but widespread, phenomenon of poetry festivals. These festivals were literary-political and populist occasions replete with danger for those who attended them and testimonies in the history of a highly particular tradition of Palestinian Arabic poetry. Notably, these festivals were filled with a kind of Arabic poetry that soon began its descent into oblivion: traditional lyrical poetry. Just like a village wedding to which everyone was traditionally invited, the poetry festivals were open to everyone and offered the lyricism of classical Arabic verse to all those who attended, and it seemed as if really everyone did. I open my ethnographic narration of modernizing, Arabic literary forms with the phenomenon of these festivals; they will initiate a story of a cohort of poets and their once dominant poetic form. To present the story of this form and its poets is to present a foundational practice of the poetic tradition prior to its modern dismantlement: the discipline of metrical measurement.

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<sup>1</sup> (*Al-Jadid*, 1958, vol. 6: 38). Tawfiq Zayyad was an established Palestinian poet, member of the Israeli Communist Party, and a mayor of Nazareth. He died in a car accident on his return from Gaza to welcome Yasir Arafat, following the Oslo accords in 1993.

For those poetry festivals under the first Israeli military regime in the 1950s, poets generally composed in the traditional form characterized by precise metrical rigor. This form, historically and hegemonically had defined Arabic poetry throughout its nearly sixteen centuries of recorded history, beginning in the pre-Islamic era. As I have already noted, in common, modern literary parlance, this verse form is called *al-'amoudi* (the pillar-based) for its adherence to the “pillars” of classical Arab poetic composition. The architecture of this form is governed by a mono-rhymed and mono-metered versification. However, surrounding the dismantling of Palestine in 1948, nearly a century and a half after the Napoleonic assault on Egypt, the hegemony of poetic pillars and the form whose construction they enabled disintegrated. To note the production of this highly lyrical verse at local Palestinian poetry festivals in the 1950s is to note an hegemony nearing its end.

To examine the cohort of poets who once worked, and some still do, in *al-'amoudi* form is to examine practices, conceptions and subjectivities that were abandoned in the fierce quest to modernize Arabic poetry, most notably in the middle of the Twentieth Century. The *al-'amoudi* poets remain left, as it were, out of modernity. They are the “reactionary” and the ridiculed, and the stifled; they are silenced by the literary figures and institutions who have the power to define what modern Arabic poetry “should” look like.<sup>2</sup> The silencing of poets occurred not only at the behest of the literary establishment, but also on occasions at the behest of another grand modern establishment: the nation-state.

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<sup>2</sup> To illustrate, there were the Arab poets invited to read at the 34<sup>th</sup> Cairo international book fair at the expense of the General Egyptian Organization of the Book (GEBO), none of whom were affiliated with the classical form. I also am reminded of the Palestinian *al-Karmil* periodical that is quite unlikely to currently publish poetry of the *al-'amoudi* form. For many poets, as this study will demonstrate, this form is no longer suitable under the current conditions of Arab society.

Palestinian poets who composed under the first Israeli military rule were sent to prison for their words.<sup>3</sup> They believed their words could change world orders; presumably so did guardians of the state who clearly feared them and their words.

Later generations of poets, however, say they can hardly mend their own selves, let alone the world. No one wants to scream and shout any longer, poets say, when reminiscing about the poetry of that time; even though it seems now they have the previously non-granted liberty to do so. Yet, it is precisely this moment in the long history of the Arabic *qasida* (ode) at which this ethnographic story begins.<sup>4</sup> I open the story just before sonority became “screaming,” before the song was deemed “superficial;” before the discipline of poetic meter was sent into its modern exile.

Here, as in the following two chapters, it is poets who, for the most part, tell the story of transforming modern Arabic poetry; they express different and oppositional views. They talk about the particular conditions under which they produced their poetry in *al-‘amoudi* form. They convey the capabilities and sensibilities necessary for producing this form, the marginality they face in pursuing it, and the kinds of relations they forge with their audiences. However, the story does not emanate only from my conversations with the poets. It also emerges through archival investigation I conducted at the Emile Touma Research Center in Haifa during my fieldwork.<sup>5</sup> At the Touma Center I found archived

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<sup>3</sup> The three senior Palestinian poets I present in this chapter, including the one whom I just cited (Tawfiq Zayyad), were imprisoned in the jails of the Israeli military ruler during the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>4</sup> Although *qasida* is sometimes made to refer strictly to the classical poem or to the genre of classical poetry in English-language scholarship (e.g. Sperl and Schackle, 1996), in this study, as in common Arab poetic parlance, *qasida* means a poem, irrespective of its historical time or formalistic features.

<sup>5</sup> Emile Touma, a local Arab scholar and communist leader from a Greek Orthodox family, who wrote extensively on politics, economics, history and literature.

the entire publication of *al-Jadid (The New)*, an Arabic literary journal of the Israeli Communist Party. In *al-Jadid*, I found a four decade-long documentation of the poetic scene and more particularly of historic poetry festivals, and the *al-'amoudi* form that once bourgeoned in them.

### **Dangerous Weddings**

The years following the first modern destruction of Palestine in 1948, were a time when poets were heard, and heard widely. It was a state of awakening for *al-'amoudi* form just before its final hours. It sought to enliven just as its own life was nearing its end. *Al-'amoudi* poetry arose from the destruction of Palestine, and shortly after, fell in its own. When Arab poets elsewhere began to modernize their craft by discarding this traditional form, Palestinian poets continued to compose *al-'amoudi* poetry living and writing under the power of both an Israeli military rule that severed their existence from that of surrounding Arab societies, and an ancient poetic tradition that had dominated Arab versification for the last sixteen centuries at least. While disdain and isolation might have been a common lot for poets at different conjunctions in the vast history of Arabic poetry as near the end of the Muslim rule of Spain or during the pre-World War II Romantic era, Palestinian poets at poetry festivals within Israel who composed in *al-'amoudi* form were sorely needed in the fifth and sixth decades of the Twentieth Century.<sup>6</sup> The political institution that supported many of them was the Israeli Communist Party, which afforded Palestinians in the nascent Jewish state the only legalized non-Zionist and non-Jewish political mobilization.

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<sup>6</sup> See Ihasan Abbas' discussion of Hazim al-Qirtajjani's sense of poetry's loss surrounding the loss of Andalusia (1971: 539) and M. M. Badawi for Romantic Arabic poetry between Europe's world wars (1975:204-5).

After the 1948 fall of Palestine, poets who remained on the soil of their usurped homeland made the word, the poetic word soar. When everything else appeared so vulnerable, so contingent, and so shaming, the words of the deeply rooted Arabic ode (*qasidah*) that originated in the distant desert provided refuge and light. Although poets still produced *al-'amoudi* form regulated by a single meter and a single rhyme, as the ancients did, their output was anything but a replica or incarnation of the classical poets whose verse architecture they had inherited and sustained.

The fact that they composed in the aftermath of the first modern destruction of Palestine left indelible marks, such as the need to write for the “masses” (*jamaheer*) in keeping with modern socialist realism prevailing then in other Arab countries.<sup>7</sup> However, the Palestinian poets who read the works of foreign poets such as Hikmet, Lurca, Mayakovsky, Neruda, and revolutionaries such as Lenin, Sartre, Marx or Trotsky, were also the very poets who followed the footsteps of an ancient tradition of Arabic poetry stretching from the pre-Islamic slave-hero poet ‘Antara bin Shaddad, to the prince poet of modern Egypt Ahmad Shawqi.<sup>8</sup> This historically peculiar poetry that they produced was one that simultaneously advocated modern and global ideologies of socialism and

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<sup>7</sup> The leftist and Arab nationalist Beirutian literary journal, *al-Adāb* (Literature), edited by Suhil Idriss, introduced socialist realism, particularly the notion of “commitment” (à la Sartre) in 1953 (see Badawi., 1985: 12-3).

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad Shawqi, a leading neo-classicist of Egypt (1869-1927), was known also as “Prince of Poets,” a title he earned in 1927 in Cairo. ‘Antara bin Shaddad (d. 614m AD) is a poet-knight-slave of an Abyssinian slave mother in the ‘Abs tribe. His amorous and chivalric poetry constitutes a rich oral epic tradition (*sira*) around the Arab world and his poem was dedicated to the cousin he loved, ‘Abla, belongs to the pre-Islamic body of canonical poetry called *al-Mu‘allaqāt* (The Hanging Ones), which are said to have been hung on the walls of the K‘aba in Mecca.

communism, while also sustaining a pre-modern architecture of versification based on equal hemistiches throughout the poem.

However, neither the ancient Arab poetic tradition nor the fierce globalized ideological transformation affecting poetry were the sole forces shaping the local scene of Palestinian poets. It was also subjected to local politics, geography, and history. For example, an important historic player was the Israeli Communist Party (ICP). The ICP provided the only legitimized (not necessarily always tolerated) zone of non-Zionist political mobility for Palestinians, the subjects of the military rule in the newly established Jewish State. With the ICP's resources, Palestinian poetry festivals, evoking the popularity and openness of village weddings, functioned as political-literary-populist events addressing what mattered to the party and to its constituency. One issue of importance was the state's assault on the Arabic language; Arab intellectuals aligned themselves with the ICP responded through prose, as well as poetry. Their words, shown here in a 1951 *al-Jadid* editorial, offers a rich testimony to a composite of linguistic and literary, local and global orders:

The series of articles published by Comrade Stalin on language, which he wrote last year, confirms to us that our democratic cause to preserve the Arabic language in Israel, to nurture it and save it from what is attacking her is a battle with tidings of success. But to stand cross-armed, relying on the stability of grammar and the stability of the total sum of vocabulary is to stand fatalistically, which leaves the language without any living weapon to protect its existence. The literati of the Arabic language and all its lovers are invited to participate in the democratic battle for preserving the Arabic language in Israel. We understand that in some of the schools in Israel there is an attempt to substitute the classical Arabic (*fusha*) with the demotic dialect (*'amiyyah*) and for a long time the school curriculum for Arab pupils has been with a content of songs taught in colloquial Arabic such as '*ala dal 'aouna* and so forth.<sup>9</sup> Although we appreciate the charm (*'udhubah*) of many of those songs, our schools are called upon, not to teach the

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<sup>9</sup> '*Ala dal 'aouna* is a common ballad in what is known as *Bilad ash-Sham*: Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.

demotic dialect for this is a dialect that pupils know without the school, but to teach the classical language and the songs in the that language.<sup>10</sup> And who is more entitled than our poets, both established and rising, to fight against this direction by composing (*nadhm*) lyrical poetry with facile diction in literary Arabic so they could be sung with popular melodies and become widespread among pupils.<sup>11</sup>

Poems, besides prose, were composed in response to the attempt of undermining the Arabic language and of creating historical amnesia. With their poetry, Palestinian poets played a powerful and unforgettable role in infusing hope, strength, and persistence (*sumood*) among their people, in the face of a conquering regime. “We were supposed to be domesticated,” said the pioneering poet Hanna Abu Hanna in an interview with me; he was among the first local poets to publish in *al-Jadid*, in 1951, and to recite at poetry festivals. Like any other poem that I encountered in the field, Abu Hanna’s poems would not have seen the light of day, had it not been for one or another kind of institution. At that time, the institution that stood by Abu Hanna’s poetic and political work was the ICP. It was the party that sought and lived on the recognition of the state and represented a constituency whose existence the state itself barely and reluctantly recognized.<sup>12</sup>

A conquered people, whose religious, political and social institutions had collapsed, found refuge in one of the conqueror’s parties, the ICP.<sup>13</sup> While the Arab population

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<sup>10</sup> Generally, due to the difficulty of translating certain Arabic word into English or due to a particular significance of phrases, I place Arabic words within parenthesis.

<sup>11</sup> *al-Jadid* (1951, vol 4: 1-2).

<sup>12</sup> I am referring specifically to the abstinence of the Israeli government to issue ID cards to the local Arabs, shortly after 1948.

<sup>13</sup> Rakah is the local electoral name of the ICP whose dual catering to both the Jewish state and its Arab constituency was captured in the following passage by Zureik (1979: 171): “... while Rakah has espoused Palestinian nationalism and anti-Zionist doctrines, and at times pan-Arab socialist principles, it would be a mistake to call it a revolutionary party. It operates within the constitutional framework of the state, and in 1969 it supported a government bill in which campaign expenditures were financed by public funds... Rakah did not hesitate to dissociate itself from, and even expel, Arab party members who engaged in violent protest activities and were accused by the authorities of endangering state security. Its literary organs refused on more than one occasion to publish articles, written by Israeli Arabs, which the Communist Party perceived to be extremely nationalistic.”

provided a constituency for the party, the party served as a powerful outlet for thoughts that were meant to remain suppressed in darkness. Under the latter's tutelage, the poetry festival reached eminence. Salman Natour, a local, literary critic reminisced about that period. He speaks of a cultural *nakbah*, accompanying *an-Nakbah* (the catastrophe), which stands for the 1948 destruction of Palestine:<sup>14</sup>

The cultural *nakbah* led to the dispersion of the intellectuals and to the destruction of all institutions and the theft of cultural and civilizational treasures from museums and even books and to the destruction of the Palestinian city. Within Palestine of 1948 there remained 150,000 out of the 800,000, most of whom lived in villages on whose lands they were born or they were exiled or refugees from other villages in their own homeland and they had to "bury the dead and rise" as the poet Tawfiq Zayyad said upon the next round of expulsion in 1967. They had to fight for their stay and for re-establishing their culture in a heroic (*mustameet*) defense of their Arab Palestinian identity under a new colonial rule and a military racist rule that sought to Hebraize the Arabs through school curriculum and through the call for Palestinian writers to write their literature in Hebrew.

Between the *nakba* and the *naksa* (1948-1967),<sup>15</sup> we Palestinians who remained in the homeland were in a kind of detachment or severance of ties with our Arab nation (*umma*) and the rest of our people. Books published in the Arab world did not reach us unless one or two were sneaked in by those who went to visit relatives in Jordan through the Mendelbaum Gate or through smuggling by those returning from abroad.<sup>16</sup> The book moved from one house to another, from one village to another until its pages were worn and torn and then we copied it by hand. We used to meet our Arab peoples (*shu'oub*) through the waves of the ether and send them greeting or they us. Between a longing and a longing we listened to "Our Beautiful Language" and to "Two Words Only" and impatiently we would wait for Thursday evening when Umm Kulthum would launch her new song.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the pain about which Um Kulthum sang in her love songs was not the same kind of pain addressed in poetry festivals: the pain of loving a homeland. Those songs were not

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<sup>14</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (August 19, 2002:10)

<sup>15</sup> *Naksa* (setback) is here a reference to the defeat of Arab countries in the 1968 war.

<sup>16</sup> This is one of the gates in the old city of Jerusalem, which until 1967, was under the Hashimite Kingdom's sovereignty.

<sup>17</sup> "Our Beautiful Language" and to "Two Words Only" are names of programs on Egyptian radio programs.

to be heard in concert halls, but from improvised stages, with oil lights, under trees and under curfews, sometimes with and sometimes without the permission of an Israeli military ruler, but always with the fear and frequent defiance of his rules, bequeathed to him by the Emergency Laws of the British "Mandate."

To be sure, under military rule these festivals were not called Palestinian. To invoke Palestine was to invoke the suppressed, but haunting memory of a conqueror and to resurrect a life not entirely erased in the war's aftermath, hundreds of villages were destroyed and then renamed in Hebrew names, not in Arabic. The first poetry gathering after the 1948 destruction apparently took place on March 12, 1955 at the library of the Christian Men's Association of Nazareth. The organizers, a Suheil Mu'ammār and Michel Haddad announced a gathering of poets through the latter's periodical, *al-Mujtama'a (Society)*, which they named it the "Conference of the Poets of Arabic" (*Mu'atamar Shu'ara al-'Arabiyya*).<sup>18</sup> During my fieldwork I met two poets who seemed to have been excluded from this festival: Hanna Abu Hanna and Hanna Ibrahim. They participated nonetheless in many other ICP-supported festivals.<sup>19</sup>

Hanna Abu Hanna, schooled in the prestigious Arab College in Jerusalem under the British rule, is now a senior poet and a retired high school principal living in Haifa. In 1957, he assessed in an unmistakably optimistic, nationalist tone the significance of these

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<sup>18</sup> Jamal Qa'awar (*al-Sharq*, 1972, vol. 1 June: 25)

<sup>19</sup> From a letter sent to the organizers via *al-Jadid*, it appears that this conference of the "Poets of the Arabic Language," as the author of this letter referred to it, did not include more leftist, nationalist and communist-aligned poets. The author, Sasson Somekh, an Iraqi Jew, listed a few names of poets who, according to him, cared for protecting the Arabic language and for the brotherly bonds between Arabs and Jews, as did the poets who were actually invited to Nazareth (*al-Jadid*, 1955, April, vol. 6: 56).

poetry festivals. His assessment points to the then still dominant conception and valorization of lyricism in verse, and hence the notion that the poem is, above all, song. He also expressed the commonly felt positive view of those festivals, and the poems recited in them particularly. Abu Hanna pointed to a general shift that took place after World War II in Arabic poetry generally, and certainly in Palestinian poetry, the shift marked a move from a between-the-wars Romantic trend to what was called in the language of the day a “committed” poetry of nationalists and leftists.<sup>20</sup>

The calamity that struck this Arab Palestinian people scattered its sons, a remnant of it stayed within the borders but the majority of men of letters and educated ones were sent to exile. The conditions that surrounded this remnant of people converged to deprive it from cultural continuity with the Arab world and so an Arabic book became a scarcity that we rushed to seize. Also, the Ministry of Education directed Arab students in such a way that their Arab culture will be erased and their linguistic abilities damaged. But the spirit of this people battled all these obstacles and for this reason we see the budding fruits of Arabic literature in this country, defusing its delicate, refreshing scent all over... everywhere around us there is a call for poetry... everything around us is filled with emotion and *song*... we find these poetic fruits in our poetry festivals that became one of our blessed literary traditions in this country... there is no doubt that a true change occurred in our poetry at this stage. While the first fruits were distant from *realism* (*waq'iyah*) in a distant self, detached from our pains and miseries... [t]he rising of *national* and *human* spirit took poetry *forward* in its realism.<sup>21</sup>

In meeting Abu-Hanna personally, I learned that his poetry “went forward” by abandoning the Arab Romantic trend in which the poet’s favorite themes were inter-subjective love and nature. His reading of Mayakovsky led to a poem titled “Divorcing Romanticism” and resulted in a short period of imprisonment.<sup>22</sup> By divorcing

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<sup>20</sup> This is not at all to imply that poetry produced in Palestine was “apolitical” or detached from the political conflict, with Zionists before 1948. Many a poet, Arab and Palestinian, concerned their works with the threats of the British and Zionist project (see Kayyali, 1975; ‘Alayyan, 1987, al-Asad, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> *Al-Jadid*, 1957, “Lafta ila al-Shi’r Al-‘Arabi fi Biladina,” vol. 4: 26.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), a leading poet of the 1917 Russian revolution who also pioneered the Futurism movement.

Romanticism and wedding poetry to socialist realism, Abu Hanna spoke through his poetry to “the masses” about a revolution towards a socialist global order. Yet the modern quality of socialist realism that affected his literary-figurative conduct had not as yet affected his linguistic-prosodic practice in those years. It was as if his poetic content was informed by a modern socialist realist vision, while his poetic form remained in a traditional, namely, *al-'amoudi* form. The entire sound structure of a single poem was constructed out of one meter (*wazn*) and each verse line ends with an identical rhyme (*qāfiyah*); almost always with the identical letter/phoneme (*rawiyy*) at the end of each line, which was divided into two equal hemistiches (*shatrayn*), each with a regular and equal number of “feet” (*tafi'ieela*). It was because of this highly regulated metrical composition in Abu Hanna’s poetry and in the poetry of his generation that their poems fundamentally were conceived of, heard and appreciated as *anashaid*, loosely meaning: “cantos,” “sonnets,” “hymns,” “lyrics,” or “songs” – all of which point to the intimate, indeed, antediluvian link between music and poetry.

Abu Hanna’s assessment registers both the popularity of poetry festivals and the dominant conception of the poems recited at them. In addition to their popularity and their encapsulation of a significant moment in the history of Arabic poetry from a very particular place, another central aspect of those poetry festivals was: danger. Danger was the general condition of attending, reciting or even commenting on those festivals. This danger visited both the poet and the audience, and supposedly the regimes they contested, as the following testimony illustrates. The fact that the author of the testimony titled his comments “Let Poetry Be Proud” and wrote under a borrowed name of *Nuwwar*, points

to a frequent practice of writing under Israeli military rule; such practice became unnecessary only after the first military rule ended in 1966. Many of the period's published poets were teachers employed in the state's public schools. Most of the poets who participated in poetry festivals and whom I met in the field found themselves imprisoned during that rule at one point or another.<sup>23</sup>

The festivals of poetry became national demonstrations that terrified the authorities of oppression and terrorism. The word found in our poetry a sharp weapon in the battle of our people. *The song (an-nashid)* turned fire by our struggle and by insistence and faith in the people. We still remember the fear that struck the soul of the authorities and its agents on the eve of last year's festival in Kufur Yasif. A few months ago when a poetry festival took place in Acre the oppressive system went hysterical and since it failed to terrorize the poets, it resorted to the cheapest of tactics when they shut down the electricity. The administration of the cultural club of Kufur Yasif called for its [second] annual poetry festival on 10/10/1958, Friday evening, but the two poets, 'Isam al-'Abbassi and Habib Qahwaji, were not given permits to enter the village... [T]error and pressure was exercised against invited poets and before the festival commenced police cars began to drive around the village to scare people away... But the loud speakers of the festival welcomed the poets and announced the opening of the festival and the more than 800 people present clapped very loudly and filled the court of the village that surrounds the club... The poets succeeded one another in singing their poetry (*yunshidona shi'rahum*) with a magnificent climate of zeal (*jawwun hamāsi*). It is difficult to see a people love poetry more than our people... Masses of crowds –most of them standing listening to poetry for over two and a half hours... [and] beautiful melodies all gather in one symphony in the horizon of national struggle and liberation that crowns our honor and gushes in the souls of our people.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the lyricism, popularity and risks that filled the poetic scene, the flowery language of the testimony points to a then pervasive conception of time in which history is synonymous with human progress. In this conception, there is faith in history moving forward and in people, men and women, “making” history. Both poet and audience thrived on an unrelenting faith in “the struggle of the people.” All had faith that the world

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<sup>23</sup> According to Mahmoud Darwish, then an editor in *al-Jadid* Shimon Peretz called this poetry “the poetry of daggers” (*Al-Jadid*, 1962, vol. 2: 33).

<sup>24</sup> *Al-Jadid*, 1958 “Li al-Shi'r,” vol. 10: 56.

would change. Indeed, it did. Yet when it did, poets called many things into question, including faith in “the people,” and political parties that claimed to speak in its name as well as the very poems they composed and how they composed them. More specifically, this loss of faith manifested itself in the sound structure of poems. Thus in those poetry festivals, two distinct conceptions of time were embodied: a modern one located in the semantic meaning of words (extracted from modern socialist realism), and a non-modern one located in their phonetic meanings (their sound structure). The conflict between those two conceptions placed the socialist realist Palestinian poem with the classical sound architecture within a modern conundrum: How can a poem speak of “progress” when its sounds are not “progressive”? To echo the modernizing poets, how can a poem be “modern” when its rhythms remain the configurations springing from an Arabian desert some sixteen centuries ago, rather than the factories, laboratories, and museums of the modern “global” metropolis?

Hanna Ibrahim was another poet who personally attended those festivals and paid the price for years to come. Yet more than illustrating the risks or costs of being a Palestinian poet under Israeli military rule, his story allows for an examination of an eminent practice, which has defined all traditional poetry -- metrical composition, which entails measuring, that is, regulating the sounds of poems.

I met Ibrahim in Haifa, a city of literary importance in the two decades subsequent to the 1948 collapse that now appears no more than a forgotten relic of its former self. I did not encounter him at a poetry event, which the city once welcomed in abundance, but at a

poor shabby, publishing house that I happened to visit in an attempt to locate a particular poetry anthology. He came from his village of al-Bu'aynah to the city in order to work on publishing a book of short stories. Apparently, from verse, he is retired with relief.

Now in his mid seventies, Ibrahim no longer believes in poetry's power as he once did. This shift marks a dramatic difference in the life of a man who once had contacts with the clandestine National Liberation League (NLL), a pre-1948 group of communist Palestinians that secured its book holdings in Ibrahim's house. Through this contact Ibrahim had been able to read Marx and fellow revolutionaries and learned to advocate for socialism and communism. He also became an asset to the Israeli Communist Party, which secured a place for what was left of the NLL in the aftermath of 1948. Ibrahim worked in a stone quarry in the 1950s, raised a family, and often found himself in trouble with the Israeli government. Until the mid 1980s, during his years as a manager in the publishing house of the communist Arabic daily, al-Ittihad, he was not permitted to leave his village. In 1989, he was elected head of the local council in his village, winning the support of a Muslim majority, in a village of Christians and Muslims. Today he has retired from all these posts, from the communist party that had bitterly dismayed him.

Upon completing his business with his publisher, we decided to head to my parents' house up the hill. After having lunch, we retired to the living room for an interview. Ibrahim declared that: "today's place for poetry is in the back seat." This reason was why he had turned to prose, writing short stories and newspaper articles he . Ibrahim's offers a close examination of what is at stake in the production of the festival poetry in general

and the traditional poem in particular, including the central place of meter in poetic composition at that time. His story also reveals how “context” is very much *in* the intimate details of the “text.” For Ibrahim, the materiality of the poem -- its regulated sounds -- is an articulation of global and local orders. Above all, it points out how the measurement of sound (through poetic meter) is also the measurement of moral and political actions (keeping people united):

Our goal was to keep the people, most of them, in one stand, united. The public meeting, however, was dangerous. One runs the risk of being accused a communist. If you are accused of this you can lose your job or permit. People were afraid to come; it was a risk. To entice people, there was a role for poetry to play. I remember there was a public meeting with the Secretary General , Mekunis, people feared coming. The chairs remained empty... “Come O crowds come,” and people stayed out, peeking from distance. So they asked me to recite a poem. When I finished, the chairs were full. I chose the strong appropriate meters and brave, expressive words. Today I don’t like revolutionary talks. I am the bitterest enemy of revolutionary words. But then that was necessary. If you need to encourage people you need a strong voice. The meter needs to be appropriate and helpful and the words strong. The meetings that had poetry were well attended. Arab public likes poets and good orators. The poets tried to address poetically the problem of the people. People like poetry, so they came in masses to meetings even though they could have paid a price. To take a loan you need the military ruler to be pleased with you. They could have lost their jobs or endangered their children’s education or careers.

Hanna Ibrahim learned many things in his poetic career. One of the lessons was the mastery of poetic meters, which enabled him to produce poetry on various occasions. His performance at a political gathering raises many questions about metrical composing: How does a poet learn and master the meters? What is involved in composing metrically? When and why is such a composition sustained? What connections might there be between a poem’s metrical structure and social events and structures? I took those questions (and more) with me to meetings I had with poets who are working generally, but not exclusively with *al-‘amoudi* form. I say generally, because occasionally some of

them dabbled with “free” verse which, and therefore continue to measure sound in this form, but they do so to a lesser degree than the poets who work with *al-'amoudi*. This cohort of poets continues to defend measurement, measuring sound, working with meters, even if on occasions some of them compose his less rigorously measured verse and also prose. The following section focuses on how poets enter and learn the poetic craft.

### **Beginnings with Memory**

One Saturday afternoon, during the fourth and last reading session, Nijma was allowed on the stage of the second Palestinian Poetry Festival; it was the weekend after September 11, 2001. The primary organizer of the festival, Moustafa Murad, could not refuse the fifth-grader whom he playfully called “the promising star.”<sup>25</sup> He consented to her request to read poetry if only to express gratitude for her native city of Tamrah in the Western Galilee, especially since it was its mayorship that had morally and materially supported the festival, which it hosted in the basketball court of its main community center. With a tight, long black dress, its thin strings webbing her shoulders, Nijma went up on the stage, uttered the *basmallah* and then commenced to read from a paper her half-memorized poem for a crowd of little more than fifty people.<sup>26</sup> With eyes darting to the paper, but always with bodily drama, she dedicated her traditionally composed poem to the traditional and ubiquitous subject of martyrs (*shuhadā'a*), and to the Al-Aqsa Mosque

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<sup>25</sup> Nijma literally means “star.” Moustafa is himself a poet and the owner of a publishing house he runs in a shelter built under his residence. Through his publishing house, he came to befriend many poets throughout the country. Moustafa recruited their help in organizing the festival. He also received funding, I was told, of 60,000 NIS (\$ 12,000), for the festival from the municipality of Tamra, which is headed by the northern section of the Islamic movement in Israel. I estimated the crowd to include 130-150 attendants during its first and most attended section, which was the opening section on Friday afternoon.

<sup>26</sup> The *basmallah* is an Islamic invocation of God whose content is (In the name of God the Most Merciful and the Most Compassionate), and which the pious are induced to utter (silently or aloud) prior to the start of any licit action, ranging from sexual intercourse to writing.

of Jerusalem. Her poem was quite fitting for this festival since it was dedicated to martyrs.<sup>27</sup> When Nijma completed her reading, she received the strongest and warmest clapping of the festival, even if from a half-empty gym hall.

I attended this festival on the Friday and Saturday following the attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001; the attack was the subject of the first poem to be read at the festival.<sup>28</sup> In a poem titled "Palestine is Coming," the poet mourned the dead in Washington D.C., in New York City and in Jenin, where an increasing number of Palestinians had been assassinated during the darkness of global attention to the collapse of the World Trade Center. The festival was called by a name that would have been impossible under the first Israeli military rule (1948-1966): "The Second Palestinian Poetry Festival."<sup>29</sup> For the word "Palestine," as the land itself, was not supposed to exist.<sup>30</sup> Naming the festival was a subject of debate during one of the festival's organizational meetings in Nazareth. However, even more intense was the debate over the poets who were to appear or not appear.

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<sup>27</sup> Al-Aqsa Mosque is in the Noble Sanctuary (al-Haram al-Sharif); it is more well known in the Western world as The Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The poetry festival coincided with the Al-Aqsa Festival. This latter festival, which reportedly filled a whole soccer stadium, was a major reason, according to a few poets, for the poor attendance at their own. The Al-Aqsa festival is supported by the Islamic Movement and the Al-Aqsa Foundation within Israel.

<sup>28</sup> The U.S. also served as the focus of the last poem (when the stage was, whimsically, open to all on the second and last day). However this verse was a parody, not a eulogy. Two poets, a woman and a man, performed a *zajal* (colloquial form of poetry) in a local Bedouin dialect. The father cajoled his daughter Munifa to go and visit President Clinton in the hopes of accomplishing what the Arab rulers failed to do: "advance the Palestinian cause."

<sup>29</sup> "The First Palestinian Poetry Festival" took place a year earlier in Kufur Mandah in the Galilee.

<sup>30</sup> Mustafa Murad, as a poet and a publisher, told me in one of our many conversations that were he to organize the festival under a title that excluded reference to Palestine and instead refers to things Arabic or even Israeli he would have received financial support from the Arab Section of the Israeli Ministry of Education, to see a poetry, as he put it, of "a softer language."

The poet Mahmoud ad-Desouqi had demanded without success that a committee be set up to screen the poets who would read. A vociferous objection came from Samih al-Qasim, a poet who enjoys a literary grandeur and supportive majority unavailable to ad-Desouqi at the organizational meeting. Unlike ad-Desouqi, Al-Qasim had abandoned *al-amoudi* long ago and since then had achieved poetic prominence throughout the Arab world and beyond; his modern and post-modern poetry has been translated into several Western languages. Al-Qasim demanded that the festival be run like the ancient *suq 'Ukadh*, the Meccan bazaar in which poets of various tribes rivaled each other through poetry recitation.<sup>31</sup> Yet it was precisely this kind of forum to which ad-Desouqi objected – not all who deigned to read poetry deserved to be called “poets,” he argued. He feared that if they did, the sought after model of *suq 'Ukadh* would turn to just that: *a suq*, strictly meaning bazaar or market; in Arabic this word also connotes baseness. Hence the term *suqi*, meaning something like vulgar or plebian. Ad-Desouqi considers the poetic scene filled with too many “poets,” ones who had not learned the fundamentals of Arabic poetry as he had learned them, starting when he was Nijma’s age.

Ad-Desouqi’s childhood was spent under British and Israeli rules. His Egyptian sounding name, ad-Desouqi, came from an Egyptian ancestor, a scholar and mystic who settled centuries ago in Palestine when the ancient borders were more open. To this day, people seek his help to restore the health of sick ones, expressing a lingering belief in the healing, protective power he inherited through his genealogy. Now, in his seventies, ad-Desouqi is a retired accountant; he had studied economics and journalism at an Israeli

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<sup>31</sup> *Suq 'Ukadh* is an ancient, annual fair of commercial and literary pursuits, strategically located southeast of Mecca on the Spice Route of Western Arabia.

university. His family came from a village that was destroyed in 1948, and he has been living since then in the centrally-located town of at-Taybeh. Ad-Desouqi is active in the local Cultural Association (*al-Muntada ath-Thaqāfi*) where I often heard people refer to him with the honorable title of as *ash-sha'ir*, “the poet,” the title conferred him with the same reverence accorded to a doctor or professor, or a *sheikh*.

In meeting with ad-Desouqi, I asked him how and why he had entered the craft that had earned him his title. I also focused on understanding what was entailed in learning his *san'ah* (*techne*), as one would call poetry in the traditional sense of it being a craft. As ad-Desouqi and other poets of his generation told me, in their largely oral world, memorizing and religion were part of the long, arduous path towards mastering their poetic capability.

When I was little, I had an illiterate Uncle, ‘Ali, who memorized a lot of poetry... ‘Antara and Abu Zeid al-Hilali, and in Ramadan we gathered to hear him *sing* (*yunshid*).<sup>32</sup> I loved what I heard and went to buy what he memorized and learned it by heart. So when my Uncle was absent or sick I would substitute for him. Perhaps memorizing this poetry resulted in my poetic capability. Another reason is that my father was educated and he almost went to al-Azhar but he did not.<sup>33</sup> However he had a library of literary and religious books. Since I was little, I was exposed to books of poetry and religion. I also memorized a lot of poetry as a child. At school we memorized a lot of poetry: al-Mutanabbi and Shawqi.<sup>34</sup> I read their diwans, learned them by heart, and was influenced by them.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Both the lives of ‘Antara bin Shaddad and Abu Zeid al-Hilali are recorded as ancient epic poetry that is recited and occasionally sung, however decreasingly so, in the contemporary Arab world. For an ethnographic attention to *sira* (“epic”) such as Abu Zeid al-Hilali, see Dwight (1995).

<sup>33</sup> Teaching at Al-Azhar University in Cairo began in 988 AD, to this day it attracts Muslim students from around the world.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Mutanabbi or “the one who claims prophecy” is the surname of Abu at-Tayyib, Ahmad (915-955). He was born in Kufa, Iraq to a family of humble origins and later traveled and dwelled between different deserts and courts of the Arab East. Famous for his panegyrics, al-Mutanabbi is perhaps of singular influence on the centuries of Arabic poetry produced after him. He continues to be widely read, invoked and debated to this day.

<sup>35</sup> *Diwan* here means poetry collection but it was also how Arabs traditionally conceived of their poetry. Traditionally, Arabs conceived of poetry as their *diwan*, that is, their historical register.

The poets whom ad-Desouqi mentions above learned no poetry without meters. Yet ad-Desouqi lives in age where both “free” verse and, even more so, the prose poem not only thrive but also dominate. As if to underscore this aura of anachronism and atrophy associated with *al-‘amoudi*, an emcee of one poetry event I attended in Cairo described Ahmad Bekheit before his reading as a “unique poet who resurrects the *al-‘amoudi* poem.” Bekheit is originally from a village in the South of Egypt and I first met him at a poetry tent at the 34<sup>th</sup> International Book Fair in Cairo, which was sponsored by the General Egyptian Book Organization (GEBO), an agency of the ministry of Culture. I attended that book fair partly because poets such as, ad-Desouqi, encouraged me to go and partly because Palestinian poetry could not be fully understood without attention to the larger, encompassing Arab and global poetic scene. Years and deserts separate Bekheit and ad-Desouqi, but both commenced their march towards mastery of poetry through memorization and religion. Bekheit, like ad-Desouqi and other poets whose entry into poetry was through *al-‘amoudi* form, continues to valorize the place of sound and music in poetry in ways that modernizing poets do not.

For a living, Bekheit composes songs for shows on Egyptians television. Bekheit’s narrative recalls a story of poets whose entry to poetry was through an everyday world filled with memorization, orality, lyricism and religion:

[My] beginnings were in the enchantment (*inbihar*) with music of speech (*musiqa al-kalam*), starting from learning the Qur’an in the Kuttab and then textbooks in schools.<sup>36</sup> They had special charm. I used to memorize all the poems in those Arabic textbooks as soon as I received them... I used to feel that a word has a spell of magic in the poem. It is different from the word in the lexicon. It is capable of shaking a string in the heart through its rhythm if used well. These issues are hard to explain. They are spiritual. I had the understanding that poetry links to the

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<sup>36</sup> Kuttab: a religious school for learning mainly the Arabic language and recitations of the Qur’an.

music of speech. I had the feeling that there is a language other than prose to express oneself. The more language had this music, the more I liked it. There was this extremely precise and mastered (*mutqan*) rhythm that charmed me, as in the Qur'an and other human texts, especially in poetry. Poetry distills (*tuqattir*) human knowledge through music.

For Bekheit, knowledge associated with poetry via its music is not knowledge that one obtains by reading, but by listening, and, the seat of that kind of knowledge lies in the heart. Like ad-Desouqi, Bekheit speaks of the centrality of poetic memorizing, as a practice that cultivates masteries and capabilities of poetic production in the *al-'amoudi* form. This point is crucial because it is in those mnemonic capabilities and practices that I locate, following the poets, the working of metrical composition as a discipline. In mastering the discipline of meter by way of memory, one masters the measurement of a poem's sounds. In memorizing traditional poetry, ad-Desouqi and Bekheit learned how poets composed in the traditional meters. Poetic meter is something to be practiced, mastered and eventually *internalized* in the work of those poets. Meter is the cultivation of a discipline and internalization of its restrictions, which ultimately *enables* poetic production. I now want to convey how this discipline works in and on poets.

### **Metrical Discipline and Mastery**

I have presented two narratives of poetic beginnings, which conveyed their authors' early exposure and entry to the poetic craft. Now I want to present more closely aspects of cultivating an essential capability necessary for producing the traditionally lyrical *al-'amoudi* form. Both ad-Desouqi and Bekheit described having memorized an impressive amount of the canonical Arabic poetry, all in *al-'amoud* form. Although, they primarily compose *al-'amoudi*, occasionally they dabble in "free" verse. Their experiences are a

testimony to the reality of poetic forms. Only on the rarest occasions did I encounter poets who worked with only one form. Yet those *al-'amoudi* poets would never practice the prose poem, the poem without any meters. On this point, they both could be found in concert with Samih al-Qasim, who also abstains from the prose poem, even after entirely abandoning *al-'amoudi*.

Samih al-Qasim differs in many ways from ad-Desouqi and Bekheit, but like them, he remains an advocate of measured poetry. Like them, he sees mastery of meters, that is, their internalization, as an enabling, not a debilitating discipline, as it was also true for the poets who abandoned measurement. Al-Qasim was born in late 1939 to a Druze family from the Galilee. His *sheikh* father used to gather Druze, Christian, and Muslim religious men for discussions in his house. As a child, al-Qasim served water to his father's guests; this was how he became acquainted with the religious texts that he is famous for employing in his poetry.

Unlike many of the "big" poets I sought to interview, al-Qasim was rather accessible. I met with him at the office where he edits a weekly tabloid *Kul al-'Arab (For All Arabs)*. In his carpeted office, I saw mounted photos of him with President Yasir Arafat, photos of other poets, and a painting of a refugee child with a dove resting in his palms. Before the interview began, I was served the traditional welcoming coffee; I explained to al-Qasim my interest in learning about his work as part of my ethnographic investigation. Unlike all the other poets, he was uncomfortable with the digital recorder so I manually recorded his words. Although al-Qasim no longer writes in *al-'amoudi*, I present his

views along side the poets of this form because, like them, he expresses, even if implicitly, the attainable “freedom” in *al-‘amoudi* form, once the poet masters and *internalizes* the poetic meter:

Every movement in the universe is constrained by another one. The sea wave has a range that ends when a new wave comes. There is no absolute freedom. Even volcanoes and winds are limited, and so is the freedom of the human. Free verse is a provocative name, as if the measured verse is not free. When you write a poem of free verse, you need time, a hand, a pen, and a paper. All those are restrictions. You also need an idea and a language. And a language is grammar. Without it, it breaks down. The question is what do you do with restrictions. If the poet masters them he becomes free. If the restriction is in you and you have mastered it, then you are freed. Poetry has its restrictions, but those become tools of liberating cultural consciousness. The poetic meters are restrictions for a starting poet. For an able poet, they cease to be restrictions. The poet who has not mastered the meters faces a restriction.

The poet Hanna Ibrahim also conveyed to me that meter is something difficult and restrictive, but that, once mastered, the meters come naturally, as they did to him when he saw, on TV, a Palestinian child killed in his father’s lap. Mastering the craft (*san‘ah*) of poetry is inconceivable without mastering the meters. For Ibrahim, the foundation of being a poet rests on a practice, a practical activity -- the measuring of sounds, and regulating sound into patterns. Poetry for him is not a state of mind or a state of being. If novice poets find entering or mastering the poetic craft to be difficult, it is not because they were lacking a poetic approach or a poetic state of mind. Rather, it is difficult, according to Ibrahim, because metrical mastery is still absent.

The first rule in learning poetry is that you have to know Arabic grammar. Without it, there is no poetry. Second, you have to love reading. I used to read any thing I could get. I also read ‘Antara bin Shaddad. My father used to ask me to read ‘Antara’s diwan when we had family gatherings at night. People loved to hear this. All Arabic folk songs derive from poetic meters. In our nature we like song and poetry. When someone feels poetry, he begins to croon (*yudandemu*). Then the image comes. You collect images and paint them with words and with colors. I saw Muahammad ad-Durra’s picture when he was shot. I hummed, it

come out as Muahammad, the rhyme came naturally and fitting with the name... He who does not write with meter is because he is not capable. As al-Mutanabbi said: 'If it were not for struggle, all people would become rulers.' If a doctor's license is easy to obtain, like composing modern poetry, then all people will be doctors and in times of test, these doctors will kill all their patients. Also poetry's license should not be simple to achieve. Not everyone should ride the mule of poetry. Poetry is difficult and not everyone is fit for it.

Ibrahim's claim that capable poets could *naturally* bring out rhymes is interesting to consider in relation to the common word for meter in Arabic; it also refers to another natural phenomenon: *bahr* (sea).<sup>37</sup> The grammarian Al-Khalil Ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi of Basra, Iraq (d. circa 778) was the one who coined this term. His appellation is reportedly linked to his conviction that a single meter is like the sea. Similar to the sea whose waves never end and are never identical, so it is with the single meter, which could produce an endless number of different verse lines. Al-Khalil's coinage occurred as part of a larger endeavor that established him as the founder of the science of prosody (*'ilm al-'arud*). In establishing this science, Al-Khalil identified the foundations of rhythms in Arabic. He identified fifteen distinct meters in which Arabic poetry is traditionally composed; al-Akhfash (d. circa 1040), a student of his student, added a 16<sup>th</sup>. Al-Akhfash's manuscript on the subject, unlike al-Khalil's, was not lost. Al-Akhfash defines prosody as "the science, which reveals the breakages and the alignments in verse."<sup>38</sup> In other words, he meant that prosody involves uncovering the ways that verse aligns or deviates from established sound patterns.

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<sup>37</sup> Bahr is the Arabic singular for "sea" (*bahar* is the plural). Another, just as common word that is used to mean "meter" is *wazn* (scale or measure).

<sup>38</sup> (in Bahrawi: 1998:46). A version of this 11<sup>th</sup> Century manuscript was located and edited in Saudi Arabia and Egypt around the mid 1980's. I am referring here to the manuscript that was found in the Ahmadi Mosque of Tanta, Egypt, and edited by Sayyid Bahrawi (1998)

The sound patterns of Arabic rhythms are generally divided into three tiers based on their temporal duration, that is, quantity of sounds, as opposed to the stress or accent of sounds. The shortest, most basic sound units are found in the tier of “pegs” (*awtād*) and “cords” (*asbāb*); they stand for six combinations of “mobile” (*mutaḥarrik*) and “immobile” (*sākin*) sounds. The “immobile” sounds stand roughly for consonants and the “mobile” sounds for consonants followed by vowels;<sup>39</sup> respectively, these terms could be partially equated with concepts of “long” and “short” syllables.<sup>40</sup> When sound units of the first tier reoccur, they produce a second tier of ten medium sound units called “*taf‘ieela*” (“foot”). A recurrence of the medium sound units of *tafā‘ieel* (pl. “feet”) creates the longest and final tier of sixteen meters. Those meters could and often do subdivide according to codified quantitative variations contained in them called “relaxation” (*ziḥāf*) or “defects” (*‘ilal*), in which the poet can manipulate the collocation of “long” and “short” syllables. The meters (*buḥur/awzān*) are essentially quantitative. Therefore, ultimately, when a poet composes metrically, he or she *measures and regulates*, whether consciously or not, the quantity of “mobile” (*mutaḥarrik*) or “immobile” (*sākin*) sounds in each verse line. Those quantitative sound patterns lay the foundations of traditional Arabic rhythms.<sup>41</sup>

The architecture of the single verse line (*bayt*) in *al-‘amoudi* form derives from this metrical system. The predominant construction of *al-‘amoudi* verse occurs when a poet

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<sup>39</sup> Bahrawi (1998:22) notes in his introduction to al-Akhfash’s manuscript that the latter belonged to the Mu‘ataziliate school of philosophy, in which, “silence” (*sukun*) was taken as the origin of all sounds/letters.

<sup>40</sup> The ancients did not work with the concept of “syllable.” On that point and for a short, but detailed introduction to Arabic poetry and prosody, see *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993:81-94).

<sup>41</sup> In modern scholarship of Arabic prosody, there have been attempts to establish alternatives to al-Khalil’s metrical system (e.g Abu Deeb, 1974; ‘Ayyad, 1968)

collocates a bipartite *bayt* of two equal hemistiches (*shatrayn*; sing. *shatr*). Equality of hemistiches here refers to a regularity in number and kind of feet, if there is more than one kind of foot. This regularity of verse lines is then sustained throughout *al-'amoudi* poem. The regularity is sustained visually as illustrated in *al-'amoudi* specimen (Figure 3). The poem is al-Khansa's ancient eulogy for her brother Sakhr. She composed this ode in the *al-baseet* meter (the outspread).<sup>42</sup> This meter is produced by the regular reoccurrence of two kinds of feet, twice in each hemistich. See Figure 3 for the poem and Figure 4 for its scansion.<sup>43</sup>

My explication of Arabic prosody is a severely simplified presentation of an extremely elaborate metrical system. It is not my aim to engage in a linguistic inquiry into the accuracy or universality of al-Khalil's metrical system. Nor is it my aim to reveal the ideology, which this prosody bears.<sup>44</sup> What concerns me is prosody as a locus of an intricate metrical practice that enables poets to produce through discipline their verse. By memorizing classical poetry, poets are internalizing this metrical discipline. Of course the ancient poets did not learn the meters through the science of prosody, nor did they consult manuals of poetic meters as poets can today. They learned it by memorizing what others had composed before them. Regulating sound in *al-'amoudi* verse involves composing in

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<sup>42</sup> Tamadur bint 'Amr (575 – 646 AD) is known in literary history as al-Khansa'a from the tribe of Banu Sulaym. Her brothers, Sakhr and Mu'awiya died in tribal feuds. Sakhr stood by her financially and morally on many occasions in her life. She invokes his prominence by comparing him to a mountain on whose peak stands fire in verse line 17 (not cited in this excerpt).

<sup>43</sup> See Appendix G for an English translation of the excerpt I cite from her ode. I cite the first fourteen verse lines out of an ode that is thirty lines long as it appears on the following website: <http://home.infioline.net/~ddisse/khansa.html> (retrieved on 9/15/03).

<sup>44</sup> Among anthropologists, there is an exposition in theoretical linguistics of this prosody (Caton, 1990) and a Bakhtinian reading of the prosody's ideology by Taminian (2001). The former strives towards a universal theory of meter, and the latter towards an ethnographic reading of Bedouin ideology, as manifest in prosody through the names used to describe meters.

a regular meter, a regular rhyme, a regular number of feet, a regular configuration of “syllables,” and a regular last phonemes/letters. It is precisely this discipline that will constitute an object of attack by advocates of modernizing Arab verse.

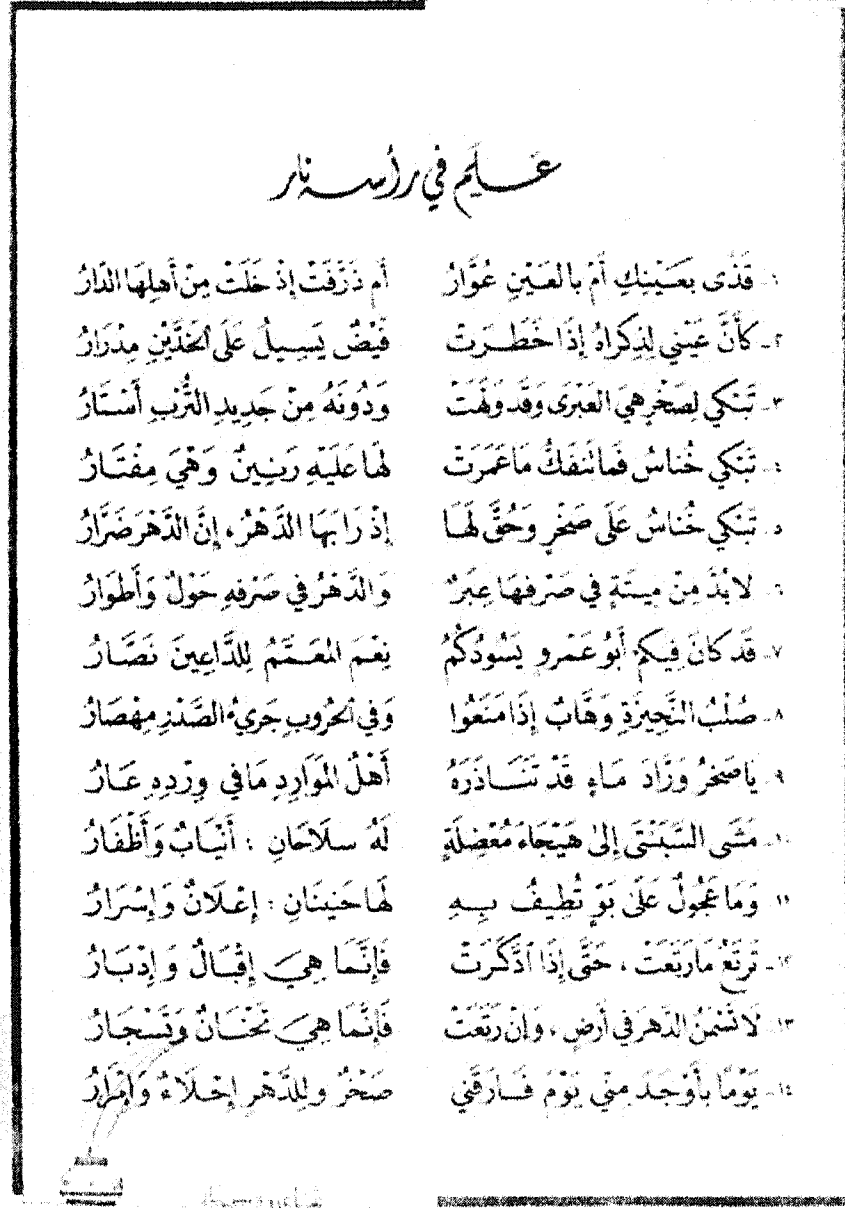


Figure 3

*A Mountain with Fire on its Peak*  
By Al-Khansa'a (d. 646 AD)

Source: <<http://home.infonline.net/~ddisse/khansa.html>>(retrieved on 9/15/03)

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Figure 4

Scansion: Al-Khansa'a's "A Mountain with Fire on its Peak"

Note: the above scansion (*taqti'a*) is in Arabic and, therefore, it should be read from right to left. In this meter of *al-basit* (the outspread), there is a general regularity in two kinds of feet in each hemistich, whereby (-) stands for "short syllable" and (U) for "long syllable".<sup>45</sup>

--U- | -U- | --U- | -U-    --U- | -U- | --U- | -U-

<sup>45</sup> I thank Jeries Na'im Khouri for providing me with the scansion of this poem and the other two poetic samples included in this study.

However, for Ahmad Bekheit, this prosody is a discipline and a “treasure” he is unwilling to surrender; he finds in it a richness that only an ignorant poet would miss.<sup>46</sup> Such a poet would be incapable of “weaving” prosody into “the fabric of his being” (*nasijuhu*). In “breathing” the music of the meters, one can tap into their immensely diverse formulations. When Bekheit refers to what I translate as “submeters” he is referring to all the canonized deviation and derivatives from the established metrical patterns that were produced by regulated inflections called *ziḥāf* (inflections) and *‘ilal* (defects). These regulated inflections of sound patterns enable a metrical diversity, even within each single meter. The diversity of metrical formulation is inaccessible to the poets who have not mastered the meters. The poets who have mastered them speak of metrical “restriction” as a form of “freedom.” For them, freedom is attained, not by discarding restrictions or regulations, but by mastering them:

Let me tell you something... people think that the meters of *al-Khalil* are about symmetry, that it is a dead body. But this stems from ignorance. The good poet can give you varied music in the same meter through syntax. [Bekheit gives examples from his poetry to explain his point about variation within the single meter]...[I]t is as if prosody is like musical distribution and the poet is like a composer of a melody out of sentences. But the bad poet does not have prosody in his fabric (*nasijuhu*). A bad poet is not breathing music in his heart, is not regulated by the music which he uses. You find him afraid and he will give you the monotony that sends you to sleep... There are a million tricks to change rhythm within one meter, and inside these meters, there are submeters. So it is not just 16 meters. The total is over 64 musical formulations. I challenge you to find another poetry around the world with this amount of diversity... I challenge you....

I was challenged, however, by a concern different from Bekheit’s and the ensuing “parallelism” of his verse, as Formalists might say. I was challenged by how his

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<sup>46</sup> During the fieldwork, I found poets conflating prosody with meter. They made the former stand for the latter, although prosody is a conscious knowledge and mastery of identifying meters. In this sense, a poet can be a great master of meters, but not a prosodist. A poet of this sort upon hearing a verse line can quickly detect if the meter is “broken” or “aligned,” but may not be able to detect what is the meter’s name or its classification in the entire metrical system, as a prosodist normally is able to do.

generative poetic discipline has become the object of modern dismantling. Why should the primacy of sound in poetic production and the regulation of that sound began a descent to oblivion upon the arrival of modernity? Are not regulations, precision, and discipline some of the hallmarks of the modern era?

In the eyes of poets who ascribe to measuring sound in verse, especially in *al-'amoudi* form, chaos (*fawḍa*) defines contemporary Arabic poetry today. Indeed, due to their defense of meter and prosody in a poetry whose modernity rejects antiquated practices, *al-'amoudi* usually poets end up speaking from the margins; they are not published as widely as they might otherwise be. To illustrate, ad-Desouqi explained what had happened to prosody, or more precisely, the discipline, which it entails, during his poetic career. His account attests to his marginality as a poet and to the marginality of what he practices: the measurement of sound. However, from his position of marginality ad-Desouqi defends meter, and measurement more broadly, and completely rejects the prose poem. What emerges from his narrative, is a defense of meter and sound measurement that was infused with a defense of Arab tradition against an alienating modernization. In attacking or defending a “poetic device” such as meter, poets also defend or attack things “outside” poetry, as it were.

I was able to observe Ad-Desouqi’s marginality during my fieldwork. He had been writing since he had sixteen years, age at the time shortly after the British evacuation of Palestine. Subsequent to attaining a certain fame, the Israeli military ruler offered him a good position if he would drop his political poetry and instead write obscure poetry that

readers could interpret as they please. Indeed, during 1950s and 1960s, ad-Desouqi composed poetry that “breathed fire” among people who heard his recitation. He was among the few and senior poets held under “civil arrest,” until the mid 1980s. Under such orders, he was not permitted to leave his town of at-Taybeh in the center of the newly founded Israel without the permission of the Israeli police. Upon Arafat’s return to the homeland after the Oslo accords, he was invited to read poetry to mark the occasion. For despite his marginality among the “established poets” today, he is, according to him, the best “poet of occasions.”

I met ad-Desouqi in the town of at-Taybeh, about ten minutes away from his destroyed ancestral village and about twenty-minute ride from the Jewish town of Netanya; he and his wife picked me up at the central bus station and drove up to his home. His wife drove since she had better eyesight. One of the first things ad-Desouqi talked about was his sense of disappointment about what he sees happening among poets in the last two decades. He complained that people today call themselves poets immediately after they “put two words on top of one another.” He also complained that people today have no knowledge about the prosodic basis of Arabic poetry and thus made its music a scramble (*khabīṣah*). He relates prosodic chaos within the poem to chaos in the field of poetry and political parties:

Prosody (*al-‘arūḍ*) is a necessity of poetry just as water is a necessity of life. If one does not *master* (*yutqin*) prosody, one does not *master* poetry. Today prosody books have disappeared. The subject is excluded from the school curriculum. Prosody used to be a subject we learned in the schools back in the days of the British rule. If someone writes poetry without knowing prosody, the person cannot be a poet. There is chaos (*fawḍa*) in poetry. Here in Israel-Palestine, the political parties are behind this to a great extent. Anyone who belongs to a party, whatever he writes, is published in the party’s paper just because he is a party

member. This is wrong. There is no discipline (*dābiṭ*). Even in the last poetry festival, I asked for screening. I was on the selection committee, but the majority objected. It is important, especially for poetry, to have a discipline (*dābiṭ*). Even in the Arab world, there is a struggle between free verse and prose poetry and metered poetry, an overwhelming *fawḍa*. But eventually, what is right shall remain right. The metered poetry is the fundamental of writing poetry... The majority of poets today *master* neither the Arabic language nor prosody. There are 72 rhythms out of 16 meters. If you master those, you need no prose poetry... How can you write if you don't master the meters?

Whether ad-Desouqi extracts seventy two or seven hundreds rhythms out of the 16 meters identified (so far) in the Arabic versification is irrelevant to the issue of there being a *dābiṭ*, without which he cannot work. For him it is not a dead practice, but one that lives and thrives. For him prosody, or more precisely metrical composition, is the equivalent of poetry. He charges prosody and meters with the role of *dābiṭ*. I translate *dābiṭ* as “discipline” when in fact it is semantically broader and includes that which controls, regulates, measures, governs, rules, restrains and more. All these actions are at work when ad-Desouqi generates his verse lines that contain regular rhymes, a regular number of rhythmical feet, and a regular configuration of this number. This disciplined construction is what makes it very unlikely for him that he publish in the prestigious *al-Karmel* literary periodical, which prints the works of “developed” modern Arab and Western poets. The vast majority of these poets work with “free” verse and prose poetry. Thus, ad-Desouqi is left to publish scattered poems in daily parochial presses, or to publish them at his own expense in the form of poetry anthologies.<sup>47</sup>

If ad-Desouqi continues to work on poetry through and because of metrical discipline and its “restrictions,” it does not follow that it is always easy for him to do so, even after six

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<sup>47</sup> As I learned from poets during the fieldwork, the average cost of publishing a poetry anthology is \$800.00 - \$1,000.00 (generally for 1000 copies).

decades of composing. However, to *al-'amoudi* poets, the importance of cultivating this discipline surpasses aesthetic and affective judgments. To work with the meters identified by al-Khalil is to sustain a particular sense of history in which the present does not triumph over or ameliorate the past. This distinct conception of time in the lyrical form does not view the present as a protagonist in a drama of temporal succession. Rather, it is as if the present is forever the degraded distance from a past before, as it were, the fall. It is as if the only redemption for the present of poetic production is a repetition of the originary and inimitable moment. In the history of Arabic literary poetry, this time vision means the utopian repetition of a splendor residing in the pre-Islamic odes of *al-mu'allaqat*. The cyclical sense of time is infused in the architecture of *al-'amoudi* form, manifested in the cycling and repetition of verse structures even as words, hence, sounds, change. The verse ad-Desouqi commits himself to parallels the sense of time that he articulates. Here he responds to a question about a poem he surprisingly composed in “free” verse:

I wrote this free verse poem because it was not easy to express things in a metered rhyming poem on this subject. You cannot describe everything in this form. Free verse is easier to *picture* (*tusawwir*) all that you want... The poetic meter is a restriction. It is a big restriction because it limits the words you can use in the line when you want to describe... In order to establish equivalence (*tasāwi*) it becomes difficult to bring many descriptions. [Khaled: Why is the meter limiting now?] The more distant we are from the old, the weaker we are in performing what the ancients accomplished. Who can write the *mu'allaqat*? Poetic production generally gets weaker the more it is removed from the source.<sup>48</sup> Poets before did not have a dictionary of the language; they knew its words spontaneously, instinctively. People did not have grammar manuals; upon mixing with Persians, a need for a grammar books arose.

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<sup>48</sup> *Mu'aallaqat*, the pre-Islamic poetic canon composed of 7-10 odes, which are said to have been hung on the walls of al-Ka'aba in Mecca inscribed in golden script. Hence *mu'allaqāt* (The Hanged Ones) or *mudhabbaāt* (The Golden Ones) are some of the names by which they are known.

“Free” verse (*shi‘r ḥurr*) is the inaccurate, but widely used name of the form that triumphed over the classical ode of *al-‘amoudi* form in the middle of the Twentieth Century. It is also known as (*taf‘ieela*) poetry; the Arabic term is equivalent to “feet” in English, thus capturing its most dominant prosodic feature. This form and its poets are the protagonists of the following chapter. Here, ad-Desouqi appears caught between two conflicting forces, renovating or preserving the traditional architecture of the Arabic *qaṣidah*. Up to a point this is a debate between the old and the new. The debate between the old and the new or the “moderns” (*muḥaddithun*) and the “ancients” (*qudama*) is not foreign to Arabic poetry, for example, consider the controversy surrounding poets such as Abu Nuwwas and Abu Tammam in Baghdad of the Middle Ages.<sup>49</sup> Strictly speaking, the debate then was largely over dictions and the themes of poetry. Urban and urbane poets of the global metropolis of Baghdad rebelled against the *qaṣidah* they inherited from the pre-Islamic age. It embodied what they saw as the coarse desert life of Bedouin Arabs. They did not want to begin in the way that Arab poets until then had traditionally begun – with descriptions of tribal encampment and bemoaning the desertion of loved ones. While renovating or “modernizing” novel themes and obscure diction were the objects of Medieval controversy, the architecture of the *qaṣidah* remained largely and dominantly the same and dominantly until the middle of the Twentieth Century.

It was not until the Twentieth Century that the meters were experienced as “restrictions” that stifle “art” and “creativity.” Even the Arab poets of Muslim Spain composed the then

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<sup>49</sup> Both Abu Nuwwas (757-810 AD), who died in Basra, and Abu Tammam (804-805 AD), who died in Musil, are of canonical standing in the history of Arabic poetry during the Abbasid rule (749-1258 AD). The Abbasid caliphate (“succession”), the center of power in the Islamic empire, was based in Baghdad and collapsed upon the Mongul attack, it is commonly taken to mark the end of the classical era in Arabic culture and literature.

unfamiliar and peculiar strophic poetry of *al-muwashahāt*, utilizing of meter still reigned supreme in verse construction in which rhyme differs from one group of lines to the next. In other words, the Medieval poets of al-Andalusian *muwashshahat* varied their rhymes, but did not discard meter. To be a modern poet in the Twentieth Century, it is insufficient to change rhymes of different lines or stanzas; nor is it even sufficient to work with two or more meters in a single poem. In order to be modern, it is necessary to question the very concept of meter and the very practice of sound measurement that it enables. To persist on working with meter is to surrender to the past, to refuse to develop, and to refuse to be a poet of a modern world.

### **Metrical Practice on the Periphery**

One place to observe the marginality of *al-'amoudi* poets is in publishing practices.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond their canonical presence in schools and university curricula, most *al-'amoudi* poems that I encountered appeared as published works in the literary sections of newspapers, as opposed to anthologies or the more esteemed literary journals.

Furthermore, when an *al-'amoudi* poem does appear, it is not infrequently formatted within a smaller space and in smaller font, in contrast to the “free” verse and prose poetry, which tend to have a smaller number of words and more blank space between the words. *Al-'amoudi*'s words always appear more condensed and crowded. The publishing conditions of the wider Arab literary world were echoed by those in the local Palestinian scene.

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<sup>50</sup> Generally, during the fieldwork, I found publication practices to be governed by party politics and personal connections. Poets normally tended to be personally familiar with the editor of the literary section in which they seek to publish and generally are known in public to be supportive of the political faction affiliated with the newspaper. This point will be presented in further detail by poets themselves throughout this study.

An Omani poet by the name of Dhyab bin Sakhr al-'Aamiri criticized the publishing practices of the London-based daily *al-Quds al-'Arabi* (*The Arab Jerusalem*) in a letter published in its op-ed section. In the title of his article, al-'Aamiri contends that the newspaper's rejection of *al-'amoudi* poetry contradicts its nationalist line. Al-'Aamiri faults the newspaper for not treating the "traditional form" with the same respect and equality it accords the "modern." While al-'Aamiri locates a dazzlement with the West in the "modern" form, he locates a confidence in Arab tradition in the traditional form. Al-'Aamiri also blames the newspaper for regularly and proudly announcing the near death of the traditional form. Positioning himself as the "other," in relation to the paper he proclaims that:

Your stand with the causes of justice and equality demands that you do not belittle the other and therefore you need to give a chance, encouragement and attention to the poets of measurement and rhyme, tantamount at least to the respect that you bestow on the modern poets of prose. Arabs from the Ocean to the Gulf wish – except for the modern among them that *al-Quds al-'Arabi* preserve the authentic and eternal pattern of Arabic poetry, in keeping with its nationalist line, and not be dazzled with the Western pattern of poetic writing.<sup>51</sup>

The marginality of *al-'amoudi* ebbs and flows in periodical rhythms. The rhythm of its appearances is related to social and political events or conditions. For example, an *al-'amoudi* poem took up the space of an entire newspaper page during the weeks the weeks of Spring, 2002 when Israel began reinvading the West Bank.<sup>52</sup> When circumstances were more mundane, I saw the "free" verse and the prose poem published more conspicuously than *al-'amoudi*. During more prosaic times, *al-'amoudi* form remains

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<sup>51</sup> *Al-Quds al-'Arabi* (January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003:18)

<sup>52</sup> On Friday, April 19, the *al-Ittihad* Arabic daily of the Israeli Communist Party published a famous, old poem from the archives of Palestinian poetry. Titled "To the Kings of the Arabs," it was by Abu Salma (1907-1980) in the poem, the poet pleads, through *al-'amoudi* form, to intervene and protect Palestine and Palestinians.

largely in the hands of “traditional” “conservative,” or “religious,” poets.<sup>53</sup> The *al-‘amoudi* form regularly appeared in the Islamic Movement weekly, for its leader, Sheikh Rai’d Salah publishes “songs” (*anāshid*) for children in the literary section.<sup>54</sup> I also saw *al-‘amoudi* occasionally in the Communist Party’s daily by a poet who composes only in *al-‘amoudi* form: Daoud Turki.

On one quiet Fall afternoon I visited Daoud Turki. He now lives at his home in Haifa, where he had lived with his wife and two daughters before being imprisoned for decades for organizing a militant group of Jews and Arabs opposed to the Jewish State. He had recently lost his wife; one of his daughters is in exile but his younger unmarried one assists him. His legs had been amputated and he is wheelchair-bound. I was too timid to inquire about the cause of his injury; and he never even alluded to it. With one hand always in a glove and another revealed, Turki sends poems to the locally published *al-Ittihad* with impressive regularity.

Turki spoke from a position he has in shares with ad-Desouqi; the marginal position of a poet, insisting on the old, traditional forms. Like ad-Desouqi, Turki holds a devolutionary sense of time. The present steadily descends from the past. In Turki’s defense of the classical *qasidah*, he expresses a non-progressive, non-triumphalist rhythm of time.

History is a regression; or, alternatively, history’s redemption lies in repetition, a

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<sup>53</sup> One of the longest *al-‘amoudi* poems I encountered in the press was by a Christian clergyman, Father Michel Saba, his poem “The Philosophy of the Stone” was dedicated to those who “humanize the stone in stoning” and amounts to a total of 107 verse lines (*Fasl al-Maqal*, January 11, 2002: 20-1).

<sup>54</sup> Sheikh Ra’id Salah, the founder of Al-Aqsa Foundation and the leader of the Islamic movement in Israel was one of the poets I interviewed; and unfortunately his interview was lost. His poetry appears in the literary section of the Islamic movement’s weekly publication, *Sawt al-Haq wal Hurriya*. Accused of funneling funds to Palestinian “terrorism,” Sheikh Rai’d Salah is now in prison, awaiting trial.

repetition of an originary moment. Turki tells a story of Poetic Fall. Like ad-Desouqi, he locates this originary moment in the pre-Islamic era, which signifies the climax of Arab poetic excellence; it was an era, which later poets could only try to reach.

Turki finds his heroes among the enslaved and wronged, but dignified, poets, ‘Antara bin Shaddad and Tarafah bin al-‘Abad.<sup>55</sup> ‘Antara, the son of an enslaved Abyssinian mother, bought his freedom from his father upon his heroic fight in defense of his tribe, Bani ‘Abs. A long poem by ‘Antara describing his chivalry and his love for his cousin ‘Ablah is one of the *mu‘allaqat*, the pre-Islamic poems that constitute the canonical origin of Arabic poetry. The other poet, Tarafah, deprived of his inheritance by his maternal uncles, and despite warning, faithfully carried the letter he was entrusted to deliver, even though it treacherously included his execution order, leading to his death as a fecund and illiterate poet at a very young age. For Turki, the grandeur and honor of those pre-Islamic poets lies more in their moral accomplishments than their artistic ones. What surprised me during our interview was Turki’s rejection of being called a “poet.”

I don’t need the title of a poet. I don’t accept such a title. I am first a man of struggle (*munaāḍil*) and then a poet. This is what I write. You don’t have to call it poetry. You can call it political articles composed on *poetic meters*. It does not honor me to be a poet. My action is my honor, my homeland. But poetry is not honor (*sharaf*) for me.<sup>56</sup>

Turki spent thirteen years in Israeli prisons for his usurped homeland. He was born in 1929 to a Christian family that migrated from a village near Lake Tiberius for wage labor

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<sup>55</sup> According to tradition, the pre-Islamic poet Tarafah (b. 564 AD) was killed at the age of 26 by the ruler of Bahrain to whom he carried a letter, including the command of his execution. The order was issued by the local king of Hirat, against whom Tarafah had composed a lampoon. The supremacy of Tarafah’s work was considered so high, in spite of his young age, that his composition of 104 verse lines belongs to one of the pre-Islamic *mu‘allaqat* (The Hanging Ones).

<sup>56</sup> Turki’s stance on the label “poet” did not preclude the Second Palestinian Poetry Festival held in the town of Tamrah from honoring him in absentia as a “pioneering poet” (*sha‘ir ra‘id*).

in Haifa during the British rule. Turki said that he is “the son of a peasant who knew neither reading nor writing. But he was a man of *nakhwa* (courage), and he bequeathed it to me.” It is because of such *nakhwa* that he is so proud of his daughter ‘Aida. She helped him in his mixed guerrilla band of Arabs and Jews. He is so proud of her that he asks to be called Abu ‘Aida (The Father of ‘Aida), in contrast to the dominant, patrilineal Arab tradition by which a father is called after his eldest son. He is also proud of another woman in his life, his first cousin who was also his wife, Umm ‘Aida (the Mother of ‘Aida). It is to her that he dedicated the first poem he composed while imprisoned in 1974. If he followed a tradition in sharing his life with a cousin, he deviated from it by what he said when he mourned her in death. On her death announcement posted in the different streets of Haifa, Turki iconoclastically quoted a famous line from a speech by Qis bin Sa‘idat al-Ayadi, the pre-Islamic Arab Christian orator, and a supposed bishop of Najran. He substituted the quotation for the common image of a crucifix printed at the head of death announcements among Christian Arabs. He asked during our meeting at his house: “Why should I bring a Roman symbol? This is something that the Church established in Europe. It took it from the Romans. The crucifix is a sign for crime and punishment. Why should I look to Rome when my history is in Wadi Najran.”<sup>57</sup>

Turki works only with the *al-‘amoudi* form. He said to me: “I cannot memorize what is written today. Everyone is free to write anything one wants. I will not cancel it [new poetry], but I don’t like it. My ear is used to the classical music in Arabic poetry.” Turki’s poetic beginnings stemmed from early childhood ability to memorize traditional verse. In 1935, his teacher copied a poem by the Syrian poet Omar Abu Risha on the blackboard

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<sup>57</sup> Wadi Najran, currently part of Saudi Arabia, is an oasis bordering Yemen.

and soon after. Except for Turki, no one in his first grade class had succeeded in memorizing the poem. This mnemonic potency helped Turki find a job as a clerk in the tax administration when the British ruled Palestine. During our interview, his responses frequently came out in the form of memorized verses, including some that were first uttered more than fifteen centuries ago.

Arabic poetry reached its pinnacle in the pre-Islamic days, the days of 'Antara. Then they began to be influenced by foreigners whom they wanted to imitate. To the young poets, I say, yes, we do need to renovate, but not in this way. We don't need to imitate the *franjah* [Westerner], in greed of global prizes, in greed of acceptance in the world. I see 'Anatrah, the slave as the most honorable. He fought for his freedom. Another one is Tarafah, who as a young illiterate man carried the letter of his execution order. He did not fear death. These are the people I respect. The nature of our country gives a different inspiration. Of course it is all relative. Our skies are not like the skies of Paris. It could be more beautiful there. It could be more beautiful here. But nature plays a role... This is not to say we become hostile to others. But each and his climate (*taqsuhu*). In poetry, it is the same thing. I take what's useful and leave out what is not. As for poetry, what life produced here is not what is produced out there.

Regardless of the season, Turki is mostly homebound because of his severed legs. His house is located in the neighborhood of Wadi an-Nisnas, a major Arab neighborhood in Haifa, a mixed city of Arabs and Jews. Although mixed, most Jews live in their own neighborhoods, apart from Arabs. Perched on the slopes of the Carmel Mountain, the neighborhood's old stone homes are a witness to its age of seven to eight decades. Turki lives in such a home. Greeting me at its entrance was an assortment of herbs and plants that locals often grow: basil, lemon, grape leaves, and mint. They were arranged in pots on the wide balcony, another feature typical of old-style architecture. Doors and windows were arched below high ceilings. Turki's house, like his verse, represented an uncommon sight.

Yet one did not need to be Turki's age to compose the kind of poetry that he and much of his cohort composed. Ahmad Bekheit, once again, is a case in point. In an attempt to break through the isolation that seemed to have surrounded both my own work and the poets I encountered in Haifa, I went to the Cairo, the great Arab literary-political metropolis. I first met Bekheit first at a poetry reading he conducted in one of the tents at the 34<sup>th</sup> Cairo International Book Fair. Like ad-Desouqi and unlike Turki, Bekheit dabbles in "free" verse. However, the form that he would never work with is the prose poem, in which there is no identifiable metrical composition, no regulated measurement of sound. I present Bekheit's narrative below because of his unique position as a young poet (he was born in 1966) who persists in composing in the *al-'amoudi* form.

Bekheit's criticism reveals his attachment to lyrical poetry. From his standpoint, it is an attachment to a practice that came during the last decade of Arabic poetry to signify an act of rebellion, not submission, during the last decade of Arabic poetry especially the case in Egypt where the prose poem dominates. For a poet like Bekheit who has the "poetic meters in his fabric," as he says, the rhythm of sounds remains central to his work, in ways that it is not to "free" verse poets, and certainly not to prose poets. For Bekheit the defense of meter is a rebellion against a modern present.

The rhythm compensates for the failure to send the meaning (*dalalah*) to the recipient. Each one of us has a role. I want to fill a zone, which if I were to abandon would be a loss. If there are other zones to be covered by others, that would be beautiful. I want to fill a zone that convinces the reader that the *'al-'amoudi* has still something to offer. In Egypt at least, I found that zone unoccupied. I was feeling that this zone is dying, if it were left neglected, uninhabited, if no one developed it and enriched it. This was a partial goal towards which I started working. Gradually, I begin to discover the responsibility is increasing, there is something larger than form, *al-'amoudi* form. There is a strong stream that wants to dump all that we have, what we have is music in

poetry. This is why the effort needs to be established, preserved. I am gradually convinced that I was right in my decision. Experimentation is going to extremes. Soon we are going to need a new beginning in poetry. What will we be left with soon? Music is gone. Picture is gone. And the human is gone, we will be left with a white page. It used to be that writing free verse is to be new, to be rebellious. I want to claim that today to be in *al- 'amoudi* is the peak of rebellion. It is against us being one voice... Why should we all become prose poets?

It frightened me to think that every attack on Arabic poetry and its language was not a poetic attack in origin. It was an attack in disguise on the Arab person, the Arab heritage, Arab certainties (*thawābit*). This provoked me. It provoked me in such a way that it led me to defend one spot of order. True art bears the spirit of the nation (*ruh al-ummah*). You can destroy a people in one of two ways: its religion or its poetry. These are the two fundamental certainties in it (*thābitayn*). The attack on poetry was never a pure literary attack for the sake of poetry. It entailed behind it much, much desire to attack other things.

This sense of being attacked as a lyrical poet, or as a traditional poet was precisely what animated my conversation with another poet who is ten years younger than Ahmad, but nonetheless works with *al- 'amoudi* form. 'Abdul Majeed Hamid was born in 1976 in the village of Beit Dajan near Nablus on the West Bank. Like all *al- 'amoudi* poets, I interviewed, he began his poetic career by memorizing songs. However, the poems he learned were mostly religious Islamic songs (*anashid*). Similar to many of the poets I present in this chapter, he spent time in Israeli prisons. Indeed, like Turki, he composed his first poem in prison, and later published it in a collection produced by a publishing house affiliated with an Islamic movement on the West Bank. By his own admittance, he said the poem is an imitation of an Egyptian work composed by a Hisham ar-Rifa'iee, on the night of his execution due to involvement in the movement of *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (The Muslim Brotherhood). Like the Egyptian poet, 'Abdul Majeed dedicated his poem to his parents. The Israelis arrested him upon his return from Jordan where he had been expelled immediately after reading poetry at a university where he was also a student.

‘Abdul Majeed resumed and completed his undergraduate studies at the Arabic Department of Birzeit University. He won first place in the Palestinian Universities’ Poetry Contest. ‘Abdul Majeed now teaches Arabic at a private schools near Ramallah. He also occasionally serves as an imam of a mosque in his village, and occasionally works out at a local gym. Our first interview was at the public library of Ramallah. In May of 2001, when the city’s closure that began on March 28<sup>th</sup> had eased, I was able to return to Ramallah from Haifa after a two-month absence. I felt that ‘Abdul Majeed spoke with a particular honesty about his confusion as poet with only 26 years of age:

I see poetry walking towards a dead-end. The dead-end means not receiving this poetry. I believe in renovating. But this modernity goes to extremes. I cannot stand its prose poetry. I don’t see it as poetry. I like it as a literary work. Why should you force me to acknowledge Israeli occupation as part of the Arab League? You bring a body with a name that it does not deserve. What is wrong with calling it prose? Does not prose have its beauty! These people want to impose a foot in the literary court. I don’t understand this talk [when a poet says]: ‘My head is the hat of the world.’ My sensibility is against this exaggeration. This is against my Arab sensibility. My soul mingles and interacts with the poem that stays within accepted modernity. Prose poetry has to stay in the category of prose, poetic prose. Let’s keep a criterion for distinction between literary genres. Let me be able to distinguish between the male and female, between the old and the young. The heart does not hold two opposites at the same moment. You cannot be unfaithful and faithful at the same moment. You cannot be hateful and loving at the same moment. It cannot be prose and poetry at the same moment.

‘Abdul Majeed is not making a statement against prose as a genre, but against calling it poetry. According to him, poetry has its own criteria, which differs from the criteria of prose. These criteria do not separate it from this world or from the public, but from other genres. Note how for ‘Abdul Majeed there could not be a poetry without an accountability to a public. It is interesting to observe two things that surface in ‘Abdul Majeed’s articulation of a relation to a public: how words sound and what words mean. This is not to imply that the meanings and sound of words are separate. The very fact that

'Abdul Majeed is committed to words of measured sounds, has, as I have been arguing, all the political and moral meaning that a social practice can have. In both the diction and the sound of his verse, there is a meaning. In these two aspects, there is a significance and consequence to the kind of relationship that 'Abdul Majeed seeks with an audience.

'Abdul Majeed's stand accentuates the public face of poetry insisted upon by poets of *al-amoudi* form. This claim is not to say that modernizing poets do not care for a public, but rather that there is a difference between how they define their public and who actually is in their public. 'Abdul Majeed's insistence on the particularity of and accountability to an "Arab public" leads him to reject what he describes as "obscure" modernizing poets. In fact the complaint that modern poets, especially those who write in prose, are obscure is one that I heard quite frequently among poets and people who reject the increasingly dominant prose poem. It is not that this poem includes rare vocabulary, from the tombs or heavens of the language's diction. If this were the case, one would only need to open a dictionary. The complaint is that while words themselves are easier and more mundane in modern poetry, the connections between them are not. The transformation of sound regulations, and of connections between words, occurred with another transformation that affected the poet-audience relation.

## Poets for “The People”

After more than a dozen phone calls and months of anticipation, I finally met the poet, Hanna Abu Hanna. His house on Allenby Road in Haifa is only a twenty minute walk down the mountain from the apartment my wife and I had rented during my fieldwork;<sup>58</sup> also, it was also not far from my parents and adjacent to my maternal aunt on Hatzionut Avenue. After taking my daughter to the nursery school, I headed to Abu Hanna’s house. On the way there, I came across two workmen posting plastic frames containing printed poems. They were constructing a path on several streets that would open under the title “The Path of Poetry;” it was sponsored by the Haifa Municipality through its Beit Hagefen, a community center that promotes “co-existence” between Arabs and Jews, and located in the Arab section of the city. I encountered a bilingual poster (Arabic/Hebrew) of a poem written by Abu Hanna himself in what I thought was the form of “free” verse. Yet, on this walk, I was more interested in his prosaic words that would constitute much of the interview, rather than the versified ones. When I reached Abu Hanna’s home on the second floor of a stone building, I rang the doorbell; his surname appearing on it in three alphabets (Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin). The door opened, and Abu Hanna welcomed me into the living room. It was our third and final meeting. The main purpose was to resume a conversation that we had started a few months prior.

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<sup>58</sup> Allenby Road is named after the British General, Edmund Allenby (1861-1936) who fought against the Turks and led his country’s mission of occupying Palestine in World War I. *Hatzionut* (Zionism) Avenue also has a noteworthy naming history. The street has been called *Shari’a aj-Jabal*, “Mountain Street”, as it had been the only main road up to Carmel Mountain from the shores of Haifa. When the UN recognized the State of Israel, the street was honorifically renamed as UN Avenue until 1975, when UN resolution 3379 denounced Zionism as racism. In retaliation, the street was renamed *Shderot Hatzionut* (Zionism Avenue).

In his captivating autobiography *Dhillu al-Ghaymah (The Shade of the Cloud)*, Abu Hanna describes life in his home village near Nazareth, its peasants' processions for rain, his Qur'anic schooling in the town of Sdoud, and his boarding school in Jerusalem under British rule.<sup>59</sup> Yet, he does not broach the subject of his poetic beginnings. In our conversations, I was learned things about his early attachment to Romanticism in poetry through his enduring love for Jibran Khalil Jibran: "Jibran writes in a daily language, away from... traditions (*taqālid*). And when he was criticized... [Jibran] said that 'You have your language and I have mine.'<sup>60</sup> So his work was a rebellion against tradition. Socially he was rebellious. He rebelled against the priesthood and protested against poverty." Jibran's rebellion inspired Abu Hanna's shift to socialist realism even though the former is marked as a pioneer of Romanticism in the history of modern Arabic poetry. Abu Hanna actually wrote a poem about this shift titled "Divorcing Romanticism." He divorced Romanticism after reading Mayakovsky. Abu Hanna's socialist realism infused much of the poetry he recited at poetry festivals sponsored by the Communist Party during the 1950s and 1960s. Changing the priorities of poetry affected its relationship to its audience.

The question of a poet's relationship to audience inevitably surfaced in my conversations with Abu Hanna, and all the poets I met. I traced how poets working in the different forms used the phrase "the people." I was curious to know who were "the people" and

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<sup>59</sup> Sdoud is the Arabic name for the current Israeli town of Ashdod. Abu Hanna's father was a landscaper whose job had him travel throughout Palestine. In Sdoud there was only a *kuttāb*, a Muslim religious school, available to the Greek Orthodox Abu Hanna.

<sup>60</sup> Jibran's utterance "you have my language and I have mine" (*lakum lughatukum wa liya lughati*) that Abu Hanna cites here invokes the rhythm of the Qur'anic verse (109:6): "You have your religion and I have mine." (*Iakum dimukum wa liya din*).

what “the people” meant to different poets in the different forms. Whether or not to measure sound in a poetic utterance is unthinkable without the audience that is the potential target. In other words, whether to compose in the traditionally lyrical form, in “free” verse, or in the prose poem is, in many ways related to the particular audience who will hearing (or reading) the poet. The question of poetic form, thereby, becomes inseparable from another question: For whom do poets compose? What kind of audience relationship they are seeking to sustain or avoid?

The poets’ articulation of their relations with their audience reveals significant transformations in definitions of poetry, audience, and ultimately new ways of being in the modern world. Hanna Abu Hanna has a foot in the world’s of both , through *al-amoudi* and the “modern” forms. He has practiced the traditionally lyrical form for a good part of his poetic career; but when the time came to abandon it in favor of *free* verse, he did. His narration of his poetic shift reveals the changing relation of poets to their audience and also the social conditions that were part of this poetic “progress.”

Today the poet has to be an intellectual in order not to give something usual, prosaic. But when I compare my writing in the 1950’s, then I had to write honestly, when, I went to the *mihrajan* (festival), the role of the poet was revolutionary. I once wrote a *Winter Night (Lylu Shita’a)* in the 1950’s and published it in *al-Jadid*. It was a bit symbolic. And back then the level of intellect was not high. Comrades came and asked me, ‘What is this! How will people understand this?’ So we started writing clearer. People were not as educated as they are today. Today, artistic valuation is higher. Then there were 150 thousand villagers and a handful of educated ones. Today we are a million and 200,000 with thousands of university graduates. There is a critical eye today to poetry. This is the new approach to poetry.... The new stream was to take the foot (*tafi'eela*) and not restrict myself by a fixed number, rather distribute it on the basis of the drama. Today we live a new vision, a new world. To express yourself today you need to give a picture and a stand through a drama through a story and symmetry does not allow that... The old poetry is all lyrical... They used to say *anshada shi'ran* (he sang poetry). In the Twentieth Century, there was

development, an opening to Western culture... The poem picked up new themes. The themes today picture a human condition.

I want to focus attention on that “development,” which brought about a “higher” art because it points to the transformation by which the importance of sound was diminished in modernizing poetic composition. It also points to how both sound and diction were affected by the modernizing of their forms. Whether poets transformed sound or diction in their verses, they were transforming their relationship with their audience and its modes of reception. In this “development,” whereby a poet writes “less honestly” as Abu Hanna’s implies, what matters more than sound is the pictures, or images, to put it in a more literary language. The ear in this new world is the seat of musical enchanting (*tarab*), as modernizing poets would say; it is not the seat of “deep” knowledge, possible through the mute and prosaic words written on the page. Why have poets largely ceased to sing? Why has singing verse in the traditional sense acquired a modern semantics to mean also screaming or droning? What has happened in a society that now valorizes the prosaic and devalues the lyrical?

The story of Hanna Ibrahim is a place to ponder such questions. Ibrahim, a compatriot and contemporary of Abu Hanna, left poetry. It is not that he does not love it any longer. He simply lost faith in its potency. Now he believes in the power of newspaper articles and stories. He recently published a book of short stories telling tales of the homeland and its peoples. He considers only that which is rhymed and metered as poetry, in keeping with the traditional definition of Arabic poetry. Yet, he no longer finds a place in his world for “screaming,” orotund verse. This verse was fitting to a revolution that his

generation thought was coming, but never came. Ibrahim may not compose the “free” verse that Abu Hanna does, but he agrees that something had happened to words, language, and society that makes it no longer necessary to sing and “scream.”

There is no more fear today. Let’s admit today in Israel there is a democracy. There is a *freedom* of expression. But this is not always an indication of the ruler’s generosity of heart and democracy. It could also be an indication of the weakness of our position. This is to say that our words are not frightening *anymore*. When under military rule, we were so weak, when they used to renew our residency rights on annual basis, you can’t move without military permission. I once asked someone, a policeman, ‘Why you are treating us like this? We have nothing, no weapons, we even recognized Israel before Israel existed.’ He said ‘Your talk and your poems are more difficult than weapons.’ So if it were more perilous then why is it no longer? Because it lost its value. Talk as much as you want you will not frighten us. The Caliph Mu’awiya said once, ‘I shall not interfere with people and their tongues so long that they don’t interfere with us and with what we own.’<sup>61</sup>

Today there are no socialist, no Arab, no Islamic worlds. Everything is torn. Israel steps on them all. On the contrary, they say, ‘let them talk Let them vent their anger in words and poems, let them scream until they have a headache and go to sleep’... When one wears a coat in the winter, this is natural. When one wears a coat in the summer, what will people say about him? Back then the revolutionary sentence was timely and valuable, but today it is like someone wearing a coat in the summer. The ones with revolutionary sentences are either wounded or weak. Pardon my words, but there is a colloquial saying that goes: the big fart comes from the tired donkey. Maybe in a battle there is a point for screaming.

Ibrahim lived in a world where poetic words were frightening. He was part of that battle in which “screaming” words were the primary weapon. However, given the modern exile of poetic meter, the sound of modern poems had to become quieter because new moral and political subjects are in the making; a new world is emerging as an old one has been collapsing. How sonority became the equivalent of screaming is not simply an alteration in the aesthetics of sound, but also in the politics of being. In the aftermath of the 1948 fall of Palestine, poets throughout the Arab world found sustenance in great hopes that a

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<sup>61</sup> Mu’awiyya bin Abi Sufyan was the first of the Umayyad Caliphs. He ruled the Muslim Empire from Damascus between 661 and 680 AD. After his reign, the caliphate became a hereditary position.

redemptive and liberating Arab secular nationalism, especially in the 1950s and 1960s under Jamal 'Abdul Nassir, would triumph over the oppressions of Arab traditional order, which was blamed for the loss of Palestine. Abu Hanna said about the decade following the catastrophe of 1948: "The time was the time of incredulity (*kufi*) in everything... in leaderships and leaders, in orations and words. Masks were torn and fell down."<sup>62</sup> Deserting the traditional architecture of the Arabic *qasidah* was part and parcel of deserting a traditional societal order embodied in it.

When Abu Hanna and Ibrahim recited at the poetry festivals, the orotund sounds of their verses were described as "beautiful melodies" and "symphonies" that affirmed the bonds between poetry and "the people" (*ash-sh'ab*), or the masses (*aj-jamāheer*). Yet such sounds -- historically particular as they were because of the modern socialist realism infused in them, and because of the traditional verse architecture that sustained them -- did not continue for long after the fall of Palestine. The revolution shifted ground. The poets today, especially those of prose, maintain that the state wants them to compose "screaming" poetry, or at least tolerates them when they do so. However, as the bearers of a revolution yet to come, they will not follow an antiquated model. For them, the revolution, if it occurs, will occur in the souls of a few private readers and not on the stages of poetic recitations, accompanying massive political demonstrations. Yet the contemporary idea of poetry as a salvation of the soul is so potent that even poets with *al-'amoudi* form resort to it, when describing their poetic mission. Ahmad Bekheit is a case in point.

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<sup>62</sup> (1990: 188).

Bekheit received loud applause when he came up to read his *al-'amoudi* poem at the Evening of Poetry Tent at the 34<sup>th</sup> International Book Fair in Madinat Nasr, in Cairo, Egypt. Organized by the General Egyptian Organization of the Book (GEBO), this book fair attracted poets, writers, and publishing houses from throughout the Arab world and beyond. In the Evening of Poetry Tent, I saw Bekheit on a podium with two other poets: ash-Shehawee, who dedicated a love poem, which seemed directed at a woman sitting near me, and Abu Bakri who recited, in demotic Egyptian, a satirical poem against the authorities called *There is Nothing (ma feesh haga)*. All three poets read other works in the classical form and all appeared to have memorized much of what they recited.

Although the audience applauded loudly for Bekheit, especially when he was introduced as someone who was resurrecting the classical form, Abu Bakri received the strongest applause, both from those sitting inside the tent and those standing outside to hear her. People were drawn to hear and take part in both her poetic and theatrical performance; veiled, Abu Bakri mocked political and religious authorities of censorship in the country.

Bekheit's own views on his relationship with the audience came out over a series of conversations we had in downtown Cairo. Bekheit concurred that an audience could seduce the poet by providing a sense of accomplishment through its applause. In turn the poet gives the audience what it wants to hear. However, he argues that only an indolent poet, or a poet who wants something other than poetry from poetry, could be seduced by this. As a young poet in his mid thirties, Bekheit speaks in the fashionable parlance about "the soul" (*ar-ruh*) being the object of poetic redemption. He also articulates a positive relation with the audience that only *al-'amoudi* poets have expressed unwaveringly.

Furthermore, for Bekheit, composing lyrical poetry for “the people” does not prohibit working on the soul, or, in other words, composing “profound” poetry.

Poetry is all that I own. First of all, I write for myself. I feel more wholesome, more beautiful. This is what I feel when I write alone, feeling that you produced something that makes you feel good. It makes you feel better to find that your work reached someone in the desert of ugliness around us. I write with the hope always that someone needs this in the moment of clash with the soul. I write for the people, not for poets or critics. I am not concerned with them. Most rewarding about poetry is that you meet people who never saw you before, but love you for no other reason but your poetry. This makes me feel alive. It is worth it, in spite of all difficulties to meet this love, even if you face them for twenty years. My only hope in poetry is not accolades. It is that poetry lives with people. I don't want dead anthologies in university bookshelves. It makes me so happy to run into someone who has read a line from my work.

Here, in Bekheit's account, a sense of poetry for and among “the people” is evident once again. Yet, “the people” does not mean all of them. This was not the case in the past nor is it in the present.<sup>63</sup> Earlier, I focused attention on how the poets' relation to “the people” affects the sounds of their words. Now I want to turn attention to how this relation is part of the very words that poets select. Not only do audiences affect the distribution of sound in a poem, but also the poem's diction.

Ad-Desouqi was a poet who particularly articulated this concern. Born in 1936, ad-Desouqi remains committed to the metrical and rhymed composition of *al-'amoudi*. I accompanied him to various events in and outside his town of at-Taybeh, in the center of what has become Israel. Our conversations were filled with reminders of his accomplishments. It seemed that he needed to talk, to tell his story, as if he were living in a world that had turned deaf on him. The more I heard him, the more ad-Desouqi

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<sup>63</sup> That the very concept of *sh'ab* “the people” is of a modern aura is evident in the previous and now obsolete terms of Arab societal categories, such as *'ammah* (commoners) and *khaṣah* (elites), prior to modern encounters with nationalism and socialist realism.

conveyed a sense of his world withering away. He wished to uncover his world for me before he departed from this world. Ad-Desouqi and his cohort of poets were particularly giving of their spoken words and printed works, as if they were begging for an ear or an eye. Eager to remind the world that they exist, their parting “gifts” to me often were loads of anthologies and single poems that they published or wanted to publish.

I received many such “gifts” one evening at a meeting of what is informally called *al-Muntada* (the Association), a group to which ad-Desouqi belongs, along with three women and four other men. Walking to the meeting through the old alleys of at-Taybeh, ad-Desouqi and I came across residents who greeted him as *ash-sha'ir* (The Poet). In their greeting, they recognized the honor and authority of ad-Desouqi's status as a poet, which modernizing poets and critics deny him. Ad-Desouqi expressed that all literature, prose or poetry, is “from and to the people” (*min wa ila an-nas*). He wondered, poignantly, “For whom do we write then? Why then is poetry called the *diwan* of the Arabs?”<sup>64</sup>

“The people” hear him, ad-Desouqi says; it is the “renovators” (*muḥaddithun*) of poetry who do not, belittling his verse for its “direct language” (*lugha mubāshira*). This accusation implies that ad-Desouqi's language is all too facile, semantically and logically, too pedestrian and common. However, in the case of ad-Desouqi, being blunt did not preclude “misinterpretations” of his intentions. That evening at the *al-Muntada* meeting he caused an uproar among the poetesses, all veiled, when he condemned the

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<sup>64</sup> *Diwan* in one sense means “office” or “register.” In literature *diwan* also means a collection of poems (see ft. 33). When poetry is referred to as a “*diwan*,” a third sense of the word is evoked, as the register or repository of Arab history.

Arab rulers for the complacency and failure to defend Palestine; he called them *awlad al-qahba* (sons of bitches). Although shocked, one woman defended him, quoting the ever-cited dictum about poetic license: "A poet is entitled to what others are not."<sup>65</sup> Another woman was not sure if ad-Desqoui's lampoon was directed only against Arab rulers; in the discussion that ensued after the poem's reading, she suspected that the poem's blunt condemnation could be misconstrued so as to target all Arab peoples as well. Although a senior poet like ad-Desqoui has at his disposal an arsenal of subtle ways in which to condemn Arab rulers, he chose to condemn them bluntly, without "signs" or "allusions," because he objects to obscurity in verse.

While "the renovators," of poetry draw upon the ancient *myths* of Babylon, Canaan, Egypt, Greece, and Phoenicia, ad-Desqoui finds it sufficient and important to evoke a *history* that "the people" know. The title of a controversial poem titled "Enough... Oh Offsprings of the Slave," refers to a biblical genealogy that identifies Hagar, an Egyptian slave, the second wife of Abraham and the mother of Ishmael, as the mother of all Arabs. In consideration of "the people," the enslaved Hagar remains a much more familiar name than the goddess Anaat, of Canaan, a commonly employed figure among modernizing Palestinian and Arab poets, who have embarked on recovering ancient mythical knowledge in the history of their societies:<sup>66</sup>

Those who write obscurities are the ones who acquire fame in the West, because the Orientalists wanted that. The clear and understood poetry is the poetry that arises, awakens the people. For example, in the days of military rule, the ruler asked me to write obscure poetry. He did not want me to write clear poetry in

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<sup>65</sup> In Arabic: "*Yahiqqu lil sha'ri ma la yahiqqu li ghayrihi.*"

<sup>66</sup> Anat, a Canaanite goddess of fertility, sex, hunting and war, is considered the consort of the major Canaanite god, Ba'al. Her name and worship traveled to the religions of neighboring civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece.

order not to entice people. I will not call al-Quds “Yabous,” for who among the lay people will recognize that we are talking about Jerusalem?<sup>67</sup> Yes, the poet has to be in the middle, not too down for the audience or too far above them. Not obscure. You have to write things that people (*ash-sh‘ab*) understand and benefit from.

Ad-Desouqi’s stance towards “the people” demonstrates how metrical discipline gives a poem its semantics, as well as its sounds. Form and content are not dissociable. In choosing *al-‘amoudi* form, poets chose to compose for “the people” and in choosing to compose for “the people,” they select words and references “the people” know. For lyrical poets like ad-Desouqi, “myth” as defined in modern time, is not an option, as it is for modernizing poets. He instead wants to write “history” for the “lay people.” And the words of that “history,” even when controversial, must be measured and clear for “the people” to comprehend. Both the selection of diction and the measurement of sound are always the activation of a relation with audience, in this form as in others.

But where are “the people” for whom ad-Desouqi is composing? Raising this question records a kind of absence I generally observed in the fieldwork. “The people’s” absence signaled a double marginality in the world of the *al-‘amoudi* poets. They are marginal in a poetic scene that is itself marginal. While I witnessed the marginality of *al-‘amoudi* poets in various press outlets, I observed the marginality of the poetic scene during another evening of poetry featuring ad-Desouqi; the event was sponsored by *al-Muntada* at a new community center in the town of Qalansuwah, near at-Taybeh.

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<sup>67</sup> “Yabous” and “Ore-Salem” are considered the pre-Hebraic, largely Canaanite names for Jerusalem. “Al-Quds” literary means “the holy” and is the present day Arabic name for Jerusalem.

The reading was to take place in the largest hall, the auditorium, and also the emptiest one, as other rooms were filled with children taking classes in crafts, karate, and music. It also was held a day after members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) had killed an Israeli cabinet member, in retaliation to Israel's assassination of its leader.<sup>68</sup> The chairs were arranged in two columns and four rows, and remained largely empty for some time, following the scheduled start of the reading. The opening was thereby delayed, fortuitously enabling me to chat with some of the attendees. One of them had enough age behind him that he remembered the festivals so popular in the 1950s and 1960s. About them he said: "We used to cry... We would read poetry even under the rain, under the branches of an olive tree... No one would go home in spite of the rain... In the 1950s, two hundred to three hundred people came to a festival of poetry." No more than twenty people were at the even in Qalansuwah. One of the *al-Muntada* members from the town that hosted the event, 'Abdul Raziq Abu Ras, apologetically opened the delayed evening, reminding attendants that even a poetry reading in Nazareth, which he called the "the cultural capital of the Arabs in Israel" would bring no more than fifteen to twenty people. Speaking immediately after him, the head of the community center said he found the attendance encouraging: "The message is to those who are present... Today it is especially difficult to leave TV." I understood his comment as a reference to people closely following the news of the unfolding occupation.

But is it really TV that is keeping poets from talking to people other than the fellow poets who composed most of the attendance at this event , as well as other poetry readings that

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<sup>68</sup> In mid-August, 2001, missiles from an Israeli helicopter killed PFLP leader, Mustafa Abu 'Ali, in Ramallah. In retaliation, the Israeli minister Rahba'am Zivi was shot in a hotel in West Jerusalem.

I had attended during my fieldwork? The occupation dominates much of the news, but it is not new news. Is there something else that has been taking place in Palestine? When occupation was very young and insecure, poetry was a major act of defiance in its face. People in the hundreds attended such events as this one. If the fact of occupation has not changed, what else has happened in Palestinian society that had led “the people” to stop listening to the poets and the poets to stop “singing”?

Even five decades ago, it was evident that poets are no longer just singing in the local Palestinian scene. In 1965, only seven years after lauding the traditionally lyrical and orotund verse of *al-'amoudi* as “beautiful melodies” in *al-Jadid*, and ten years after the first poetry festival in Nazareth and thirteen after the fall of Palestine, Salim Jubran announced its death. He announced the end of those festivals and the end of the “noisy” songs that poets sang in them: “If we consider today the history (*masirah*) of Arabic poetry in Israel, it is not difficult to notice that the oratorical, festival poetry that shook villages and towns when it appeared is now dead, and what is left are the poems that treat our concerns with authenticity and depth and without noise!”<sup>69</sup>

The poems and poets “without noise” are the protagonists of my succeeding chapters. Yet even Hanna Ibrahim who is committed to traditional measurement in versification does not believe in the high sonority of poetry anymore. He calls it “noise.” Although Ibrahim retired from poetry, he insists that were he to compose poetry today it would be for the “the people.” This is in part typical of poets working in *al-'amoudi*, and also in keeping with the views of the cohort of poets working within modern socialist, nationalist,

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<sup>69</sup> *Al-Jadid* (1965, vol. 2: 17).

communist, or religious ideologies. Yet, underlying these modern thought formations is a deeply traditional stance that poetry is a public event and a public practice. For poets in this form, there is a relation of accountability to the public that modernizing poets do not encounter either with the same velocity or mode. This does not mean that their poetic form is more popular than other forms, in and of itself. All it means is that the “the public” is so integral to defining and validating what they do. A public is integral to the production of *al-‘amoudi* form, in ways that it is not for poets of more modern forms and more conflicted relation with “the people.”

I asked Hanna Ibrahim about the criteria of his craft. I asked him what were his criteria for good poetry. In response, he mentioned “the people.” Ibrahim’s response is typical of poets working in *al-‘amoudi* form. The poetry that Ibrahim composed had not yet been conceived as a realm in and of itself. It was composed for a recipient somewhere to hear it; its intention was neither saving a poet’s soul nor just for the sake of art. To Ibrahim, those who set the criteria of poetry are:

The people, the people’s taste. I know for example how people react when [they] hear comprehensible and metered poetry or when they hear just any poem, any piling up of words. I see a difference in their response... I wrote no poem for a paper or magazine. I wrote it only for the people, to be heard at festivals. Even the title of the poem was “*Nashid lil Nas*” (*Song for the People*).

As a poet, I became known among people. I was appreciated as a poet. On the other hand, this blackened my face with the government. For 29 years, I could only move with a permit. For two days, I had to take off work in order to go and obtain permits. For the Communist Party, I was useful for elections. My poems brought voters... Poetry, for me, was a way to convince people about socialism and communism. I wanted to convince people that capitalism is exploitative and that social justice rests with socialism.

Can someone in a demonstration or meeting against land confiscation read what they call today prose poetry! The audience could slap him or get him off the stage.

To entice people you need an enticing tone, enticing language. This [tone] may not be always good. Sometimes it is uncalled for. But back then the strong language, the strong meter, and the musical rhyme that transferred zeal to people was necessary and important in order to gather people, unite them around a cause.

Note how for Ibrahim, the highly lyrical, highly metered form of *al-'amoudi* did not preclude employing his poetry for causes that he saw as enlightening. Being sonorous and loud did not inhibit him from addressing “profound” problems of ideology, consciousness and justice – quite the opposite. The clear and blunt verse was necessary for rousing the people. He said a prose poet would have been slapped by “the people.” In Ibrahim’s lyrically dominated world, knowledge was attainable in ways other than reading books. Hearing and singing poetry brought knowledge. In the proceeding chapters, I will present poets who increasingly find “the people” to be the blackmailers of their art. They feel alienated from an audience, which wants a verse of *tarab* (musical enchantment) and clapping. For the sake of their “art,” for the sake of affording “profound” knowledge through it, modernizing poets increasingly need to escape “the people.”

## Chapter Five: The Picture

When the Iraqi poetess, Nazek al-Mala'ika lit the flame of "free" verse from Baghdad in 1949, all the words of Arabic poetry seemed flammable. It was as if the fire of her call were unstoppable.<sup>1</sup> By the late 1950s, a local bastion of classical poetry within the Palestinian tradition seemed to have become all wood, petrified wood. The first cracks could be heard in *al-Jadid*, the communist Arabic periodical that has followed poets and poetry in Israel since 1951. Nine years later, one Palestinian poet, at no more than twenty years of age, was himself a contributor to *al-Jadid*: Mahmoud Darwish. Darwish is said to have been the first poet to publish a "free" verse collection; it appeared in 1960 among Palestinians who remained under Israel's first military occupation.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly forty years later, I found myself during the fall of 2001 in Ramallah, seeking to interview Darwish. Many see Darwish as lighting the flame, not only of "free" verse but of Arab verse itself, in an especially dark age of prose—when prose has "invaded prayers and shattered the hymns" in Darwish's own recent words after the angel of death, as one might locally say, paid him a visit in a Paris hospital during the late 1990s.<sup>3</sup> That angelic visit exacted from Darwish not his life, but a new book of poems. Darwish now lives

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<sup>1</sup> Nazek al-Mala'ika (1962: 61) claims that in her anthology of *Shadhaya wa Ramaad* (Shrapnel and Ashes) published in 1949, she was the first to call for "free" verse. The appearance of her first "free" verse poem in December, 1947 titled *Colera* coincided with the appearance, shortly after, of another "free" verse by a fellow graduate of Baghdad's Teacher's Training College, namely, Badr Shaki as-Sayyab (1926-64). The latter published *Hal Kana Hubban (Was it Love?)* in the form of "free" verse, also at the end of 1947, thus causing a commotion over precedence in *shi'r hurr* ("free" verse) (see Terri DeYoung, 1995: 190-191, Jayyusi, 1977: 558). Yet there are studies claiming that "free" verse of irregular rhyme and feet was produced already in mid 1924 (cf. Moreh, 1976: 205).

<sup>2</sup> Fahid Abu Khadra, a local poet, informed me during an interview that in 1960 Darwish's *Aṣafir bila Ajniha (Birds Without Wings)* was the first local "free" verse collection.

<sup>3</sup> (2000: 21).

part-time in Ramallah, where I repeatedly attempted and repeatedly failed to interview him.

Darwish is a master and celebrity poet in the Arab world, a founder and a member of the Parliament of World Writers whose works have been translated into over 20 languages. He is a recipient of several awards, including the Lenin Peace Prize, the Lotus prize from the Union of Afro-Asian Writers, and the Prize for Cultural Freedom from the American Lannan Foundation, which granted translation of his books through the University of California. Darwish is also an editor of the prestigious *al-Karmel* periodical, housed in the mansion-like *Sakakini* Cultural Center of Ramallah, with a driver to pick him up and drop him off, as I learned while waiting for an interview with him. Twice I waited and twice I failed to achieve that interview, although we met briefly on both occasions. Of course, occupation is part of the story. Neither one of us could enter Ramallah when one wished. In this dismembered land of ours, he was stuck in his other house in 'Amman, and I, in Haifa. But the other reason for the interview not taking place, had to do with Darwish's requirement that I interview "good" poets. Indeed, I sought to speak with "good" poets but it was never my intention to meet only "good" poets. The point that mine is an ethnographic study of Arabic poetry, rather than a pursuit of literary appraisal, did not persuade him in the least. It even angered others.<sup>4</sup> I must have criteria for judging what is "literature", Darwish told me, just as I must have criteria for judging what constitutes "social science."

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<sup>4</sup> Once, upon introducing my project to a poet who heard of my disinterest in the literary merits of poets, he angrily responded that I must uphold criteria in order to distinguish between Shakespeare and trash.

Deprived of a direct narrative of his “literary development” I have had to content myself with his published positions on the need to “renovate” poetry, as found in a plethora of publications starting more than four decades ago. In 1961, in one of his regular contributions to *al-Jadid*, titled “An Opinion on Our Poetry,” Darwish, found it fit to chide the poetic community for compromising “art” in the local and widespread poetry festivals, sponsored by the Israeli Communist Party, while appreciating the political potency of poetry at those festivals:

The regrettable reality is that we took the cheapest of paths... [w]e descended with a zeal that surpassed the zeal of the audience whom we so wanted to please... in order to buy its clapping at the expense of the art that was lost in much of our poetry... [t]his danger found a fertile soil in much of the poetry festivals... [a]s much as we acknowledge their value in awakening political consciousness among our people and reminding it of its bitter reality and opening its eyes to its wounds and chains, as much as we worry about the artistic value of poetry, ... [w]e don't deny our pride in the grand, brotherly affinity between the poets and their people, but we regret that our poetry became slogans, undistinguished from political sermons except by meters.<sup>5</sup>

Only three years before Darwish regretted this orotund, metered poetry, an enthusiast wrote about the “beautiful melodies” at those festivals.<sup>6</sup> And in 1965, only four years after Darwish's regret, his fellow poet and compatriot, Salim Jubran, as cited at the end of the previous chapter, announced the death of those festivals and the poetry they solicited for the sake of poetry “*without noise*.” With such pronouncements, Jubran was urging the local community of Palestinian poets to “catch up” with fellow Arab poets, especially those in Baghdad, where the Arab version of the modern form of “free” verse then appeared as the dazzling future of Arabic poetry.

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<sup>5</sup> *Al-Jadid* (1961, vol. 8: 40)

<sup>6</sup> *Al-Jadid* (1985, vol. 10: 56)

The poets working with the form of “free” verse and their ongoing pursuit for a “quieter” and “deeper” poetry is the focus of this chapter. While the previous chapter examined poets who are said to be before or outside the modern realm, this chapter focuses on the poets who are championing the cause of modernity in Arabic poetry. While the previous chapter documented the conditions of poets working with the traditional rigor of metrical discipline, this chapter will focus on poets who will, for the sake of modernity, find it necessary, in fact, inevitable to forgo that discipline, even if not entirely. I will trace how this search for modern poetry relates to a transformation in the very conception of poetry, rhythm and a relation with the poetic audience. I want to demonstrate that these transformed poetic forms and tools came with transformed forms of being in a modernizing society. In the grip of a powerful notion, by which freedom becomes synonymous with a lack of “restriction,” the modern poet, as a modern subject, has to be “free” from the “restrictions” of “tradition.”

### **The Abandonment of “Screaming”**

In May, anticipating that I would have the last of my monthly visits to Ramallah before concluding the fieldwork, I decided to stay within the “cage,” as I came to see the city. Usually, at the end of the day on those visits, I headed back to my rented room in al-Dhahya, a neighborhood outside the “A” zone, which is what the besieged Ramallah became after of the Oslo accords. However, on my last visit, I figured that my time was too precious to really waste it on some checkpoint soldiers, probably from Ethiopia or Russia, who decide who stays in and who does not. Thanks to the generosity of people that I met throughout the field and people that I hardly met, every night I found a place to

sleep. In the early part of each day I worked at the Palestinian House of Poetry on the very edge of the attached Muslim town of al-Bireh, which might as well be a continuation of Ramallah, only that unlike the Muslim-Christian city, its stores do not sell alcohol.

Inside the House, a complex of three floors, one cannot escape the presence of the Pasgout Jewish colony on the hilltop. But perhaps no less escapable is President Arafat's Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The signature of this colony inside the House of Poetry was traces of bullets on broken windows and damaged furniture. The signature of Arafat himself was immediately present in his pictures hung to greet visitors at the entrance staircase and in the offices of various staff members. To be sure, there were other kinds of pictures in the House, including pictures of the *intifada* such as a man emerging from a cloud of smoke to hang a Palestinian flag on an electric pole or a child stoning a tank. There were also pictures of notable poets from Palestine and the Arab world decorating the walls of the House of Poetry, an initiative found in several other Arab capitals.<sup>7</sup> I was told that in times less troubled than this, the House hosted poetry events that brought together poets from various parts of the Arab world – those who were willing to pass through Israel. In the current conditions, it is housing staff members who find returning to their home villages throughout the West Bank far too perilous and have therefore made the Poetry House their temporary residence. Some poets in residence converted the salon into a bedroom where couches became beds.

The office of the House's director conveyed the regality with which al-Mutawakkil Taha held the place – the intercom door, his bodyguard-chauffer, his busy cell phone, and his

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<sup>7</sup> The Moroccan House of Poetry has Jacques Derrida on its board of trustees.

assistant, Sima, who conveys the orders of coffee or tea to the House's porter. Sima saw to it that I had an office in which to sit and review, and sometimes copy from some of the House's periodicals. The office belonged to a staff member who could not make it to the House for weeks, as he was stuck in his village. Although short staffed, the House seemed never short of a telephone line; the lines worked at all times. I cannot say the same about other houses and establishments, not even the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Culture. In addition to the phone lines, two things seemed never to close in the Director's office: the TV and the door. For the most part, al-Mutawakkil's high-pitched voice seemed to overshadow the presence of the TV. An alumni of Israeli prisons, he mastered not only the Hebrew language, but also the language of Palestinian political institutions, of which the House is undoubtedly one; on more than one occasion I was told that Arafat offered the directorship of the House to al-Mutawakkil as an appeasement, due to his exclusion from the Palestinian cabinet. In *Black Milk*, one of his recent anthologies, al-Mutawakkil takes the highest of these institutions – the presidency of the PNA – as a subject of his work. He also made sure to let me know that contrary to what is expected of poets as having a need to rebel, he keeps his five prayers and abstains from drinking alcohol. Under pictures of him with Arafat and another picture of Arafat alone, al-Mutawakkil told me he no longer gives prime significance to rhythm in poetry. While the timing of his poetic shift bears the mark of singularity, there is nothing singular about the shift itself. It is one that marks the work of all modern Arab poets, at least those working with the notion that orality and rhythm are the property of “traditional,” read “superficial,” poetry.

In our early poetry, before 1994, we went to rhythm. And rhythm is a kind of screaming. Now, I no longer pursue rhythm. Since rhythm alone causes

no more than excitement and instantaneous stimulation. And this is of no use. It is more useful to leave a signature in the heart, being and mind of the recipient. So I started to pursue the Idea, not the Sound. The Idea is more charming and more penetrating.... in our early *texts* we let rhythm dominate everything, after 1994 we started searching for harmony in our *texts* that balances rhythm with idea, *picture* and enlightenment.... what happened in 1994, a year that is a turning point, that witnessed three quakes (*zalaazil*) in the world and in Palestinian thought. The first, is the collapse of what appeared the final bastion for the idea of Arab unity and the triumph of regionalism as evident in the Second Gulf War when Arab countries participated in the Atlantic attack on Iraq. This shook the Arab being. The second, no less dangerous, was in the deep transformation in the Palestinian's view of his opposite. Before, we saw the Israeli as the total enemy that we must get rid of.

In 1994, as if suddenly, there were Oslo and Madrid and we began to hear about possibilities of co-existence. This was a deep quake. This led to the shock of many intellectuals and the silence of many of them. This signals the beginnings of a new kind of content in Palestinian texts. The third quake was the collapse of the Soviet Union and leaving the globe in the hands of the Americans. For me, out of the three quakes the most dangerous one was Oslo, it was the deepest... Oslo was something that I had to come to grips with, it led me to reconsider a lot of my givens. We were disillusioned, we were lied to... we abandoned screaming and naiveté but we did not abandon anger, and contemplative writing. This is *a more advanced stage* of seeing things and handling them with more wisdom. Before Oslo, we were charmed by orations and rhythm. After the revelations in light of Oslo one became more mature, more reasonable and more deeply angry. The quiet voice could be more influential than screaming.

In al-Mutwakkil's narrative one sees the unfolding of poetic conventions and devices linked to political events. All too often among the poets, their telling of the former made their telling of the latter unavoidable. However, the equation itself of "rhythm" with screaming or droning, as occurs in the narrative above is hardly Palestinian and thoroughly modern. Poets, wanting to be modern in Palestine and elsewhere in the Arab world embraced this shift, this escaping of "screaming and droning," which has been the choice of many poets for decades before Oslo. Al-Mutwakkil's narrative serves as a reminder of the insertion of modern processes in varied personal histories. More

importantly, to change a view about “rhythm” in poetry is to change a view about a host of other things beyond a single poetic device. In narratives to follow it becomes apparent that this shifting conception of rhythm relates to the poet’s articulation of a new self, invested in a new notion of history, language, creativity, and freedom.

### **Poets Searching for Freedom**

In October 2001, I went on my third visit to Ramallah. Riding in four different vehicles for nearly four hours in order to reach downtown Ramallah from Haifa is what occupation does to a dismembered land. Sometimes I was on the road between those two cities for seven hours. Flying to London would have taken less time. In normal times, a ride from Haifa to Ramallah should take around two hours. The subject of checkpoints and moving around is on the tongues of everyone. People compare and contrast the miseries afflicting their mobility. The roads on which people travel are a different story. The roads are a special place to observe the state of the space. They are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Roads can end or begin in the most unexpected places. They can become anything at any moment: to walk on, to drive on, to demonstrate, to sell, to shoot, to hide, to get arrested, or to get killed. They are so beaten, so wretched to the point of standing as symbols, very concrete symbols, of the entire life under occupation and corruption. In one taxi ride inside Ramallah, the driver complained to me how forgotten “we” are. Leaders and politicians in the Arab world care only for their positions, he reminded me as his cab dived into ponds, some made by nature, others by occupation. But life goes on, and therefore drivers will drive almost anywhere. People’s

“normal” lives must keep going despite or because of occupation. And so must mine, I thought. On this October trip, I met Mahmoud Abu Hash-Hash for the first time.

I met Abu Hash-Hash through Lina, a high school friend of mine from Haifa, who now lives, works and studies in Ramallah. Lina is a graduate student and instructor at Birzeit University in the Women’s Studies Department. She arranged for all of us to meet on a quiet Friday afternoon, when Ramallah was still considerably open. The meeting place was *al-Mattal*, one of Ramallah’s cafés, an old stone structure unique in its elevated rooms, domed ceiling, and arched windows overlooking a pastoral valley on the city’s edge. In short, it was an architecture that summons a coziness that still clings to the city. After this first meeting, which lasted for five hours, Abu Hash-Hash and I meet later on our own at other locations in the city. Abu Hash-Hash is in his mid-thirties, and like much of Ramallah’s current population, is not originally from the city. Those considered Ramalleans today come originally either from the villages destroyed in 1948 in what now is Greater Tel-Aviv, from villages and towns on the West Bank, and most recently after the Oslo accords, from other Arab countries. Abu Hash-Hash originally came from the al-Fawwar Refugee Camp near al-Khalil (Hebron). He graduated from the English Department of Birzeit University, and now works at *al-Qattan* Foundation, a Palestinian millionaire’s philanthropic institution for the promotion of art, science and education in Palestine. Abu Hash-Hash is responsible for literary and poetry programs at the institution. In his poetic career and in the local Palestinian poetry scene, Abu Hash-Hash belongs to the “generation of the 1990s,” a generation with complaints of being ignored by institutions of power, such as the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Culture.

The value of getting to know a young poet like Mahmoud Abu Hash-Hash is that he is not one of the “big” poets, whose offering of time and highly polished and evasive words generally proved frustrating to my research. Unlike “established” poets, Abu Hash-Hash did not start by asking me which other poets I had met.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, “big” poets were on his mind; in fact, the young Abu Hash-Hash appeared to be an admirer of the older Mahmoud Darwish, whose poetry he has memorized in impressive ways. He told me that it takes someone like Darwish to remind one that poetry is still beneficial. Darwish, he says, regularly publishes five thousand copies of an anthology and in Paris sometimes, whereas he has published only one thousand local copies of his collection. The young Abu Hash-Hash was very gratified to learn one day that an excerpt of his poem was unexpectedly translated into German, for which he received a symbolic sum of money. He mostly publishes in “free” verse, but throws in prose poems to show that he is not exclusively committed to the former, which he regards as taking a “position towards modernity.” As for classical poetry, he finds that its ‘validity is low in this age.’ I asked him about what appealed to him about “free” verse.

Free verse not only allowed freedom of rhyme but also freedom from foot (*taf'ieela*). This raises the question about the nature of poetry. I believe the classical form of poetry with all its regularity, repetition, and banality (*ratābah*) cannot help you organize your chaos, the chaos of the contemporary poet. Look even visually at the classical poem. It is disciplined, measured like a scale (*mizān*), completely and almost absolutely. There is tremendous order (*nidhām*) in it. At some point in history this order broke down. Foreign and distant forces descended upon it. It is obvious now that the concerns and complexities of life now are immeasurably greater than in the past. Life in the past was simpler even though the fate of humans now is the same as in the past. I cannot write about *al-Fawwar Camp* in Aristotle's tragedy addressing the nobles. My

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<sup>8</sup> “Big” (*Kabir*) is one of the adjectives Arabs traditionally use in referring to their master poets.

poetry represents my world in an individual way, but it also intersects with the concerns of other people living *in this world*.

Abu Hash-Hash makes it obvious that the choice of a poetic form is the choice of a temporality, in so far as it is a choice; and by temporality I mean a sense or conception of time. The temporality of Abu Hash-Hash poetic production is one in which the present appears more complex than the past and, therefore, the verse of the modern age is charged with “more complex” tasks than the old. Yet, to hold such a view of the classical verse, one need not be born in Palestine or in a refugee camp. Consider for example, Nazek al-Mala’ika who, as mentioned earlier (see page 133), pioneered “free” verse from Baghdad in 1947. In 1962, she published her *Issues of Contemporary Poetry (Qaḍāya al-Shi’r al-Mu’asir)*, in which she argued the case for “free” verse, defending it against assaults from those who saw it as a heresy towards the Arabs’ literary tradition and from those who saw it as a compromised, half-hearted attempt at modernizing this tradition. In the second chapter of her book she discusses the “social roots of the free verse movement,” noting five of them: a thrust towards realism, yearning for independence, resentment of patterning (*namudhaj*), flight from symmetry and preference for content (as opposed to form). In a particularly revealing section, she relates her resentment of the disciplined and symmetrical classical versification to her childhood resentment of what she identifies as “oriental” architecture in Baghdad:

The modern poet found himself in need of a release from this rigorous geometric thinking... and this is not strange in an age that is searching for freedom and wants to break chains, thus living its intellectual and spiritual needs to the fullest... Now, when I look back at the past, I sense that I actually rebelled against the Khalili two-hemistich method as a way of repelling the symmetrical adobe whose two sides are completely identical; and the truth is that I would feel

immense discomfort with the order of houses in Baghdad. Every time I saw a symmetrical residence I found myself tighten and darken. It did not occur to me then that I made this passionate call (*harrā*) to build verse on unequal lines and an irregular number of feet because I was also calling for changing systems of construction and because I am repelled by symmetry and long to destroy it and rebel against it.<sup>9</sup>

I heard more or less similar views during my interviews with other non-Palestinian poets whom I met in Cairo. They too find the modern age one that could not bear “repetition,” “symmetry,” “order,” or “regulations” because they found it to be “more complex.” It is as if the new poetry was charged with the task of erecting a zone of difference and deviation from what now seems repressively ordered. As I mentioned earlier, my plan to visit the Cairo International Book Fair stemmed from my concern to avoid parochially segregating Palestinian poets from the larger Arab poetic scene of which they are part. Also, it was encouraging to know that other Palestinian poets go there, invited or not, to read their works. Ferial Ghazoul, an Iraqi professor of comparative literature at the American University of Cairo, e-mailed me about possible contacts. She led me to my would-be host in Cairo, Helmi Salim, who turned out to be a leading poet of prose in Egypt, if not the Arab world. In Egypt, I met many other poets who were working in various forms and with various registers of the Arabic language. In fact, it was in Cairo that I saw how the life of this language, Arabic, is so overwhelming in its diversity, stretching from the mountains of Europe, to the deserts of Asia and the plateaus of Africa: a language that lives as one soil, rich with vegetation.

I planned my visit to Cairo mainly around the 34<sup>th</sup> Cairo International Book Fair, which has been organized since 1968 under the auspices of the General Egyptian Book

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<sup>9</sup> (1962: 60-3).

Organization (GEBO), an agency of the Ministry of Culture. That year the GEBO brought books from almost 40 countries to the grounds of Madinat Nasr in Cairo. In addition to books, there were also pavilions, dedicated to selling related items (e.g. stationary, electronics and accessories), research panels, and entertainment. The Book Fair also invited more than a dozen Arab poets living abroad to come and read their works. To my knowledge, none worked in the classical form. Rather, all were known for their “free” verse and prose poems. Poets invited at the expense of the Egyptian Department of Culture stayed in what seemed to be five star hotels along the banks of the Nile.

Al-Munsif al-Wahaybi of Tunisia was among the poets invited to read his work and to give a talk about his poetic experience. A “free” verse poet, he is of the view that the classical poem is of the past and not suitable for the present time. He is also of the view that poetry does not need an audience, or, rather, more precisely, needs only a small audience; according to him, an audience, as a phrase has auditory and oral connotations. In his view, what the poet actually needs is readership. I met al-Munsif on the grounds of the book fair, in a café named *al-maqha al-thaqāfi* (*The Cultural Café*). It was curious name for a café whose prices seemed to presume a certain kind of audience; not only one with “culture,” but with enough money to pay double or triple the usual amount for say a *finjan* of coffee.<sup>10</sup> One could order tea, food, coffee, and of course, the water-pipe (*sheesha* as the Egyptians call it). This cultural café is a place that people frequent in order to see who is and is not there. I found it a very hard place to sustain a conversation. Someone always had to stop, interrupt and say hello. It was a place for nurturing and

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<sup>10</sup> *Finjan*: a small cup for serving coffee.

expanding one's network, for making oneself visible, and for registering a presence. This did not mean that it was not a promising café for my fieldwork; I had a few very engaging encounters there.

The "cultural" café in which I met al-Munsif was attached to one of the tents dedicated for reading poetry, or, I should qualify this by saying "modern" poetry. This tent had red carpets and a stage with a banner titled "Cultural Association." Poets reading "traditional" verse, were relegated to the stage-less tent of "The Gathering of Young Poets," which was covered with a raggedy, gray carpet yet contained more chairs than "modern" sites. Many of the poets who came to recite or read in the tent of "The Gathering of Young Poets" were not young at all, as I came to learn from my many visits to it. It was *the kind* of poetry, not their age, that really grouped the poets in that same tent. It was a kind of poetry that al-Munsif associated with death.

Besides writing "free" verse, al-Munsif also works as a professor of Arabic literature in Tunisia's al-Qyrawan University. He gave me his recent *Metaphysics of the Sand Flower* from which he presumably read at the festival. Although I missed my chance to hear him read, we did discuss his views about the current state of Arabic poetry over tea. Intrigued by his bold views on the usefulness of borrowing from Western poetry, I arranged to meet him at the entrance to his hotel; from there, along with Shahir, a colloquial poet friend of al-Munsif from Syria, we walked to *al-Gourion*, a restaurant-café serving alcoholic drinks that seemed to attract many Westerners and Western-oriented locals in downtown Cairo.

Al-Munsif conveyed confidence that when Arab poets borrow from Western poetry, they make it their own. Moreover, he is convinced that today Arabic poetry is among the most advanced in the world. Needless to say, I remained nonplussed as to what criteria he employs in making such a proposition. When I asked him why “free” verse appealed to him, he had the following to say:

Free verse allows me to get closer to what I want from poetry. I am convinced that this form can serve my understanding and goals of poetry. I wrote *al-'amoudi* and it is the easiest thing that I can write. I became convinced in the last few years, that *al-'amoudi's* time is gone. This ode (*qasidah*) has come to us from the pre-Islamic period (*jahili*). You write, and without noticing, you see that this is the composition of al-Mutanabbi, Abu Nuwwas, etc.<sup>11</sup> I try to avoid this, by staying away from *al-'amoudi*. This *qasidah*, willingly or unwillingly, takes the poet to the past. It does not live up to the new conception of poetry, as involving drama. It is almost impossible to find modern *'amoudi* poetry. He who writes in *al-'amoudi* is producing death.

If the death of poetic form means that literary critics have abandoned it, then in a certain way the Cairo Fair is a place to observe that death. That is where the poets of the traditionally metered verse were left in the main to recite on their own, without critics to recognize their existence. Critics were in the company of “free” verse and prose poems in other tents of the fair. But poets do not live on criticism alone. There were larger audiences attending the recitations of “traditional” poets. It is as if the more chairs filled up, the more metered was the verse, and certainly the more colloquial. People in the tents of “traditional” poetry did not seem to sit cross-legged, high-heeled, neck-tied or tight-robed. I saw more of the latter kind of appearances in the more sedate, more “modern” poetry events where clapping was often softer and chairs emptier as in the “Cultural Association” or “Poetry Evening” tents. In the more-crowded, traditional poetry events,

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<sup>11</sup> Abu Nuwwas, an Arab poet of Persian descent on his mother's side (born 757 AD) and al-Mutanabbi (born 937 AD) are two poets of the Abbasid period (749-1258 AD).

taking place mostly at the tent of the “Gathering of Young Poets,” I saw more headscarves, gowns, beards and flip-flops. Here, I heard so much from men and women about the Palestinian martyr (*shaheed*), the *intifada* and *al-Quds* (Jerusalem). In other more “modern” poetry tents, I heard much more about Sufis, fear of death, nightmares, and erotic dreams. No tent, however, monopolized one poetic subject. But the more obscure or distant the language became, and the less rhymed the verse was (those seemed to coincide), the emptier the chairs were.

The measure of the chairs’ occupancy as a spontaneous scale measuring the popularity of poetic words was impressed upon me on many occasions. Without much ordeal, it seemed, visitors dropped in or left the poetic sites as they pleased. One January night, while attending the Fair’s regular “Poet and Experience” session that was always supposed to start at 8:30 p.m., I met a leading “free” verse poet in Egypt and the Arab world: Ahmad ‘Abdul Mu‘ati Hijazi. He came to speak at the only poetry session, that was to take place each evening in what was perhaps the largest and most regal performance site at the fair, dedicated to poetry, but not only to poetry. It was the hall, not tent, of *Saraya October the 6<sup>th</sup>* in which a mural of the President wearing dark sunglasses appears, the Giza Pyramids behind him, comprising the backdrop of the stage along with two huge artificial bouquets of flowers. This cement and glass hall, *Saraya October the 6<sup>th</sup>*, named to invoke the 1973 date of military victory over Israel, and has attracted prominent figures including the Coptic Patriarch of Egypt, a prominent Palestinian parliamentarian in the Israeli Knesset, the General Secretary of the Arab

League, and the Egyptian President himself, among others, and always accompanied by nationally televised live broadcasts.

From this stage, Hijazi spoke to about a hundred people in a hall that seemed able to fit a quadruple that amount. Hijazi recounted the beginnings and development of his poetic career. As he went on, the empty chairs of the hall began to fill and the noise increased. This shift puzzled me for a while, until I learned that the chairs were filling up not because of him, but because of who was following him: the singer/poet Ahmad Fuad Nijm, who gave a rousing performance of poems/songs in colloquial Egyptian later that night. In fact, people became impatient when it seemed that Hijazi, it seemed, was prolonging his speech, having started much later than he was scheduled. It was impossible not to notice the sense of relief and rejuvenation around me when his talk ended. I followed Hijazi to the entrance of the hall, and waited until he finished talking to the TV anchors about the need for Arab poets to learn about globalization, and not only about the ancients and their classical prosody. Introducing myself as a student from Palestine who was conducting an anthropological study of Arabic poetry at a New York university, I asked to set up an interview with him later on. I also conveyed to him the regards of Samih al-Qasim, a Palestinian poet of equal standing whom I had interviewed earlier in Nazareth.<sup>12</sup> Hijazi kindly gave me his home phone number and said that I could see him there when I was ready.

It was noontime on Saturday when I met him for an interview. In fact, I rarely interviewed poets before that time in the metropolis of Cairo. The city itself seems to start

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<sup>12</sup> I presented my interview with Samih al-Qasim in the previous chapter on the classical form.

even later in the day, at least that was the Cairo I saw in the company of poets. Cairo is different from the less urban cities of Ramallah or Nazareth, whose peasant past is not entirely past. I arrived at Hijazi's house to find him busy handwriting something on a desk in his book-lined office; Sa'adiyah, the maid, was attending to his two grandchildren, visiting from France. That was where the poet himself had lived and taught for nearly fourteen years. Now, residing again in Egypt, he is on the editorial staff of the state's newspaper *al-Ahram (The Pyramids)* from which he had recently launched a series of critiques against the prose poem. Hijazi ordered Sa'adiyya to bring me my choice of "disciplined" or "correct" (*mazbuta*) coffee, coffee with a medium amount of sugar, while he went on writing for twenty minutes or so. He then announced that the interview could not last long, since his wife was to come home soon.

I met with Hijazi in order to understand his need to work with "free" verse. The sense that "free" verse belongs to this age and the al-'*amoudi* does not is what emerged in Hijazi's presentation of his poetic approach. His first work in "free" verse was published in late 1955, which made him an avant-garde poet at the time. The poem that is a landmark of his career is "A City Without A Heart" (*Madinatun Bila Qalb*), which I learned during my high-school education at the Greek Orthodox College in Haifa. This move to "free" verse was possible, he told me, after he had rid himself of the "restrictions" of the romantic and classicist influences that had dominated the scene of Arabic poetry at the time, in Egypt and elsewhere.

I was telling you about our need for a new language, neither the language of the classicists that served bad purposes of panegyrics, nor the exhausted, romantic language that became cold and all too familiar... [t]he classical language of the ancients felt far away from us, we know it, we

study it and all but find it far, not because of diction, but because it is associated with particular subjects of bad reputation, such as panegyrics. At that time, the question was not simply of language and poetry, but also politics... There was a general anti-royal atmosphere, and all associated rituals including panegyrics poetry...

Also, this [romantic language] was a language of the inner; you don't have in it any sign to daily life, to reality. It is the language of emotions. The poets don't need to talk about the bus, the street, the city, the food, the hunger, etc. This shortcoming of the romantic language is common to the ancient language; their distance from the life we live... What appealed to me about this form is that it became my form, my language; I no longer had to search and find authority (*marji'a*). In the old form, classical and romantic alike, you needed a preceding authority, and references; you had to be committed to a certain form. Yet the new *qasidah*, the liberated form, is your own poem. You make with it what you want.

Khaled: As if you were the beginning?

Yes, exactly. It is as if you were the beginning. What does that mean? That means that you say what you want, what you believe is very necessary, and what is pressing you, without restrictions. Therefore you could use colloquial Arabic and *you could form your own meters, in your own peculiar ways.*

The search for one's own meters, for what on the tongues of modern poets is called "internal rhyme" is a search not only for those who have lived under monarchical regimes. This search was also the lot of those wanting to belong to this age, be it in Nasser's Cairo or Ba'athist Damascus, be it a Sudanese poet or a Syrian one, be it in the homeland, or in exile. This is what I learned from Ahmad Dahbour. Dahbour is originally from Haifa, from the largest, still extant, Arab neighborhood of *Wadi al-Nisnas* – where Jewish visitors frequently came on safari-like tours to be entertained by the artistic productions of a few Arab and many Jewish artists displayed on the walls or sealed-up windows of the evacuated and sealed homes in the neighborhood. Before they evacuated during the war, the Dahbour family had owned a bakery and a house that he was able to visit for the

first time in the early 1990s, only after the Oslo accords. When they lost their home in 1948, Dahbour, his siblings, his parents and his blind grandmother found themselves in a hut in a refugee camp near Hems, Syria; Dahbour describes the camps as not fit for “human existence.” There is where Dahbour’s struggle to survive and to imagine began.

Deprived of electricity, the content of family gatherings in the evenings was storytelling. Dahbour’s parents were good storytellers, he recalls. His father, who earned some cash from washing the dead and reading the Qur’an on their graves, asked him to read from a yellow book when he was in fourth grade. It was the epic of *al-Zeir Salim* and he immediately fell in love with these “split texts,” which he did not know were poetry.<sup>13</sup> His mother, able and resourceful to her family and neighbors, saved him with her stories about a magical, parallel city called Haifa. “Why do you need to see the Wonder Box?” she asked him, when he could not join Syrian kids who watched the box on display at town fairs. She promised him that she would bring him instead the sea on a mule from *The Mules’ Court* in Haifa.<sup>14</sup> She also told him that there is no need for swings for which he could not pay, not even with bread, which was a money substitute for penniless kids on the ‘*Eid*.<sup>15</sup> She reminded him that Carmel Mountain in Haifa moves when children ride on it. When clothes were torn and shoes split open, she asked him not to care about clothes, for in Haifa, clothes do not matter. There, she told him, rain falls only on plants

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<sup>13</sup> *Al-Zeir Salim* is a *sira*, an indigenous Arabic genre, that can be translated as a “folk epic.” Alternating between prose and verse, this particular *sira* narrates the chivalrous life of a Bedouin warrior.

<sup>14</sup> Now the Mules’ Court (*Sahat al-Hanattir*) has the Hebrew name of *Kikar Paris* (Paris Square).

<sup>15</sup> ‘*Eid* here refers to one of the two Muslim holidays: either ‘Eid al-Adha (the Sacrificial Feast) on the day pilgrims sacrifice in the valley of Mina or ‘Eid al-Fiṭr (the Feast of Breaking the Fast) on the first day after the fasting month of Ramadan.

and soil, but not on humans. These sayings and many more he recalled as he sought to account for his childhood entry into the kingdom of poetry.

Today, at the start of his sixties, Dahbour lives and works in the ancient city of modern refugees, which is Gaza. There, he resides with his wife and children, one of them now a student in the US. He returned to Gaza after studying in Baghdad, and living in Tunisia for some time, and after the Oslo Accords, along with many Palestinian National Authority (PNA) functionaries. He works as a Director in the Ministry of Education and Culture. He also contributes a Friday column titled "*Stone in the Air*" to the communist daily, *al-Ittihad*, first published out of Haifa six decades ago. This is a way Haifa stays with him and he with her. But it was neither in Haifa nor Gaza where we met. He is barred from entering Israeli territory and I, from entering Gaza, because of my Israeli citizenship.<sup>16</sup> We in fact met in Cairo during the book fair, as he was invited by the Egyptians to read during one of the poetry evenings. The Israelis allowed him to leave by land and me by air, but only on the way to Egypt.<sup>17</sup> At the fair, I missed Ahmad's reading event but was able to interview him for nearly four hours in the cafeteria of the Sameramis Hotel, on the bank of the Nile.

For someone with an upset stomach and worries about his wife and children back in Gaza, Dahbour, nonetheless, spoke clearly and engaged me for hours over coffee and tea

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<sup>16</sup> Strictly speaking, a military ordinance bars my entrance to any locale on the West Bank. Yet Ramallah, unlike Gaza, was a place where such military rule was not uniformly or strictly applied, as my experience proved.

<sup>17</sup> The Israeli security personnel at the International Cairo Airport deemed my computer laptop suspicious and dangerous due to a "technical problem" that they "could not reveal." They also could not, they said, in any way, allow me on the aircraft with the laptop computer. So I returned to Haifa by land.

with stories about his childhood mentor, the poet Maurice Qabaq, and the poetic ability he nurtured in him. Dahbour said that Maurice Qabaq, a name that would accompany him throughout his life; Qabaq was his “guardian angel,” who taught him not only poetry but also “the art of life through giving and tolerance.” Qabaq also taught Ahmad that it is “not necessary to be noisy and oratory because the modern poem is read with the eye.” Dahbour also learned that the modern poem is read as a whole text, not as discrete verse lines. Because of this modern conception of reading a poem, according to Dahbour, Qabaq once found himself in scandalous trouble with the “past-ist” (*salafi*) culture in town when he demonstrated to the clergymen of the local church that they were misreading his poem, *Love And Theology*. In particular, he angered the local church’s doctrine of trinity when he wrote “The Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Father, three in One Phantom/ if we do not praise the Lord.” It is with the help of the iconoclast Qabaq that Dahbour was able to do what Hijazi of Egypt did before him: leave romantic and classicist verse for the sake of a “modern” and “liberated” one:

I am undeniably indebt to *taf’ieela*, that is, modern poetry, to Maurice Qabaq who noticed that this child, who may be talented, is afraid of *taf’ieela* because he is pulled by the tradition (*turath*). He noted that the prose poem is not worth a shilling. He taught me that with *taf’ieela* poetry you could write it and keep it metered. *Taf’ieela* was then the revolution in the 1960s, it was the future, *taf’ieela* was like an earthquake. Today you don’t see that when there is prose poetry, which is considered the third road. Khalil Khouri of Syria and Maurice Qabaq, who are among the best poets of Syria, were deliberately flunked in the university because they wrote *taf’ieela*. On the radio, it was forbidden to broadcast the modern poetry of *taf’ieela*. Even many modern poets wrote poems about modern poetry. *Choosing the modern form is choosing the modernity of life*. It was enough for me to know that this form has its rules and that it is difficult and challenging. Beware that *taf’ieela* is the difficult one not *al-‘amoudi*. With *al-‘amoudi* once you figure the meters (*awzān*) you walk the lane. With *taf’ieela* you have to know when to put 2 feet, 4 feet or 10 feet on the line, when to absent the rhyme and when to reveal it. This challenge, this search for new forms that are not pre-made lead to a heated debate... I

discovered that the word's meaning is not literal. I felt that I live in open air.

What was "open air" for Ahmad remains for me an open question. Having heard his response, I still did not understand why modern poetry meant what it meant for him in a very common way: a less regulated and less disciplined form, in terms of meters and rhymes. *Taf'ieela* is a term indicating a medium unit of sound measurement (between meter and "syllables") in Arabic verse. It parallels the concept of the "foot" in English poetry. This prosodic name also became the common Arabic name for "free verse" (*shi'r hurr*), which takes the single "foot" and not the entire meter as its basic unit for verse construction. As such the poet is "free" to collocate a different number of "feet" in each line and to hide or reveal the rhyme "freely" in different lines, even while committing the entire verse construction to a single poetic meter. By loosening the grip of metrical rigor, the *taf'ieela* poem contains irregular rhymes and uneven number of "feet" in each verse line (see sample poem by Fadwa Tuqan in Figures 5 and 6). If so many other things about modern life are said to be more regulated, more orderly, and more disciplined, why is it the opposite for modern Arabic poetry, or perhaps for modern poetry generally? Now, my questions will shift from a focus on the need for a new form to the need for a new kind of rhythm. Why had rhyme become so loathsome for the poet who sought to be modern? And what are the social implications of this loathing?

نار الحريره  
والي تنكمش اليوم بحزنٍ وسكوتٍ  
هذه الأرض سيبقى  
قلها المغدور حياً لا يموت

• • •

هذه الأرض امرأة  
في الأحاديث وفي الأرحام -  
سر الحصب واحد  
قوة السر التي تُنبِتُ نخلاً -  
وسنابل  
تُنبِتُ الشعب المقاتل

• • •

دارت الأيام لم التقي فيها -  
باين عمي  
غير أنني كنت أدري

٥٤٣

حمزه

(١)

كان حمزه  
وأحدًا من بلدي كالأخرين  
طيباً يأكل خبزه  
بيد الكدح كعمومي البسطاء الطيبين

• • •

قال لي حين التقينا ذات يوم  
وأنا اخبط في تيه الهزيمة :  
اصمدي ، لا تضعفي يا ابنة عمي  
هذه الأرض التي تحصدتها -

٥٤٢

Figure 5

*Ḥamza: a "free" verse poem by Fadwa Tuqan (1918-2003)<sup>18</sup>*  
(Fadwa Tuqan, *Collected Works*, 1978)

<sup>18</sup> A translation of this poem can be found Appendix H.

والتي تتكلمش اليوم بحزن وسكوت	كان حمزه
-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /°	-ب- /-
هذه الأرض سيبقى	واحدا من بلدتي كالأخرين
-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /-ب-	-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /°
سر الخصب واحد	طيبا يا كل خبزه
-ب- /-ب- /-	-ب- /-ب- /-
قوة السر التي تثبت نخلا-	بيد الكدح كقومي البسطاء الطيبين
-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /-ب-	-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /°
وسنابل	قال لي حين التقينا ذات يوم
-ب- /-	-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /-
تثبت الشعب المقاتل	وأنا أخط في تيه الهزيمة:
-ب- /-ب- /-	-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /-
	أصمدي، لا تضعفي يا ابنة عمي
	-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /-
	هذه الأرض التي تحصدها-
	-ب- /-ب- /-ب- /-
	نار الجريمة
	-ب- /-ب- /-

Figure 6

A Scansion of Fadwa Tuqan's *Hamza*

This scansion is in Arabic; therefore, it should be read from right to left. This "free" verse poem is measured on the meter of *ar-ramal* (*the running*), whose base is in the feet – ٠ – –, whereby (–) stands for "short syllable" and (٠) for "long syllable."

### **“It is Internal”: New Life, New Rhythm**

One of the Arabs’ old and remembered poets once said: “the miseries of one people is the gain of another” (*Maṣa’ibu qawmin ‘inda qawmin fawa’idu*).<sup>19</sup> Without Ahmad Dahbour’s stomachache, I doubt that we would have had a four-hour-long conversation on a beautiful January day in a city like Cairo. Not feeling well, Dahbour opted to take the day easy and to stay at the hotel. To be sure, we did not spend all four hours conversing about poetry. An Iraqi novelist-friend of Dahbour, who was invited to the festival from London, joined us. Ahmad and his friend spent nearly an hour reminiscing about life in Iraq. This is how I heard about Ahmad’s longing to visit Karbula’a and its shrines, and to be around Iraqi folk songs and foods. This is how we drifted all the way to talk about his admiration for the genius of the prophet Muhammad whom the Arabs, he reminded me, first accused of being a poet – accusations which the Qur’an repeatedly refutes.<sup>20</sup> As for Dahbour’s poetry, after hearing him recount the story of his road to poetry, and to free verse in particular, I was still interested in hearing from him about the significance of rhythm, of a poetic device in a poetic form that is sustained by and for, it is said, the picture and not the sound. To inquire into the significance of rhythm in the working of a free verse poet was to inquire into a concept that is no longer what it was thought to be.

Each poet is a planet. I am with the spirit of multiplicity. I am not for pre-made patterns. I don’t place a condition on poets that they must know of or to have metered poetry. But if they do write metered, it has to be according to prosodic rules. Just as when a poet writing in demotic [language], his work is not judged for grammar. But if you write prose, why not? That too is poetry. Even prose poetry has its own rules. It does not tolerate rhymes. Yet, metered verse needs and demands rhyme... I am interested in Eliot’s stand when he said that: “I make in new poems music

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<sup>19</sup> Al-Mutanabbi. (b. 937 AD).

<sup>20</sup> For example, *sura* 36, verse 69 or *sura* 37 verse 36.

of thoughts.” This is not the music of chronological distances between letters and vowels. But the idea itself moves from collective to personal talk from market (*suq*) to a high language of imagination and wings.<sup>21</sup> Rhythm gushes in language according to movement in the psyche, it is a sensibility. I can’t tell you how to develop a rhythm. It is internal rhythm.

It is as if rhythm now is the stuff of emotions alone; it is no longer taken as the basis of a *practice* – the practice of mastering the traditional meters of Arabic poetry. Dahbour could not tell me how to develop a rhythm, but the young Abu Hash-Hash of Ramallah told me how his own rhythm developed and what it represents. Dahbour learned early on from Qabaq’s lesson that a modern rhythm has to register the existence not of the donkey cart, but the airplane, electricity and microphone.

Abu Hash-Hash, however, grew up and lives on a modern rhythm, which registers speed but also loss and confusion, occupation and co-option. I saw Abu Hash-Hash for the last time before leaving the field in May. From late March to mid May, we stayed in contact over the phone since I could not visit Ramallah during that period, and he could not leave it. Although soldiers came to his house and to his sister’s next door, they did not arrest him. His brother in-law, on the other hand, was detained for a short while. If any thing arrested both Abu Hash-Hash and me, as we concurred over the phone, it was TV, especially the news on the *al-Jazira* satellite channel. It is as if watching TV were the only thing one could do – watch TV – as if this were the only thing one could do against occupation: watch it. Perhaps it gave me a sense of control in this uncontrollable situation. Perhaps it allowed a sense of hope that something would change, something would come to an end soon and fast, as fast as the news. The horror of Occupation cannot

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<sup>21</sup> *Suq*, meaning marketplace in Arabic, connotes that which is base and unrefined; hence, the pejorative adjective *suqi*, meaning plebian or vulgar.

become a daily matter. No one should *get used to* horror. These were my illusions and nothing more than illusions. Life went on, on hold.

Many things were put on hold during that period. After the March re-invasion of much of the West Bank, not only were my visits to Ramallah suspended, but so was much of life in Ramallah and the rest of the occupied land. Once, trying to convince myself that I was doing fieldwork, that I was still doing anything at all, that I was not succumbing to the malaise all around me, I decided to just hang out with Abu Hash-Hash. To simply hang out with poets was, I figured, part of my ethnographic “job.” I stopped by his office in *al-Qattan* Foundation, another restored two-story mansion in the more affluent *al-Masyoun*, a neighborhood where fancy apartments commonly were vacated for safer ones in America, where *intifada* graffiti was less frequent, where the stones of walls and fences remained generally intact and “cleaner” – at least in comparison with the walls of the refugee camps. In his office on the second floor, above the foundation’s library, Abu Hash-Hash made us some tea and complained how there was no sense in doing any work, no sense in planning for anything. What might take him months to plan, such as designing workshops, poetry contests, and so forth, could be so easily ruined in a second, an “ease” made possible by occupation. In a subsequent May interview, he explained to me how his poetic rhythm relates to the rhythm of his circumstances in a modern, occupied Palestinian society:

The rhythm that represents this modern poem is psychological; it is confused, complex disorderly and fast. This is not necessarily the rhythm of all poets. I cannot say that I have a clear vision and project. Honestly, I am still searching. I write with more freedom now than in the past. I published prose poetry to make a statement that I am not committed entirely and eternally to free verse. This new freedom allows me to write

anything without caring if it is prose or verse. It allows me just to write without concern over form. I write as if no one is going to read. Of course there is no absolute freedom but there is extreme freedom. The more freedom that *a writer* has during writing, then what is written is more honest. There is more chance to bring something new. It is important just to write, regardless of everything else.

Writing is practicing freedom. The 1990s generation feels freer, more absolved from commitment to that which had been attempted. Because all that has been attempted has failed. Today a lot of dreams have been vanished and destroyed from the Gulf War to the Oslo Accords. Today we are not permitted to even use the phrase, "Zionist enemy" in *Al-Ayyam*.<sup>22</sup> Those who spent their lives in the collective struggle feel they are wasted. They discovered that with Oslo, all appears like a mirage. This is why I don't want to repeat the experience of others. I take a personal not a party position.

These were the pronouncements of a poet dismayed and disillusioned with the struggle for an independent Palestine; his comments express a dissatisfaction with leadership that was seen as all too impotent: seeking to score high in the politics of peace while unable to safeguard even the scores and records of its student population in the basement of the Ministry of Education and Culture.<sup>23</sup> Abu Hash-Hash's rhythm is the rhythm of someone in a generation who has entered the Arab poetic scene for the first time in the 1990s, and quite locally. Abu Hash-Hash's modern rhythm is located in the psyche of a modern self, not in language's sounds as such. Above all, Abu Hash-Hash's rhythm is simultaneously the rhythm of the occupied and the ignored at once.

Reflecting the thoroughly and typically factional poetic scene of Ramallah, Murad al-Sudani of the House of Poetry protested in the pages of the London-based daily *al-Quds al-'Arabi* that his generation was being ignored. He found his generation ignored in a

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<sup>22</sup> *Al-Ayyam* is a daily out of Ramallah, which is seen as aligned with the PNA.

<sup>23</sup> From one visit in May, I learned that the Israeli army had raided student files and a safe with several thousand Israeli *shekels* in the basement of the Ministry of Education and Culture in Ramallah.

recent book of selected Palestinian poems commissioned from 'Amman, the designated capital of Arab culture for the year, and assembled by 'Ali al-Khalili of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Culture. The book did not include any of his cohort's works. Al-Sudani made sure to mention in his article many of the names that al-Khalili overlooked. In it, he refers to an anthology titled *The Permanent Guests of Fire* that includes the works of thirteen poets of the 1990s generation.<sup>24</sup> Al-Sudani concludes that for the last ten years no intellectual or institution has paid attention to his generation's efforts, creating a scene in which "each sings for his own Lila."<sup>25</sup> This generation, according to al-Sudani, welcomes the criticism of those "older in creativity and culture," but rejects being ignored.

There is something emblematic about al-Sudani's protest, emblematic of the time and its poets. It points to one of poets' greatest, if not the greatest, fear, that is, to be ignored. To be ignored is to be sentenced to death. This death largely occurs when critics and literary editors are keeping a poet's name "in the dark." It means the Palestinian poet is often facing the angel of death *twice* each day: as a Palestinian and as a wordsmith. To stay alive, therefore, is to stay above, not under, the grounds of Palestine and also to have one's name mentioned by someone somewhere -- in newspapers, periodicals, books, poetry events and so forth. To name a poet is to declare a poet's existence.

Through publication, I learned more about the place of rhythm in the works of Arab poets whom I was able to meet. A printed daily brochure announcing the events of the Cairo

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<sup>24</sup> Mahmoud Abu Hash-Hash is among the thirteen contributors.

<sup>25</sup> Lila is a reference to a character from the romantic folk epic of *Majnoun Lila* (The Madman of Lila). The name Lila is invoked here to mean "a loved one."

34<sup>th</sup> International Book Fair allowed me to know who was reading what, when and where. This is how I was able to identify and contact Joseph Harb of Lebanon. As I learned in our meeting, he is apprehensive about being relegated to a submissive relation but not by a military occupation, as the young Abu-Hash-Hash is. He is concerned with the havoc not left by an Israeli occupation (and a co-opted Palestinian leadership), but by Western colonization. I learned many other things from meeting Joseph, thanks to Madam Safinaz who, I learned from the company of poets, was the person coordinating the poets' visits. When I told her what I needed, she was disappointed that I had failed to contact her earlier. She would have introduced me to all the poets visiting from the Arab world and Europe. Before meeting Mm. Safinaz, I had been trying to contact the poets on my own, waiting on the Fair's grounds for them to be available at the end of their readings. Mm. Safinaz, however, was in a strategic position to connect me to all these "brothers" and "sisters" coming to town. She was in charge of their accommodation and transportation on behalf of the ministry that had invited them. She knew all the hotels where the visiting poets were staying in downtown Cairo.

Reaching the Giza Sheraton in a van that was serving Mm. Safinaz and her poets, I was able to meet for a short period with Joseph Harb, who writes mainly in "free" verse and occasionally in colloquial Lebanese. Before our interview, I had heard him on a memorable night in the "Poetry Evening" tent in the company of the Egyptian, Farouq Shousha, and the head of the Syrian television 'Ali 'Abdul Karim. All are working primarily in "free" verse. Farouq Shousha was adamant and embarrassed that the Fair's organizers did not host the event for Harb and 'Abdul Karim in the *Saraya of October the*

6<sup>th</sup>, a place he deemed better fit for Egypt's guests and for poets of such stature as Harb and 'Abdul Karim. Though lacking the grandiose or regalia of the *Saraya*, the "Poetry Evening" tent still had a red, checkered carpet and an elevated stage with a table and a podium. This setup was certainly unlike the tent for the "Gathering of Young Poets" unofficially reserved for more traditional recitations, where anyone could show up and register to read her or his poetry. No such spontaneous reading could occur at the "Poetry Evening" whose performers were all scheduled in advance, several of whom were even from outside Egypt. From the elevated stage of this latter tent, Harb, wearing a suit and a necktie, stood behind a podium to read his work with the aid of a microphone.

Introducing his work by calling it a text (*naṣ*), Harb announced that it was dedicated to the late Salah 'Abdul Sabour, a pioneering poet of free verse in Egypt.<sup>26</sup> He also made allusions to what sounded like a painful childhood among the nuns at his school. In what I took to be a commentary on the entire Arab poetic scene, he declared: "From under the ground are the true poets. Above the ground are only those who attempt to be poets." We met in one of the lounges in his hotel, only a couple of hours before his flight back to Beirut. There, Harb expressed to me his anguish over the road that Arab poets had been taking. When he was younger, no one dared to publish what is being published nowadays. He said that today it is kids (*awlād*) who are running the literary sections and supplements of the press and the general media. For him the poet is charged with the task of discovering the "depth of the human soul," and therefore he sees that "poetic conceptions reach further than political and military effects." He also told me that

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<sup>26</sup> Salah 'Abdul Sabour (1931-1981) was also a dramatist who served as an Undersecretary of State for Culture, and most famous for his poetry collection, *People of My Country*, and play, the *Tragedy of al-Hallaj* translated into English as *Murder in Baghdad*.

“Mahmoud Darwish will be more lasting in his effect on the Palestinian self than Abu ‘Amaar [Yasir Arafat] because the poet sees what is further and deeper, what is yet to be known, and so moves society’s wheel forward.” As with the young Abu Hash-Hash of Ramallah, so it is with Harb of Lebanon: poetic rhythm is now a property of the “psychological” (*nafsāni*). However, while Israeli occupation surfaces in Abu Hash-Hash’s presentation of rhythm, it is Western domination that surfaces in Joseph’s presentation of rhythm:

The internal rhythm is the rhythm of the soul (*nafs*). The psychological state forces you to use words and phrases that are closer to that psychological state. This is how a rhythm is produced.... what bothers me is that the poet brings a rhythm that is not his own but is the product of a different group. And that bothers me. You belong to a history that is not accustomed to this rhythm. Rhythm is a collective historical sense with its own history and you the poets are a product of this given history, part of it, and all of a sudden comes something, a command, from another poetic production. This is our big calamity, that Arab society had something stolen from it and became a new thing.

We are slaves of the West and don’t think in a free way. I love Baudelaire, but I will not allow him to abolish my historical accomplishment and put in its stead the collective sensibility of another group. This way I lose my own collective sensibility. To not do so is to turn into an imitating creature, and such a creature does not possess anything but the tools of those imitated. I am referring to the surrealist, nihilist, modernist and postmodernist schools. As we took from them shoes, dress, dance, painting, and song, we also take from them poetry. We treat poetic writing as if it were something to be exported like all other stuff. Every theorizing for the West in a Western style is stolen theorizing... Those who theorize for the West are thieves. They think they won’t be discovered, that their sources are stolen. There is a lot of falsification for the purpose of marketing, and that brings the value of the poet really down.

What I found to be unique about Harb’s position is the absence of phrases such as “development,” “progress,” and “advancement,” including the modern transformation of rhythm in Arabic poetry. Those phrases flourish in the narratives of poets of his standing,

who triumphantly champion the cause of modernity, a Western condoned modernity, in Arabic poetry. The accusation often leveled against them from less established poets, which I heard throughout the fieldwork, is that they, the master poets, yearn for Western recognition (in the form of publications in Western languages) and the awarding of Western prizes such as, the Noble Prize included. According to these criticisms, these poets say what the West needs or wants to hear: about the “fanatic nature” of Islam, the “traditional character” of the Arabs, and the “intolerance” of Arabs and Muslims to multiplicities of being. But more pertinent to my concern with rhythm is Harb’s stand towards rhythm, as a product not only of a psychology, but also of a particular group, with a particular history, which renders his “internal” rhythm not entirely internal. This rhythm continues, at least for poets such as Harb, to be the rhythm of a people.

### **The “Modern” Poet and the “Conservative” People**

Down the hill of *al-Harah al-Sharqiyya* (Eastern Neighborhood), the predominantly Muslim section of Nazareth, I finished my breakfast of homemade *manaqish* and *shai* with my aunt, Um Hisham, who died a few months later from complications due to kidney failure.<sup>27</sup> I stayed with her every time I visited Nazareth. I would ride a bus or take a car service from Haifa’s old *Mules’ Court* for nearly an hour northeast towards the Galilee. In late August, my friend Mouna al-Dhair, a descendant of a family whose ancestor, Omar al-Dhahir once governed Palestine under Turkish rule, invited me to attend a meeting of al-Sibatt, a group of poets and non-poets who are concerned with the cultural preservation of Palestinian folk art. She offered to introduce me to several poets

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<sup>27</sup> *Manaqish* are Palestinian pastries made of *z’atar*, a blend of local thyme with other spices and olive oil. *Shai* is “tea” in Arabic.

in the city at a time when I was desperate to speak to poets who are barely known or completely unknown, much like Mouna herself, who later asked if I would mention her in my dissertation. The *as-Şibat* meeting never took place in the old and strikingly deserted *qaşbah* of the city, where municipal donkeys, not trucks, pick up residential waste its narrow alleys. A shopping mall, wide and tall on the hill of Natzeret Elite, can be seen from the windows of al-Dhahir's family salon.<sup>28</sup> Here, I met Mouna's family for a late afternoon coffee and cake. I had lots of time to chat with them since the *as-Şibat*'s meeting had been cancelled. Determined "to make the best" out of my visit to Nazareth and to counteract a fieldwork that all too often felt ethereal, I decided to stay overnight at my aunt's. The next morning, I walked to Edmoun Shehadeh's shop on the main, almost always congested street of Nazareth: Pope Paul VI Street.<sup>29</sup>

On this street,, Edmoun Shehadeh now has the bookstore he always wanted to have. He started the bookshop after quitting his profession, upon his doctors' recommendation, as a carpenter, a career that had occupied him for two decades. He also had to sell half a *dunum* of his family's land in order to build the store, in a city where cement is spreading in almost petrifying proportions with houses crammed next to one another, leaving only remnants of gardens.<sup>30</sup> On the glass counter of Shehadeh's bookstore, he was having a breakfast that he invited me to share with him. I thankfully declined and went on to explain to him about my research and the reasons I wanted to talk with him. I considered

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<sup>28</sup> *Natzeret Elite* ("Upper Nazareth" in Hebrew) is a Jewish settlement-town on a hill that once was Nazareth's. Recently, an increasing number of Arabs, facing a shortage of space in the old city, move to Upper Nazareth; here, they live side by side with Jews, many of whom were brought from Ethiopia and Russia. Bringing people identified as Jews from abroad has been part of successive Israeli government projects to protect the "Jewish character" of the Galilee (and the state) from the "demographic threat" caused by high rates of Arab reproduction.

<sup>29</sup> The first name Edmoun is an Arabic rendition of Edmond in English.

<sup>30</sup> A *dunum* is a measure of land that equals approximately 1000 sq. meters.

him to belong to the oldest cohort of living Palestinian poets. In his late sixties or early seventies, he must have been through a lot. Even the store, he said to me, is something he is putting behind him now. His daughter is really the one running it, but he comes every day to help out. He does not have energy for it anymore nor does he have energy for poetry, which in fact, he started writing late in his life. Initially, he was part of a theatre group and much of his writing was plays. Today, he writes very little poetry and few play. He could not stay up late as he used to do at a younger age. However, he was recently able to complete a short novel called the *Road to Birzeit*, and received a writer in-residence award from the “Arab Section” of the Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture, a section that many see as contributing to a deeply damaged poetic scene particularly through its “promiscuous” (*liman habba wa dab*) publication of poetry anthologies.

Yet, it is not for everyone that Shehadeh writes. He says that he wants his “verse to have mobile, alive pictures, where you feel life and drama and conflict.” Shehadeh adds, “I see poetry not as photographic pictures. I try in my picture to give symbols, allusions.” After hearing his views on the goal of modern poetry that he learned to write in the “Iraqi way,” I wanted to understand what kind of relationship he has or wants to have with the audience.<sup>31</sup> I, therefore, asked him, for whom does he write.

First of all, I write the poem for myself, not in order to be recited as oration in front of masses. I write for people who like to think while they read a poem. There are people who read a poem quickly and want to understand it from the first glance. I try to go deeper in my verse. I want the reader to take part in the poem. The reader responds to the meaning of

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<sup>31</sup> The “Iraqi way,” refers here to the “free” verse (*shi'r hurr*) movement that erupted out of the Teachers’ Training College in Baghdad, starting in the late 1940s by the poetess Nazek al-Mala’ika (b. 1922) and two fellow Iraqi poets, ‘Abdul Wahab al-Bayyati (1926 - 1999) and Badr Shakir as-Sayyab (1926 - 1964).

the poem. This is a good thing. I let the reader be a critic. This should be the correct poetry, not the poetry of clichés and photographic pictures. We need poetry with depth and symbols. I am not calling for poetry soaked in obscurity... This audience doesn't want to read riddles and quizzes. They should be able to understand much if not all the poem. My poem requires effort, but it does not make you feel blind... [B]ut the audience still likes, from what I see in poetry readings, music and rhyme. The poetry with symbols, living pictures, drama, and significations does not get much applause like my poetry. I don't scream and tickle emotions like traditional poets. I address the mind, which is harder to reach.

His aversion to a poetry that reaches the ear but not the eye, one that is meant for reciting not reading, could have been one of the reasons that I did not see Shehadeh at the Second Palestinian Poetry Festival that took place in the Western Galilee town of Tamra during the month of September, 2001. Shehadeh himself furnished two other reasons; he was busy with the shop (it was back-to-school season), and he found that Moustafa Murad, the organizer of the festival and the municipality of the town hosting the festival, were inviting what he considered "fourth or fifth rate" poets.

It was during the last day and last hours of this festival that I finally had the opportunity to hear someone else's criticism of the festival, and from someone who actually had attended it. Ahmad Kiwan came to the festival to hear and not to read. But he was rather dismayed by the kind of poetry he heard at the festival, and by the poetic scene in general, both Palestinian and Arab. Kiwan spoke to me about his views of poets, not about his occasional work as a poet, mostly in the traditional form. It became apparent that what he considers a regrettable state of the poetic scene is part of regrettable political Arab reality.

On the fourth and final day of this festival that stretched over two weekends, its organizers planned a trip to Jerusalem in order to express solidarity with the Orient House, a sign of Palestinian statehood in Jerusalem that had come under Israeli seizure and closure. There, on a sidewalk near the House, (neither standing at the entrance to the House nor in front of the tall cement blocks that blocked the street in front of it was permitted by Israeli police), poems and speeches were read in honor of the Palestinian struggle. The poets appeared in the order they acrimoniously negotiated on the bus ride to Jerusalem. They read their works in the presence of ‘Abdul Qadir al-Husseini, who following his late father, Feisal al-Husseini, assumed responsibility for the House. Besides words, ‘Abdul Qadir also received some memorabilia of the festival -- a tray and a handful of flags.

Afterwards, the House served us cold drinks on the sidewalk of a nearby street, then we took the bus again to the old section of the city, where people diverged for different purposes, either to eat, shop or pray. The festival group reunited in the early afternoon to head back to Nazareth. On the journey back, I decided to take a nap. Ahmad Kiwan was sitting behind me and talking to me without any intention of stopping. I opened my eyes and resigned myself to listening to what proved to be a lamentation, not only of the festival, but also of the state of Arabic poetry. In his reflection on this “bad time” for poets and Arabs alike -- a commonly heard reflection – Kiwan said bad poets have the same fate as the one-eyed. The one-eyed among the blind is a king:

Today poetry is akin to a *suq*[market], and the *suq* is filled with poets or semi-poets or those who call themselves poets. In such a state the bad mixes with good (*al-habil bi al-nabil*). What is lacking among our poets is knowledge, culture (*thaqafa*), reading and familiarity with the tradition

(*turāth*)... It does not matter which poetry you write, but it is important for it to have a “musical bell” (*jaras mousiqi*) for the ear to cultivate, to formulate. If we consider all this with regard to the Tamra festival, then you will find that the number of poets is very, very few. For much of what was said, there was prose and sometime bad prose at that. Chaos was all over the place in that festival... In poetry one has to begin from the beginning, the rhymed and metered poetry, because this is the foundation on which the Arabs built their tradition of poetry, and one cannot with the brush of a pen cancel what has been acknowledged for more than a thousand years. This is injustice to poetry and to literature... [O]nly after the poet has a firm ground in the traditional poetry can he go in all sorts of ways, but in all cases he must retain the music of poetry. This is what many poets of modernity lack as they write dispersed poetry (*shi'r mursal*).

In early October, a couple of weeks after meeting Kiwan, I went south to Ramallah. I sought to make it a habit to visit Ramallah at the start of every month for a week or so, when the city is open. In October it still was. At that time of the year the mountains of Ramallah and Jerusalem betray the desert climate characterizing much of the land. If snow falls, most likely it will fall on those mountains and almost nowhere else. But the cold nights were not the only thing that concerned me and my friend, mentor, and host, ‘Abdul Karim Abu Khashshan, a professor of modern Arabic literature at Birzeit University. We were concerned by nights of fire exchanged between settlers and Palestinians firing from right under his house, which faces the Jewish colony of Pasgout from a dangerously exposed spot. Abu Khashshan was actually incensed by the Palestinian militants who endangered his family in such an irresponsible way. He knew that by firing from under his house, the Palestinian gunmen provided the army force guarding the colony with an excuse to start shooting indiscriminately. His neighbor had been shot under such circumstances. Staying away from the windows that overlooked Pasgout, Abu Kashashan and his family slept in the back of the house, while I slept on

the floor of his office. When the shooting was more frequent and intense, as it became in late March, Abu Khashshan and his family moved down the valley to his mother-in-law's house, which is closer to the colony, but less strategically located for gun battles.

One late afternoon October, Abu Khashshan, with his customary Bedouin kindness, took me to the Ministry of Education and Culture in Ramallah, where telephones do not work, but faxes and cellular phones do. There was a man he wanted me to meet, Muhammad Al-Battrawi. He introduced us to one another in a hurry because then, as on every Tuesday, al-Battrawi was on the air to receive calls from poets on a Palestinian-National-Authority-sponsored radio a program dedicated to poet novices. Although I never had a chance to listen to the radio show, I was able to hear al-Battrawi's views through a series of interviews that took place in his third-floor office. From him, I learned what a "modern" reader might want of poetry. He showed me how the modern poem is no longer something to be heard, but seen.

Al-Battrawi, now in his seventies, confessed that when he sees himself in the mirror, the face in front of him is the face of a stranger. He finds a man that frozen in his twenties. Something about his age stopped growing when he left his village of Sdoud whose destruction gave rise to a Jewish town similarly named Ashdod, as occurs on colonial occasions. Al-Battrawi continues to dream every night in terms of the village. This is also why he continues to like what young or adolescent men like: chocolate, women, and the old versions of the Tom and Jerry cartoon. But he learned about territorial rulership not only from a cat and a mouse on TV, but also from the British

colonial presence. This is how al-Battrawi knew about getting in trouble with the authorities, prior to the rule of the Israelis. Before finishing his schooling in the seventh grade, Al-Battrawi had already gone on campaigns, seeking to convince people not to pay taxes to the English (*al-ingleez*). In the mid 1940s, when he was in his teens, he participated in establishing *al-Ittihad* newspaper, which later became the only Arabic daily in what became Israel, and the mouthpiece of the Israeli communist party. When the roads were open, Al-Battrawi traveled frequently to the U.S. and attended international conferences for writers. He is a member of a World Union of Writers.

Apparently, al-Battrawi helped launch not only a newspaper, but also the careers of many poets and novelists as well. He did this during his work as a literary editor for one of the local newspapers on the West Bank. Paying attention to beginners is very important to him. He provided me with half a dozen names of known writers whose beginnings he nurtured. For him, the letters of young poets to the editor are “most dangerous” since “the published word in our society has the power of magic.” He went on to describe to me about the ways in which publishing gives the youth a sense of self-worth and self-fulfillment in an otherwise frustrating age. Yet, he considers this age to be poetically better than the previous one.

Poetry today is a picture... I don't distinguish between prose and poetry... In the past I used to like metered and rhymed poetry, which had eloquence... As a Marxist, I hold certain aesthetic perspectives... I am concerned with progress and it is manifested in my reading of poetry... The receiver is the one who owns the poem... The recipient of a poem has more of a role to play today than the poet. The poet alludes to things. We have only poetry left to take us away by a human experience (*inf 'aāl*). This is because the world is mechanized.... The picture and the poem take us to the same place: peace with oneself... The poet writes with a particular vision... As a recipient, I rewrite the poem in a new

form... because the stock of memories and pictures is different for me... Experimentation is important, and I am for reaching for that which is better...the world is moving from regionalism to that scale of broader humanity... This is what makes a human being look for other ideas and other experiences that are not Arab... I finally realized that the ultimate goal of poetry is to provide a mental picture through which the human can sense or know (*yudrik*) with his senses, as if he were in front of a painting hanging on a wall, which he is contemplating regardless of the sounds, external, oratorical, and loud sounds and slogans that might be in it.

In contrast to Ahmad Kiwan who demands a poetry that continues to appeal through its “music,” as a listener al-Battrawi asks for a more “advanced” poetry, one that is founded on a picture. While Kiwan speaks of poetry grounded in Arab tradition, al-Battrawi speaks of a poetry grounded in human experience. While Kiwan sees Arabic poetry in a state of loss and confusion, al-Battrawi sees Arabic poetry blessed in the multiplicity of its poets. Kiwan is likely to earn the label of “traditional,” while al-Battrawi is likely to earn the label of the “progressive” or the “modern.” But whom does the poet satisfy?

In a four-hour conversation at the Sameramise Hotel in downtown Cairo, I broached this subject with the poet Ahmad Dahbour. I thought that Dahbour, as someone who publishes not only poetry, but also articles about poetry, would have something to say about the current relation between a poet and audience. I asked him what kind of relation he seeks to have with his audience and what relation he deems satisfying. He answered:

There is a thorny, challenging and exciting relation with the audience. A hypocrite and liar is he who says he does not care for audience. In our countries, where we speak one language and write another, the price of pleasing the audience is costly. The poet has to find his precise equation as if he were walking on glass, so he could *keep the art* and at the same time reach the widest audience. But if you are plagued with a cause, like many of us Palestinian poets, it becomes harder because the *salafi* (past-ist) taste is dominant and asks for the common thing. They are asking Mahmoud Darwish to write what he wrote 30 year ago. The audience leans towards

that which brings soothing (*iṭm'inān*). They clap for what they know and not for what they don't know or for what the poet discovers. Consequently, there is not a solution to this battle. It is the right of the ordinary audience to tell you I want to understand you. The audience generally tends to be conservative. They are always in a state of schizophrenia. They are in need of change because they are poor, and long for rebellion and change. Yet, in terms of expression, they lean towards that which is familiar and dominant.

But, of course, the revolution is not departmental. You cannot express the revolution in old language. Revolution is *hadatha* (modernity)... and adventures. One time, for example, there used to be a correspondence [between poet and audience], at the time of the Revolution. Today, when I get invited to a public *mahrajan* [festival] in year 2000, I read a poem I wrote three decades ago and ethically this is more right, I feel. I don't want to write in 2000 a poem of the 1960s, so instead I bring the 1960s poem itself. I don't want to lie because if I write in that style now, I am cheating. I would write with the audience on my fingers, as if I am waiting for its clapping. No. It becomes a craft (*san'ah*) in the ugly meaning of the word. But if there is a poetry evening with a tough audience, I want the challenge. I want to challenge the audience's taste and put it in battle with mine.

Dahbour's revolution of the mid 1960s, witnessed the mobilizations of Palestinians in refugee camps (mainly in Jordan and Lebanon), and the establishment of the PLO, marking a turning point in the history of the Palestinian national struggle, which until then had mainly been the business of Arab regimes. This was a "revolution" that Dahbour lived during his twenties. Today, a poet with an additional four decades of experience, he notes that revolution does not mean only or primarily establishing sovereign political institutions. Revolution also means new ways of seeing things, and new ways of saying them, too. In other words, revolution has to occur in language and not only outside it. Yet, prose poets who rose to dominance after the retreat of Arab nationalism, say that "free" verse, failed to deliver this kind of revolution to the Arab world.

Nowhere did I hear about the need to “challenge” the audiences of Arabic poetry, more frequently and more forcefully than with the poets of the prose poem. Nowhere did I hear more about the poet’s annoyance with “conservative” audiences than from the poets working with the prose poem, particularly those who have dominated the Arab poetic scene for the last fifteen years. If generally speaking the “free” verse poets in their quest to modernize their craft found “the people” lagging behind them, for some of the prose poets, “the people” are obsolete, or so they claim. Obsolete also for some prose poets is not only a fixed number of feet or different rhymes in different lines, as “free” verse poets generally compose but the very concept and discipline of metrical measurement; for the world we all live in, they will say, is a world of prose and at the present moment it is dominantly so – at least in so far as the Arab poetic present is concerned. Therefore, without them, without the poets of prose, the story of modernizing Arabic poetry would be truly incomplete. It is to their stories– the stories of prose poets – that I turn in the next chapter.

## Chapter Six: The Dream

Not too far from the ancient burial caves, among the almond trees in the village of Koubar, that was where Hussein's dream came true. Hussein al-Bargouthi's dream was to be buried there, in his ancestral village in the part of Palestine occupied by Israel in 1967. Six months before that fulfillment in early May of 2002, Hussein was kind enough to grant me a five-hour interview from his sickbed at Tal ha-Shomer hospital, an Israeli hospital in the part of Palestine occupied in 1948. His lymphoma and some personal connections is what brought him there and my questions about Arabic poetry were what brought me to him. I had met Hussein before at *al-Qasbah café* in Ramallah, upon the encouragement of several of his friends and followers. Our first conversation with him then, awkward and embarrassing as it was, propelled me to pursue another one. My conversations with Hussein began to reveal what has been happening in modernizing Arabic poetry, especially among Arab prose poets who are the focus of this chapter. My conversations with Hussein revealed what happens in the pursuit of "rational" questions through an ethnography that takes poets, certain poets, as its interlocutors.

From my interlocutors I generally wanted to inquire about the modern shift in forms of Arabic poetry, and about the social and political forces that had led to those shifts. Particularly from Hussein, I wanted to understand his occasional resort to the prose poem, the form in which there is total rejection of the discipline of metrical composition. Yet Hussein's poetic reasoning, for the lack of a better term, poses a challenge to the academic one, which he also practices. Hussein began publishing poetry only in the last ten years of his life. He was born in 1954 and lived part of his childhood, after the 1967

Israeli occupation, in Lebanon and Jordan. His graduate studies were split between two cities: Budapest, Hungary and Seattle, Washington. From the University of Seattle he earned his Ph.D. in comparative literature and with that he returned to Birzeit University, his Alma Mater, to become a professor in that field as well as in the field of cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> While on the faculty, he started a circle of followers in the student section of the cafeteria that later came to regard him as a master in poetry and other things. Entitlement to mourning this master's death in local Palestinian literary outlets was the occasion for disputes among his followers.

Following Hussein to the hospital during Ramadan (November 2001), I thought, would allow me an occasion to raise questions to a prose poet. In a certain way, it is unfair towards Hussein to regard him as a prose poet; he already had professed during our interview his belief in a multiplicity of forms, genres and beings. However, I came to consider him as a beneficiary of the prose moment under the current conditions of Arabic poetry. This claim is especially true when it comes to a prominent idea among contemporary prose poets that the poem is what I tentatively call *work on the self*. This idea may not have been at all peculiar to Hussein, yet he challenged some of my questions. Indeed, my most simple questions, so easily answerable by other poets, appeared now very dull, shallow and superficial. Hussein's answer to the question that usually started my interviews (why do you write poetry?) is an illustration:

Why poetry? Perhaps there is no answer *today* for this kind of question. It is like asking why music. Not that this is general but it is in the nature of the human. The human for example is often moved by rhythm, that is his

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<sup>1</sup> Based on his stay in Seattle, Hussein also produced a biography, *ad-Dou'a al-Azraq* (The Blue Light) documenting his encounter with his own madness and with the "philosophy of void," which he learned from a Turkish Sufi master while living in the city.

nature. This is how God molded him. Why do we have eyes... frankly I don't know, but maybe this is what brings satisfaction, the satisfaction derived from creating new things... to create something is to transform something or many things, material or mental, you transform many things, least of which is your self. When you create something new, there is in you something new. You see things in new ways; you articulate them in new ways.

While more “traditional” poets -- poets of socialist, religious or nationalist persuasions -- might have responded to the above question, by invoking this or that collective cause for writing poetry, Hussein makes the question of writing itself appear as somewhat superfluous. Yet it is not superfluous enough to inhibit answers. Hussein's answers come at a time evident over the last fifteen years when the Palestinian poetic scene is said to be embracing the marginal, the partial, the prosaic, the quotidian, and the un-heroic.<sup>2</sup> This shift is perhaps in keeping with Arab poets who embraced the prose poem nearly five decades ago. On the account of those poets, theirs is not a poetry that enchants, nor one that describes. Nor is it a poetry that mobilizes the masses, projects a collective redemption in the “people's future,” or answers questions as previous earlier cohorts of poets who deployed *socialist realism* (either in traditional or in “free” verse forms) sought to do. This new poetry speaks to no masses, and, when it speaks it raises only questions. No more talk about big revolutions taking place in city boulevards or squares as poets talked until late the 1960s. It is a kind of poetry that creates, transforms and saves, at least the author.<sup>3</sup> It is poetry that is a dream itself, a salvationist kind of dream, perhaps like prayers. Indeed, both *prayer* (*salah*) and *dream* (*hulm*) become not only

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<sup>2</sup> Amjad Nasir (*Shu'ara'a*, winter, vol. 10: 9).

<sup>3</sup> Contrasting the prose poem with what he calls “the poem of measurement” (*wazn*), Adonis (1960: 83) notes that the prose poem: “as an expression of our deepest aspirations [presents] the clandestine rejections and obscure spiritual shifts in our lives, and the face hidden in shade and darkness, which is more complex, healthier and richer. It [prose poem] abundantly emanates from our human condition with no aim but to surpass it. This abundance (*fayd*) is our ark and flood at once.”

potent underlying conceptions in the composition of many contemporary poems but also reoccurring phrases in them and recurring states of writing them. For the task of the poem now is to afford, at least the poet, what the surrounding world cannot. Through poets' narratives, I want to demonstrate how so: how is it that poets of highly secular sensibilities produce a seemingly otherworldly poetry?

One result of this general prosaic state is that not only readers but also sometimes poets themselves do not understand what they have written. My endeavor to understand why and what poets do or say seemed particularly daunting in the case of prose poetry because the poets themselves appeared not to know the reasons for things they did or meanings for things they said. Once again, Hussein provides an example. I had read one of his books *Pouring Mirrors*. In it, he talks about *jinn*s dictating things to him.<sup>4</sup> I asked him who wrote the poems of that piece. Between breaks that his lungs needed to take, he said:

They were not written in a state of consciousness, those poems. I dare say these are not ones I wrote myself. I wrote them while asleep or read them while asleep. A jinn handed them to me. I am talking seriously. It is not the "I" who brought them and I am not speaking as a Freudian. I don't know where the jinn came from: Wadi 'Abqar, Wadi Ramallah or Wadi 'Aarah.<sup>5</sup> I don't understand all that is written there. But the parts that I wrote, I do understand.

Hearing about Hussein's uncertainties, which in turn augmented mine, one thing at least appeared. It occurred to me that there is something to be learned here about how modern strive to become modern subjects. Apprehending the prose-dominated poems, in which poetic meter no longer matters and in which the poetic public borders on irrelevance, I

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<sup>4</sup> *Jinns* are supra-human spirits in Arab-Muslim tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Wadi means valley in Arabic. The first two which Hussein mentions are Palestinian valleys, while the last valley, *Wadi 'Abqar*, the ancient name of a place in Arabia thought to be the location of poetic inspiration. The adjective *'Abqari* (as from *'Abqar*), in Arabic, means genius.

began to suspect that the story to be told is not simply a story about modern ways of being an artist but about modern ways of simply being. Indeed, stories about a certain kind of being and thinking are all that I collected when poets spoke to me about what and why they do what they do. In the following narration, I will present their stories in three sections: how poets choose a form, how they approach meter and rhyme and how they conceive of their relation with audience.

### **An Ideology of Prose: Salvation in Writing**

Nearly ten years after Nazek al-Mala'ika called for "free" verse (*shi'r hurr*) in Baghdad, Adonis made his call for prose poetry. His call was made in 1960 in Beirut through *Shi'r*, a journal reportedly affiliated with the Syrian Nationalist Party.<sup>6</sup> Heeding al-Malala'ika's call happened at a time when colonialism seemed on the wane, except in Palestine.

Heeding Adonis' call happened at a time when pan-Arab nationalism seemed on the wane, especially in Egypt. The modernizing vehemence, which the free verse inaugurated after the fall of Palestine in 1948, is something the prose poetry movement seemed to have continued after the 1967 defeat in the war against Israel. This defeat, commonly referred to as *an-naksa* (setback), is said to have had the effect of a massive earthquake, turning certainties into disbeliefs. In its wake, a disbelief in the promises of victory and progress made by Arab regimes, developed. There also developed a disbelief in the ability of Arab "free" verse movement being able to deliver modernity to poetry. Prose

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<sup>6</sup> Adonis advocated the prose poem based on his reading of Suzanne Bernard's (1959) *Le Poem en Prose, de Boudlaire jusqu'a à nos jours*. In arguing the case for prose poetry, he declares: "Mutability not stability, possibility not determinacy are the common staple of our age, and the poet who genuinely expresses our age, is the poet of severance -- from that which is common, accepted and general... in here lies the danger of the prose poem... the prose poem is dangerous because it is free." (*Shi'r*, 1960, vol. 4, Spring, issue no. 14: 78-9).

poets saw in the “free” verse movement a conservative reform of a tradition that needed radical transformation. Arabic poetry, as prose poets commonly argue, needs to question and, if necessary reject, even its most fundamental tools and conceptions; hence, the accusation against the prose poets for being rejectionists (*rafdiyyun*).

The defeat of three Arab countries at the hands of the Israeli army revealed not only the military bankruptcy of Arab regimes, but also the bankruptcy of socialist and nationalist projects in a neo-colonial reality.<sup>7</sup> In Egypt, the discourse of the regime grew increasingly unpopular among secular and religious segments. The regime’s socialist, romantic, optimistic and nationalist discourse appeared as no more than hollow slogans. In Egyptian poetry, the rejectionist stand entailed in the prose poem increasingly grew acceptable, and even desirable, among the poets belonging to the “generation of the seventies,” as those prose poets were called in retrospect. This generation was formed on the “ground of rejecting” authority in all its manifestations.<sup>8</sup> The authority of Jamal ‘Abdul Nassir’s regime and the project of pan-Arabism that he championed seemed to wither. In 1972, two years after Abdul Nassir’s death, and one year before the successor regime began an episode of friendlier relations with the West, Cairo witnessed massive protests. Many university students were arrested, among whom were a handful of poets. Thirty years later, I found myself in the company of Helmi Salim, who once was among those imprisoned student poets.

On a Friday, after noon prayer, I took a taxi to Salim’s house on King Feisal Street, not far from the Giza Pyramids. He lived across from an American monument, in the form of

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<sup>7</sup> Along with Egypt, two other Arab armies engaged in this war: Jordanian and Syrian.

<sup>8</sup> Sh’aban Yousif (2001: 164).

a gas station called Shell; his is what might be considered a semi popular neighborhood, including a typical juice store, a *sheesha* café, and a nuts store.<sup>9</sup> On the second floor, the door to his apartment had a brass sign announcing his full name and profession: a journalist. Salim works for *Adab wa Naqd (Literature and Criticism)*, a well-known literary-political periodical in the Arab world. As I learned from the frequency of congratulations extended to him, he had just been appointed as a chief editor in the state's High Council of Culture. This position puts grants him the authority to review and determine the publishing fate of many literary texts seeking the state's support. Gradually, I learned about the prominence that Salim enjoyed in the local Egyptian poetic scene. He was among a handful of avant-garde poets, who established a publishing space for the Egyptian prose poem through their periodical *Ida'ah 77 (Lighting 77)*. Salim, born in 1951, did not start as a poet. His political beginnings were in Arab socialism and its literary manifestation in short stories. That was before he discovered a new notion of poetry:

As I matured, I realized that poetry is a human activity, something that people make and people change. The idea of sacredness in poetry collapsed. Poets have to develop it throughout history because people make language and people make poetry. Then in the 1950s, the movement of free poetry did for us half of the job. It broke the hegemony of the *al-'amoudi* poetry. It kept only the principle of feet but let go of fixed number of feet or regular rhyme. This really paved half the way. At the same time, I read texts in our classical Arab tradition; they are very beautiful texts, but they were not considered poetry. Yet I would contrast that with what is regarded as poetry in Arabic, but is very weak. An-Nnifari's Sufi texts, for example, are beautiful, very lofty poetry, but Arab culture relegated them to prose, to theology or religious thought.<sup>10</sup> This was not considered poetry because it was not metered. So this made me think. Then also came the poets, such as Adonis and al-Haj, who

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<sup>9</sup> *Sheesha*, in demotic Egyptian is the word for hookah.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Nnifari (or Al-Niffari) a renowned mystic from Nnifar (ancient Nippur) in Iraq, died ca (967 AD).

discovered for us these Sufi or non-Sufi texts, such as al-Jahidh.<sup>11</sup> Then we also had exposure to Western texts that led us see that meter (*wazn*) is only one principle, that it is human. We also saw through Western texts people like Rimbaud and Baudelaire. All this helped us with accumulating courage to reconsider concepts and create new ones, to create space for new creativity. All this brought about a change in my and others' thinking.

This "change in thinking" leading to his literary prominence in Egypt, coupled with activism in the realm of human rights, is probably what earned Salim an invitation to a Sudanese cultural center in Cairo on that first night I met him. He invited me to come along. The evening featured by the exiled American-African Committee Against Torture commemorating one of its activists who had been martyred (*istashahada*) in the cause of human rights. The invited poets, Egyptian and Sudanese, came with varied genres, forms and ages. The first poet to read had barely five years of age; he recited in the classical register of the Arabic language a panegyric poem (in the classical form), in honor of the martyr, as if to assure the latter and the present audience that the struggle continues with his generation.<sup>12</sup> The child poet received thunderous applause, much more than the later adult poets who read short, but obscure prosaic poems.

In fact some readers of those poems did not introduce their works as poems, preferring to call them texts (*nusus*). In general, theirs, was not the kind of poetry that filled the evening. It was not even the kind of poetry that Salim usually offers. That evening Salim

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<sup>11</sup> Al-Jahidh ("The One With Bulging Eyes") was a medieval philosopher and polymath, born in Basra (775 AD); there, he sold bread and fish prior to his rise to fame as the "master of Arabic rhetoric," after producing works, such as *al-bukhala'a* and *al-bayan wa-tabyeen*, he died at the age of 96 (868 AD) as tradition has it from stacks of books that fell on his already ailing, paralyzed body. Adonis ('Ali Ahmad Sa'id) (b. 1929) is a Syrian poet who exerted immense influence on generations of poets through his prose (e.g. *The Static and Dynamic in Arabic Culture*) and poetry (e.g. *The Songs of Mihiyar the Damascene*). Unsi al-Haj (b. 1937) is a Lebanese poet who, as did Adonis, iconoclastically championed the cause of prose poetry through his collection *Lan* (Never).

<sup>12</sup> Muoustafa Sayyid Ahmad.

read a poem in honor of another martyr, a boy from Gaza who was shot in his father's lap.<sup>13</sup> Unlike, most of what Salim writes, this "postcard" for the Gazzean boy was not a prose poem, rather its was measured as free verse and titled *Biṭāqah*.<sup>14</sup> But in doing so, Salim did what poets usually do when the subject is "traditional," as the subject of martyrdom is understood to be. On such occasions, poets tend to compose in "traditional" forms meaning measured, metered, versification. The fieldwork taught me that this choice is not peculiar to Salim.

While on my first evening in Salim's company, I observed him perform his poetry, on my last night I heard him (and debated with him) about it until almost four in the morning. It was essential that I understand where Salim comes from because he like no one else I had met was most explicit about the political implications of the poetic form with which he works. I asked him if he sensed a crisis in the poetic scene since there are said to be a few readers and many, many more poets. In the course of his response an articulation of a self, one that exists in writing and defines itself via writing, emerged:

Now I no longer write for revolution and all these big ideas. I lowered the goal. I write because my writing saves me. It makes me feel I am a beautiful human poet. As such it is not right for this human to betray his country, to be a reactionary, to be son of a bitch, to be unjust, to be a thief, authoritarian or a hypocrite. My writing therefore saves me from erring or falling. When I write, I fulfill myself. I feel creative and beautiful. I am producing. I don't have to steel. It gives me the sense that value is in creativity, not in a battle for authority (*sultah*). Those who struggle for authority think that it is authority or salary, which gives value. Writing poetry allows me to see that value is in creativity. It saves from vice (*radhilah*). Of course this is the illusion that I want to claim... We have in the Arab world hundreds of thousand poets, say 300,000 people. If writing saves every poet then contemporary Arabic poetry around the Arab world is saving 300,000 people from vice each year, or each phase of writing.

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<sup>13</sup> Muhammad ad-Durra.

<sup>14</sup> *Biṭāqah* Arabic for *Postcard*.

This is mightier than any revolutionary or moral factory in the world. At least this is the theory that I constructed for myself.

The “theory” that Salim constructed for himself is one that many other poets have constructed as well. That the *writing self* is an inherently ethical self is a view that I encountered among many prose poets. For this prosaic self, writing the poem is both the means and the end: to do something means to say it, or to be something is to write it, as I heard from poets of prose, both men and women alike.

One regionally famous poetess of prose is ‘Aa’isha al-Mughrabi, a Libyan living in Egypt who is considering exile to France with her family. I first met her at the Cultural Café during the 34<sup>th</sup> Cairo International Book Fair, where she had been invited to read. We had agreed to meet outside the café for our interview. Around afternoon prayer, we sat on the steps of a huge hall on the Fair’s grounds. She told me that she only writes prose, no “free” verse: “I don’t put rules to my writing.” She had studied philosophy and married a literary critic, also from Libya. Her tribe, al-Mughrabi, according to her, is full of poets and poetry and was among the prominent tribes to resist Italian colonialism.<sup>15</sup> Her father was an illiterate man who often asked her to read books to him. As a child, she also used to bribe her friends, offering them candies in return for their consent to listen to her *writing*.

The sense of I-write-therefore-I-am, which Hussein at the hospital and Helmi in his apartment conveyed, was one that ‘Aa’isha shared with them. As usual, I wanted to know why my interlocutor turns to poetry. However, also as usual with the prose poets, the

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<sup>15</sup> Lybia fell under an Italian occupation in 1911 that lasted until 1943; during this period tribal resistance was famously lead by Omar al-Mukhtar (who hanged in 1931).

answer to that question was no longer about poetry per se but about writing or not writing, being or not being. This is what 'Aa'isha recounted about her writing self:

Writing for me is existence. To ask why I write is to ask why I exist. For me writing is inseparable from existence. It is the way I practice my life. This is how I was born. I felt this is how I am fulfilled. I always dreamt that through writing I could change the world. With my little fingers, when I was in my beginnings and I am still in my beginnings I thought I could destroy all that which is ugly in the world and stand up for the wretched and the poor. I thought I could open a world of good things to the weak. I would draw on my papers, houses, streets and lives, ones that are not connected to this ugly world. But this was entirely a child's dream. This was the promise that poetry gave me. Then I was struck. I left childhood, and was pained that poetry did not deliver its promise. I felt I am totally responsible for any sad voices anywhere in the world and I felt particularly connected to the question of Palestine and Lebanon. I am focused on the misery of the human, about the immigrants off the shores of Morocco heading to Spain. There was a young man who wanted a different life, so he held to a bottom of a van until he was burned. You cannot realize how much I wanted to reach that person, to tell of his suffering that lead him to end in such a miserable way.

Telling the misery of people is exactly what Hussein Muhanna wants to accomplish in his work. Yet, he could not accept what 'Aa'isha and others accept about writing: as a means and an end of a self in its search for salvation. We met at his house in Buqy'aa, a mixed village of Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Druze families in the Galillie. The son of a poor and religious Druze sheikh, Muhanna was raised on socialist and communist ideals. Under Israel's first military rule, he wrote under a pseudonym in order to retain his teaching job in the village. He taught English and Arabic to high school students. He is now retired from his teaching job, but not from his commitment to serving "the people" and "the world" through his poetic work. Signs of this commitment were manifested in his trilingual library and in the posters of Lenin and the Palestinian peasant past hanging on the walls. Alongside them on the wall was a line from Jibran Khalil Jibran in Arabic

calligraphy: "Humanity is my family and Earth is my home." Grabbed by the reality at home, however, the present reality of martyrdom, he is particularly interested in reaching out to the mother of the martyr (*shaheed*). If she read his poem and she were consoled then he would consider his poem delivered.<sup>16</sup> For the martyr, according to him, is difficult to comprehend as a concept and reality.

In poetic reality, Hussein Muhanna of Buqy'aa, unlike the first Hussein at the hospital or Al-Mughrabi above, is not willing to work in prose poetry. More specifically, from where he stands the poetic scene appears deeply damaged, and the abandoning of meter, calamitous. When it comes to prose poetry, he does not see any sense in such a name. It is either prose or poetry. This point was not his only disagreement with the the prose poets. Unlike Salim of Egypt, he does not think that the age of "free" verse is gone:

We should give more time for free verse to develop. I see it as still growing; it has not become old in order to replace it. If I want to call that prose, poetry, then it has to rely on reality. There is no reality without a rhythm. Without rhythm, I cannot call it poetry. Poetry, by definition, has to rely on rhythm, let's not call it meter, but it has to have a rhythm. Out of respect to poetry, to prose, to myself when I write without rhythm, I call it prose... Today we are in a state of chaos, there are no linguistic or prosodic restrictions. You hear a poet today saying that 'language does not matter, the important thing is to have poetic pictures. The important thing is to deliver a meaning.' This chaos group has flooded us with unfathomable poetry, the search for strange pictures. As if this were more poetic. The true poet is the one who does not contribute to this chaos. Today's poets don't want to work hard. Today everything is published. It is so easily available that no one cares for it. To distinguish between prose and poetry is not to contrast, which is better. This is only a professional distinction, just as it is important to distinguish a blacksmith and a carpenter. To make things easy is damaging for poetry. Under the name of poetry, under the name of prose poetry, they write whatever. This is why we lost touch with the receiver. Unfortunately today we want to be cosmopolitan.

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<sup>16</sup> He was speaking of Um Aseel of 'Arrabah Village in Israel, whose son, Aseel, a high school student, was shot by police in Fall, 2000.

To be “cosmopolitan” is not exactly how Salim describes his aspirations, but something very much like it. Salim is drawn to an Arab, Egyptian society that is heterogeneous. He speaks of a society based on multiplicity and diversity, a society that does not submit to what he calls monist (*wahdani*) thought. This is the notion of society that Helmi expressed in our last and longest encounter. During that visit, Amal, his Lebanese wife, prepared dinner for us and constantly supplied us with fennel tea and cardamom coffee. While she and their two daughters went to watch TV at one end of the room, Salim and I retired to the study at the other end.

What followed was a dialogue between someone who sees rebellion in prose poetry, Salim, and someone who does not, I. In his rebellion (according to Amal, he rebels against many things) Helmi wants the poetic tradition to redefine its fundamentals, including the question of what poetry is. Although, as Salim seeks to question and undermine how the Arabs have defined their poetry, he seeks also to question how they have defined other things. What emerges from his response is a common fusion of a poetic rebellion with a moral and political one:

In our Arab culture, expressing yourself in prose form is itself a rebellion because the poetic form was hegemonic. You're using a marginal tool of expression. You're deviating from the main tool of expression among the Arabs. But there is also a transformation in our Arab life that led to the rise of the prose. This is for several reasons. Those who wrote in it, made a statement by disassociating from those officials (*rasmiyeen*) who write in the classical form, and who represent a form of authority. Because the *al-'amoudi* poetry, with its meters and feet, constitutes a kind of authority. This construction, this custom of writing, whether you're the ruler or the opposition, is in the same place. They're one, even when the message is revolutionary. This is because form is not just an empty glass, it is an ideology.

If Salim saw prosaic form as an ideology that stands in opposition to the authority of tradition or the political establishment, 'Izz al-Din al-Manasrah, a Palestinian poet living for now in Jordan sees it as a "tranquilizing poem" (*shi'r tabrid*), one that cools down what he considers the "culture of resistance," which no regime desires. He developed these ideas from his position as a once-prose-poet now working mainly in "free" verse. He also works as a professor of comparative literature at Philadelphia University in 'Amman, Jordan., and he had written extensively about Arab literary criticism and prose poetry.

It seemed that to write under the Jordanian regime, is to commit an inherently suspicious act. The word seems constantly watched and patrolled, as if it were a threat. Upon traveling to the Hashimite Kingdom, my books were searched frantically at the border by the Kingdom's security personnel. I would not have thought that a book on ancient Pharaonic Kingdoms titled "Dawn of Conscience" could pose a threat to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Hashimite Kingdom. Everywhere I saw posters and slogans for the deceased King Hussein and his ruling son 'Abdullah. The very first sign I glimpsed at the border was a poster bidding farewell to the late Hussein as "The Master of All Men." Later, I saw "Most Decent of Kings and Kings of the Decent." All I could associate with those posters was fear, the fear of power constantly haunted by the specter of vanishing. This reminded me of Israel's fear from the memory of Palestine. While Israel's fear involves fierce veiling, Jordan's involves constant revealing. Israel wants to keep Palestine under the ground; Jordan wants to keep the Monarchy above it.

Between the fear of two regimes, there lies the Jordan Valley. Crossing the valley could have been significantly shorter were it not for the bureaucratic rituals on the borders of modern states. The bus I took from Nazareth descended one chain of mountains to ascend another. Looking through the window into the distance, I wondered about another kind of fear: what must have been the fear of people during the exodus of 1948, when tens of thousands of Palestinians crossed this valley, later to make up the majority of Jordan's population. I imagined how this valley almost fifty-five years ago saw a flux of thousands of peasants marching by foot or on donkeys or trucks, towards life, a new life, in an old city. Amman, this ancient city of the Canaanite and subsequent Roman ages is located entirely on mountains and peopled mostly by Palestinians. Surrounding the hotel in which I stayed, near al-Manasrah's house, streets carried names of towns and cities that Palestinians want to remember and to inhabit again. Al-Manasrah is one of them.

Al-Manasrah has not seen his hometown of Bani Na'iem near Hebron since 1964. When it was occupied in 1967 he was still studying in Cairo.<sup>17</sup> If he were to travel by car from Amman, it would take no more than three hours to get there. Yet, he would not do so since he refuses to return as an occupied subject, even though he has been invited to return in the days of the Oslo accords. In his poetry, he speaks of a far longer ride, evoking not simply Palestine's loss to a modern Zionist state, but to biblical Hebraic kingdoms. Al-Manasrah is known in Palestinian poetry for resurrecting the memory of

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<sup>17</sup> While a student in Cairo in 1968, he was the first poet working with the then iconoclastic "free" verse to receive The Egyptian Universities Prize for Poetry.

the Canaanites, who peopled Palestine, rather Canaan, before Jews, Christians and Muslims arrived.<sup>18</sup>

Al-Manasrah and I first met Thursday afternoon at the lobby of the hotel in which I was staying. We chatted for two hours and then headed to the Poetry Festival at the Jordanian House of Poetry, located in a mansion right above an ancient Roman amphitheatre.

'Amman was designated as the "cultural capital" of the Arab world for that year and poets from various Arab countries came to read at the festival. Once again, one had to see the regal pictures of father and son posted above the reading stage. All but one of the poets read from a paper, and all but one read classical poetry. Throughout my attendance, all talked about Palestine, panegyrics for the *intifada*, martyrs, and martyrdom, and they lampooned against the occupation, notwithstanding the fact that the Israeli regime had signed peace accords with the regime sponsoring this very event. The latter regime, of course, was the subject of no poem.

The subject of the Arab regimes, however, was that I broached with al-Manasrah. His concern is that Arab regimes in the age of globalization and Americanization are only paying lip service to "resistance." What really interests them, according to al-Manasrah, is a "culture of peace." To him the prose poem is associated with Arab regimes through their pursuit of globalization and pacification:

Prose poetry is one of the manifestations of disorder (*la-nidhām*). It is an ideological manifestation of a state of fragmentation. The prose poem reached the zero degree of freezing. It is a resignation to cultural globalization. It is a negation of what came before and what came before

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<sup>18</sup> Another pioneering poet in the resurrection of Cana'anite past in modern Palestinian poetry Ahmad Hussein from Musmus village within what is today considered Israel, whom I also interviewed.

was resistance. This cooling of political discourse fits the culture of peace with Israel. Why do three quarters of the prose poets support peace with Israel and demand co-existence with it?...I am not against the prose poem as a form. I am against its conception which goes against a Palestinian identity. This poem of prose is exported Western talk. The prose poem crosses genres just as multinational corporations cross continents. It is literary work but not poetic... The prose poem horrified the audience because of its silence and its tranquilizing language.<sup>19</sup> It is not right to blame society for a 'backward structure.' Look at the modern buildings with swimming pools in 'Amman... The prose poem is a manifestation of the destruction within us. It is the state of non-identity. Modernity means to develop your self not to run away from your people. But there are institutions sponsored by the regime, which work on spreading the culture of consumption. The prose poem became widespread in 1985 because what happened in the world destroyed the existing ideals leading to the birth of liberal imperialism. There is vengefulness against the culture of resistance. It is the settling of scores with the culture of resistance that triumphed from 1967 to 1985.

The "culture of resistance" to which 'Izz al-Din al-Manasrah refers is one that in Palestinian nationalist memory began with the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, lasting until the evacuation of Palestinian fighters from Beirut in 1982. Before the exodus from Beirut, the faith in Palestinian "resistance" or "revolution" was still solid. From the 1960s onward, Palestinian poetry became synonymous with resistance poetry in the Arab world.<sup>20</sup> Mostly, it was written mostly in "free" verse. This is not to imply that the prose poem is inherently quiescent towards state projects and policies, even if it appears politically detached. Whether the rhythms of the prosaic form collide or clash with state ideologies it is clear now that in either way this

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<sup>19</sup> "Tranquilizing language" is my rendition of al-Manasrah's phrase "*lughat tabrid*" which in a more literal translation would have become "cooling language." Al-Manasrah uses the phrase "*lughat tabrid*" to describe that language in poetry, which extinguishes the flames of "resistance" against Israeli occupation, Arab corruption and American hegemony.

<sup>20</sup> Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972) a Palestinian originally from Acre, is said to have coined the adjective of that poetry and introduced it to the defeated Arab world in 1968 as "resistance poetry." Kanafani, was a prolific journalist and novelist, assassinated in Beirut by Israeli agents who set up a bomb in his car.

form, like any form entails a position to something other than poetry, towards the institutions surrounding it.

Yet what some poets saw as resistance, others saw as servitude. This view reflects Salim's. Resistance through old poetic forms constitutes no resistance for him or for the friends whom I came to know through him. The vision of a new poetry that Salim strives for is one he shares with a network of his friends in Libya, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and London. One evening, guests at his house converged over at least two things: Amal's famous *melukheya* dish that she prepared for dinner that night and the fact that they were all, like Salim, prose poets. They all began publishing it seemed, in the late 1970s after dreams about many grand revolutions were crushed. Most were in their late forties to early sixties. After the age of forty, many a poet confessed to me, they felt freer to pursue that which they could not or did not before. As an example they referred to the Prophet Muhammad, whose poetic revelation started at the age of forty. Yet another commonality among Helmi's poet guests that night was their disinterest or rejection of the classical metered form. Helmi told me of his own reasons for not accepting that hoary form:

This classical form of poetry (*al-'amoudi*) is not value-free, it is an expression of a society, its values and views. It is a society of duality (*thuna'i*): heaven and earth, city and desert. Such a society compartmentalizes. Each verse line is independent. This is a routine-based society (*taratubi*). Also, it is a society in which the intellectual is detached from the masses. He descends from heaven to address the rabble. This is a society that copies itself (*istinsakhi*). There is no diversity. All this is to say -- while recognizing the arbitrariness of some of my judgments -- that form is an ideology. Behind forms there are ideas. Therefore, leaning towards prose is a breakthrough deviation from a rebellion against this aesthetic, philosophical, artistic pattern. So if a poet talks about need for change, diversity, multiplicity and breaking patterns in *al-'amoudi* form, I don't believe him, regardless of how much he writes about those subjects. This is because he speaks about breaking patterns from within one pattern.

A pattern that emerged from my encounters with the poets is their tendency to link poetic form with a form of political authority, society, or morality. What the “traditional” poets lamented as fragmentation or chaos, the “modern” poets, and prose poets in particular, celebrate as a multiplicity to be strived for. I was still curious to hear from Helmi about the kind of ideology that the prose poem itself embodies or advocates:

The ideology of prose poetry is that it does not submit to monism (*wahidiyya*) of text, that the poetic text is no longer sacred. Breaking the prescription, multiplicity of forms, poetry, and therefore thought can take many ways and does not have one source. It seeks to break the sacredness of the language. It seeks to break the mysterious relation between language and religion. It seeks to show that language is a social phenomenon and not heavenly. It is the property of those who speak it, not of heaven, or *fuqaha* or dictionaries.<sup>21</sup> This is not a simple point, especially if we connect language to thought, and if we see language as expression of thought. This group sees the poet as an ordinary person. He is not the prophet, or the hero, the sage. He is an ordinary person who walks down in the market. The authors of this poetry focus on reality.

The “ordinary” type of poet for which Salim advocates is always focusing not simply on a reality but on a particular kind of reality. This point was made clear to me in Egypt and other places as well. Furthermore, it was true in the past. Consider, for example, those who wrote prose poetry starting in the 1950s among Palestinian poets. I am thinking of Tawfiq Sayegh’s publication in 1954 of his collection titled *Thirty Poems*.<sup>22</sup> Such attempts initially, singular and sporadic, first took place outside the country, distant from the grounds of a present and fatal colonial reality. What people in the colonized land needed to hear or what poets had to say was largely confined by the needs and consequences of this reality. There was a need to talk about heroic persistence, heroic

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<sup>21</sup> *Faqih* (pl. *fuqaha* ‘a) in Islamic legal terminology is one knowledgeable of and specialized in Islamic doctrine. In Arabic language, the verb *faqaha* means understood or knew.

<sup>22</sup> Tawfiq Sayigh (1923-1971), born in southern Syria and raised in Tabariyya of the Galilee, taught and died in Berkeley, CA. Prose and Christian theology are highly manifest in his poetry.

homeland and heroic sacrifice. To talk about planting tomatoes, ants, hippopotamuses, ghouls, windows, beds or handcrafts, was simply out of place. Yet, these are the things Zakariyya Muhammad has wanted to talk about since the 1970s, when he was a student in Iraq before returning to Palestine. Today in Ramallah, he has quit his editorial work at the *al-Karmel* literary magazine to serve as a functionary of the Palestinian National Authority in its Ministry of Culture and Education. As an occasional sculptor, he recounted his beginnings with a poetry that is more like prose:

From the beginning, when I started publishing in mid 1970s, I was against this heroic mood in Palestinian poetry. So I was the voice of dissent. This is why no one heard of me then, and sometimes I was embarrassed to publish it. And many did not accept it. People were fighting; tanks, killing and blood, but I wrote about other things...Perhaps it is my childhood, my personal mood. I was a meek, slim kid. I was not Abu 'Ali.<sup>23</sup> So others could beat me if they fought with me. So my make up is not of a hero. Also, I studied in Iraq in the early 1970s and the mood of Iraqi poetry was focused on the self far from the heroic. On the contrary the heroic poetry was that of poets of the government. The simple poetry about little things, which talks about love, coffee, ants and birds, was the poetry of the majority and the better ones. This helped me with facing the bravado mood in Palestinian poetry, which dominated then. Today, almost no one speaks about politics in Palestinian poetry, in the sense of direct national poetry. Palestinian poets today write about almost everything. Before, the homeland was the only subject, every one wrote about it. But that wave is defeated. No wave can last forever, especially in this time. As soon as something begins, it starts to disappear.

What disappeared in Palestinian poetry was not only faith in the Palestinian "revolution" launched with the establishment of the PLO in 1964 to bring back the hijacked homeland, but also the faith that poetry can do anything outside of poetry. It is clear to poets now that no poem, no PLO and, of course, no Arab regime is capable of bringing back Palestine. A notable, local literary critic noted that poets of resistance, once a synonym

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<sup>23</sup> *Abu 'Ali* is idiomatic phrase for bully.

for Palestinian poets, have realized now that not only are they unable to save the homeland; they are also hardly able to save their own selves.<sup>24</sup>

One of the greatest things contemporary poets want to be saved from is poetic meter. It is so stifling and so outdated that it resembles the regimes of oppression, which govern their lives.<sup>25</sup> With the disappearance of a homeland, therefore, another monumental disappearance began to take place in Arabic poetry. A tradition of the last sixteen centuries had defined poetic composition as that which is measured and that which rhymes. When the “free” verse movement began to spread in the 1950s, it only did away with the discipline of one meter, one rhyme or a regular number of feet in each line. Arab poets working with “free” verse did not entirely efface meter and “feet” from their verse as prose poets will more commonly do later on. It is the prose poets who would have leveled the final blow to meter. The shackles of tradition, regulation, and discipline could no longer confine the modern poet, the true poet. While the aim of the current section has been to convey how poets practicing the prosaic form define poetry and their need for it, the following section will focus on the question of rhyme, meter and rhythm. More specifically, I want to focus on the stories of poets, which convey the vanishing of metrical discipline from their works as changes in moral and political sensitivities.

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Aadel al-Ustta (Al-Ayyam, supplement, 9/29/2001). Vol. 2077, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Although the modern need of the poet to banish meter from the craft is not at all Palestinian consider for example how Mourid Bargouti, a Palestinian poet exiled in Egypt depicts an atrophied state of poetry under occupation: “The prolonged Israeli occupation has brought sclerosis to our language. Our poems have been more pulverized than our streets. Yet, the majority of us are aware of the fact that we must resist military meter, simplistic imagery and khaki poems.” <[http://www.autodafe.org/autodafe/autodafe\\_03/art\\_07.htm](http://www.autodafe.org/autodafe/autodafe_03/art_07.htm)> (Retrieved on March 21, 2003).

### **When Meter no Longer Matters**

It was a clear December day after a week of much longed-for rain. The scene of occupation was making itself felt even in this normally sedate city of Haifa; on the outskirts, a Palestinian had detonated himself on an Israeli bus. Normality, however, did not always stand in opposition to occupation. Sometimes occupation appeared normal. Determined to keep it a “normal” day, struggling to stay in touch with the questions that brought me to the field, I went on the *Path of the Poem (Darb al-Qasida)* in the German Colony, a historic section of the city.<sup>26</sup> As part of its “co-existence” ideology, the Haifa Municipality had sponsored, via its Arab-Jewish center of Beit Hagefen, a free literary outdoor trail of Arabic and Hebrew poetry, posted on the walls through a marked path that ambles through various streets.

Aiming to foster “co-existence” between Arabs and Jews of the city, the municipality locates most, if not all, of its “co-existence” activities in Wadi al-Nisnas, the largest Arab neighborhood; rarely do these activities take place in the Jewish part of the city. Usually it is Jewish visitors who come to observe the “difference” inhabiting this Arab neighborhood, as if it were a safari susceptible to the tourist gaze. Sometimes this difference consists of art creations by Jewish or Arab artists. In the instance of the *Path of the Poem*, the works were by both Arab and Jewish poets, women and men. They were all from modern and contemporary poetry, that is, “free” verse and prose poetry, but none were classical. Moreover, none of the Arab poets were from the 1967 occupied part of Palestine. This is an act that is in keeping with the Zionist dismembering of any viable

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<sup>26</sup> Established by the German Templar missionaries in 1869.

form of Palestinian memory, economy, literature or political entity. Memory, the memory of Palestinian poetry, is itself a site of contestation.

It was very thoughtful, I reflected, of those who arranged the display of the green and white posters, all laminated and bilingual, to have the works of such notable poets as Darwish, al-Qasim and Zayyad, located in front of the newspaper that nurtured them, *al-Ittihad* – the Israeli communist newspaper and the only, barely surviving Arab daily within Israel.<sup>27</sup> The intrigue of this arrangement is that when those poets worked with the newspaper and its party during the “resistance days” of their youth in the 1950s and 1960s they were considered a threat to “security.” All were imprisoned for various periods of time. All of them now could have the fate of Malcolm X: a life of confrontation, then a co-opted memory. It remains to be seen if there would be a day when the postal department of the Jewish state would find it fit to have, say, a Zayyad commemorative stamp.

Searching for something tangible in this short excursion of little poetic pieces, I observed that Arabic poetry along this route is in accessible modern language, with the poems being formatted into line-verses divided by slashes. The native language of the poet was the upper language on the poster. Lexically the language is rather easy, but not the ideas it expresses. I found myself reading certain pieces numerous times until I began to comprehend its meanings, although I was still unsure where the poetry in the poems was. The range of themes included the pleasure of reading literature, the beauty of nature, and

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<sup>27</sup> In the classic literary study of Ghassan Kanafani (1968) those three poets among others are said to be the ones who started the “resistance poetry” for which Palestinian poets came to be known in the Arab world.

the small things of daily life. My walk ended in the midst of the small stores of the quiet *suq*.<sup>28</sup> I suspect some of those small stores were closed not only because it was Sunday, but rather, because malls with big stores had usurped their patrons.

It was not about “small” things that Zakariyya Muhammad spoke to me. Similar to numerous works displayed on the *Path of the Poem*, his poems also left me uncertain about what constituted the poetic in them. Yet this was not why he had little chance of having his poems included in the *Path of Poetry*. His belonging to the “wrong” political category prevented his inclusion in the municipal project of “co-existence.” For Israel, it would have presented a demographic threat to admit Muhammad’s poetry or the population to which he belongs, into projects of “co-existence” between Arab and Jews. Muhammad falls in the category of Palestinians living in the 1967 occupied lands. But it is not about borders between peoples or states that I wanted to discuss with Muhammad, a prose poet rising to prominence in the 1980s. From his bureaucratic position in the publication department of the Palestinian National Authority’s Ministry of Culture, he spoke to me about the borders between poetry and non-poetry. I asked him what I thought was a simple question, but his answer made it clear it was not:

Where is poetry is a very complex question. Where the poetics (*sha iriyyah*) of a poem lies is a difficult question. There are no criteria at all that distinguish poetry from non-poetry. I know that it is poetry but I don’t know why. Add to this that modern time opened the doors between prose and poetry. In Arab history, the issues were clear, the limits were meter and rhyme. No one could say that outside those borders there is poetry. Today this is no longer correct. These borders are broken. Poetry melted into other arts and other arts melted into poetry. So we cannot tell where the borders are. I personally *feel* when there is poetry, but cannot tell you why. Sometime someone speaks to you in regular way and you *feel* that he is entering the zone of poetry, that his words are poetry.

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<sup>28</sup> *Suq* Arabic stands for marketplace.

If poetry were fated to be *felt*, as morality has been, in this modern emotive age, the question remains where does one *feel* poetry and how?<sup>29</sup> Or, alternatively who is a poet? It seemed as if the real poets were the ones who do not call themselves poets. For instance, my friend Maha Qassis, a poet from Ramah of the Galilee and a graduate student of Arabic literature at the University of Haifa, describes her mother as a poetess (*shā'ira*): "Because she is a simple person nonetheless has a unique perspective on the world. I could call someone a poet when he writes no poetry. The poet is someone who has *thoughts* that differ and are uncommon, one who has a desire for things to be different, for the world to be different." This is when, in Qassis's words, "everything in the world is familiar." This expansion, or rather, alteration in the definition of poets into allegorical scope includes, according to the details of the Palestinian poetic scene, those who do what all poets say they want to do: guard the dream. Their dreams are written with no drop of ink but with every drop of blood they have. They are the martyrs (*shuhada'a*). The poets themselves point to acts of martyrdom dwarfing their work; to these wordsmiths, deeds of martyrdom surpass the eloquence of many, many words.<sup>30</sup> The more time I spent with the poets, the more I felt as if no one really cares for what they do, at least not in the local scene. Indeed in this globalized present, certain poets are better known abroad than they are known at home. Abu Nizar, more formally known as Taha Muhammad Ali, was one such poet.

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<sup>29</sup> "Emotive" is a phrase I borrow from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1984).

<sup>30</sup> Darwish said on March 24, 2002, to a solidarity delegation from Parliament of World Writers including Jose Saramago and Wole Soyinka, that "I know that the masters of the words have no need for big words before the eloquence of blood." (*Fasl al-Maqal*, March 29, 2003).

Abu-Nizar is a prose poet who has been invited to read in many foreign countries and universities. I learned that he was invited to read on both sides of the globe – from China all the way to Columbia University in New York. Yet, wherever he goes, he told me that he takes with him his erased ancestral village of Saffouryeh. In the 1948 war, at the age of seventeen, he was forced to seek refuge in Nazareth five kilometers away. While the relics of his village, as typical of hundreds other villages, gave rise to the Jewish state, it was that state, five decades later, through its Ministry of Culture and Education (Arab Department) that awarded him a yearlong stipend to support his poetic career. I met Abu Nizar on two occasions; once at his house and another time at his souvenir shop in old Nazareth, near the Basilica of the Church of the Annunciation.<sup>31</sup> The old artifact-filled house appears as an extension of the souvenir shop. Everywhere inside the house, I saw the dead relics of an agrarian Palestinian society. In front of his house there was a living relic, a traditional garden and orchard; fruit trees are a rarity amidst the cement-pouring habits of contemporary architecture. Abu Nizar was another instance of how I often found the poets to be an unusual kind of beings – but only up to a point.

Unlike Salim of Egypt, Abu Nizar of Nazareth does not speak about distinct ideologies or thought systems as being associated with different poetic forms. Nor does he need the prose poem in order to question and undermine the policies of the state or the authority of societal traditions. His needs appear innocuous in that regard. Yet like Salim, al-Mughrabi and Zakariyya Muhammd, he no longer has a need for meter. He too *feels* an “internal rhythm” in his poetry and he also *feels for* it. He told me that his poem is like his own son whom he would never desert; it makes no difference whether he is

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<sup>31</sup>Jesus’ birth is said to have been announced in the location of that church.

handsome or not, retarded or not. Abu Nizar would not send his son to a mental institution, he said. This is what the poem, the prose poem is for him. To expect him (Abu Nizar) to work in the classical form is, using his own metaphor, is like expecting a chicken to lay an alligator's egg. Abu Nizar's answers to my questions always were expressed through metaphor. Initially his response frustrated my search for the "the real" within a quest for "actual" life experiences – until I learned from poets to appreciate "the real" that already existed in the metaphor. In his metaphorical meditation on his poetic work, it was apparent that Abu Nizar's poetic form is like his children; he chooses neither. For him to choose a form is not a deliberate or meditated act. Instead, it is like being hungry or thirsty. He told me during the second interview at his shop while listening to classical Western music, why he cannot write in the classical Arab poetic form:

It is impossible for a Greek poet today to be like Homeros.<sup>32</sup> It is impossible for an Arab poet today to be like Nabigha al-Dhubyani because the life, environment, and psychology of this differs from that.<sup>33</sup> If his voice and signature are lost then he is not authentic, he lies and claims to himself a poetry he is not writing. Singularity is the principle of art. Poetry is an individualist work, the voice, and the metaphors all have to be individual. Only 'Antara could have said what 'Antara said.<sup>34</sup> It is not meter or rhyme alone that makes poetry... my poetry is different. I don't employ meter and rhythm. I stay away from meter because it is easier to express what goes inside myself. Arabic poetry historically comes with rich music, it is sung, it enchants, more than European poetry. It is singing. If you give up meter, you have to have a strong substitute for Arabic poetry's rich music. You have internal deep music. You don't hear it with the ear, but you hear it in your spirit. It is not sung, but is read, and rarely aloud.

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<sup>32</sup> Homer in Arabic

<sup>33</sup> Nabigha al-Dhubyani, one of the most renowned pre-Islamic poets.

<sup>34</sup> 'Antara, the pre-Islamic poet-slave-knight.

Wanting to find out how poems are actually read is what brought me to Mahmoud Amin al-‘Alim, an Egyptian Marxist intellectual known throughout the Arab world, not so much for his reading of poetry as for his involvement in human rights, freedom and democracy efforts. At one point, these efforts led him to clash with the Egyptian state and consequently to be imprisoned. In recognition of these lifelong efforts he received the recently established Ibn Rushd Prize in Germany.<sup>35</sup> Appearing to be in his late seventies, al-‘Alim is running the periodical *Qadaya Fikriyyah (Questions of Thought)* with the energy of a much younger man, and without any intention of retiring. He speaks through a multitude of publications and about a multitude of subjects, including a defense of the prose poem, which is receiving a torrent of objections in its rise to dominance. Al-‘Alim told me that he feels compelled today to defend the prose poem just as he felt compelled in the 1960s to defend the free verse movement. During our interview, I asked him if poetry today ends up perpetuating or negating contradictions of reality:

Poetry wants to abandon the picture of harmony, which authorities give to reality. So when poetry is embodying contradiction in reality, it is destroying the official image and version of harmony, which the authorities promulgate about reality. This is because authority wants to perpetuate the status quo. Each authority seeks to canonize its reality. Therefore, I distinguish between the culture of authority and the authority of culture. The authority of culture is not bound by the present. It is inhabited by the future... What you hear on the street now is not what you heard in the desert in the past. Now unity of contradictions is a rhythm. Changing and contradicting of rhythms is a rhythm. The rhythm of life has changed and consequently its expression did too. The prose poem expressed in contradictions the contradiction of reality. This is a rebellious expression in structure against that which is around it, against logical expression in the novel and other things. There is no logic in poetic sentence. This is a genuine, dramatic expression for a new reality in the world. This is an expression of a torn-up reality.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) the philosopher, theologian, and scientist more known in the West since Mediaeval times as Averroes and as the “Commentator of Aristotle.”

The idea of expressing and resisting a “torn-up” reality through a “torn-up” rhythm invites doubts; I wondered whether the claim of a rebellion could be attributed to such a change in rhythm. I carried those doubts to my meeting with Nida’a Khouri, a Palestinian poet in her mid forties, married with teenage children. As a child, she had become famous for writing; frequently she was asked to write amorous poetry for her girlfriends to their boyfriends. One night, I called Khouri in her village of Fasoutta near the Israeli border with Lebanon. She agreed to meet with me and through a middleman sent me, a dozen of articles about herself clipped from the local press. She suggested I read the articles before our meeting her.

Eventually we met in al-Mughar, the mixed village of Muslims, Druze and Christians near Lake Tabariyyah.<sup>36</sup> She came there to attend a reading of “Mediterranean” poetry that had brought together French, Spanish, Jewish and Arab poets. That Palestinian poets co-existing on the West Bank or in Gaza were excluded was entirely predictable since this festival, as learned, was the initiative of institutions focused on the Israeli version of “co-existence” between an Arab minority and a Jewish majority. I had already read a recent collection of poems by Khouri called *The Most Beautiful of Goddesses Cries*, published in Egypt, and was able to understand very little of it. Thus my hope was that during our meeting, Khouri would provide a better understanding of that particular work and her entire project. The book I read by her seemed like highly liturgical prose, and I did not know how to make sense of it. I noticed, however, that she appeared to approach her poems as prayers and I asked her if this were indeed the case. She responded:

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<sup>36</sup> The Arabic version *Tabariyyah* comes from Tiberius, the Second Roman Emperor. The Hebrew name of the lake is Keneret.

My poem is not a state of prayer it is a state of infidelity, denial of this sickly complex state of things. I import from the religious lexicon in order to penetrate the sacred. I want to make the sacred something of us, not above us. I don't want to be stuck in that which is beyond, above, the godly. Let me give worth to the daily, to the personal. Let's say they are a different kind of prayer. They are not begging, pious prayers... The essence of faith and relation with the Creator is above such prayers and such texts.

Her poetic project, which she also treats as an intellectual one, is concerned with the fragmentation of society, the patterning of the human self, the monist and religious mode of thought in the Arab world, the relation of the oppressors and the oppressed and the connections between males and females. Once during an attack of depression or a possible nervous breakdown, in the course of her intellectual endeavors, she managed through connections to stay for a while in a monastery in Jerusalem (Latroun), where she was horrified to see the monks, "cloaked with religion," as she put it.

Many of my questions to Khouri were left unanswered, but a notable exception was when I asked about her connection to Nietzsche. She replied that he is: "my sweetheart because he is insane. Only he died young and insane. He was the bravest of the brave when he saw and captured the essence of our truth. He saw the nihilism of our existence." But it was not "our truth" that really interested me. I was interested in the "truth" about the prose poem and more specifically about the "truth" that emerge about modernizing verse when its modernity means the abandonment of meter and rhyme. Like male prose poets who abandoned meter, Khouri keeps meter out of her verse because of its association with tradition in the wider society. She saw poetic meter as associated with gender politics that affirm male dominance. She wants through her poetry to explore the

feminine, and new relations between the feminine and the masculine – an exploration that is not feasible with the “restrictions” of meter. Khouri says about her self: “Even in driving, I try not to miss any chance to violate rules. If I did not violate, I feel I missed something... being a married woman with children from an Arab, conservative oriental, peasant society, to have cuts and freedom in my text is an act of confrontation.” In the course of “violating” metrical regulations in her verse, Khouri redefines her relation with the audience. I asked her about the kind of reader she aspires to have:

I dream of a reader like myself, a reader who transgresses, ferocious, not satisfied with the trivial. The question is not what is the new thing to say, but how to say it. Most of what I write was written in the late hours of the night, before sleeping and after distancing the reality of the day. It is a state of in-between. There is an interaction between consciousness and sub-consciousness. This is where you begin to reach places. To be disciplined, according to a system, distorts the act of creativity... the dispersion of the Palestinian people, its undisciplined rhythm of life, the lack of map and methods, freed from commitment to a mold... make the prose poem fit to the spirit of a dispersed, dismembered people. You can cut lines, you can write a paragraph, half a page or three lines and call them a poem, based on the length of peoples' lives.

This is a form that fits Nida'a since Nida'a has been trying to write since [she was] 14 years old, and to this day, after a thousand attempts and a thousand beautiful teachers of Arabic and grammar, Nida'a still cannot be domesticated to the rule of language and its movements. I consider myself an artist of the phrase and meaning and the connection of meanings and their associations. I don't work on the discipline of language rules... I am unable to succumb to rules.

While Khouri views both her personal rhythm and that of her people as fragmented or undisciplined, Mahmoud Amin al-'Alim views this rhythm as the modern one, as the one appropriate for modern people, occupied or not, for the modern age itself. Speaking from a Marxist tradition, he considers the reality of this age to be the reality of globalization. Of concern to him are the evacuation of resources from the country, the inhuman effects

of globalization and how the state had become an instrument of this process by which there is disregard for the particular in both economic and literary conduct. Khouri speaks about the rhythm of a people without their nation-state and al-‘Alim speaks about a rhythm of people abandoned by it. According to their accounts, measured rhythm on their fits neither reality. Yet, according to al-‘Alim:

There has to be a particularity. This is why we celebrate literature from Africa, Latin America and Shakespeare. We enjoy Greek struggle – and with due respect to cousin Marx – not because there is a child-parent relation between the Greeks and us, as he thought but because we live a struggle with the same fundamentals, not against destiny but against colonialism, authority, and society.... I still like *jahiliyya* poetry because it represents an attempt to express the self in the face of necessity<sup>37</sup>... I am alive. I am facing difficulties... this limited dark person who is breaking the chains, the *chains* of traditions and closed customs<sup>38</sup>... To talk about Western modernity is short-sightedness. There has always been modernity: the *Š‘aāleek* poets, Abu al-‘Ala’a, Abu Nuwwas, Islam is modernity.<sup>39</sup> Every historical epoch of renewal has a modernity (*hadatha*).... The fundamentalist trend says, “Nothing will amend our present other than what amended our past.” This is a Wahhabi vision, but it applies to anyone who wants to persist in the old values of meter in poetry and foist it upon the new.<sup>40</sup>

The relationship of parent to child, of the old to the new is one that also figured in my interlocution with Amjad Nassir. He practices the kind of modern poetry that al-‘Alim advocates, that is, one fit for the modern age by the virtue of banishing metrical discipline. More specifically, Nassir, finds no more rules of rhythm. He believes that

<sup>37</sup> *Jahiliyyah* is a reference to the pre-Islamic age. *Jahala* and *yajhau* are verbs indicating the state of ignorance. The age of ignorance, summarily called *jahiliyya*, connotes the ignorance of monotheism, which prevailed among the Arabs (save the Christian and Jewish communities) before Islam.

<sup>38</sup> He is referring to the classical pre-Islamic poet ‘Antara.

<sup>39</sup> *Š‘aāleek* (sing. *š‘ulouk*) originally refers to a group of brigand poets, banished by their tribes and therefore leading precarious life of poverty and endurance. Both Abu al-‘Ala’a al-Ma’arri in Syria (973-1057) and Abu Nuwwas in Iraq (756-810), are of canonical standing in Arabic classical poetry.

<sup>40</sup> Wahhabi [more commonly transliterated as Wahabi] is used pejoratively to mean “reactionary.” The name derives from Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792) who led a movement of Islamic reform calling for the purification of Islam from all accretions by applying only the teaching the Qur’an, the Prophet and the Righteous Ancestors (as-salaf as-salih). His doctrine gained support when he struck an oath of mutual support in 1744 with the emir of the Saudi dynasty Muhammad bin Saud, the father of the first king of Saudi Arabia, King ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin Saud, as they were on hostile terms with the Ottoman empire and other dynasties of Arabia.

rules of rhythm, at least for now, are nowhere to be found in poetry, not even his poetry. Nasir is a Jordanian poet who lives in London and edits the literary section of one of the city's Arabic newspapers, *al-Quds Al-Arabi*. I met Amjad at the Sameramese Hotel in downtown Cairo. He was invited to read at the book fair along with several other invited poets, prose poets. Like that of Khouri, Nassir's work has increasingly focused on the body and its desires. In the 1970's, his Palestinian friend Zakariyya Muhammad then returning from his studies in Baghdad brought a few books to him by Sa'adi Yusuf, an Iraqi poet widely associated with prose poetry.<sup>41</sup> Upon reading Yusuf's work, Nassir discovered the value of narrating -- narrating stories of little and intimate things -- even though he, like the figure that influenced him, Yusuf, was still writing in "free" verse at the time. In due time, he, too, rebelled against free verse., telling me his life now seems to have been a chain of rebellions. Over 47 years of life, he lived in Yemen, Cyprus and now London; he said he found himself always needing to rebel, most notably against his father and against the traditions of Arabic language and literature. For example, he found his father a royalist and himself Marxist; he supported the Palestinian resistance and his father, the Jordanian army. Similar to Khouri, breaking rules always appealed to him. He always found himself making decisions contrary to the rules of his family. He described this impulse to rebel as crucial to his poetic path. I asked him how he builds his rhythm:

You don't even need meter (*wazn*) sometime for rhythm (*iq ā'a*). I think rhythm is built on a lot of things, not just rhyme. Some of the constituents of rhythm are words themselves. I can't write outside a rhythm that is not out of me, peculiar to me, to my poetic sentence. I can't move even one cm if I felt the rhythm is not appropriate to me, not peculiar to me, even though I write prose poetry that is not metered at all. But rhythm is necessary for structure of poem; you can call it rhythm of sentence,

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<sup>41</sup> Sa'adi Yusuf (Basrah, born 1934), currently exiled in London, is known also for translating Walt Whitman, Constantine Cafavy, and Yannis Ritsos among others into Arabic.

rhythm of breathing, rhythm of idea. I can't give you rules of rhythm in poetry, not even my own poetry.

But Nassir, Khouri or al-'Alim saw modernity's banishing of metrical discipline the "breaking of chains," Zakariyya Muhammad saw modernity and its poetry as merely the transformations of those chains. For him, chains are a permanent condition of both life and art. He believes that rather than going away, they only soften. Poetry still has chains but not the vulgar chains of meter and rhyme, on which the Arabs developed and sustained their tradition for at least 16 centuries. Now the modern poet works with the chain of the picture or the idea. In our second interview, I asked Zakariyya Muhammad about a view he had expressed in a previous interview in which held that "clear" chains have disappeared in poetry:

This is the way of life generally. We dumped feudalism and had capitalism, old chains are dumped and new chains come. Capitalism replaced vulgar chains and put on softer ones. There is nothing in life without chains. The only difference is that chains get softer and less dense but they remain chains. In the past, they used to mutilate your eyes or something else in the feudal or Ottoman period.<sup>42</sup> Now they imprison you ... In Arabic poetry, we dumped clear, familiar chains and put ourselves in other chains instead, for example, size of a poem, cuts, respiratory cuts, limits of a picture, a huge set of chains. Because I dumped the music I made the picture the limit, but it is a softer and more obscure limit. I dumped the path of a rhythm to the heart but had to find a substitute. The rhythm, my chain, used to be my way to the traditional hearer. Meter was my way to his head (*ras*). I found that this path is not satisfying to me emotionally, this clear, and familiar and agreed upon rhythm, if I want to have a different effect. The rhythm is so hackneyed, so understood that it does not add anything. It breaks my idea, prevents it from coming out.

A composition based on the discipline of poetic meter and more generally identifiable regulations of rhythm was not the only things to disappear with the advent of modernity in the poetic craft; consider the prose poem sampled in Figures 7 and 8 in which its

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<sup>42</sup> From Istanbul, the Ottoman Empire ruled, from much of the Eastern Muslim world from 1452 to 1917.

author deserts any commitment to meter and rhyme. With prosodic disciplines and regulations, easily identifiable meanings in poetry seemed also to disappear. Obscurity itself becomes a potential for aesthetic achievement. Many poets and readers complained to me that poetry is easier to compose today, but harder to understand. The belief is that the poet's argotic language is what is damaging the scene, and above all, the relation with a public of poetry. Yet many a poet also was ready to contest what he or she saw as "traditional" positions standing in the way of "modernizing." To counter "traditional" arguments, the "modernizing" poets hold that poetry was always the craft of specialists. In their argument, poetry, good poetry that is, was always a specialization of the few for the few.

Rather than appreciating the role of an audience, the new poet finds in the traditional public not the locus of an art's valuation but the source of its strangulation. The new public is more likely to read the poem rather than to hear or "sing" it. As the mistrust in a traditional public, and even in the very notion of public, grows, so does the poet's need to develop an "inner rhythm" (*iq ā'a dakhili*). "Inner" rhythms are not sounds that one hears; rather, one *feels*. Along with moral judgments or religious beliefs in the modern age, poetic rhythms live in the belly of a modern leviathan. This modern leviathan is the "private feelings," "experience" and "self-sufficiency" of the modern "independent individual."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> As a prose poet, Adonis says about the subject of rhythm in this new form: "The world of music in the prose poem is private, personal one... the poet of measurement (*wazn*) in this regard is one who accepts the rules of the ancients (*salaf*) and adopts them while the poet of prose is rebellious and rejecting. He is not a pupil. He is a creator and master." (*Shi'r*, 1960, vol 14, no.4: 80).

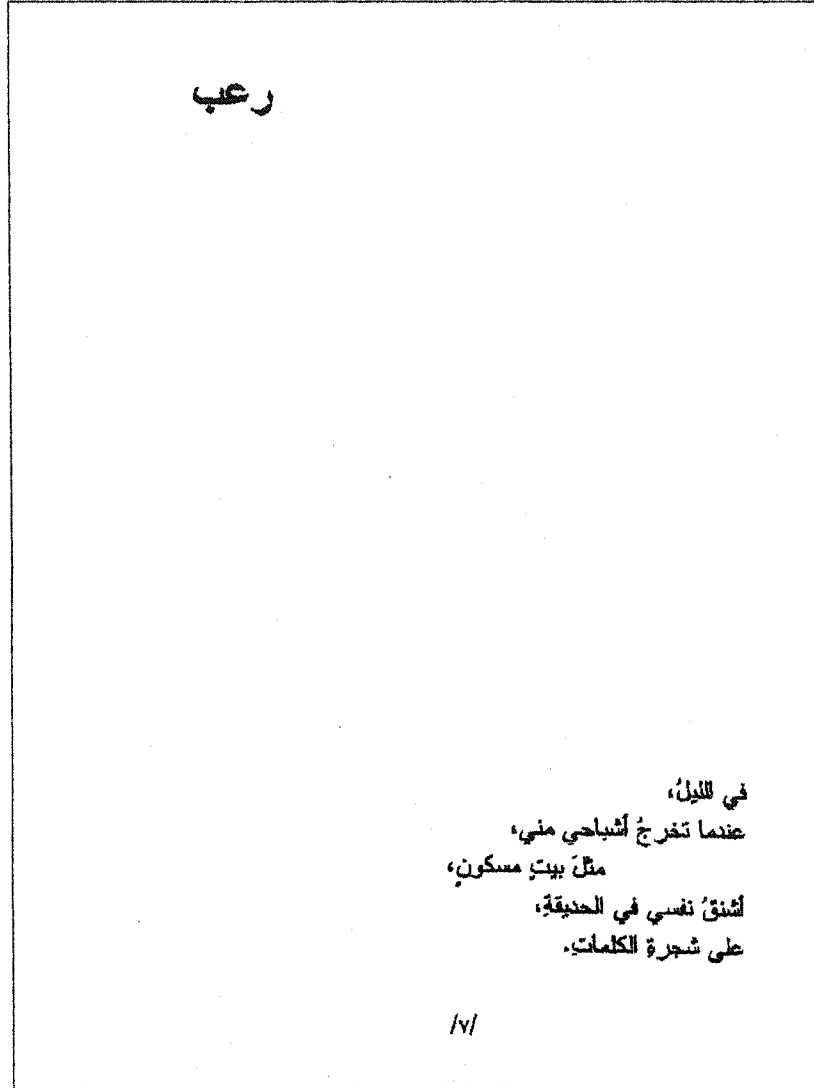
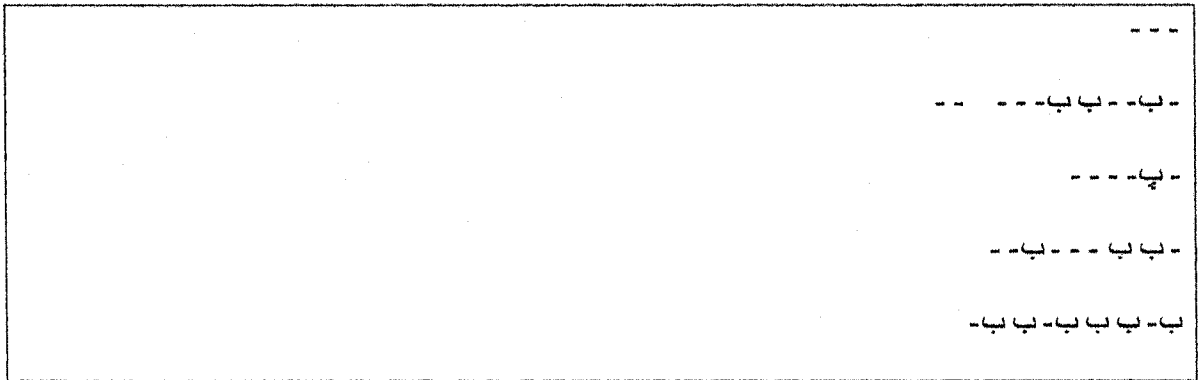


Figure 7

**Horror:** a prose poem by Salwa an-Nu'aymi<sup>44</sup>  
Source: *Dhaba Al-Ladhina Uhibbuhum (Gone Are the Ones I Love)*, by Salwa an-Nu'aymi, 1999.

<sup>44</sup> A translation of this poem can be found in Appendix I.



**Figure 8**

A scansion of Salwa al-Nu'aymi's *Horror*

Note: there is no identifiable regularity of meter or rhyme in this piece of prosaic poetry, whereby (-) stands for “short syllable” and (U) for “long syllable.”

### **People and Poets: An Escalating Estrangement**

Certain relationships open doors, while others close them in fieldwork. In my experience, the one relationship that always opened doors for me was familial. I am a nephew to an uncle with a considerable amount of respect in the literary scene. For decades, he has been an Arabic teacher at the Greek Orthodox Arab High School of Haifa. Once he campaigned but failed to save the cemetery, part of the Islamic *waqf* in the city from state appropriation.<sup>45</sup> As a result, a road was constructed, separating the graves. Now I no longer hear him bemoan the bones of those under the ground, but the tongues of those who speak, try to speak, in Arabic above it. My uncle, Fathi Furani, is not only a teacher of the language, but sporadically a poet in it, and on rare occasions, her writes in English

<sup>45</sup> *Waqf* is a Muslim charitable endowment commonly in the form of land to be used for communal purposes.

and Hebrew. Recently, he took the position of a literary editor at *al-Ittihad* newspaper. Also recently, he started teaching Arabic to prospective teachers, both Jews and Arabs, at a local teacher's college. When people knew of this familial relationship, they gladly consented to meet with me; I suspect that some of my interlocutors would not have consented at all were it not for my last name. I always found myself entrusted with *salmaat* (greetings) from poets in different parts of the country to be sent back to Uncle Fathi.

In order to maintain clear boundaries between familial and "ethnographic" or "scientific" conduct, I did not plan on conducting an interview with my uncle. But one night, which his family was visiting at my parents' house, he asked me about my research. Uncle Fathi was curious to know which poets I had met so far. I took this frequently asked question as a way of measuring at least one thing: the soundness of my pursuit. When I was asked to drop names, I generally had to employ tact and care, so as not to turn off or lose anyone I was interested in meeting. Losing my uncle was never an issue. In fact, there was much to gain from talking to him. As our conversation on poetry began to drift from the interests of the people sitting with us in the living room, he and I went to sit at a table in the kitchen; there, we delved deeper into a discussion of modernizing Arabic poetry. I did not carry with me the digital recorder that almost always accompanied me to other meetings. Instead I used a pencil and a note card. On this card, I was able to record what my Uncle, as a reader, as a recipient of modern Arabic poetry, told me about his own reading practices and about his observations of the state of Arabic poetry today. I asked him about his general view of poetry today:

The conception of what poetry is today has changed... it is influenced by Western theories and that is a product of particular circumstances ... the reader of poetry today participates in the forming of the poem... the difficulty of today's poetry is that it is not lexically difficult... before when I read it and came across difficult words I would go and open the dictionary to find out the meaning of the word... today we as intellectuals are having difficulty understanding this poetry... how then would the case be for people who are not intellectuals... [Khaled: What exactly has changed?]. For us there is a wide, broad zone of knowledge (*iṭṭilā 'a*). We have books, internet... *our world is wider than the world of the desert*... today our poetry is called "whispered poetry"... today's poetry is not written for musical ecstasy (*tarab*). *Tarab* is not the function of poetry. Today poetry raises questions... simplicity of poetry has disappeared... it is written to be read quietly, at home with your self. There is in it a package of meanings, which is transmitted from the poet to the recipient who might be pleased by it without necessarily knowing why... you may like prose poetry, but you will not know why. New poetry is not read on stages. Today's poetry is for a select few

A select few is precisely what I thought I saw upon my first attendance at a poetry reading in Cairo's 34<sup>th</sup> International Book Fair. There were about fifteen people in the "Cultural Association" tent that probably accommodates about one hundred people. Such a select few, I later came to hear, were called a "qualitative audience" (*jumhur naw 'ai*). Among them were my companion and host, Helmi, and a professor of Spanish literature from al-Azhar University, Hamid Abu Haamid. They were to comment on the reading of a notable Egyptian prose poet Muhammad Farid Abu Sa'ada, a friend of Helmi. Those who came to hear him seemed to be in the main other poets, writers, university students and professors. After the poetry reading, the floor opened for a discussion. The audience's difficulty in comprehending this poetry was a prominent subject. Repeatedly in the discussion, I heard references to textual "signs" or "allusions."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Signs (*isharat*); allusions (*iha'aāt*).

One attendant at the session asked Abu Haamid about the difficulty of understanding “allusions” in prose poems. In his defense of the prose poem, Abu Haamid replied that “Abu Sa‘ada presents to us a new and useful experiment and enriches the prose poem, which is a *global experiment*, and I don’t know why we reject it. Perhaps because of a comprehension problem... if the public is diminished for this kind of poetry, it is like the diminishing of the public for scientists, millions of whom are not read.<sup>47</sup> But who is going to read them if they [the people] watch *al-Haj Metwalli*.” *Al-Haj Metwalli* was a character in an Egyptian melodrama that was a hit one Ramadan. Arab television stations compete to produce popular soap operas that would entertain millions, via satellite stations, after sundown, after the breaking of the fast. *Al-Haj Mitwalli*, the polygamous and successful fabric merchant, became the common subject of familial, scholarly and even parliamentary conversations and criticisms. At the Book Fair, one evening session was dedicated to this TV series, and included the participation of its prominent cast members. The tent was so packed that audience spilled onto the grounds outside.

No tent featuring prose poetry had anything close to that ferocious attendance. This sparse attendance is not necessarily lamented by the prose poets. They would like to have spectacularly large audiences. Yet, they worry about the cost of such a crowd to their poetry. Many prose poets expressed distaste for the large audience, sometimes even just the idea of audience. Zakariyya Muhammad, of Ramallah, is one such poet. He mentions his work as competing with entertainment sources. In fact, entertainment is the wrong word to describe Muhammad’s artistic craft. He and fellow poets no longer see the job of the poem as providing any kind of collective reassurance or hope, let alone pleasure. The

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<sup>47</sup> Scientists (‘ulama’ a).

last thing they want to do is to entertain. They want to take their reader to the zone of the unfamiliar. For the rhythm of the world is something new. As he put it:

The prose poetry that hit the Arab world in the last 15 years goes to show that the rhythm of the world is prosaic rhythm, not poetic. Of course picture has to do with this. Poetry is one of the arts that have an increasing number of competitive arts in the Arab world and worldwide. The profession of the poet is no longer important. The TV, the theatre is even more important. The social significance of the poet lessened. So maybe this is why the poet turned self-centered. If society does not need the poet, then the poet does not need the society. Maybe this is what led us to the obscure and self-centered kind of poetry. I don't say I write only for the select but in the end my poetry reaches only a select group of people. I am not searching for people to clap for me. When I write poetry I try not to submit to the blackmailing of people.

To defeat blackmailing, the poet banished "the people" from the act of creativity. Now the people are conceived not only as being outside this act but also as a threat to its authenticity. Muhammad is aware that this is a recent development in Arabic, and more specifically Palestinian poetry. In the Arab world, the Palestinian poetic scene historically did not have the "luxury" for the kind of "aesthetic experimentations" as other Arab poets. So overwhelming had been the national, collective struggle that it only was in the 1990s when poets began to find the "luxury" to broach the subject of the "self and its things."<sup>48</sup> The new poetic topics include private body, private memory, and private death. The days of poetry festivals in which people came in the hundreds or thousands to hear the word are much more of a rarity. There seems to be a confidence now that Palestinians are no longer on the verge of extinction or oblivion. Moreover, it appears now that the loss of Palestine is a loss of many other things besides a homeland. The world now appears far more complex than promising victories and revolutions that socialist or nationalist poems once expressed. The commitment of the poet to those once

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<sup>48</sup> Nouri aj-Jarrah (*Shu'ara'a*, 1998, summer, vol. 1: 207).

hoped-for revolutions is now substituted with a commitment to questions that poetry itself raises. Both people and poems have changed, but the relationship between them remains complex. According to Muhammad:

The question of poet-audience relation is a complex one, and it is difficult to understand it outside specific time periods. For example between the 1950s and late 1970s the poet in Palestinian society had a deep (*waṭida*) bond with the audience. The meeting with the audience was always through festival (*mihrajan*) and poetry evenings. The generation of the 1980s got tired of this condition and wanted to react to it so it turned its back to the people, to the audience. It was tired of the idea that poetry is employed (*musakhar*) for pleasing people, for gaining their clapping. It appeared that in 1980s people don't care about poets; therefore, it became more self-centered, more introverted, more obscure, opened to the inside more than to the outside.

Maybe it is a two-sided change. People got tired of poetry recited on stages, of poetry on politics, of poetry read in public courts but not at home or in the newspaper. At first, the people needed national awakening. Both sides needed this talk. But that period is over, where politics dominates everything. The poet could not write *ghazal* or contemplate philosophical questions.<sup>49</sup> He became the port-parole of his people, and that lasted for a long period. So when the 1980s came, poets were bored with this. Even society itself was tired of this talk. They already established national institutions, and they no longer needed someone to scream at them, reminding them of their identity. The world appears for people far more complicated than what people thought in the 1970s and 1960s through the heroic, naïve and optimistic poetry. There is no room for the optimist spirit of that generation. Back then poetry was mixture of romantic optimism, oratory, mass-oriented, political. In the 1980s all this would change. My poems are now closer to philosophical contemplation.

Throughout the fieldwork, I heard on poets' tongues and in their texts the names of various philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Marx, and Nietzsche. As with some of those philosophers, the world of the Greeks and those who came before them frequently was invoked among the poets; thus, rendering some poems into what I call an "oasis of enchantments." Yet, I heard something other than philosophical contemplation

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<sup>49</sup> *Ghazal* in Arabic is a reference to a genre of amatory poetry. This word (*ghazal*) traveled to other languages, such as Farsi, Urdu, and Turkish in which it acquired a distinct sense.

from the poets too; I heard poems that resembled liturgical meditations. This trend was evident in the proliferation of names of gods, goddesses, mythical heroes and heroines. Phrases like temples, prayers, rituals, fire, myth, and incense abound in poems of prose. In these texts, so rich with religious imagery, it was striking that their authors are invested in secular or even atheistic visions of the world. It was disorienting to read priestly-sounding texts from authors who want the diminished the role of priesthood and religion in public, political life within contemporary Arab societies.

This observation became much clearer to me on my last night in Cairo. I spent that evening at Helmi Salim's house listening and debating with him until the early hours of the morning. I was puzzled by his stand on poetry as a means of transformation in society. He wants to democratize poetry, but he also expects his work to be mediated for the masses and not directly understood by them. He added that he has no illusions that poetry would be a medium of change – certainly not in any immediate way. Salim said to me: "I have no illusions about my poetry feeding the people and changing society. Is there a poem in the whole world that can substitute for the piece of bread, be it the poetry of Neruda or Darwish? I am a poet and I believe in the significance of the word, but I am not stupid and idealist. Where is that poetry that changed society? No. It is a social revolution that will change society."

Revolutions may or may not change society, but no revolution will change what humans are: mortals. This constant fact of human mortality was what 'Abdul Min'im Ramadan fears. Abdul Minim was kind enough to meet me on late notice – hours before I was to

leave Cairo. He is a friend of Salim, and, like him, he works in prose poetry. Prior to the interview him, I had met Ramadan once before at one of Salim's dinner parties. His skills and passion for narration were striking. When I went to meet him with my friend, Sayyid el-Miliji at *Zahrat al-Bustan* café in downtown Cairo, I learned that his skill and passion for speech were cultivated out of a necessity. As with Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*, his way of warding off death is by resorting to speech, to storytelling. One story I wanted to hear from Ramdan was why he never made it to the Book Fair although his name appeared on more than one occasion in its publication of daily events. For Ramadan, the Book Fair is a "cultural show," for the purposes of the state to domesticate intellectuals. His name has been appearing at the festivals for the last thirteen years. Ramdan said that, for some in the Ministry of Culture, "events materialize in advertising them, not in their actual happening... This is part of our moral corruption not just our literary one. This fair is good to conduct business."

The business that I found so pressing is what happens to poets who want to be "modern," and whose commitment to poetry, to the art in their poetry, compels them to ask certain questions. In *Zahrat al-Bustan*, with hot chocolate for Ramadan and lentil soup for Sayyid and me, I heard how in the "business" of poetry, form no longer matters. As Ramadan put it, the concept of the private poet is an entirely different concept when contrasted with the public poet:

I am an advocate of the private poet, in contrast with the public poet. This is the poet that I search for, regardless of form. What I mean is that, in the history of Arabic poetry, the poet was always occupied with expressing the collective. He was the port parole of the collective's sadness, happiness and so forth. Of course there is nothing pure on this earth. There is no pure public poet. But since the late 1960s in Egypt, the private poet

began to rise. The private poet is not a populist. The public poet arrives at an already prepared audience that responds to him. The public poet produces to an already created audience. The private poet has no audience. He creates readers. You cannot use the phrase audience with the private poet. You cannot use the phrase reader with public poet...The public poet is not pleased with a position lesser than a leader. Yet the private poet does not accept a position larger than that of a small creature... the public poet is a poet of Bedouinness. Therefore, in the city, there is less room for the poet. But in the desert, in the tribe, there is ample room for the poet. The tribe needs the unity, the leader, and the pillar. In the city, there is multiplicity; there is less room in it for the public poet. The city is against the public poet. Perhaps Cairo, more than other Arab capitals, is most hostile to public poets since it is closer to the idea of the City.

The city of Cairo is at least one thing that Ramadan shares with his fellow poet and friend Salim. Salim, the kind of private poet that Ramadan advocates, refuses to reach out to a wide audience through his poetry. He sees this outreach to the masses via the poem as compromising the art, the commitment to art, in the poem. He sees his work, a cultural work, to be in need of mediators – ones who are capable of spreading poetry. So I asked him if he sees in his role as a poet and in his insistence that poetry be mediated, a reincarnation of a priestly role in a secular fashion. His response was:

Yes, why not... when you read a book in philosophy or society or economics, you still need the help of dictionaries, of teachers and friends even though these books use dictionary-language, definitional language. Poetry does not use indexical, communicative language. It deviates, it alludes. I am not saying that night is not night in poetry but it is not only night. Why should poetry be easy? It is one of the duties of poetry to change the sign into an allusion. My idea is that language in poetry carries the back meanings, secondary, assumed meanings, not primary, blatant meanings. Poetry doesn't communicate information, it alludes, it does not report. But the difficulty in poetry is not because of the holiness of the text, it is because we lack mediators and because the language of poetry is allusive and not reporting... why should the content of economics, sociology need explaining but not poetry? This is not to say that poetry is sacred or priestly. Why go far: your own dissertation, you will write within scientific requirements and terminology. Will I accuse you of being detached and elitist? Of course not. Even though you will use more

communicative language than I will, you will end up having a text that requires explanation.

Salim's work may not reach the masses but it certainly reaches a few -- mostly other poets. In Egypt, I met such a reader at her Madinat Nasr mansion in Cairo. It was Maysoon Saqr, who originally came from the United Arab Emirates. Saqr and her family fled to Cairo from their homeland in the late 1960s because of a coup d'etate that led to the imprisonment of her father, a statesman and a poet. Entrusted with the keys and the cleaning of her imprisoned father's library, Saqr tried to read everything that it contained. In the sixth grade, she read *One Thousand and One Nights*, which she received as a graduation gift from her father. Yet, while prose brought father and daughter closer, poetry separated them.

Later on in life, her father held many, many things against her poetry. Incidentally, Saqr is also an occasional painter; the trouble, however, was her poetry. At some point her father denied that she was one. He was a classicist with occasional dabbling in "free" verse poetry, but his notion of freedom was different from hers, creating a profound fracture between them that struck beyond, she would say even "below," poetry. He insisted that her first collection of poetry be burnt. Saqr told me about her habit to this day of burning all the leftover copies of her published poetic anthologies. Having recently published one such collection, she was invited to read at the book fair. One afternoon, before driving us there in her Mercedes, she invited me and a Moroccan journalist for coffee and dessert. Here I learned what appealed to her about the prose poem, especially that she admired in Salim's hands. As she once told to a reporter, the prose poem allows

her to “express the personal and the feminine, the free and the marginal. I cannot express my femininity within fixed fundamentals and measured rules.”<sup>50</sup>

In fact, all six women poets I interviewed in this study work in the prose poem form and occasionally the “free” verse (*taf ‘ieela*); none in the classical form (*al-‘amoudi*). I sampled poetry by three women poets working in three different forms deliberately, to preclude the hasty conclusion that attributes “masculine” and “feminine” essences to “traditional” and “modern” forms, respectively. However, two women poets I interviewed seemed to point to that conclusion saying that they found the prose poem to be in alignment with their feminist politics. Those two women prose poets locate in their poetic form not only a subversion of dominant poetic tradition, but also a dominant, patriarchal tradition associated with metered form, including the “free” verse. Fleeing the “regulations” and “binaries” of the classical form, they are interested in flowing, fluid and feminine architecture that they see embodied in the prose poem. Whatever features one might actually attribute to the prose poem, it is apparent, that gender along with other social formations, figures into the poetic abandonment and adoption of forms. Below, Saqr elaborates on the consequences of expressing her femininity through the prose poem. One consequence is a particular approach to language and therefore to audience:

All what I am trying to say is that the circle of intellectuals and writers is no longer public, as it used to be... the poet near the *sultan*.<sup>51</sup> Now politics is one place, the masses in another and the poet yet in another little normal place. The role of the poet diminished. The poet became an ordinary person, a different person. *Before that, the poet did not play the real role of the poet. The poet served a role for other things. Now the poet’s role is in the poet’s writing. This made him more specialized, deeper in writing. What is the shame of having a role in writing only? This is the real role of*

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Quds Al-Arabi (November 10, 2002: 10).

<sup>51</sup> *Sultan* here means the ruler.

*the poet inside writing.* What is the role of the doctor outside medicine? I don't want the illusion that my writing as a poetess [*shā 'ira*] will change society. I can change from within my writing, from within poetry. I will not compromise or simplify my writing so it could be understandable by the public... I don't see my writing as a writing to change society. The tools of changing society today are different from what they used to be. It used to be that they would put a poet in front of the army to mobilize it. But today it is very different, a different society. Where is that society that will hear us? We hardly affect 15 people. The idea of poet as a god or prophet no longer exists.

Ideas come and ideas go. That poets are specialists is not a new idea. The fact that the Arabs, in keeping with classical societies, traditionally regarded poetry as a craft (*san'ah*), not just an "art" (*fun*) to be practiced by specialists, attests to the historic eminence of this notion. However, the kind of specialists that poets represent is itself new. Modern poets as modern specialists are engaged with a practice that is set in segregation from other kinds of pursuits such as law, religion or science. Therefore the modern poet becomes like, for instance, the modern historian, the modern botanist or the modern mathematician. All of them pursue "truths" that are believed to be found outside political, moral and religious kinds of reasoning. One poet, Hussein al-Bargouthi, in fact, likened his poetic pursuit to that of mathematician. I asked al-Barghouthi at the hospital, what kind of relationship does he want to have with an audience (*jumhur*).

I don't think about *readers* (*qurra'a*). This is the concern of sociology, politics. This is not the concern of the act of creativity. The more you think about audience, the worse is your writing. Second, there is no single audience. Writing for one audience is no more. Perhaps in the past, the poet wrote for one tribe. You also don't write for the entire globe. I am aware that I don't write for all. Of course, through experience, through knowledge, I have a select group of people that I have in my mind. It is dangerous for someone outside to interfere in the moment of creativity. I compare my poetry with mathematics. If one wants to read and understand advanced mathematics, one has to master the basics. I don't write for an ignorant reader. Such a reader does not concern me at all. If a reader does not want to invest effort then that reader is of no concern to me

whatsoever. I have nothing to do with him. Is there someone who writes mathematical theory for someone who knows neither how to add nor how to subtract? For example, can Einstein stop where readers cease to understand him. If this were the case, we would never have had Einstein... let me be more precise, you take from poetry what your mind allows you... the history of human kind is history of specialization, since the times of Pharaonic priests... history gives birth to people of unequal strength and intelligence. This is why you get someone like Shakespeare and four more centuries pass without someone like Shakespeare, but many hospitals for mental health in between.

If truth is hard to bear, and if certain truths are almost unbearable, then for some poets, only madness becomes bearable. I often heard poets valorize madness, in my personal encounters with them and in my encounters with their texts. In a grain warehouse built around 150 years ago in Nazareth, and now a “cultural café,” I met Wisam Jubran, a poet who made that choice of madness in so far that it is a choice. He was invited to read and play his *'oud*, although there was little mood around for any poetry, let alone music.<sup>52</sup> That night, there were two kinds of music, Arabic and Spanish. It was late April, after the massive Israeli invasion of March 28<sup>th</sup>, and reports were already leaking in about a mass murder in the Refugee Camp of Jenin. This café, in Nazareth called the Palestinian House, along with a local Phinique Association, had arranged an event of solidarity, although with another occupied people: the people of the Golan Heights. A week earlier, villagers in the Golan Heights had observed Syria’s Independence, and poets from there were invited to read at the Palestinian House.

To call something Palestinian inside what is today Israel is indicative in a certain way of the remoteness and the strangeness of Palestine. To invoke the name of Palestine is to invoke something lost or kidnapped, to reclaim a forbidden name, to utter a silenced

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<sup>52</sup> *'Oud* Arabic version of lute.

history. In addition, the very gathering seemed to have a significance of its own. To come together to read poetry and hear music in an ocean of pain and helplessness entailed a certain act of defiance, or more precisely an act of overcoming. It is an overcoming of the constant feeling of guilt and embarrassment for remaining alive, an overcoming of sheer, debilitating anger at 'the situation.' The first poet to read, Hussein Muhanna of Buqay'aa, admitted his inability to write under the current conditions. He said he is "used to poetry being an action, not a reaction to events." His poems, like the overwhelming majority of poems that night, were about the reality of occupation. Due to this overwhelming reaction, Jubran prefaced his reading with an apology for not writing a poem on "the situation" as all other readers seem to have done that evening. His poem was not "political," he said; for it talked about neither martyrs nor homeland.

Wisam Jubran is a native of Nazareth. He holds a Ph.D. in music that led him to live for an extended period of times in Russia and Germany – two places that will make him a speaker of five languages and of subjects that Nazareth would not have allowed. In Germany, he developed, I am told, close ties with Adonis himself, the grand modernizer of Arabic poetry in the Twentieth Century. Jubran dedicated some of his work to Adonis, in a way of apprenticeship. The title of his piece that evening was "Empty Him from the Speech of Palm Trees." Of course I understood very little of it. In general, however, it seemed that Jubran's conflict is with something more primordial than occupation. My fieldwork was ending and he was my last interlocutor. Jubran agreed to meet at a café in the lobby of a Haifa hotel on Carmel Mountain at the end of May. We had a conversation about all sorts of topics and peoples. One subject was Nietzsche. I wanted to know what

Jubran found valuable about that philosopher-poet's work for his own poetic project. While songs emanated from a Jewish birthday party at the other end of the lobby, he conveyed to me his valuation of Nietzsche's work:

For me, madness is an exemplary case in which the human leaves the pattern, the pre-arranged, and the collectively consensual. In madness there is transgression against law and common values. Madness is closer to truth. It is a state between childhood and genius. The brain, in madness is freer. If the brain is guarded, the madman is freed from the guards. Madness here is an aesthetic state of being. To incarnate the mad as you work with language, can create new impulses for writing. It allows you to see things as not descending from Heavens. This is not my only way of writing, only one way... many prophets were accused of madness. The unique one is often thought of as mad. There is a state of rebellion within madness. Everything in our reality calls for it, here in Palestine. I am not exaggerating – especially when I think of the spiritual and intellectual aspects of our lives. This leads to resentment in me, inability to reach out to people. What is more painful, this reality precludes people from reaching out to me. My hope exists in the people yet to be born, yet to come. My audience is not people present today, but [those] who could read me, understand me in the future.

In May 2002, I left Wisam Jubran, finding no readers for his poetry in the present. Yet, in this same present, I also left behind readers who found no poetry, and even poets swearing that there is no poetry anymore. Among the former, I heard 'Ala'a al-'Azza a graduate student of international studies at Birzeit University, where he also completed a Bachelor's degree in chemistry. Coming from a refugee camp near Bethlehem, al-'Azza had always liked poetry; he recounted to me how that liking of poetry was transformed: "I used to like the poems that I understood. Then I used to like the poems that I sensed as with [Mahmoud] Darwish and Qabbani."<sup>53</sup> Now I neither understand nor sense poems. The only thing left is to be fascinated by the distribution and ordering of words on the page." But what exactly is left on the poetic page? Is there poetry left?

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<sup>53</sup> Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998), a Syrian poet, and a former diplomat, is renowned throughout the Arab world for a poetry that merged themes of love, erotica and politics.

In my final days in Ramallah, I wanted to put to rest the sense of mission or task that accompanied me during my ethnographic pursuit. Realizing that I had little time left, I decided to stay within Ramallah and to avoid the checkpoints that I used to cross daily. One night I stayed with Muheib al-Bargouthi, the cousin and disciple of Hussein al-Bargouthi. Muheib shares with Jubran his valorization of both Nietzsche and madness. In fact, many see in Muheib nothing more or less than a mad man, a *s'ulouk* kind of poet, in the very margins of the margins. In one conversation that extended to the early hours of the morning, he swore to me, saying: "Really, by God, there is no poetry." He truly believed that poets and poetry are gone today in what he saw as an age of defeat.

The valorized madness of certain poets and the flight of their public led me to face two suspicions at the end of this ethnographic pursuit. My first suspicion is that the experience of the poem – the guarding of the dream and the act of salvation-- lies in a place other than what poets call poetry. The ideology of martyrdom is one such place. My second suspicion is that modernity is not, after all, a process, which enhances order and rationality in society. Instead, it enhances a particular kind of order, and a particular kind of rationality, while destroying other kinds. In the peculiarly modern secular order, the measuring of sound – and in sound the human word began – becomes obsolete. For now it is other things that have to be measured. Thus, I suspect that the masters of words must seek asylum either in their madness, in their silence, or in their dreams.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In my ethnographic narration of how Arab, mainly Palestinian, poets have been modernizing their verse since the late 1940s, I wanted to trace the modern disappearance of a poetic discipline. I argued that through transforming the rhythmical structures of their verse, poets were transforming moral subjectivities and moral sensibilities. I demonstrated how different ideologies of self and society were manifested in different poetic literary forms. In accounting for their adoption or abandonment of certain poetic forms and devices, Palestinian and other Arab poets, always articulate their positions towards various social structures and processes within and outside Palestine (e.g. occupation, nationalism, gender, globalization, Western hegemony, Arab tradition, secularism, and religion). Ultimately, through my argument about the social salience of poetic metrical discipline, I wanted to express the need for an inquiry about *kinds* of discipline, freedom, order, and rationality associated with the modernization process. In this vein, I explored in a preliminary fashion how a secular doctrine informs the modernizing of Arabic verse. Here, I will review the main themes and findings of this study, and its intimations for future inquiry. I will conclude by discussing some of the ambiguities in my main argument about the modernizing effects in Arabic verse.

In telling the story a discipline abandoned in modern time, and even banished by poets who champion the cause of modernity, I have employed certain premises about poetry. I approached poetry as a kind of knowledge, not merely “art.” This position is in keeping with a foundational conception of verse in the Arab poetic tradition as *'ilm* (knowledge). As a body of knowledge, poetry serves as a site for raising questions about categories that

inform an analysis of the modern present. Had I further extended this study's line of inquiry, I would have examined the relationship between poetic practice and social theorizing.

During my fieldwork, it was intriguing to observe that contemporary poets have interest in post-structuralist formulations and in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. Similar to these philosophers, the poets' "gaze" is towards language itself. I would have liked the chance to explore questions such as: Why do poets increasingly speak of their fear from or hopes of salvation in language, not too dissimilarly from certain trends in post-structuralism? Why in contemporary Arab poetics, as in post-structuralist theoretical formulations, has there been a need to reject "grand narratives" and embrace "daily narratives"? Why is memory (as distinct from "history") increasingly deployed in both poetic and theoretical engagements? Given the overriding concerns of this study, the complex relationships between poetic language and the language of social theory could remain only, as the objects of ephemeral and preliminary observations.

Another chief premise of this study has been that material and technical aspects of poetic form bear content. Not only do a poem's words (semantics of diction) convey social significance, but also the way they are arranged and their sounds, distributed (semantics of sound). My focus has been on the question of the poems' sounds, on what poets have had to say about producing and measuring such sounds. Here lies the nexus of my primary argument – the story of a transformation in the measurement of sounds in Arabic verse over the last seven decades. In modernizing the structures of sound in verse, there

has been a shift towards a state of disorder, deregulation and the erosion of sound measurement. I argue that the poets' quest to modernize their craft, the resultant expulsion of poetic meter, and the shifts from lyrical to prosaic poetic forms, have been social, moral, and political transformations. Poets' statements' about poetic meter, coupled with a visual tracing of poetic forms have revealed that shifts in the practice of disciplining sounds are shifts in articulation of self and society in an embattled Arab and Palestinian present. Embedded in my argument is the call to open up such "technical" transformations into inquiries about notions and effects of modernity, as deployed by Arab poets, rather than relegating them to the purview of only linguistic-literary analyses.

The poets' statements about the detailed and "technical" aspects of their works reveal a set of traditions, discourses, sensibilities, powers, and ideologies that they work with and against. This ethnographic probing of poetic subjectivities sheds light, however scant, on links between prosodic-sound structures of poems, on the one hand, and social-political structures, on the other. While falling short of examining specifically the connections between selections of particular meters and the social conditions that might be implicated in those selections, I have examined relations of different forms (not particular meters) to such conditions.<sup>1</sup>

One benefit of an ethnographic probing into poetic subjectivities is the exposition of the text's context finds its way to seemingly intimate details, including rhyme, meter and

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<sup>1</sup> On numerous occasions, poets and literary critics pointed out that, not only forms, but also certain meters are more fit than others to the rhythms of modern life. This observation is related to several others offered by poets about the suitability of different meters for different poetic genres (e.g. elegy, panegyrics, lampoon etc.)

rhythm. Traditional poets point to their inability, indeed refusal, to write about a subject such as land confiscation, in prose. Other poets point to their inability or refusal to write about private torments or their disillusionments with state and society in the lyrical form, a practice which they associate with powers they want to contest. The difference between poets who continue to compose in the lyrical and those who have adopted more modern forms (“free” verse and prose poem) is not simply a difference in “artistic genres,” or in poetic “devices.” The very relations poets have with those “devices” or “artistic genres” are part of their attempts to work out their relationships with the realities of tradition and modernity in an Arab present of occupation and cooption, colonialism and neo-colonialism. While those who were perceived to be “traditional” poets continue to work with (others will say, “stay stuck in”) the lyrical form and to write about “traditional” subjects (e.g., martyrdom, homeland, collective national bravado, and honor), those perceived to be “modern” poets resort to “free” verse, and more recently, to the prose poem, and they write about “modern” themes (e.g., personal dreams and nightmares, mysticism, carnal desires, and obscure anxieties).

Of the three cohorts of poets presented in this study, the cohort of the classical form of *al-'amoudi*, naturally remains the most ardent supporter of poetic meter and rhyme. In committing their verses to a single meter and rhyme they measure sounds with striking rigor and precision. The significance of sound, and therefore the discipline of poetic meter are unmatched in comparison with the more modern forms. *Al-'amoudi* poets compose primarily for audiences (fancied or real) who will *hear* their verse.

Accountability to a public (local Arab, Palestinian, or Muslim), clarity of language, and

the notion of poetic production as direct political action are most notable in this form. However, to simply see the *al-'amoudi* poets of this form as “traditional,” as they are often depicted in polemical exchanges within the literary field, would be a hasty conclusion. Many of these poets have relied on ideologies that are thoroughly modern, such as socialist realism, Islamic revival, and Arab nationalism. Both modernity and tradition find their way to into the contemporary *al-'amoudi* literary production, as they do in the production of seemingly “more modern” poets. Finally, young *al-'amoudi* poets who entered the poetic scene only in the last two decades, present their persistence with metrical form as an act of utmost rebellion in a literary field dominated by prose.

The second of “free” verse (*taf'ieela*) poets does not entirely abandon metrical discipline. These poets are “free” to omit or employ the rhyme and to place different numbers of “feet” in different verse lines, as they continue to compose metrically. More concerned with image than sound, their poems, on the whole are less sonorous and more mythically loaded. “Free” verse poets compose for an audience who *reads* their works. The notion of an audience retains a positive value to them even as they also begin to fear that an audience would compromise the “artistic” quality of their work. As they rose to dominance in the 1950s and 1960s, with great hopes in socialist and national liberation movements, poets who championed “free” verse, insist that modernity should find its way, not only in the themes and diction of poetry, but also in arrangements of its words.

In their rebellion against the old poetic architecture, and against a reclusive and dominant Romantic trend in Arabic poetry that developed between the European world wars, “free”

verse poets were expressing their rebellion against Arab traditions, within and outside poetry, especially after the fall of Palestine in 1948. The almost sacral and historically hegemonic status of poetic meter seemed no longer sustainable when other foundational social practices were collapsing, and new ones coming into being. This cohort came of age during the peak of Arab nationalism, secularism and socialism, and during the collapse of several monarchial and colonial regimes. What sets it apart from the cohort of al-‘amoudi poets is its attempt to redefine the aesthetics of sound, and consequently the politics of poetic engagement in society. Prior to its comprising political action, verse begins to emerge primarily as “artistic” conduct. This sense of poetry being primarily an “art” and “creative” action would only sharpen among the prose poets who work with the view that real, necessary, and more radical social change begins *in* language, not in say, mass rallies and orations.

The third cohort of prose poets views the rebellion of the “free” verse movement as incomplete and totally abandons poetic meter and rhyme in producing their prose poetry (*qaṣīdat an-nathr*). Apparently, on the scene with the first half of the Twentieth Century, this form did not become widespread in the Arabic poetic scene until after the occupation of Palestine was completed in 1967, and the withering of Arab nationalism began. Among Palestinian poets, the prose poem began to dominate only after the 1982 exodus from Lebanon, and especially in the 1990s, after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority under the Oslo accords. For many poets at that point, it became quite evident that the generally optimistic poetry of “free” verse is unsuitable to a world appearing far more complex than it had appeared in socialist and nationalist ideologies.

For them, the complexity of the world demands a complexity in their poetry. Although prose poems are generally shorter, and lexically present easier diction, the connections between its words and logic of word combination are far less accessible. While the poetic effect of the traditional lyrical form is that of a “song,” and the more modern form of “free” verse that of a “painting,” the primary poetic effect of the prosaic form is that of a “dream.” Indeed, prose poets increasingly take “dreaming” (and often times “praying”) as indistinguishable from the act of poetic composition – for them an act of resistance against a world that diminishes the place of the word and poetry in society.

The quintessential audience for prose poets is comprised of readers, not listeners; those readers are in fact meant to be, paradoxically, very few and physically anywhere, across continents and oceans, speaking any language. As the poets of prose generate a relationship with their audience invoking notions of specialization, universalism, and globalization, the very notion of audience becomes problematic in new ways. Some poets now seek to dispose of the word “audience” because it connotes listening; they are searching for readers, the say.

Readers also point to an estrangement from what they consider “modern” poetry. In the reader-response section of Chapter Two, respondents commonly identified the traditionally lyrical *Morning Sun* as “popular” or “populist” – some even questioned its suitability for this age. Yet even as respondents identified the prose poem *The Rhinoceros* as “modern” and “allusive,” they also regarded it “for specialists.” Moreover, although the author of the prose poem *The Rhinoceros* did not attribute any immediate political

relevance to his poem, his readers clearly read politics into it. Contradictory and unintended readings of this prose poem (not found in the more traditional forms) point to not only the inseparability of form and content, but also to the inseparability of sound structure in verse from political engagement in society.

Many prose poets insist that their work is thoroughly political, but unlike traditional forms, their verse requires mediators. Unlike the lyrical poets, they must speak about unfamiliar things. Their form cannot be readily available for mass reception. Their act of expelling meter is part of a larger endeavor to articulate new roles for poetry and new ways of saying and doing things in society. The task of their literary production is no longer to enchant the masses, but to save a few souls, who could then save many more. They want to inscribe the illogic of sociopolitical reality into their very verse, in order to shock numbed minds and dried up hearts—numbed and dried up by regimes who speak of order and harmony. In their undisciplined and deregulated poems, they identify a rebellion against pretenses of harmony and order in the service of existing regimes, which barely hide the deep horror they see underneath. Their act of discarding meter is an act of resistance against and freedom from dominating forces in society.

To argue that modernizing verse brought disappearance of discipline is to raise questions about the kinds of order, freedom, regulation and discipline that modernity installs and removes. I did not ask whether modernity brought order or disorder. Nor was I interested in advancing an argument about the existence of a separate “poetic” or “alternative” Arab modernity, as anthropologists studying modernity in non-Western settings might expect.

If modernity has ordered and disciplined the subjects of the secular, free market nation-states in schools, armies, prisons and hospitals, this study has aimed to show that the poetry of that very modernity forsakes discipline, regulation, and order.

Poets who work with different poetic forms also deploy different notions of freedom. The traditional poet works with an illiberal notion of freedom, which means the mastery and internalization of restrictions through metrical discipline, to the extent that they cease to be restrictions. The modernizing poet, however, works with a liberal notion of freedom, involving the rejection of “external” restrictions (external to the “self”), of which poetic meter is an instance. The ideologies and strategies of self that each side puts forth could not be detached from wider discourses of morality and politics in society. As I aimed to demonstrate throughout this study, the rejection or acceptance of poetic meter (and associated techniques) always turns out to be a rejection or acceptance of versions of moral and political formations in society. Defenders of meter see “chaos” in the present of Arabic poetry, and by extension society; while its critics welcome the discarding of meter due to the “multiplicity, “tolerance,” and “experimentation” they see as so sorely needed in Arabic poetry and Arab-Muslim society.

In my drive to tell primarily the story of a discipline’s disappearance, I was little able to dwell on one of its central ambiguities -- the extent to which the abandonment of metrical compositions is an act of capitulation to or rebellion against the modern condition. On the one hand, modernizing poets infuse their craft with modern, individualist, indeed, secular ideologies. On the other hand, poets desire to produce forms that deviate from ever-

present instantiations of order, symmetry, and regulation, outside as well as inside poetry. Recall in Chapter Two, how Nazek al-Mala'ika admitted, as a leading "free" verse poet, her resentment of symmetrical architecture in Baghdad. The question remains as to how much exiling traditional meter in poetry involves submitting to or rebelling against the modern present. How rebellious is the rebellion of the contemporary Arab poets against the modern present if the peculiarly modern liberal and progressivist conceptions of time and self dominate them and their literary production?

It is notable poets have an ambiguous relation with the modern of secularism. I found that secular visions informing ways in which Arab poets modernize their verses. For example, Helmi Salim, a leading prose poet, said of the ideology of prose poetry: "The poetic text is no longer sacred... It seeks to break the mysterious relation between language and religion... It seeks to show that language is a social phenomenon, and not heavenly." Ambiguities of secularism in modern Arabic verse can be fruitfully examined in a poet's relation to audience. Modernizing poets want to speak a language from their modern reality, not the reality of their desert-inhabiting ancestors, who bestowed a sacred standing on poets; they want to be ordinary, prosaic people. In the words of Salim again: "This group sees the poet as an ordinary person. He is neither the prophet nor the hero, nor the sage. He is an ordinary person who walks down in the market. The authors of this poetry focus on reality." However, even as they seek to be ordinary persons who talk about "reality," they relate to public in ways that involve attitudes of fear, aloofness, alienation, disinterest and mistrust.

Poets, such as Salim, are not simply estranged from their people, as poets have been since Sophocles. Rather, their estrangement seems to be particularly modern, thriving on the privatization, individualization, and specialization (in a Weberian, almost bureaucratic sense) of their craft. It involves the valorization of writing, writing for its own sake, and writing for a select group of readers, (as opposed to large public of listeners). For example, recall the words of Maysoon Saqr, who followed Salim with admiration. While echoing the secular doctrine that prescribes separating politics and religion, she declares:

Now politics is in one place, the masses in another, and the poet, yet in another little normal place. The role of the poet diminished because the poet became an ordinary person... Now the poet's role is the poet's writing. This made him more specialized, deeper in writing. What is the shame of having a role in writing only?

To have “a role in writing only” precisely illuminates the paradox of a poetic movement that wants to render poets into “ordinary” people, while relegating writing (and art) to a realm of “extraordinary” existence distinctively separate from or “above” the realms of politics and morality. This ambiguity about the poet’s relationship with audience is related to a poet’s approach to language. While poets want to write a language of daily life, and of this modern reality, they are increasingly evoking otherworldly, and fantastic diction.<sup>2</sup> Modernizing poets, especially the prose poets among them, express their desire to secularize Arab society. They want a worldly authority and reasoning. Paradoxically, however, their poems replete as they are with “signs” to gods, goddesses, temples, prayers, rites, and rituals, are resoundingly eschatological. It is precisely here that I locate a main contribution of this study as it sheds light on the problematic relation between “the religious” and “the secular.” The poetic production of different forms defy the facile relegation of “the religious” to the “traditional” and “the secular” to “the

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<sup>2</sup> Recall how in *The Rhinoceros*, the prose poem sampled in this study, God was declared the only target of that animal’s horn. English translation is available in Appendix F.

modern.” As became apparent in this study there, is an ambiguity in the working of secularism. While poets adhering to the traditional lyrical form were able to work with modern and secularist ideologies such as socialist realism, prose poets and advocates of secularism in Arab society were keenly interested in evoking the mythical and eschatological in their verse. To formulate this ambiguity as a question: What constitutes the secular in a verse whose secular authors increasingly invoke “religious” diction? Are the authors of those “religiously” worded poems following or fleeing “secularism”? Raising those questions is part of this study’s contribution towards a more sensitive understanding of secularism. Through examining secularism’s effects in a seemingly literary process, this study aimed to contribute to an understanding of secularism, whereby it does not stand in contrast to religion.

In addition to the difficulty I faced in identifying the boundaries between the secular and the religious, I found it challenging to maintain a clearly marked boundary between what is considered poetic and that which appears the poetic realm. The story of modernizing Arabic, Palestinian poetry also includes changes in choices of themes, words, and language. Poets once threatened those in authority. Yet in today’s age of “free speech,” the words of poets hardly scare anyone, except for, sometimes, their own authors. While poets who recited at poetry festivals under a newly installed Israeli military rule during the 1950s and 1960s were threatened and intimidated by a variety of means, the poets at the “Second Palestinian Poetry Festival” of Tamrah in 2001, only a few days before the United States declared its war on “terrorism,” were ignored, at least by the pedestrian public. Commenting on the impotence of poetic words today, the retired poet Hanna

Ibrahim notes: "Everything is torn. Israel steps on them all. On the contrary they say 'Let them talk. Let them vent their anger in words and poems. Let them scream until they have a headache and go to sleep.'" But if poets are indeed sleeping, what kind of sleep is it?

If it were once true that human life was lived as the enactment of a narrative, that is, prior to the birth of the great modern artifice called novels, then by extension one could imagine that life in the age of lyrical poetry was in a certain sense also an enacted poem. To imagine life as an enacted poem is especially tempting where verse, not prose, is *the* repository of a people's history and tradition, as it has been for the Arabs, who took verse to be their *diwan* (repository). Today, however, life for poets is inside the poem. Life is possible because and for the sake of the poem, the dream. The poem is an increasingly distinctive form of "art." The poets live their dreams or nightmares within poems, within what I call "pockets of enchantment." Recall an-Nu'aymi's *Horror* in which she declares: "At night... I hang myself in the garden... On the Tree of Words."<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, at least in Israel/Palestine, someone else is living the dream; there, someone other than a poet is living life as if it were a poem – the martyr. In a world of disenchantment, poets are going to sleep and conjuring their prayers, dreams and nightmares. The question remains, is it the sleep of those fatigued after defeat or those sleeping in preparation for a new cause?

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<sup>3</sup> English translation is available in Appendix I.

## Appendix A

Morning Sun by  
'Abdul Qadir al-'Azzah

# شمس الصباح

نَهَارٌ جَدِيدٌ شَهِيدٌ جَدِيدٌ  
وَفِي كُلِّ مَطْلَعِ شَمْسٍ شَهِيدٌ  
وَجَرَحٌ جَدِيدٌ وَهَدْمٌ بِيوتِ  
وَتَرْفٌ بِمَاءٍ وَقَصْفٌ رَعُودٌ  
اِذَا كَانَ هَذَا هُوَ الْمَسْتَطَاعُ  
أَنْبِكِي عَلَيْهِ بِدَمْعِ الْقَصِيدِ ؟  
فَمَوْجٌ شَدِيدٌ وَخَضَمٌ عَنِيدٌ  
جَنُودٌ جَنُودٌ وَجَيْشٌ حُشُودٌ  
وَلَيْسَ لَنَا مِنْ سِلَاحٍ سِوَى  
تَضَامِنِنَا وَالْعَطَاءِ الْأَكِيدِ  
سَنَصْمَدُ رَغْمَ اخْتِلَافِ الدُّعَاةِ  
لَأَنَّ الْبِقَاءَ أَخٌ لِلصُّمُودِ  
وَشَعْبٌ تَأَلَّفَ فِي حُبِّهِ  
يَطُولُ السَّمَاءَ بِعِزْمٍ جَدِيدِ

زنادقة قد كفرنا بهم  
 وألحد ربي بهم والشهود  
 هو الشعب يصنع للمعجزات  
 خبير خبير بكسر القيود  
 ونفض غبار الردى والأسى  
 ولفظ الجمود وطرد الشرود  
 وطمس الحقوق وفضح العقوق  
 وكشف الخداع وزيف الوعود  
 أب للحقيقة لا تنطلي...  
 عليه طلاس كل شريد  
 فمن يطمس الشمس بالكفا  
 والنور يسطع رغم الحسود...؟  
 على الدهر يا من وعيت الدروس  
 فلسطين مقبرة ولحود.

١٩٨٩/٢/٢٤

وقد آمن الطفل في حقه  
 وأن العطاء أب للوليد  
 ومزقت البنت أم تارها  
 وخفت تصب دماء الوريد  
 تقدمه للثرى سقية  
 وتدخل أبواب مجد الخلود  
 لأجل وليد صغير جديد  
 سيبسم عما قريب سعيد  
 ونجم جديد وشمس وعيد  
 لنا كل يوم وخفق بنود  
 وفي كل ليل هوى كوكب  
 يطل على الكون هذا الوليد  
 وألت سهام على نفسها  
 ستنجب في كل يوم شهيد (١)  
 عبيد الدراهم في عرشهم  
 كأنقاصهم يشبهون القروء

(١) سهام المرأة الفلسطينية

## Appendix B

### Translation of *Morning Sun*

A new morning, a new martyr  
    And with each sunrise a martyr  
A new wound, and homes destroyed  
    With bleeding and thunderous shelling  
If this is the present  
    Do we weep with the tears of a poem?  
Fierce waves and stubborn foes  
    Soldiers, soldiers and massive armies  
We have no weapon but our  
    Solidarity and unhesitant giving  
We shall persist in spite of different voices  
    As survival is the synonym of persistence  
A people bonded by love  
    Reaches the skies with iron will  
The child believed in his right  
    In that giving is the source of begetting  
The girl has torn her veils  
    And hurried to pour the blood of veins  
A gift for the soil to drink  
    She will enter through the gates of glory and eternity  
For the sake of a little new born one  
    Soon to be smiling happily  
Each day we have a new star, a sun  
    a festivity, and flags fluttering  
Each night a planet falls  
    A newborn comes to this world  
*Siham* committed herself<sup>1</sup>  
    To birth a martyr everyday  
The slaves of drachmas in their thrones  
    resemble monkeys in their cages  
Disbelievers in whom we do not believe  
    God disbelieves them and witnesses do too  
This is the people that makes miracles  
    An expert, real expert in braking chains  
In brushing off the dust of death and pains.  
    In expelling stillness and loss  
In how rights are effaced and how disloyalties can be exposed  
    In revealing deception and fake promises  
This people is a possessor of ineradicable truth

---

<sup>1</sup> A proper name standing here for the Palestinian woman.

By the talismans of those astray  
For who can expunge the sun with a palm  
Light is glaring in spite of the envious  
O you who have learned  
Forever, Palestine is the graveyard

Note: Translated by Khaled Furani from *Shumus As-Sabah wal Wudd al-Qadim*  
(Morning Suns and Ancient Love) by 'Abdul Qadir al-'Azzah. Union of Palestinian  
Writers, Jerusalem, 1989.

## Appendix C

*We Have in this Galilee*

By

Hussein Muhanna

لنا فوق هذا الجليلِ  
ترابٌ جليلٌ  
عليه نُقيمُ  
ومنه نبتنا كما ينبتُ العُشبُ  
والأفحوانُ  
وبين يديه  
تركنا طفولتنا  
والشبابَ  
لنكبرَ فيه  
ويكبرَ فينا  
ونحيا ..  
وبين انتصارِ الحياةِ عليه  
وبين انتظارِ الوداعِ الأخيرِ  
سككنا توارينخَ ميلادنا فضةً  
وانظرنا  
تمرُّ لقاتلُ فوقَ مواسمِ أفراحننا  
وتأكلُ قمحَ بيادرنا  
ثمَّ تمضي ...



ونبقى هنا - كما لا يحب الغزاة -

وكم من كواسر جاهدت إلينا

لثقلنا منا مواهبنا،

والكلام الجميل

وتقطعت عن دورنا شيرنا،

والهديل

وتحمل عنا

مواويل عشاقنا

ثم قمضي . . .

ونبقى هنا !!

على هذه الأرض نبتي

- كما لا يحب الغزاة -

وترعى على مهل متجدد أجدادنا

والكروم التي غرسوها . . . لتأكل . . .

طوبى لمن غرسوا فأكلنا

وطوبى لمن سوف يقرس،

كي يستحق الحياة على هذه الأرض،

طوبى لمن قال: أحي . . . !!

وقال:

أحب الحياة هنا

فوق هذا الجليل

وإن ضيقنا علينا

وإن ضيقها

وقال:

إذا مت

فكخصني التبرم

ويلق عليّ القرنفل

شيئا يسيراً من العطر

والأرجوان الجليلي،

أني وعدت الجليل

بأننا على العهد نبقى -

حياً بأبواب يدبهم الحبيب

ونبقى

لنبت فلأ ودللي

وتسبحاً على شاعرات القبور

تدلي

## Appendix D

### Translation of *We have in this Galilee*

We have on this Galilee  
Noble soil  
On it we live  
And in it we grow as grass does  
As daisies do  
In its hands  
We left our childhood  
For us to grow in it  
And it in us  
And so we live...  
Between the triumph of life over it  
And between awaiting the final adieu  
We minted our birth dates into silver  
And we waited  
For the storks to pass over our seasons of mirth  
To eat the wheat at our threshing courts  
And then to move on  
We shall remain here --as conquerors do not like  
For how many flying accipitrals came unto us  
To abduct our dates  
Our beautiful speech  
To pluck poetry and cooing off our abodes  
To carry in our stead the ballads of love  
But then they move on...  
And we remain!!  
Here on this land, to build  
-- As conquerors do not like --  
To graze with no haste  
The glory of our ancestors  
The orchards they planted... to eat...  
Blessed be those who planted for we eat  
Blessed be those who will plant  
Deserving therefore life on this earth  
Blessed be who said: I live... !!  
And said:  
I love life here  
On this Galilee  
If they tightened it on us  
If they tightened her  
And then said:  
If I die

Let clouds embrace me  
Let jasmine throw some of its scent,  
Some Galilean purple  
On me  
I promised the Galilee  
That we are keeping the covenant  
A lover melting in the warmth of a lover  
And then vanishes  
Growing into jasmine and oleanders  
Dangling like a scarf on tombstones

Note: Translated by Khaled Furani from *Ana Huwa ash-Shahid (It is I Who is the Witness)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, by Hussein Muhanna, Mu'assasat al-Aswar, Acre, 2001.

## Appendix E

*The Rhinoceros*  
By Zakariyya Muhammad

### وهيذ القرن

وحيد القرن يجز قرب النهر:

الماء أسود

والعين ضيقة

والخراتيت تسبح في المجرى

وحيد القرن في الغابة المحرمة:

حمار الوحش يلعب - بلونين اثنين - بالكون كله

وهو يجسر ويفكر بقرنه الوحيد:

أي شيء سأنطح بهذه اللعنة على جبهتي؟

الأشجار متحجرة

والعينان ضيقتان

### والريخُ عجيب

لو كان ثوراً لنطح الألوآن

لو كان نيساً لنطح الغنم

ولو كان حصاناً لنطح الرمح

أي شيء سأنطح بهذا القرن؟

أي شيء سأضرب؟

الله وحده يصلح هدفاً

لقرن الكركدن الوحيد

1992

85

84

## Appendix F

### Translation of *The Rhinoceros*

The rhino is ruminating near the river:  
The water is black  
And the eye is narrow  
The rhinos are swimming in the stream

The rhino is in the petrified forest:  
The zebra is playing – in two colors – with the entire universe  
While he is ruminating and contemplating his lone horn:  
What shall I butt with this curse on my forehead?  
The trees are petrified  
The eyes are narrow  
And the wind is dough

If he were a bull, he would butt the colors  
If he were a billy goat he would butt the clouds  
And if he were a horse, he would butt the spear

What thing shall I butt with this horn?  
What thing shall I hit?  
God alone is a fitting goal  
For the rhino's lone horn

Note: Translated by Khaled Furani from *Aj-Jawadu Yajtazu Eskadar (The Horse Is Passing Eskadar)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, by Zakariyya Muhammad, The Palestinian National Authority, Ministry of Culture, Ramallah, 1997.

## Appendix G

### Translation of Al-Khansa'a's ode, *Mountain with Fire on Its Peak*<sup>2</sup>

A mote in your eye or soreness in the eye  
Or dripping when the camp emptied of its folk

As if my eye when it thought of his memory  
Was a copious stream pouring down the cheeks

Those tears wept for Sakhr and mourned  
And he is covered under ground

Khunas wept and ceased not while she lived  
Her moans were for him and she was feeble

Khunas wept for Sakhr and she was right  
For Time deceived her, Time is a deceiver

A death with a lesson is an inevitability  
Time's conduct is change and mutability

Abu 'Amr was the one among you who led you  
A fine leader, a helper to those who call

Solid in nature and a donor when others abstain  
In wars bold of chest, cracker of necks

O Sakhr porter of water, people who come  
To drink before you, no flaws in your water

The tiger went to the fierce wars  
Two weapons were his, fangs and claws

A bereft she-camel is circling her little one  
Two yearnings she has, revealing and hiding

---

<sup>2</sup> The translation is primarily Wormhoudt's (1973). Here I have only affected minor changes so that the English text is closer to the Arabic. I did so upon consulting commentaries on the *diwan of al-Khansa* (Diwan al-Khansa'a, 1986, introduction and commentary by Ismai'l al-Yusif. Damascus: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi; and *Sharh Diwan al-Khansa* by Abu al-'Abbas Tha'alab, introduction and commentary by Faiz Ahmad, Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi. Beirut, 1993).

She grazes and grazes until she  
Remembers hers and starts longing as she comes and goes

She fattens no more on the of land of Spring rain  
Even when she grazes she groans and groans more

For a day more sad than I is the day Sakhr  
Parted from me, and Time is sweet and bitter

## Appendix H

Translation of Fadwa Tuqan's poem in "free" verse (*taf'ieela*): *Hamza*

Hamza

(1)

Hamza was  
Like others from my town  
A good one eating his bread  
From laboring hands, as do my good simple people

\* \* \*

One day we met  
While I was battered and lost from the defeat.  
He said to me:  
Persist, do not weaken O my cousin  
This land is harvested –  
By the fire of the crime  
Shrinking today in sadness and silence  
This is a land with a betrayed heart  
That lives and dies not

This land is a woman.  
With grooves and wombs  
The secret of fertility is one  
The power of the secret that  
Sprouts palm trees –  
And shibboleths,  
Sprouts also a people who fight

\*\*\*\*

Note: Translated by Khaled Furani from *Diwan Fadwa Tuqan (Collected works of Fadwa Tuqan)* by Fadwa Tuqan, Dar al-'Awdah, Beirut, 1978.

## Appendix I

Translation of Salwa an-Nu'aymi's prose poem, *Horror*

At night

When my ghosts come out of me,

Like a haunted house,

I hang myself in the garden,

On the Tree of Words.

Note: Translated by Khaled Furani from *Dhaba Al-Lladhina Uhibbuhum (Gone Are the Ones I Love)*, by Salwa an-Nu'aymi, Dar Sharqiyat, Cairo, 1999.

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