AN UNCOMMON USE OF NONSENSE VERSE
IN COLLOQUIAL ARABIC

In 1983, M. Urbain Bouriant, then Director of the French Archaeological Mission in Cairo, published a volume entitled Chansons Populaires Arabes en dialecte du Caire d'après les manuscrits d'un chanteur des rues. The book consists of 160 pages of carefully edited and very well-printed texts, with no comment or study of any kind. A note from the publisher, however, refers to the "stroke of good fortune" that brought the manuscripts into M. Bouriant's hands and announces that the selection presented then was only a forerunner of a translation and study to appear later. Sadly, M. Bouriant was struck down by ill-health in 1895, and so far as I have been able to ascertain never fulfilled his intention of following up on a very promising beginning.

More recently, Muhammad Qandîl al-Baqî has published a volume which, though he makes reference in it to a "booklet" by Bouriant, he claims to be the result of painstaking independent research and a careful confrontation of texts. The truth is, however, that al-Baqî has drawn solely on Bouriant's material, which he reproduces almost in its entirety, even to incorporating the Frenchman's conjectural emendations. And without mentioning that this material came from the hands of a street singer (indeed, he speaks vaguely of sources accessible only to the well-informed), he builds round it what he claims is a survey of "dervish" literature. In assigning such a label to these twice-published texts, al-Baqî seems to have relied heavily on his intuition; his discreditable methods ought not, however, to turn us away from the possibility that, despite their immediate provenance, some of them may indeed reflect the once pervasive influence of the Sufi brotherhoods in Arab life, although of course the issue will have to be decided on the strength of internal evidence and for each piece on its own.

Bouriant's collection will indeed repay close examination, and it is a reflection of the lack of regard for compositions in the colloquial at the time it was published that it went virtually unnoticed by Arab scholars and by Arabists alike.

All but six of its 34 pieces follow the commonest pattern for the zajal: first an introductory couplet setting what will be the binding (AA) rhyme

1 Paris, Ernest Leroux.
2 See his obituary at the end of Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, Vol. 3 (1903).
3 Adab ad-Darâwîsh, Cairo, Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1970.
of the entire song; then a variable number of stanzas almost always rhyming bbbaa, cccaa, etc., sometimes incorporating the introductory couplet or part of it (e.g. bbbaaA, or cccaAA), and the final stanza virtually always ending with the initial couplet (zzzAA). Furthermore, the penultimate stanza usually consists of praise of the Prophet, and in the last one the poet often names himself amid expressions of piety and humility. Each of the songs so patterned is called a himl, literally "a load."

A wide range of themes is covered, many being devotional or gnomic, and one at least bears directly on the discipline of a Sufi brotherhood. There are also three narrative songs, two on miracles performed by the intervention of a saint, and one stretching to 250 lines which tells in detail of the Prophet’s night journey. Rather difficult to connect with "dervish" literature are two facetious "debates", one between watermelons and dates, the other between cream and molasses. There are also love songs. Not the least intriguing are two songs, apparently by the same author although he names himself in only one of them, in which stanzas proclaiming that the poet is demented by love alternate with others which illustrate his mental derangement.

The inclusion of a stanza in praise of the Prophet is so standard that it carries no implication about the character of the composition. On the other hand, the poet describes himself as a maddâh, and if the term is used in a technical sense, it may indicate that he made his living mainly by singing at religious gatherings; and the repetition of the initial amatory couplet at the end may be no more than a formality, or it may give some ground for identifying the beloved with the Prophet. Whether the love that is expressed is therefore mystic and the nonsense verse that follows reflects the ecstatic states reached at brotherhood ceremonies, or whether indeed there is method in the madness, it is beyond my competence to establish. But even as a literary device devoid of religious overtones, this alternation of nonsense verse (in itself, no more uncommon in the Arabic than in other literary traditions) with love poetry is new to me and seems worth bringing to the attention of others, especially as I find the "mad" stanzas full of animation and the "serious" ones, although laden with the conventional images and conceits of love poetry, not without some deft and delicate touches.

Because the texts are fairly easily accessible, I transcribe and translate below only enough to convey the flavour of one of these compositions, with the stanzas numbered as they would be in the entire song.

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4 The term invites linkage with the word himâl, "carrier", which I have heard applied to an itinerant singer who does not compose his own songs, but memorises those of others.