MIKHAIL NAIMY: POET OF MEDITATIVE VISION

Among the many literary works that Mikhail Naimy\textsuperscript{1} published in his lifetime (1889-1988), only one contains his collected poems. It is entitled \textit{Hams al-Jufün} (Eyelid Whisperings) and was published in Beirut in 1945,\textsuperscript{2} thirteen years after his return to Lebanon in 1932 from the United States, where he had been an immigrant since 1911.\textsuperscript{3} Included in it are thirty Arabic poems published in America between 1917 and 1928, as well as fourteen Arabic prose translations of his English poems written between 1925 and 1930, some of which were also published in America.

Naimy's verse is obviously a very small part of his total literary output, for he seems to have decided he could contribute to Arabic letters in prose more creatively than in verse, particularly as his growing interest in philosophical ideas and spiritual concerns required him increasingly to elaborate and elucidate and be expansive. And yet, his verse has been an important component of his literary output and, indeed, an influential element of innovation in modern Arabic literature. This paper will attempt to study Naimy's poetry in \textit{Hams al-Jufün} and assess its value.\textsuperscript{4}

In many ways, Naimy's poetry was new to the Arabs who first read it, and much of it continues to be distinctive today. Perhaps one of its most impressive features is its quiet tone that communicates ideas and emotions in an honest and simple manner suggestive of a heart-to-heart

\textsuperscript{1} This is the way he spelled his name in English. In transliteration, it is usually transcribed from Arabic as Mikhâ'il Nu'aymah. See Nadeem N. Naimy, \textit{Mikhail Naimy: An Introduction} (Beirut: American University of Beirut, Publication of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Oriental Series No. 47, 1967), p. 68, n. 1.

\textsuperscript{2} The third printing, used in this paper, was published by Dār Bayrūt and Dār Sādir in Beirut in 1959.


talk that one can trust. For too long before it, much of Arabic poetry was characterized by being oratorical, depending on loud resonance and rhetorical effects, and on the use of pompous words and pretentious imagery, especially in the neo-classical poems current in Naimy’s time and immediately before it.

The reasons why he chose the quiet tone can be primarily sought in Naimy’s personal qualities of gentleness and pacific character. However, the thoughts and emotions his poetry conveyed were couched in a quiet tone because he believed that was the only way to express sincere feelings of the human heart deriving from actual life experience. Naimy felt there was much hypocrisy in the prevailing Arabic poetry, that most of it consisted of artifice and false pretense, and that following literary conventions and imitating the tradition killed any ideas it tried to convey. In his book of literary criticism entitled al-Ghirbāl (The Sieve), first published in Cairo in 1923, he attacked that kind of verse and called for renewal in poetry. He denounced imitation of past traditional models, emphasized the necessity of personal experience in expressing a vision of life, and highlighted the need for fresh, simple, and imaginative language free from what he considered to be the acrobatics of verbal embellishments.5

Naimy achieved this quiet tone by choosing his vocabulary from common diction and his imagery from everyday life. While still using the learned language of classical Arabic, he avoided rarely-used words and high-sounding locutions, as well as ready and hackneyed images worn out by ages of imitation. He created an atmosphere of familiarity with the reader by addressing him as a brother, a companion, or a fellow human being who shared the same feelings and thoughts. Selecting the lighter meters of Arabic prosody to write his poems in, he shortened his lines by permissible reductions in the number of feet in each line, and brought the rhythm of his poems closer to that of conversational exchange. Rather than abiding by one single rhyme throughout the poem as classical rules required, he opted mostly for varied rhyme schemes, preferring couplets and stanzas, with a noticeable bent for refrains, but he also occasionally devised his own rhyme schemes.6 He
