The experience of modern life is often associated with an excess of visual stimuli, a flood of images that inundates our capacity to control our interaction with the world around us. A popular metaphor for this condition is high-speed travel, which unites modern technology with the modern transformation of perception. Thus Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human*: “With the tremendous acceleration of life, mind and eye have become accustomed to seeing and judging partially or inaccurately, and everyone is like the traveller who gets to know a land and its people from the railway carriage.”

Reproduction of this modern experience of visual rapidity, chaos, overload, is a characteristic feature of Modernist literary techniques. Whether celebrated, as in Futurism, or deplored, as in T. S. Eliot, the aggressive insistence of visual images upon a feeble consciousness pervades Modernist and avant-garde literary representation. In Arabic poetry we find an exemplary instance of this phenomenon in one of the first works to be associated with literary Modernism, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī’s second collection entitled *Abāriq Muhashshama* (Broken Pitchers), which appeared in 1954. Ihsan ‘Abbās, in his pioneering study of this work, describes al-Bayātī’s technique in the following manner: “In every one of his images there is a procession of successive scenes, and these rapid scenes are as it were captured from a fast train. Their appearance is ephemeral and their concord sometimes disturbed, and following them fatigues the vision.” It is apparent then that al-Bayātī

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[This article is the final contribution to the *Journal of Arabic Literature*’s special issue “Perhaps a Poet is Born or Dies”: The Poetics of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī JAL 32 no. 2. We regret that time constraints did not allow us to place it in the earlier issue. Ed.] I am grateful to Rachana Kamtekar and Salah Hassan for comments on this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a panel titled “‘Perhaps a Poet is Born or Dies’: the Poetics of Abd al-Wahhhab al-Bayatii” organized by Suzanne P. Stetkevych under the auspices of the *Journal of Arabic Literature* at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), November 16-19, 2000, in Orlando, Florida.


2 All citations of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī’s poetry are from *Al-A’māl al-Shi‘riyya*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabiyah li al-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr, 1995). All translations from the Arabic in this article are mine.

succeeds at least in providing a window seat in the railway carriage of modernity.

There is more at stake here, however, than the simple reproduction of modern visual experience. The very diagnosis of this malady of the modern eye points to a distinctive structure of feeling, an aesthetic/historical ideology that we have come to associate with literary Modernism. Take, for example, Walter Benjamin, who places the experience of shock at the center of his conception of modernity. For Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire is the first modern artist because he was the first to transform his struggle with the shock experiences of modernity, visual and otherwise, into a form of art. Benjamin contrasts the disjointed, unassimilable impressions of everyday modern life with the structured experience of the past, rooted in tradition and community. What is distinctive about modernity, in this view, is the absence and even impossibility of an experiential framework that could encompass and give meaning to the multifarious impressions of everyday life. As a result, these impressions become autonomous and threaten the individual, who must develop mechanisms to cope with them.

Benjamin's sense of modernity is closely related to that of many of his Modernist contemporaries. It is indeed precisely the works of Modernism that bring to the fore, problematize and artistically exploit the autonomy of sensory impressions, particularly visual impressions. In these works visual autonomy is not simply an accurate rendition of modern life. It synecdochically evokes a whole theory of modernity, a complex of assumptions, attitudes, associations whose cultural dominance continues through the present. It is both an artistic technique and a form of historical consciousness. In al-Bayāṭī's poetry, visual autonomy is the chief aesthetic principle and thus the primary mark of Modernist affiliation. The visual mode of his poetry embodies a sense of modernity with which we are familiar. Nevertheless, al-Bayāṭī takes his version of Modernist visuality in a distinctive aesthetic and ideological direction. For al-Bayāṭī, the untrammeled, disordered stream of images that constitutes our experience reveals the existential deficit and political degradation of our world. At the same time, however, these images contain the fragments of a superior reality, the potential for the restoration of what we believe we must once have had. The primary significance of visual autonomy is therefore epistemological. Al-Bayāṭī's poetry detaches the visual from any external referent as well as from a determining subjectivity. The image comes to stand alone as the location of both the internal reality of an observer and the external reality of things as they exist inde-

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