QIRĀ’A—A RE-READING
(A Comparative Study of Maṭar’s Qirā’a Touching on Problems of Reception and Semiotics)

Reception theory elaborated upon in the work of Barthes, Iser, Ingarden and Fish is especially relevant when faced with the work of the poet Muḥammad ‘Afifi Maṭar.1 His poetry tends to be extremely complex an attribute often associated with the work of Adonis with which it has much in common. Critics have argued that his work is not obtuse but that this appraisal results from readers who have made the mistake of imposing the same principles on his poetry as they would have done on other poetry; Hafez (1985:135). Nevertheless, the present writer feels that the reader has to work just as hard as the author had to at the point of creation when faced with a qasida of Maṭar’s—hence the relevance to us of Barthes’ term scriptible as applied to a text which invites the reader “to shift from the role of consumer to that of producer”; Eagleton (1983:137). The reader has to struggle to concretize the work and pin down its anarchic polysemantic potential within some manageable framework. The work is full of indeterminate elements, a set of directions a reader must actualize; Iser (1978). The reader rewrites the text for himself.2 For Barthes and the post-structuralists

1 Muḥammad ‘Afifi Maṭar is seen by the more recent generation of Egyptian poets as its source of inspiration, much more so than Ahmad ‘Abd al-Muṭṭi al-Higāzī or Salāḥ ‘Abd al-Sabūr even though the latter are better known. This may be attributed to the somewhat opaque nature of Maṭar’s work. It has also been said that ‘Abd al-Sabūr considered Maṭar a threat to his position as leading contemporary Egyptian poet and wielded his influence to prevent his work being published—‘Abd al-Sabūr was head of GEBO until his death in 1981. True or not it may explain why his work has been published in far-flung places, mainly outside Egypt. Feryal Ghazoul, in her article treating a poem from the diwān Anta Wāhiduhā wa-hiyya A’dā’uk Intatharat, expressed her astonishment at how difficult it was for her to actually get hold of his works—a fact which made her a bāḥitha in the literal meaning of the word. The present writer thinks Shākir ‘Abd al-Hamīd was actually serious when he interpreted the title of the aforementioned diwān as a statement on the state of the author’s work i.e. “you the poet are one but your works are scattered.”

Maṭar was born in the village of Ramlat al-Anjab in Manufiyya, Egypt on May 30, 1935. Having graduated from Ayn Shams in 1966 he taught philosophy in Kafr al-Sheikh and then worked as a journalist in Iraq from 1977-83. Whilst in Baghdad he became editor of Al-Aqlām in which many of his poems have been published. More biographical material can be found in a conversation between Maṭar and Ḳhadīr ‘Abd al-Amīr published in Al-Ṭālī’a al-Adabiyya 1980; year 6, No. 2.

2 Due to a clumsiness in style which would result from the obsessive repetition of he/she the writer will remain masculine but reminds the reader that he is used as an all-inclusive pronoun.

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all literature is intertextual—no piece of writing has defined boundaries: the
only place where the masses of disseminating signifiers are focused is, if
only temporarily, in the reader, not in the author.

Other critics would argue otherwise and the present writer is reminded of
ideas put forward by ‘Abd al-Ṣabur in his ground-breaking diwan Al-Nās fī
Bilādi (Dār al-Adab, Beirut, 1957). In the fourth part, “Sindbad,” of the first
qāṣīda from the dīwān entitled Rihla fi-l-Layl, a title which has much in
common with Maṭār’s obsession with dreams and related imagery, the char-
acter Sindbad is portrayed as a poet in search of artistic truth. The tradi-
tional symbol of Sindbad leaving security and plunging into danger, search-
ing for the pleasure of discovery about which he tells his companions upon
his return may be seen as an embodiment of the relationship between the
poet and those who are satisfied simply to read or listen to what he has writ-
ten. If the poet has to work hard at the point of creation then there is no
reason why his audience should not have to work to some extent, especially
if they are to understand the deep intoxication a poet feels in the act of writ-
ing poetry; Zayid (1981:79-91). However, the narrator in ‘Abd al-Ṣabur’s
poem is resigned to the fact that his audience will never fully grasp this
intoxication but, like Sisyphus, continues with his task happy in the realiza-
tion that he cannot cease; ‘Abd al-Ṣabur (1977:10-11):

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فِي الصباحِ يُقَاطع النَّدُمُ مجلس النَّدُم
لِسْمَعَوا حُكَائِيّة الضِّيَاعِ فِي بَحْرِ العَدْم

السندباد:
(لا تَحَكَّلَ لِلرَّفِيقِ عَن مَخَاذِرِ الْطَرِيقِ)
إِنْ قَلِتْ لِلسَّاحِيِّ اسْتَنْبَتْ قَالَ: كَيْفَ؟
السندباد كَالعَصَارِ عِنْدَهَا أَمْتَ

الندامِ:
هَذَا مَحَالُ سَندباد أَنْ نَجُوبُ فِي الْبَلَادِ!
إِنَّ هَذَا نَضَاعُ النَّسَاءِ
وُنْغِسُ الكُرُومِ
وَنَعْصِرُ الْنِّيْبِ الْمُشْتَاءِ
وَنَقُرُّ (الْكِتَابِ) فِي الْصَّبَاحِ الْمَسَاءِ