REVIEWS


The rubric on the back cover of When the Words Burn announces that its appearance is “a major event in the international world of translation and scholarship since John Asfour has not only translated the works of thirty-five poets, but also written a wonderfully engaging and accessible introduction to the social, political and literary background of the modernist movement in Arabic poetry”. This is not a first, however, and has been attempted recently by Abdullah al-Udhari in Modern Poetry of the Arab World (Penguin Books, 1986) and by Salma Khadra Jayyusi in Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology (Columbia University Press, 1987). Jayyusi’s collection is by far the most impressive of the three, comprising 296 selections by 93 poets. Al-Udhari’s is less comprehensive, comprising 101 selections by 24 poets but is the work of one person whereas the other is a collaborative venture. Both unfortunately suffer from occasional mistranslations and the Jayyusi volume is particularly troubling for omissions mid-text. This review is an attempt to evaluate the Asfour collection per se and in the context of these other recent contributions.

Asfour has divided the work into two main parts: the Introduction, and the Anthology; the Introduction is subdivided as follows:

I. Background to the Modern Period: The Classical Tradition in Arabic Poetry before 1945
II. Free Verse-The Poetry of Taf'ila
III. The Tammuzi Poets: Regeneration in the Wasteland
IV. The Political Poem in the Resistance Movement

It is “designed to provide the English reader with a more panoramic view of their situation in Modern Arabic society” (14) and to “shed light on the major categories into which the poetry of this anthology seemed naturally to fall” (15). Although Asfour does not suggest that these are cut and dried categories, one cannot but feel that his categorisations inform his selection, a selection “made primarily from a critical perspective” (14). The use of “critical” here is unclear. The inclusion of a given poet is explained by his or her position in the tradition in the biographical notes that precede that poet’s poems but the critical inclusion of any given poem over another is not addressed.

Section I is subdivided into “The Nature of the Classical Arabic Poem”, “The Need of Evolution in Poetic Convention”, and “The Neoclassical and Romantic Poets”. This last part is a short but useful overview of the Neoclassical and Romantic poets including an effective comparison of lines by al-'Aqqād and Nizar Qabbānī. The first part is an attempt to acquaint the nonspecialist with the poetic metres and to demonstrate the classical Arabic poet’s reliance on these. Although Asfour uses the Arabic terminology (bayt, āqīz, sadr), he, regrettably, does not mention ‘arrūd (though al-Khalīl’s role in the identification of the 16 metres is mentioned on p. 27). Asfour’s decision to
explain the metres by illustrating how a poem is scanned is extremely helpful and accessible: he uses a few lines by al-Ḥusrī al-Qayrawānī in khabab, and a poem by ʿAlī Maḥmūd Ṭāḥā in jawa’il to illustrate his point. His pronouncements, however, that the scanion terms (faṣīlun, muṣṭafṣīlun, etc.) are “nonsense words” and that the classical Arabic poem is “descriptive, emotional, declamatory and grandiose in style” can only be interpreted as indictments of the tradition. He concludes this discussion with the following thought: “the difficulty of expressing the mercurial quality of twentieth century experience within such constraints is obvious.”

The next part is, therefore, not surprisingly entitled “The Need for Evolution in Poetic Convention”. Citing Jabrā, Asfour seeks to show that the modern Arab poet must find a vehicle for his experience outside the narrow confines of the classical Arabic poem. He does not fail to mention the classical poets who also felt this need to transcend the formal limitations placed upon them: Abu Nuwās, al-Mutanabbī, al-Maʿarrī, Bashshār and Abu Tammām. The music, the internal life of the poem, become the critical element. Although Asfour acknowledges that American and European models of “modernist” departure are a useful springboard, he is careful to point out that the modern Arab poet is wary of his Western counterpart.

Section II corresponds to the first division used by al-Udhari to classify the poems he has selected and which he entitles Tafṣīla Movement (Iraqi School): 1947-57. Asfour’s is divided into two parts. The first, “Objectives of the Free Verse Movement: al-shīr al-hurr and al-shīr al-manthur”, is a readable and comprehensive overview of the events of the late 40’s, 50’s and early 60’s, a time that saw the development of free verse and prose poetry. The discussion culminates in a metrical comparison of a poem by al-Sayyāb, to show the virtuosity of use of different metrical feet within one line, and part of one by al-Ḥijāzī, to show the “nervous, brooding, unpredictable music” of a poem by one who has abandoned the tafṣīla but who still uses an erratic rhyme scheme. Asfour also mentions the long poem, a form favoured by such poets as al-Malāʾika, al-Sayyāb, Ḥāwī, Adonis, Sāyīgh and al-Ṣābūr. The anthology in fact closes with a long poem by Sāyīgh.

Amal Dūnqul and Shā ḍ il Taqah are cited as particularly modern poets, the former for his chopping up of lines and the latter for his “informing modernity of attitude or tone in the treatment of subject” (34) which Asfour believes is readily identifiable in the ironic and the comic. Citing Michel Trad’s “It’s a Lie”, Asfour then broaches the issue of poetry in the vernacular and provides the reader with an aperçu on the status of colloquial poetry. He mentions several popular Egyptian dialect poets, Aḥmad Rāmī, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Muḥāmmad, Kāmil al-Shinnāwī but none appear in the anthology. To illustrate the difficulties of interregional comprehension of the vernaculars, Asfour shows the reader how colloquial and “literary” Arabic might differ (35):

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Jabli lqamar liʿbi
Wzatta mitil baqa
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We are then eased into a discussion of “Two Voices in Arabic Modernism: ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd (‘Adonis’) and Muḥāmmad al-Māḡūt”, wherein Asfour compares “the poetry of two leading modernists of the present day” (36), representatives of what he calls two divergent strains of modern Arabic poetry. Asfour’s partiality to al-Māḡūt is evident from the title of the anthology, that