

The Shape-Shifting Margin: Patterns of Change in Arabic Modernism Past Beirut

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ABSTRACT: This essay presents an initial foray into the rich field of modern Arabic poetry after the canonization phase of modernism in midcentury Beirut. Though by no means offering an exhaustive account, the chosen case studies are claimed to cover major orientations in forms of second-wave modernism that swept across poetic writing in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As Beirut became the prestigious metropolitan center for modernist poetics, shifts of sensibility are viewed in relation to its dominant modes and in terms of an altered imagining of the center-periphery duality. I follow two trajectories: a mode of exile, for which the Iraqi poet Sargon Boulus is representative, and a mode of domestic development. For the latter, I look to the cultural fringes of the Arab world—the Gulf and the Maghrib—to analyze how the Beirut paradigm moves into new territories of culture, society, and politics. Even within a monolingual transregional literature, I argue, setting a dialectic in motion with a centralized tradition generates in each reiteration unique patterns of continuity and change. Ideological faults are redressed and, by consciously forming fissures, Arab peripheries propose a reintegration of poetic modernity into a more historically grounded, inclusive, and synchronized project.

INTRODUCTION

VIGOROUSLY COMBATIVE AT THE TURN OF THE 1960s, modernist culture in Beirut was nonetheless situated on the margin of both Western culture and the Arab cultural field. Despite its far-flown ambitions, modernism and the values it represented never reached the center of collective consciousness in terms of readership and impact on nonliterary spheres. And yet in longer historical perspective this margin can be seen as constitutive in unforeseen

ways. Even after the decline of Beirut's historical role, modernisms in various shapes and forms continued to proliferate in Arabic poetry, doing so in a much more thoroughly globalized cultural environment from the mid-1970s onward. The immense variety of transformations in relation to the Beirut model defies stable notions of a literary core. Its full scope is thus well beyond the range of this essay. I will highlight only major directions of change.

My premise is that the relativity of center-periphery dualisms becomes apparent when intellectual centers are enshrined in transregional national literatures like Arabic and begin radiating outward to regional perimeters. The centrifugal motion of Arab modernism beyond Beirut will be traced, first, in the bumpy fates of errant individuals who were subject to vagaries of displacement, migration, experiential contraction and expansion. Second, it will be situated in territorial literary fields on the fringes of Arab cultural centers, where the terms by which poetry comes unshackled from politics are negotiated anew with every historical turn. Emerging from the folds of the antinational modernism in Beirut, some forms of poetic renewal entailed a deterritorialization of *ḥadātha* (meaning both “modernity” and “modernism”) lodged in the figurative suitcases of dislodged Arab writers. Others sprang from reterritorializing *ḥadātha* in new centers of cultural struggle particular to regional characters and nation-states.

These then are the suggested arcs: a trajectory of exile and a trajectory of domestic development. At its finest, the émigré mode escapes both the political pressures to which stay-home authors are subjected and the subtler traps of self-apotheosis in abstracted detachment. Exilic patterns of reading, writing, and imagining tend to elude the familiar logic of unequal cultural capital yet should not be idealized for that. The nonnational continuation of modernism produced at least one poet—the Iraqi Sargon Boulus (Sarkūn Būluş in proper MSA transliteration; 1944–2007)—whose work deserves to be read beyond the confining rubrics of uppercase Modernism. Boulus's vagrant mutability should be read alongside an unclassifiable group of twentieth-century poets whose parameters of experience are elastic enough so as not to a priori exclude any form of historical life.

Responses rooted in state systems, in turn, seem at first enhanced by the solidification of domestic structures and try riding the crest of an institution-building wave. Yet in time, cultural agents, to their great disappointment, come to face diverse forms of what the Moroccan poet Mohammed Bennis¹ has called “crippled modernity.”² This impasse then calls for localized forms of self-examination and literary reconfiguration. I examine two cases from the edges of the Arab world's cultural periphery—the Gulf and the Maghrib—that embody this process of reckoning. The reckoning involves increasing awareness of the problems unique to each state's cultural arena in terms of its volume and quality of literary production, its position with respect to Euro-American culture, and its reliance on state institutions. It also gives rise to a constructive peripheral consciousness. To establish a modicum of intellectual freedom, writers seek to absorb, transform, or actively resist trends of Arabic writing coming from the literary metropolises in Cairo (for novelistic writing) and Beirut (for poetry). Each peripheral cultural field, in addition to developing its modes of global consciousness, also becomes a singular kaleidoscope of transnational Arabness.

¹ This form of the poet's personal name, conforming to dialect pronunciation, is more commonly found in English and French than the standard MSA transliteration—Muḥammad Bannīs—which is applicable for academic reference and searches in library catalogs.

² Muḥammad Bannīs, *Al-ḥadātha al-ma'ṭūba* [Crippled modernity] (Casablanca: Dār Tūbqāl, 2004).

The dialectic dynamics engendering this plurality is best captured by what Michael Walzer, postulating the universal dimension of nationalism, has loosely termed a reiterative process: an unending attempt at negotiating and renegotiating claims to universalism with specific shapes of cultural and experiential difference.³ That this pattern of recurrence-in-difference is also the major shape taken by modern nationalisms should not come as a surprise. Poetry is, as T. S. Eliot has argued, the most stubbornly national art, and so it is in its insistent internationalism as well.⁴ Relying on a similar model of repeated adaptations, Charles Taylor claims that “modern nationalist politics is a species of identity politics; indeed, it is the original species: national struggles are the site from which the model comes to be applied to feminism, to the struggle of cultural minorities”⁵—and to the struggle of instituting a *champ littéraire*, one might add. In the preface to his midcentury multilingual anthology *Museum of Modern Poetry*, the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger advocates, in the style of an impassioned manifesto, for a utopian idea of poetry’s world language as an interminable process or a centerless plurality:

The literary capital of the world could as well be Dublin as Alexandria; it is situated in Svendborg or Meudon, in Rutherford or Merano. An island off the Pacific coast of South America, a dacha in the Russian forest, a log cabin beside a Canadian lake are no less centrally situated than are the improbable London, Paris, or Lisbon dwellings to which writers like Eliot, Beckett or Pessoa have withdrawn. The arrogance of capitals has vanished along with the pejorative sense of the word “provinces.” Its opposite is no longer Paris but universality, its reverse and complement. The special quality, the dignity, of what is provincial is released from its reactionary inhibitions, from the pigheaded narrowness of the local museum, and assumes its rights; far from disappearing in the universality of a world language of poetry, it constitutes its vitality, just as the written language feeds off the spoken word of dialect. For the lingua franca of modern poetry is not to be thought of as vapid monotony, as a lyrical Esperanto. It speaks in many tongues. It does not mean standardization, or the lowest common denominator, but the reverse. It frees poetry from the narrowness inherent in all national literatures, but not in order to tear it from its provincial soil and plant it in the abstract. It cuts right across the old languages. As a concept it is valid in the same way as the language of the Bible, or technical language, is valid. It differs from this last because it does more than serve a useful purpose, because it not only owes its existence to the national literatures but revivifies them and unobtrusively changes them. Unlike the language of the Bible . . . it expounds no doctrine, except perhaps that it is no longer possible for any nation to sever its destiny from that of others.⁶

Even if there obtains an *Ungleichzeitigkeit* (nonsimultaneity) in the material conditions that allow this language to flourish, the *omphalos* of poetry can potentially be placed anywhere. What

³ Michael Walzer, “Nation and Universe,” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values XI* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 507–56. For a similar argument advanced for literary studies and employing the universal versus particular dialectic on Marxist grounds, see Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002), 182–83.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, “The Social Function of Poetry,” in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 8.

⁵ Charles Taylor, “Nationalism and Modernity,” in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 97.

⁶ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “The World Language of Modern Poetry,” in *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics, and the Media* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 54. For the German original, see Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Museum der modernen Poesie* [Museum of modern poetry] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1960), 8–19.

unites modern poetry as a lingua franca, in this vision, is its position, regardless of geopolitics, as a *Grenzfall*, a borderline case both too marginal to be reckoned with and, because of this marginality, relatively free of the capitalist utilitarian logic of profit or perish.⁷ Whether sidelined by postcolonial politics, by more affluent literary means, or by the rich entertainment industry, modern poetry is perennially a stranger in its own land. To be a modern poet is by default a peripheral existence.

The imperative of undercutting stale modes of language—in political rhetoric, religious discourse, and conservative literary stylistics—remained paramount in Arab life long after the decline of Beirut. As the dust settled after the 1967 military defeat to Israel—widely regarded as indicative of the systemic failure of Arab liberationist modernity—the realization sunk in that the Pan-Arab project had ended its noble mission. Broadly conceived in opposition to Pan-Arabism but on par with its grand scale, poetic *ḥadātha* had to change its coordinates accordingly.

BEIRUT AS MODERNISM'S DISTRIBUTION STATION

The rise of Arabic modernism as a poetic corpus and an intellectual stance in midcentury Beirut has been meticulously analyzed in Robyn Creswell's *City of Beginnings* (2018), which offers a thick account of this modernism in its historical conjuncture. From 1955 until the beginning of the civil war (1975), Beirut lived in the collective imagination as a cosmopolitan crossroads, a mediator between East and West, and a gathering place sheltering disaffected Arab intellectuals from nationalist fires and repressive state rule.⁸ The platform responsible for turning this cultural *mélange* into a node on the international map of modernism was the poetry magazine *Shi'r* (Poetry, named after its American precursor) run by the Syro-Lebanese poets Adūnīs (1930–) and Yūsuf al-Khāl (1917–87). *Shi'r* effectively set the terms for poetic modernity as qualified by the adjectival force of “Arab” or “Arabic” with the paradox that this Arab-specific iteration of modernism was fashioned in negation of a more popular cast of modern Pan-Arab nationalism.

In analogous ways to other peripheral modernisms, *Shi'r* refused to celebrate particularism and poeticize “local color.”⁹ It turned away from sanctified norms in Arabic poetry and strove to synchronize it with an international standard of lyric finesse.¹⁰ This vision was forged by a creative rewriting of both the Arabic classical tradition and Euro-American poetics. Major figures of the Euro-American canon were carefully selected to suit a controversial liberalist agenda and remolded as radical, transhistorical individuals unburdened by collective attachments. The limits of poetry were redefined by a variety of translational strategies dubbed by Creswell as *naql* (transfer, *translatio*): “a historical act of preservation, displacement, and transformation, . . . anthologization, elegiac inheritance, and genre appropriation as well as translations in the everyday sense of the word in English.”¹¹ Methods of literal translation and intense

⁷ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Meldungen vom lyrischen Betrieb: Drei Metaphrasen” [Notes from the business of lyricism: Three metaphrases], in *Zickzack: Aufsätze* [Zigzag: Essays] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 182–85.

⁸ Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 21–24.

⁹ For interesting parallels, see J. L. Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. D. A. Yates and J. E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962), 171–78; Y. H. Brenner, “Ha-zhaner ha-Erets Yisra’eli ve-’avizarehu” [The Land of Israel genre and its accouterments] (1911), in *Project Ben-Yehuda*, accessed June 11, 2020, <https://benyehuda.org/read/854>.

¹⁰ The 1961 Rome Symposium, which centered on modern Arabic poetry, was a high point in negotiating between *Shi'r*'s internationalism and the core Western canon. See Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 32–51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

engagement with Western poetics gave rise to novel terms, genres, and modes of expression. An enduring stamp was put on the term *qaṣīdat al-nathr* (prose poem), which to this very day serves as (a heavily debated) common currency for free verse.

In its fervent internationalism, *Shi‘r* belonged to an international moment of late modernism globalized and formalized and often converging with midcentury Cold War liberalism.¹² Creswell notes that it is important not to confuse the behavior of this late modernism (and the liberal tradition with which it converged) in the metropolitan centers with its impact in the periphery. While in Europe and the United States modernism was gaining prestige as a classic and fattened with critical fodder, in the decolonized Arab world modernism went to work. It was weaponized in a cultural battle for artistic self-sufficiency and employed to construct a sphere of nonpartisan professionalism in a climate of unwavering demands for writers’ loyalty to national and ideological causes. “This helps explain,” writes Creswell, “why the tone of the Beirut modernists is so often embattled and even shrill” in comparison to the “polished certitude” of its counterparts in the West.¹³

Since in the decolonized world the major liberal values were on the margins of collective consciousness, the carriers of a liberal viewpoint—individualism, pluralism, disengaged impartiality—were radicalized and allegorized by poetic discourse to critique cultural conservatism. Though professedly apolitical, the *Shi‘r* movement was extremely partisan in its adherence to an aesthetic program to match their intellectual enterprise. In the periphery, there were much higher stakes for whether modernism would achieve historical continuity. “Peripheral” is therefore a misnomer: though the Arab modernists were somewhat provincially eager to receive recognition from their Western counterparts (and were, alas, disappointed),¹⁴ as per the familiar model of Pascale Casanova,¹⁵ the value of the modernist sensibility was ultimately tested not by admission into the pantheons in the center but by its ability to be particularized and energized in a new site of struggle.

TRAJECTORIES OF EXILE: AN IRAQI AT THE FOOT OF THE ACROPOLIS

Since a homegrown tradition was at their disposal, second-wave Arab modernists with no national base were partly relieved from the peripheral anxieties that conditioned the initial reception of the daunting names of Euro-American high modernism. They were free to practice selective and indirect patterns of engagement with the signature style of *Shi‘r* and its corpus of translations. The Jordanian poet Amjad Nāṣir (1955–2019), the Lebanese poet Wadī‘ Sa‘āda (1948–), and the Syrian poet Nūrī al-Jarrāḥ (1956–)—all peripatetic writers coming on the heels of the Beirut moment—were by the mid-1980s recognized as astute if low-key reformers of *qaṣīdat al-nathr* oriented toward a poetics of the small detail. Their canon of world poetry was formed by erratic patterns of autodidactic reading that led them off the high roads and into some side streets in global modernism. They especially took to the Greek poets Yannis Ritsos and Constantine Cavafy, both Arabized by the Iraqi émigré poet Sa‘dī Yūsuf (1934–), who worked

¹² The seminal work presenting this concept is Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), which speaks of a transnational “modernism of underdevelopment.” For a concise summary of what this moment entails in the Beirut conjuncture, see Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 6–8, 10.

¹³ Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 8.

¹⁴ See the outcomes of the Rome Symposium as described in *ibid.*, 45–51.

¹⁵ See the section entitled “Small Literatures” in Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 175–204.

from the English. Ritsos's singular combination of mystery-laden minimalism and hard-nosed Marxism was the great discovery of this generation for Arab poetics, an instrument for attuning the modernist sensibility to life in exile.¹⁶ However, this brand of consciously minor exilic poetry occasionally bore the marks of solitary individuals physically removed from Arabic-language communities and lacked the vigor of a human habitus.

Greece is a surprisingly central location for the post-*Shi' r* émigré poets. In Sargon Boulus's *Life near the Acropolis* (1988), Greece appears in its workaday existence as an offbeat porous country whose ancient luster has faded and given way to the modern plague of tourism. Like the Mediterranean Sea, which figures prominently in the book, Greece is an undefinable zone of passage between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Boulus occupies himself by walking through the streets of Athens and reliving his Iraqi past as involuntary memory activated in the embodied motion of his steps. The unvarnished portrait of Greece is a step toward regaining its lasting graces of water, light, street life, and human encounters. These are rediscovered as Boulus delves inward into his oceanic memory and fishes up poetic images laden with meaning: an Iraqi ex-prisoner as metonymic for the lostness of the 1960s, a colorful Kurdish country wedding, and a half-verse by the Abbasid poet Abū Tammām (796/807–50), enchanting in its indecision between striking beauty and moral depravity.¹⁷

In retrospect, Boulus appears to have become the major artistic compass for many of the displaced Arab poets who went beyond the content with which *Shi' r* imbued *ḥadātha*. He hailed from a family of Assyrian Christians who settled in Habbaniyya, a makeshift town in the dead center of modern Iraq set up near a Royal Air Force base to shelter Assyrian refugees. In his teens, he moved up north to the oil city of Kirkuk, where he joined a circle of up-and-coming Iraqi writers who voraciously fed on books that the British officers left behind in their hasty departure. His literary ambition took him in the 1960s to Baghdad, where he was mentored by the Palestinian émigré writer Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā (1920–94). Jabrā helped him get his first poems published in *Shi' r*. With a sponge-like absorptive capacity, Boulus wolfed down American Beat poetry. He dreamed that Arabic writing—whose standard literary usage he found too purist and divorced from sensuality—would one day be able to speak with the rawness and indelicacy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. The possibility of making this happen rested on a belief that Arabic is a master-absorber possessing trace elements from the rich variety of Near Eastern languages and cultures. About the effort to impurify Arabic, Boulus says: "I want to make the language, which for me is the Arabic language, carry everything. I'm putting things from Robert Lowell, from [Cesare] Pavese, from César Vallejo. For the first time I'm indicating that this Arabic language can take anything from the world. That is the point really, the rest is just details."¹⁸

Beirut was but a bridge for Boulus to cross over and leave behind. He traveled there to catch the tail end of the *Shi' r* years in the late 1960s and was soon after granted a visa to travel to the

¹⁶ On the "poetics of detail" promoted by this eclectic group and their indebtedness to versions of Ritsos, see Fakhri Šāliḥ, *Shi' riyat al-tafāṣīl: Āthār Ritsūs fi al-shi' r al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir* [The poetics of detail: Traces of Ritsos in contemporary Arabic poetry] (Beirut: Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1998), 101–24. Šāliḥ includes useful bibliography with the Arabic editions of the translations.

¹⁷ I will be referencing the 2008 edition published in Cologne. For the poems in question, see Sarkūn Būluṣ, *Al-ḥayāt qurba al-Akrūbūl* [Life near the Acropolis] (Cologne: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2008), 21–28, 34–38.

¹⁸ The quotation is taken from Boulus's interview with Margaret Obank in *Banipal* 1 (February 1998): 8–18. Biographical details can be found there. For a self-narration of key life milestones, see Sargon Boulus and Safeta Obhodjas, *Legenden und Staub* [Legends and dust] (Münster: Lit-Verlag, 2002).

United States in 1969. Thanks to assistance from the poet-artist Etel Adnan, he landed in San Francisco. Aside from rare journal appearances, his name nearly vanished from the Arab literary scene. He was, however, secretly hard at work: reading intensively, training his hand at wild rhapsodic poems in strange foreignized Arabic, and translating from world poetry via English. These experiments were done with no readership in mind yet eventually served as preparation for modeling a more personally accentuated, historically situated poetic experience.

The critical fact here is that his reemergence resulted from an accidental chain of events that took place in Athens, where he resided in the mid-1980s working for a translation institute. The Lebanese journalist Jād al-Ḥājj, Boulus's friend and coworker, noticed that Sargon was casually leaving scraps of poems scattered about in his room. al-Ḥājj even managed to rescue some pieces from trouser pockets on their way to the washing machine. He contacted a small Athens-based Arab publisher, and the ephemeral scraps became Sargon's first poetry collection, *Arrival at Where City*, published 1985.¹⁹

Arrival included a punchy political poem against tyranny ("Executioner") that went viral in Baghdad, along with a poem ("Baudelaire's Pains Have Arrived") that Boulus later celebrated for its strange tonal mischief.²⁰ Yet for the most part, the collection was overloaded with the uncommunicative flamboyance of his experimental American years. The great leap in sensibility came with the poems directly stemming from Boulus's Greek experience. In *Life near the Acropolis* (published in 1988 in Casablanca, a place to which I will soon return), his years of trial and error in isolation paid off as technical felicity met nonliterary life materials and personal memory. These poems were, for the greater part, prose poems not in the hermetically intellectualized mode codified by *Shi'r* but exuberant *tableaux vivants* imbibing the prosaic in big gulps.²¹ The free-ranging movement of these poems cast the *Shi'r* corpus, with its awkwardly sterile and cagey modes of cultural appropriation, in an unflattering light. With few line breaks and a strong narrative thrust, the book's typical sentence rushes forward in rapacious additive rhythms switching between dream, memory, erotic ebullience, and everyday experience in Athens and incorporating intertextual allusions to classical Arab poets, the Euro-American canon, and beyond.

The epigraph for the collection—"In a dark time / the eye begins to see"—is taken from a poem by Theodore Roethke, a savant's reference to a minor American poet that singled out Boulus's taste from the rote rehearsing of canonical modernists. This foreign line in translation is a covert programmatic declaration. Ordinary eyesight replaces clairvoyant vision (*ru'yā*) as the epistemic category for poetic truth. In a dark (historical) time, poetry endeavors for earth-bound lucidity. It no longer floats in the abstract space of *ḥadātha* removed from the dark matters of human life. Here is a full translation of the volume's titular poem, "Life near the Acropolis":

I now go alone in the way of a stern conversation with the man I was just a short while ago; I return to "as if," return to "towards," when I stared at length into the abyss when, for the whole length of an evening, time refused to rescue me after I tied my vortex

¹⁹ Sarkūn Būluṣ, *Al-wuṣūl ilā Madīnat Ayna* [Arrival at Where City] (Athens: Sāriq al-Nār, 1985). On the Athenian period in Boulus's career, see Ṣalāḥ Fā'iq's article for *Jadaliyya*, accessed June 11, 2020, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31385>; and al-Ḥājj's witness account in *Jehat*, accessed June 11, 2020, <http://www.jehat.com/ar/Mawasem/Pages/24-10-2007.html>.

²⁰ For these poems, see Sarkūn Būluṣ, *Al-wuṣūl ilā Madīnat Ayna* (Cologne: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2003), 33–35, 121.

²¹ See Ḥusayn Bin Ḥamza, "Sarkūn Būluṣ: Al-nathr bi-juru'āt kabīra" [Sargon Boulus: Prose in big gulps], *Al-akhbar*, October 11, 2007, accessed June 13, 2020, https://al-akhbar.com/Culture_People/181993.

to the peg of attentiveness because that's what you've done to me in your mad love
 I fold the vortex neatly from the sides like a handkerchief
 and with vague excuses leave the house in the evening
 pacing through Athens' stone alleys with no defined purpose
 The streets are opaque, desolate in their expanse:
 Lone seagulls drift on the flow of the emerald air as a warm seaport breeze wafts unknowingly
 and sounds the crackling of children's kites
 caught in electric wires . . .
 Until my hair is drenched in dew dripping from the shack clusters
 spiraling upwards into the great belly of darkness
 underneath the Acropolis which I avoid by not climbing up
 the cracked white marble stairs where the machine of archeological
 ghost-cloning dwells to attract tourists and where every time a Greek god
 turns over in his stony sleep, the breeze goes begging the leaves for an elegy; I would rather
 listen to the plaintive rustling that comes mixed with the meowing sound of cats in heat
 on the rooftops, before getting on the bus and heading back to our flat
 where you still lie awake, waiting for me.²²

The avoidance of the Parthenon is an act of defiant self-possession with respect to everything that the pantheon of gods represents to a poet from an Iraqi province. Nor is the subject of this poem the gods of Canaan and Phoenicia, the Near Eastern ur-civilization that the Beirut modernists dug up to overcome their inferiority and pass into world literature.²³ The caressing Mediterranean breeze is the protagonist here, a correlative to the novel poetic intonation passionately pursued by the poet. The pursuit is after the unnoticed middle, the forsaken gods who get lost between immovable antique monuments and touristic trinkets. Framing the nightly stroll as an erotic itinerary of leave-taking and homecoming subtly alludes to Odysseus, Sindbad, and the spiritual journeys of the Andalusian Sufi poet Ibn 'Arabī. The syntax and breath units of this poem are generous and permeated with insatiable (male) desire as an intimation of infinity. The latter aspect is obliquely reminiscent of Walt Whitman's and Allen Ginsberg's American rhapsodies, which Boulus labored to inject into what he imagined to be the Arabic language's nature as a supralingual omnivore.

Figuring as a proximate periphery to the Arab world, Greece gives a whiff of Mediterraneanism unspoiled by ideology.²⁴ Life at the foot of the Acropolis resists the fiction of upward ascent and dissolves binaries of high and low, vernacular culture and literary finesse. What Boulus discovers in Athens is the potential of personal memory and vivid narrative detail to put some flesh on the thrifty cerebralism of the Beirut style. Toward the end of his life, Boulus produced translations from W. H. Auden and favorably reflected on the work of the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz.²⁵ The

²² Būluṣ, *Al-ḥayāt qurba al-Akrūbūl*, 59–60. All translations from the Arabic are my own unless otherwise noted.

²³ For this argument see Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 66.

²⁴ In this respect, the Beirut modernists ideologized the ancient Near East in a manner similar to the Canaanite nativism in Hebrew poetry. For this movement, see Hannan Hever, "Territorialiyut, kena'aniyut, ve-aherut be-sifrut milhemet ha-'atsma'ut" [Territorialism, Canaanism, and otherness in Independence War literature], in *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le'om* [Narrative and nation] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 175–209.

²⁵ On Miłosz, see Sargon Boulus, "Ithaka Gave You the Journey," *Jehat* (no date given), accessed June 12, 2020, <http://www.jehat.com/en/Poets/Pages/SargonBoulus.html>. For the Auden translations, see W. H. Auden, *Qaṣā'id mukhtāra* [Selected poems] (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2012).

identification with these figures indicates that, as Edward Mendelson has argued about Auden,²⁶ Boulus was the first Arab poet to feel at home in the twentieth century, at home enough to dispense with the term *hadātha* as a credo. His versatile voice could confidently converse with anyone from Tu Fu to W. S. Merwin while respecting historical difference.²⁷ Compared with Boulus's speaker, the ironically elliptical, quasi-mythical personas placed at the center of Adūnīs's poetics seem to have no grip on the world in terms of history or empirical phenomena. The kind of sweeping claims made by the Beirut vanguard to a major prophetic role and to Nietzschean self-creation have come to appear groundlessly inflated and are largely scaled down.²⁸

Writing from beneath an Acropolis plagued by tourism has brought Arabic poetry more definitively to a place where poetic modernity is not abstractly conceptualized as "modernistic." Indeed, something intrinsically pigeonholed and provincial is revealed in claiming the "-ism" of modernism. Modern life is here taken as liberating grounds for writing. It is a place of centerlessness both situated and global, revealing that an underbelly of periphery invariably dwells within the richest gold-clad symbol of the imperial center.

TRAJECTORIES OF DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENT

Writing on the Margin: Mohammed Bennis's Maghribī Passage into World Poetry

Life near the Acropolis was originally issued by the Casablanca-based Dār Tūbqāl, a publishing house established in 1985 to promote contemporary Moroccan literature and world culture. The poet Mohammed Bennis (1948–) is the prominent name associated with this press and, by extension, with institutionalizing poetic modernism in Morocco. Bennis often refers to a Maghrib-specific tension between the local and the universal rooted in a peripheral consciousness with respect to the Arab Levant (Mashriq). This consciousness is double-faced: it looks, on the one hand, to the recent history of colonialism that left Morocco in a bilingual limbo between French and Arabic literacy and, on the other hand, to the long-standing contest for cultural primacy between the Mashriq and the Maghrib. In the latter case, asymmetric power works in the opposite way: East (Baghdad as the ancient imperial seat) is the metropole, and West (including al-Andalus) is the periphery. Robert Young has astutely differentiated between provincial and postcolonial peripherality and highlighted Maghribī writing as one result of an exceedingly productive language anxiety owing to the presence of French, literary Arabic, *dārija*, and Tamazight.²⁹ For a formidable generation of decolonized Moroccan intellectuals, inside knowledge of currents of thinking in France affords an axis of supremacy vis-à-vis the Mashriq. Conversely, modern and classical Arabic literature and the Andalusian heritage figure as nourishing semilocal traditions with which the Maghrib can be weaned off the colonizing French.

²⁶ "Auden was the first poet writing in English who felt at home in the twentieth century." Edward Mendelson, ed., *W. H. Auden: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), ix.

²⁷ On the dialogue between Boulus, Tu Fu, and other world poets, see Sinan Antoon, "Sargon Boulus and Tu Fu's Ghost(s)," *Journal of World Literature* 2, no. 3 (2017): 297–319.

²⁸ Much of what Adūnīs has claimed to have "created" was in fact—in line with standard modernist practices—translated and refashioned without acknowledging sources. For these acts of creative "thievery," he later came under severe attack for being a provincial thinker and a downright plagiarist. See, e.g., 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jannābī's *Risāla maftūḥa ilā Adūnīs* [An open letter to Adūnīs] (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 1999), a venomous takedown of Adūnīs's *Surrealism and Sufism*. See also Kāzīm Jihād's highly tendentious *Adūnīs muntaḥilan* [Adūnīs the counterfeiter] (Cairo: Madbuli, 1993), which seeks to incriminate Adūnīs of being a serial plagiarist from the poetry of Saint-John Perse.

²⁹ Robert J. C. Young, "World Literature and Language Anxiety," in *Approaches to World Literature* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013), 27–38.

Bennis made his poetic debut in 1969, receiving sanction from Adūnīs’s prestigious post-*Shi’r* magazine *Mawāqif*. These credentials positioned him highly on the local level as a middleman of modernism promoting the future creation of a “new and truly patriotic and democratic Moroccan culture.”³⁰ For this reason, he joined the Moroccan Writers Union, established in 1973 as part of the official Arabizing policy of King Hassan II. Bennis’s first PhD thesis, supervised by Abdelkebir Khatibi and submitted in 1978 to the University of Rabat, analyzed contemporary Moroccan poetry as an act of ground-clearing for the future of Arabic literature in Morocco. As soon as the nationalist state agenda took over the union, Bennis started a literary periodical—*Al-thaqāfa al-jadīda* (New culture; 1978–) —to promote his vision of Moroccan national culture and internationalist horizons. Within six years of its opening, this upscale magazine was banned during a state clampdown on freedom. By the time Bennis came to submit his second dissertation in 1988, the atmosphere of democratic openness in Morocco had gravely dampened. His second thesis is thus a massive four-volume encyclopedic work summarizing Arab modernism from the romantic age to the present.³¹ Like Ibn Khaldūn’s *Muqaddima*, it is permeated by a sense of standing at the end of a historical era. After all, the Moroccan Writers Union was founded the very same year as the state’s internal intelligence agency, the Direction général de surveillance du territoire. Bennis’s writings from the 1980s thus constantly waver between recognizing the importance of cultivating domestic literary production and the desire for an outside sphere of relation to curb parochialism: “*kitāba* in Morocco has to escape the narrow framework, travel far in its particularity, in its system of relations and difference.”³²

This declaration is quoted from Bennis’s 1981 “Manifesto for *Kitāba*,” where he proposes *kitāba*, “writing,” as a keyword for a mode of triangulation between the Maghribī particular and Mashriqī and French universals: “While this manifesto aims to clarify the concept of *kitāba*, it also aspires to reveal a viewpoint that leans on Maghribī particularity. Should it be erased, there would be no viable rallying for a possible transformation of the poetic text in Morocco.”³³ *Kitāba* is clearly an Arabic transposition of the French genre-bending term *écriture* and closely corresponds to Roland Barthes’s notion of the plural “readerly” text.³⁴ How, then, is this proposed solution to the crisis of culture a negotiation of, rather than assimilation to, French trends? Moreover, in those very years Adūnīs, under the influence of *Tel quel* theories, had transitioned in *Mawāqif* from a discourse of *ḥadātha* to talk of *al-kitāba al-jadīda* (new writing).³⁵

For Bennis, the singularity of Maghribī experience renders *kitāba* “native” as a category of betwixt and between. This has to do, first, with the firm premodern structures *kitāba* is mobilized to deconstruct, impediments that in Paris and Beirut have already been surpassed. Bennis suggests that until the 1970s Moroccan culture was by and large oral, with written works restricted to the religious sphere. Moroccan society, he states, is far from being through with the

³⁰ Taken from a 1979 address before the Moroccan Writers Union on the occasion of its sixth annual convention. See Muḥammad Bannīs, “Al-mu’ tamar al-sādis li-(i)ttiḥād kuttāb al-Maghrib” [The sixth convention of the Moroccan Writers Union], *Al-thaqāfa al-jadīda* 12 (January 1979): 166–67.

³¹ Muḥammad Bannīs, *Al-shi’r al-‘arabī al-ḥadīth: Bināyātuḥu wa-ibdālātuhā* [Modern Arabic poetry: Its structures and their transformations], 4 vols. (Casablanca: Toubqal, 1989–90).

³² Muḥammad Bannīs, “Bayān al-kitāba” [A manifesto for *kitāba*] (1981), in *Ḥadāthat al-su’āl* [Modernity in question] (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 1988), 17.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 5–6.

³⁵ Muḥammad Bannīs, “Li-musā’alat al-ḥadātha” [Toward questioning modernity], *Al-karmil* 12 (April 1984): 57.

liberationist project for self-governed productivity and has been unusually susceptible to the force of *muta'aliyāt*: spheres of sublimity, rigid superstructures, political mythemes. He describes at length the dominance of a national (*waṭani*) style of poetry—now co-opted by monolithic state discourse—that, since the times of colonial struggle, functions as mere historical witness to events and avoids deep introspection.³⁶ Maghribī culture is read along the lines of a postcolonial modernity in arrested development, fixated on colonial politics whose meanings have changed from being a bottom-up revolutionary sentiment to a top-down state imposition. A state of discontinuity with the rest of the Arab world is posited since Morocco had only recently hopped on the wagon of Arabic writing and its concomitant modernity. Discontinuity means that culture will continue to be the handmaiden of politics unless it reiterates on its own terms the dialectical process that started in midcentury Beirut. This premise justifies Bennis's call for a bridging mode of writing, *kitāba* as a palimpsest of European and Arabic textual traditions.

Second, Morocco is characterized by a unique condition of bilingualism in a multifarious contact zone. This condition was consummately fictionalized in Abdelkebir Khatibi's *Amour bilingue* (which Bennis translated into Arabic),³⁷ the literary expression for Khatibi's intellectual project of awakening the *maghāriba* to their lived reality of *ta'addudīyyat al-wāhid* (plurality-in-one).³⁸ This idea became typical of a whole generation of thinkers who grew wary of assuming universalism without attending to the Maghribī particulars. This universalist pretense provincialized Moroccan culture and polarized its dichotomies.³⁹ Being equally fluent in French and Arabic (and equally estranged from both) gave these authors an edge over radical thinkers like Adūnīs and Jacques Derrida, who because of a slant toward one cultural side, treat the other side as exotic to foreignize their major intellectual identity. Bennis, in contrast, lands on an open-ended strategy of *musā'ala* (questioning and doubt) aimed at all sides as the least problematic choice for the Maghribī modernist: a constant back-and-forth between trust and mistrust for the two hegemonic cultures as well as for claims of primacy for the local over the global and vice versa.

Bennis focalizes his concern over the Maghrib's peripheral position through a figurative lens less geometric in form than textual and scriptural, even Talmudic. He speaks of the hegemony of a European and Mashriqī *matn* (main text) associated with the primacy of the past, the sacred text. The Maghribī *hāmish* (margin, gloss, footnote)—representing life needs, inescapability of interpretation, the contiguity of past and present—aspires to preserve the continued authority of this *matn* by breaking away from its overbearing weight.⁴⁰ Elsewhere he refers to Mashriqī modernism as a trace-text repeated by the Maghribī echo-text to describe a mode of

³⁶ Bannīs, “Bayān al-kitāba,” 11–14 (on the poetry of historical witness), 19–20 (on the force of *muta'aliyāt* in the Maghrib).

³⁷ For the *Amour bilingue* in English, see Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

³⁸ See a key essay by that name in Bannīs, *Ḥadāthat al-su'āl*, 43–64. For a recent summary of Khatibi's intellectual project, see Khalid Lyamlahy, “The Professional Stranger: On Abdelkebir Khatibi's ‘Plural Maghreb,’” *LA Review of Books*, December 3, 2019, accessed June 13, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-professional-stranger-on-abdelkebir-khatibis-plural-maghreb/>.

³⁹ Bannīs, *Ḥadāthat al-su'āl*, 44–45.

⁴⁰ This figure is at its starkest in the opening pages of *Modernity in Question* (*Ḥadāthat al-su'āl*, 7–8), where Bennis discusses the rupture that led to the transfer of power from Beirut as center to the Moroccan periphery and, concurrently, to the reconstitution of *ḥadātha* as a “question.” See also Bennis's reading of the *hāmish* (margin, gloss) as the vital active ingredient in modern Arab thought (*ibid.*, 145–48).

textual migration (*hijra*) between the regions.⁴¹ Echo for Bennis has a negative aural connotation of derivativeness overturned by *khaṭṭ*—both script and the art of calligraphy—a concept also meant to connote a sophisticated decentered textuality: “the search for the text’s new rhetoricity requires that speech and voice be violated by *khaṭṭ*. This *khaṭṭ* possesses the peculiar secret of turning common knowledge into poetry, an act of rooting *kitāba* in materiality and dialectics.”⁴² Script thus acquires an autonomous metaphysical quality that releases it from its former role as auxiliary to spoken language.

The Maghrib had historically possessed a distinct tradition of Arabic orthography, and this historical difference is imagined to be the horizon for Maghribī writing. By means of calligraphic subtlety, the technology of writing and reading would be defamiliarized, and boundaries between East and West collapsed. This proposal suggests a liminal space between French disavowal of referentiality as logocentric and Islamic aniconic traditions. Bennis tested this theory in a 1979 contribution for *Al-thaqāfa al-jadīda*, where he had a poem artfully arranged by the gifted Moroccan calligrapher ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Būrī. The poem chosen for this exercise is ironically titled “Thus Spoke to Me the East,” thus reversing the hegemonic terms of the literate Mashriq versus the oral Maghrib.⁴³ By transcribing the fictive oral message from the East, the West deepens its self-reflexive textuality.

The poem progressively departs from the conventional look of poetic texts and radically puts the onus on the reader to produce even a minimal literal understanding. The typographic complexity then allows Bennis to admit materials with local flavor. In agreement with Boulus’s aloofness with respect to the Acropolis, Bennis chooses Marrakesh as the ambivalent subject of Moroccan identity. A destination marketed as authentic and overrun by tourists, Marrakesh is a marker for the local deformities of modernity. The poem begins with a call for Marrakesh to recolonize itself and ends on a note of reprimand for the collusion of the global tourist industry with internal violators: the poor from the provinces who take over its alleyways to squeeze money out of foreigners. It ends with the lines: “In Marrakesh where / people are lust / possessed / by the shadow / of a folk / countryside.”⁴⁴ This ending is shaped in the form of an upside-down pyramid, indicating a downward movement into base profiteering rather than an upward ascent to the gods.

Three years after writing the manifesto, Bennis reflects that the document had a twofold purpose: coming to terms with the failures of Moroccan modernity and, at the same time, declaring Moroccan modernism to be the legitimate offspring of its Levantine precursor. This act of legitimation would “unite the space [of Arabic writing] as it asserts particularity and difference.”⁴⁵ As a peripheral field takes the leap into the universal (here imagined as contained within a single transnational literature), deficiencies are highlighted in the previous instantiation of universalism while reintegrating it into a more inclusive whole. It is the Maghribī experience that leads Bennis to repeatedly stress, contra Adūnīs, that modernisms come in the plural and that the Arab world cannot but be implicated in historical modernity and global interdependence. These external constraints must be submitted to an internally Arabic logic of modernity. In Bennis’s tone, there

⁴¹ Bannīs, *Al-shi‘r al-‘arabī al-ḥadīth*, 3:198–202.

⁴² Bannīs, “Bayān al-kitāba,” 26.

⁴³ Muḥammad Bannīs, “Hākadhā kallamanī al-sharq” [Thus spoke to me the East], *Al-thaqāfa al-jadīda* 12 (January 1979): 113–25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁵ Bannīs, “Li-musā`alat al-ḥadātha,” 57.

is a somber realism missing from Adūnīs's conception of poetic modernity as an absolute civilizational value. In an interview, Bennis recognizes that modern poetry cannot alienate itself from Arab situated selfhood. Nor can it restore its major status in the collective imagination. Poetry is then bound to stay on the margin of both the Arab societies to which it belongs and the capitalist market logic. It is on this margin that history and the body, past and present, intersect.⁴⁶

A Critical Extremist: 'Abdallah al-Ghaddāmī's Radical Anagogism (and Antagonism)

In 1983, Bennis was invited to contribute a piece for the inaugurating issue of the Manama-based journal *Kalimat*, a meeting point for a new wave of Bahraini experimental writers. Relating to the surge of new writing in the Gulf, his brief address identified a greater "intersection of times" in the trajectory of Arab modernism. The backdrop for the address is the 1982 Israeli bombing of Beirut. The new rupture underscored the need to continue the Beirut legacy in the spatio-temporal receptacles of the more stable perimeter. The meeting of the remote ends of Arab East and West in Bahrain shows that, in its moment of transregional solidarity, the modernist path is shared by recognizing its limits. It no longer promotes illusory universalist transcendence but context-specific efforts cut down to the scale of Arab contingency. Bennis proposes *ḥadātha* as a plural category anchored in its historical conjunctures, a perennial *musā'ala* that calls for an unforeseeable multiplicity of unrepeatable responses.⁴⁷ The Gulf had answered this call by producing, in the last quarter century, seasoned poetic voices such as those of the Bahraini Qāsim Haddād (1948–); the Omanis Muḥammad al-Ḥārthī (1962–2018) and Sayf al-Raḥbī (1956–), whose literary journal *Nizwā* is among the finest in the Arab world; and the Saudis Fawziyya Abū Khālid (1955–)—the major female voice of the prose poem in the Arabian Peninsula—and Aḥmad al-Mullā (1961–).

Bennis is a temperate reformer who retains a reverent stance with respect to *Shi'r's ḥadātha*. A more controversial revisionist reading came, however, not from a poet, but from a Saudi literary thinker. An attack on modernism from Saudi Arabia would be predictable had it been conducted in the name of conservative orthodoxy. It was, however, 'Abdallah al-Ghaddāmī (1946–),⁴⁸ a wide-ranging Unayza-born Saudi-educated literary critic, who bafflingly opened a radical front against the Beirut poetics, labeling it as culturally conservative and proving beyond doubt that *Shi'r*, or Adūnīs at least, has reached the stature of an idol worth stoning. Here is al-Ghaddāmī in his 2000 *Cultural Criticism* on Adūnīs's notion of modernity:

The title of Adūnīs's book *Time of Poetry* bears a structural significance [*dalāla nasaqiyya*], as it ascribes this [poetic] attribute to time; it is not the time of reason nor the time of thought; nor is it the time for action and politics. It is the time of poetry to the extent that there is no modernity in the Arab world except in poetry, as Adūnīs says. There is no modernity in thought or economics or politics and society. Consequently, time belongs to poetry alone, or to the poet rather, the Patriarch Poet, Adūnīs himself, as is implied in Adūnīs's statements in this book and in other works. Clearly, this is a reactionary regression to the time of the *fahl*, the poet as

⁴⁶ Camilo Gomez-Rivas, "Mohammed Bennis: Keeping the Language Alive," *Banīpal* 29 (Summer 2007): 113–24.

⁴⁷ Muḥammad Bannīs, "Shay'un 'an taqāṭu' al-azmina" [Something on intersecting times], *Kalimāt* 1 (October 1983): 65–68.

⁴⁸ 'Abdallah al-Ghadhdhāmī in proper MSA transliteration. Changed in conformity with spoken pronunciation and for the sake of readers' convenience. His last name is sometimes pronounced and transliterated as "al-Ghathami."

a commanding alpha male, the poet as augur, the poem as magic. This is a return to the *jāhili*, legendary foundation of the male patriarch, as well.⁴⁹

Extreme and idiosyncratic, this reading is generally representative of a number of late twentieth-century poets who drew away from the ramifications of Adūnīs's elusive rhetoric of revolt, refusal, and visionary knowledge. Within circles of second-wave Syrian poets living under the yoke of official Baathism, a pivotal transition took place to a poetics of the quotidian and understated: small people, unremarkable places, dull incidents in linear time. At least in part, this turn emerged from a dissatisfaction with the overly poeticized hermeticism of the Adūnīsian template and its unsettling correspondence with forms of authoritarian inscrutability.⁵⁰ "The space of the poetics of the quotidian," writes the literary critic Jamāl Bārūt in the context of Syrian poetry,

in its many open-ended branch-offs doesn't presume to establish a criterial center for the aesthetic or the poetic but rather comes into being on the margins of the dominant, the prescriptive, the absolute authorities. It transgresses their boundaries and deviates from them. The absolute metaphysical claims of the authoritative source are a sham. . . . The moment they collapse, then springs the prosaic, the everyday, placing us in a world of contingency not causality, a world of dispersal not unity, the world of the transient rather than the permanent. It is the vitality of life itself.⁵¹

Like Bārūt, al-Ghaddāmī exemplifies the central role of the cultural critic specializing in poetry in connecting the minor work of *qaṣīdat al-nathr* poets (overshadowed by state monopoly on culture) with the larger social and political orders.⁵²

Al-Ghaddāmī's metaliterary extremism reemploys the lexicon of poststructuralism to expose the aporias of corrupt hegemonic systems in which poetry occupies a place of pride. The militant reuse of poststructuralism can be construed as a homecoming: a recharge of its original intemperate spirit. The keywords in the text from *Cultural Criticism* are *fahl* and *nasaq*, indicating al-Ghaddāmī's method of tracing how poetic texts from pre-Islamic times to the present reproduce the patterns of traditionalism and patriarchy. *Nasaq* (pl. *ansāq*) is a polysemic word whose basic meaning is "a fixed structure," a tightly knit grid impervious to dynamism. One of the *nasaq*'s cunning features is that it works subconsciously to perpetuate the culture's *fuḥūliyya*, the abstract noun deriving from *fahl*. *Fahl* means "stud," "stallion," or "sire" and stands here for the potent Arab patriarchy, the binding directives of *ubuwwa* (fatherhood). It has become an idiomatic phrase in Arabic for masterful poets, an association devilishly exploited by al-Ghaddāmī to militate against untouchable classics like those of Abū Tammām and al-Mutanabbī (ca. 915–65) for their latent *fuḥūli* logic. The maneuver is then performed on Adūnīs's and Nizār Qabbānī's

⁴⁹ 'Abdallah Muḥammad al-Ghaddhāmī, *Al-naqd al-thaqāfi: Qirā'a fī al-ansāq al-thaqāfiyya al-'arabiyya* [Cultural criticism: A reading of Arab cultural systems] (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 2005), 275.

⁵⁰ See Daniel Behar, "The New Austerity in Syrian Poetry" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2019).

⁵¹ Muḥammad Jamāl Bārūt, "Muqārabāt awwaliyya li-l-nathrī wa-l-yawmī" [Basic approaches to the prosaic and the everyday], *Al-anṭūlūjiyā*, September 24, 2017, accessed June 13, 2020, <http://alantologia.com/blogs/3777/>.

⁵² In the context of Hebrew poetry, Benjamin Harshav played an analogous key role in giving coherence to the Likrat poets, the so-called State Generation. Harshav has eloquently argued for the heterogeneity of poetics included in the Western modernist canon, specifically the opposite directions of dense metaphorical symbolism (as in Adūnīs's work) and a minimalism of concrete detail and direct seeing (as in Boulos and the Syrian poets). See Harshav, *Omanut ha-shira* [The art of poetry] (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2000), 147–51.

claims to modernity. It is then extended to readers and auditors, who are said to be historically complicit in perpetuating the conventions of manspreading poetic selfhood. Al-Ghaddāmī's practice fuses feminist social critique with a bulldozing antipoetic sensibility to show that poetic truth in the Arab world has too often rested on outrageous deformities covered up by rhetorical elegance. Adoration of poetry ratifies the male standards submerged within the text and perniciously slides into moral approval for backward beliefs. In a later book, al-Ghaddāmī recovers feminine modes of literary discourse as a vernacular cure for the incorrigible *tadhkīr al-mu'annath* (masculinization of the feminine) of the Arabic *dīwān*.⁵³

Sha'ranat al-shakhṣiyya (the poetization of personality) is the name given to the process by which the *nasaq* recycles the pompous poetic self. The locution plays on the association of the neologism *sha'rana* (poeticize) with *shar'ana*: to legitimize, legislate, grant *shar'iyya*.⁵⁴ "Our problem with poetry of this kind," he writes, "is that we surrender to its critical (and rhetorical) golden standard and refrain from examining its flaws. This standard forbids us from questioning the ideas of the poet and defines for us a field of vision only in what is 'beautiful' and rhetorically effective."⁵⁵ The pressing task for the Arab critic is to find where poetic language undoes its own rhetoric of sublimity. Here al-Ghaddāmī's project converges with the intellectual labor of Maghribī philosophers Abdallah Laroui ('Abdallah al-'Arwi in MSA transliteration; 1933–) and Muḥammad 'Abid al-Jābirī (1935–2010), who articulated a rigorous and pervasive critique of Arab reason, epistemology, and political ideologies.⁵⁶

This flamboyant extremeness should be read in a Saudi-specific register of disdain for the arrogance and complacency of sated establishments. Immoderation is then adequate in an intellectual world maddeningly unperturbed by cultural modernism. In his *Story of Modernity in Saudi Arabia* (2005), al-Ghaddāmī (again, extravagantly) relates his quixotic battles against an ultra-conservative system that, faced with the challenges of modernity, has strategically chosen one of two options: steamroll and co-opt or mute, repress, and avoid. Al-Ghaddāmī does not deny that enormous historical changes, chiefly on the economic and material levels, have shaped contemporary Saudi Arabia; his claim is that the kingdom has cunningly accommodated modernity externally without touching the deep premodern roots of the Saudi lifeworld. The great oil boom that washed over the country in the 1970s and 1980s granted rulers and citizens alike a passage into a global standard of economic affluence and obviated the need for a large-scale cultural project of self-critique and intellectual productivity.⁵⁷ Al-Ghaddāmī's adversarial mode of cultural criticism is intended to prove once and for all that, unlike construction projects, the type of modernization piloted by literature and metaliterary thought cannot be outsourced. It is essential in a modern world where, as Bennis claims, no nation can remain fixed, avoidant, unimplicated.

⁵³ 'Abdallah al-Ghaddhāmī, *Al-mar'a wa-l-lughā* [Women and language] (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabi, 2006), 57–83. The connection with *One Thousand and One Nights*, Shahrazad, and the vernacular tradition is made explicit there.

⁵⁴ The range of terms and claims covered in this paragraph all crop up in *Al-naqd al-thaqāfi*, 100–132.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵⁶ For the impact of these Moroccan thinkers on Arab intellectual life, see Bannīs, *Hadāthāt al-su'āl*, 43–64. For an explicit link between al-Ghaddhāmī and al-Jābirī, see Idrīs Jabrī, "Fī taqāṭu' mashrū'ay al-Jābirī wa-l-Ghaddhāmī" [On the intersection between al-Jābirī's and al-Ghaddāmī's projects], *Ālāmāt fī al-naqd* 58 (December 2005): 95–130.

⁵⁷ His personal narration of the social changes following the oil boom encapsulates his critique. See 'Abdallah al-Ghaddhāmī, *Hikāyat al-ḥadātha fī al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiyya al-Sa'ūdiyya* [Story of modernity in the Saudi Arabian kingdom] (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabi, 2005), 149–73.

Deconstructionist tactics are thus repurposed for a critical need particular to *khalijī* culture: opposition to the overlapping pressures of Islamic literalism, theocratic moralism, and a narrow conception of *turāth* (Arabo-Islamic patrimony) that iron out folds of difference into a cover-all fabric of symmetric uniformity. Society, politics, and literature in Saudi Arabia are all taken as cultural “texts” defined by *taskīn al-mutaḥarrrikāt* (“nullifying moving beings”; literally, “silencing of vowels”),⁵⁸ which al-Ghaddāmī mines for cracks in which the system’s contradictions collapse. He dissects these texts as both submerged within the Saudi psyche and outwardly performed in the public sphere: the mosques, the media, the universities, and the administrative norms of the monarchy. Against this backdrop, al-Ghaddāmī calls attention to muted values on the fringes—for which Saudi women stand as the prominent signifier⁵⁹—and to previously rejected figures on the margins of the Saudi literary canon. His writing takes on not only antimodernist establishment figures but also faux modernizers and formalist critics invested in maintaining separation between literature and politics, a legacy traceable to Beirut autonomy.⁶⁰

His 1985 book of literary criticism, *Sin and Atonement (Al-khaṭī’ a wa-l-takfīr)*, caused a maelstrom in the smug calmness of Saudi conservatism and ignited a controversy that fueled Friday sermons, televised talk shows, and departmental intrigue.⁶¹ The book’s title needs to be unpacked since it is a minefield of scandals and mistranslations. First, it is an irreverently theological name for a study in modern poetry that cites Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Roman Jakobson (irreverent with respect to both Saudi Wahhabism and French secularism). The full title runs *Sin and Atonement: From Structuralism to Tashrīḥiyya*, with the English “deconstruction” parenthesized on the cover as a translation of *tashrīḥiyya*. The use of a postmodern concept in roman letters on a Saudi-printed book already invites trouble, and al-Ghaddāmī vividly recounts the stroke of luck he needed to have this book printed within the kingdom’s borders.⁶² The word *takfīr* is laden here with its contrary semantic value of declaring someone to be an infidel (as in Hebrew, the Arabic root k-f-r may connote both repentance and unbelief). It thus anticipates the accusations that will be leveled against the author. The next bump is the adjective *tashrīḥī* with which al-Ghaddāmī tags deconstruction, a conscious deviation from the more common translation *tafkīkī*. While *tafkīk* signifies taking apart, *tashrīḥ* suggests an anatomical dissection as in a postmortem. It also biologizes criticism to challenge the givenness of male hegemony. Substantiating this metaphor, the cover design of the Saudi book suspiciously resembles the first edition of Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*.

The divergence in terminology is telling of al-Ghaddāmī’s unorthodoxy: while deconstruction has remained resistant to the recentering of discourse as such, al-Ghaddāmī is both deconstructive and reconstructive. By his method, authority is refocused on composing an exquisite corpse from disparate author-fragments. These collagist assemblages consist not only of the author’s literary output but also of private correspondence, essays, and recorded interviews.⁶³

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 29–32.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 133–42, where al-Ghaddāmī depicts, inter alia, the ceremonies of full-body veiling as Saudi girls reach puberty.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 113–17.

⁶¹ ‘Abdallah al-Ghaddhāmī, *Al-khaṭī’ a wa-l-takfīr: Min al-bunyawiyya ilā al-tashrīḥiyya* [Sin and atonement: From structuralism to deconstruction] (Jeddah: Al-Nādī al-Adabī al-Thaqāfī, 1985). For al-Ghaddāmī’s self-narration of the scandal’s unfolding and its aftermath, see *Ḥikāyat al-ḥadātha*, 175–288.

⁶² Al-Ghaddhāmī, *Ḥikāyat al-ḥadātha*, 183–86.

⁶³ Al-Ghaddāmī explains his method as “opposition by way of rebuilding.” See *Al-khaṭī’ a wa-l-takfīr*, 89–90.

The inspiration is said to have come from Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, but al-Ghaddāmī is not rewriting a Balzac, an enshrined literary classic: he restores to consciousness a forgotten pioneer of Saudi modernism—the philosopher and poet Ḥamza Shihāta (1911–72)—a voice, that is, whose authority needs to be propped up.

The sin and atonement motifs in the book's title are posited as antithetical terms in the central dualism of Shihāta's poetry. They suggest creative tensions revolving around mythic archetypes of male sexual fantasy, obsession, and frustration.⁶⁴ Viewed as an endemic complex in Saudi society, this dualism is rife with material for al-Ghaddāmī's hermeneutics of suspicion. "The center of the literary universe," writes Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, describing the anagogical mode of criticism, "is whatever poem we happen to be reading, as a microcosm of literature, a symbol of the total order of words—a monad."⁶⁵ Placing Shihāta's poetry at the center of his polemic as a master *nasaq* containing all aspects of life and language in the kingdom and in Arab culture, al-Ghaddāmī's thought is imbued with the anagogic sensibility as defined by Frye. This sensibility is intimately linked with the religious worldviews against which he rails, a link borne out by the Quranic and Prophetic references cited to substantiate the antipoetic stance: "It is better for a man," the Prophet is quoted as saying in a well-known hadith, "to stuff his insides with pus and be sickened by it than to fill his mind with poetry."⁶⁶

Al-Ghaddāmī's theorizing combines a great variety of things and has been faulted for its overreach.⁶⁷ It transposes poststructuralist vocabulary to open up a gridlocked cultural establishment; unearths forgotten texts to build a modernist lineage; rethinks the parameters of Arabic modernism as too formalistic and male dominated; and points to Saudi-specific social problems: unproductivity, rampant materialism, the muted realities of women and foreign workers. The claim has been made that peripheral modernisms, because of their belatedness, telescope a dizzying number of intellectual and artistic movements. The Slovak literary theorist Dionýz Ďurišín has suggested a theory of "irregular, accelerated development" for literary systems in peripheral positions.⁶⁸ Al-Ghaddāmī's version of deconstruction exemplifies this telescopic compression.

Formulated nearly synchronically with the massive translation of deconstruction into American academes, it arguably takes in stride more than the original theory's trademark thinkers. In comparative literature departments, critical theory would devolve into yet another instance of a canon's routinization and curation. Though honorifically titled *duktūr* (he is a tenured professor at King Saud University), al-Ghaddāmī pushes deconstruction out from academe to create constructive disarray in public discourse. Despite extensive international relations, exchange programs, elite schooling abroad, book fairs, and art exhibitions, the state system is

⁶⁴ The title of Shihāta's signature essay (originally delivered as a seven-hour lecture) is *Al-rujūla 'imād al-khuluq al-fāḍil* [Masculinity is the pillar of virtuous character]. It is available in full on the personal blog titled *Mahsabbagh*, September 22, 2012, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://mahsabbagh.net/2012/09/22/elrojola/>.

⁶⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 121.

⁶⁶ *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* [Al-Bukhārī's collection of authentic hadiths], ed. Muṣṭafā Dīb al-Baghā (Beirut: Ibn Kathīr, 1993), 5:2279. See also al-Ghaddāmī, *Al-naqd al-thaqāfi*, 95.

⁶⁷ For a robust critique of al-Ghaddāmī's overgeneralizations and single-mindedness, see Ḥasan al-Muṣṭafā, "Al-Ghaddāmī: Tahāfut al-naqd wa-qirā'at al-tanmī' wa-l-qasr" [Al-Ghaddāmī: Critique repudiated, readings standardized and coerced], *Nizwa* 32 (October 2002): 81–90.

⁶⁸ Mentioned in Marko Juvan, "Peripheral Modernism and the World-System: Slovenian Literature and Theory of the Nineteen-Sixties," *Slavica tergestina* 23 (2019): 173. Ďurišín's idea is, in turn, indebted to the Soviet-Bulgarian literary theorist Georgi Gachev.

still dominated by the orthodoxy of “divine politics.”⁶⁹ Given the steadfastness of the status quo, producing an epistemic disturbance is perceived as a collective social need. Even though al-Ghaddāmī professes postmodernism, his syncretic approach condenses multiple temporalities and intellectual trends. It is a heady amalgam of *naqd* (criticism), *taḥdīth* (modernization), and *tanwīr* (enlightenment).

CONCLUSION

Is there more to these case studies than rehashing the heterogeneity of the modernist phenomenon and enlarging our view to sample more of its differentiated manifestations? A tentative end point is that when the ideological muscle of modernism is relaxed, the reflex is not necessarily to move to a definable postmodern sensibility. What arises is an undefinable middle area of an open *musāʾala* with respect to large frameworks and attentiveness to the smaller units of language, time, and place. Poetry in this mode can recalibrate its soft-spoken ethereality, as Bennis’s poems have done, or be pulled toward the low mimetic out of exasperation with poeticized rhetoric, a strategy practiced by Boulus and theorized by al-Ghaddāmī.

Taking stock of trends in the field of global modernisms, the Slovenian scholar Marko Juvan cogently warns that repeated gestures of celebratory decentering of the core overlook “local sediments of the global symbolic struggle with (post) colonial and (post) imperial dependence.”⁷⁰ Formulated positively, when we attend to the specificity of the situated struggles for individuation and cultural agency on the periphery, we are more likely to reveal the sedimented power dynamics working within them. Though of certain global import, these struggles inexorably occur in distinct national frameworks, in terms of their temporalities and systems of signification, but invariably project universal imaginaries of all kinds.

Franco Moretti’s formula of “compromise between foreign form and local material” provides a valid starting point.⁷¹ But it is all too thin once boundaries between foreign and homegrown writing traditions become blurred, as when *qaṣīdat al-nathr* is reshaped by processes beyond Beirut translation strategies. Inverting the implicit hierarchy of Moretti’s theoretical model, Juvan states that “local perspective is the site where peripheral literary producers have to come to terms with their subjugation to the adopted foreign form as the aesthetic medium of economic-political dominance.”⁷² But even this recognition is somewhat too hierarchically confining. When Sargon Boulus confidently writes as if standing on par with twentieth-century luminaries, the figurative slab of stone on which he stands—the code of modernism—is at the same time a museum piece no longer serviceable. Boulus passes onto a stage beyond anxieties about the ladder scales of power that inhere in the notions of center and periphery.

Almost synchronically with the dawning of the term “modernism” as common coinage, its modes of being on the periphery become not only underivative but superabundantly fermenting with literary and nonliterary meanings. Moreover, when modernity clashes with poetry, the terms of engagement are far from being determined by an imported technique. Manifold irreducible cultural and experiential differentials in the receiving situation play a dominant role in

⁶⁹ Phrase borrowed from Madawi al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁷⁰ Juvan, “Peripheral Modernism and the World-System,” 173.

⁷¹ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. David Damrosch (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 163.

⁷² Juvan, “Peripheral Modernism and the World-System,” 182.

determining the ontology of the modern in the first place. The modernist *matn* is re-created in these sites as a kaleidoscopic *hāmish* of constitutive difference, just as the Talmudic gloss, out of legal exigencies of life, exegetically overrides the letter of the biblical text. To put traveling Arab modernism at our “center of the literary universe” is to reach for a microcosmic world of possible relations between literatures, between culture, society, and politics, and between centers and peripheries within the Arab world and outside it. A