

## CRITICISM IN TRANSLATION

## The Social Roots of the Arabic Free Verse Movement

NAZIK AL-MALA'IKA

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION  
BY QUSSAY AL-ATTABI

## Introduction

On 27 October 1947, the Iraqi poet Nazik al-Mala'ika (1923–2007) wrote “الكوليرا” (“al-Kulira”; “Cholera”), an experimental poem that defied the traditional rules of Arabic prosody. Al-Mala'ika wanted to write a poem in response to the outbreak of the cholera epidemic in Egypt and felt that the traditional forms restrained her ability to express the intensity of her feelings about the tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Al-Mala'ika's father, himself a man of letters, rejected the poem as “اخفاق كامل” (“a total failure”), warning her that she could not transgress the boundaries of Arab taste with a poem defying deep-rooted and time-tested conventions (qtd. in al-Mala'ika, “al-Shi'r” 92; my trans.). But the ambitious poet persisted, betting her father that the experimental poem “ستغير خريطة الشعر العربي” (“would change the map of Arabic poetry”; “Al-Shi'r” 93). And she was right. The publication of “al-Kulira” represents a turning point in modern Arabic literature, as the poem is “recognized as the first example of its kind, a dramatic break with fourteen centuries of metrical orthodoxy” (Creswell 72). Al-Mala'ika called the new form of poetry الشعر الحر (*al-shi'r al-hurr*; “free verse”), which allowed for breaking the monorhyme and varying the number of feet in each line of verse. The new form was an immediate success, and although it was hardly the only mid-century experimentation with form, *al-shi'r al-hurr* proved “the most successful metrical experiment in twentieth-century Arabic poetry” (DeYoung).

Al-Mala'ika, one of the Arab world's most famous poets, was born in Baghdad on 23 August 1923 to a well-educated family. After graduating from the famed Iraqi Teachers' Training College in 1944, she received a Rockefeller Scholarship to study literary criticism at Princeton University, before earning a master's degree in comparative literature from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Afterward, she returned to Iraq and held teaching positions at the Universities of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul until 1970, when she moved to Kuwait to work at Kuwait University. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, al-Mala'ika moved to Cairo, where she lived until her death, on 20 June 2007.

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After the publication of “al-Kulira,” al-Mala'ika penned a series of articles to explain, defend, and propagate her new form of poetry. The articles, collected in a landmark book of criticism titled *قضايا الشعر المعاصر* (*Qadaya al-Shi'r al-Mu'asir; The Issues of Contemporary Poetry*), belong to a rich period in the history of modern Arabic literature when questions of experimentation, tradition, and canon formation were passionately debated. Al-Mala'ika was a major voice in these debates, and her article “الجذور الاجتماعية لحركة الشعر الحر” (“Al-Judhur al-Ijtima'iyya li-Harakat al-Shi'r al-Hurr”; “The Social Roots of the Arabic Free Verse Movement”), published here in English translation for the first time, is an excellent point of departure for exploring her contributions, not least because al-Mala'ika's positions in the article point to the different battles she was fighting at the time in defense of *al-shi'r al-hurr*.<sup>2</sup> On one front, she had to wrestle with the zealous supporters of traditional verse forms who saw her departure from the conventional rules of prosody as an affront to the Arabic literary tradition. On another, she labored to explain to the movement's disciples that *al-shi'r al-hurr* was an improvement on, not an abandonment of, traditional prosody. Meter remained the sine qua non of Arabic poetry, and *al-shi'r al-hurr* still needed to play within strict metrical constraints in order to be considered poetry. Arabic free verse, in other words, was not free. Finally, she argued against detractors who dismissed *al-shi'r al-hurr* as a European import, and she emphasized that it was an indigenous form grown out of local social imperatives.

This emphasis on the locality of innovation was a curious point of contention in mid-century Arabic poetics. Around the same time al-Mala'ika and others were popularizing *al-shi'r al-hurr*, a group of Arab modernist poets in Beirut was experimenting with a competing form, *قصيدة النثر* (*qaṣīdat al-nathr*; “the prose poem”), fashioned after the French *poème en prose*. Members of the group both amplified and celebrated the European influence on their poetry (especially that of such figures as Charles Baudelaire, Antonin Artaud, and St. John Perse), and they dismissed al-Mala'ika as a traditionalist

whose new form imposed restraint rather than encouraged innovation. They demanded a more radical break from tradition and believed that Arabic poetry needed to find the literary models for innovation more in the poetic experiments in Paris and New York than in the prosodic legacy of eighth-century Iraq. Al-Mala'ika fiercely protested extending the label *al-shi'r al-hurr* to include this type of experimentation, deeming the prose poem paradoxical and labeling it as “الشكل المجلوب المصطنع” (“al-shakl al-majlub al-mustana”; “the fabricated, imposed form”; “Al-Shi'r al-Hurr wa-l-Jumhur” 130; my trans.). She thought that whereas French and English poetic structures and traditions might accommodate the prose poem, such enterprise was unlikely to succeed in Arabic literature because of the marked separation between the categories of poetry and prose. Further, she believed that Arabic literature stood to benefit from the European traditions as long as its forms were not subsumed by blind imitation of European literatures. Al-Mala'ika herself translated a few poems from English into Arabic, famously Thomas Gray's “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” and believed that translated literature should enrich local forms rather than replace them.

Such a multifront battle contextualizes al-Mala'ika's emphasis in “Social Roots” on the locality of *al-shi'r al-hurr* and sheds light on her strategy to simultaneously call for experimentation and caution against abandoning tradition. After all, al-Mala'ika saw herself as at once a destroyer and a preserver of modern Arabic poetry. She aimed to cope with this paradox by asserting her leadership of the vanguard movement while reining in excessive flight from tradition.

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## NOTES

1. The outbreak was a health disaster that resulted in 10,277 deaths (Shousha 353–54).

2. The article first appeared in the Lebanese journal *Al-Adab* in 1958. Al-Mala'ika subsequently updated the article and included it as a chapter in her book *قضايا الشعر المعاصر* (*Qadaya al-Shi'r*

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## The Social Roots of the Arabic Free Verse Movement

### NAZIK AL-MALA'IKA

If there was a general principle governing innovation [تجديد; *tajdid*],<sup>1</sup> it would be this one: innovative movements attempt to rebalance and reposition the individual and the nation after external factors destabilize the individual's situation or the nation's state of affairs. In turn, innovation soon proves itself a tenacious necessity, like a persistent visitor who keeps knocking at the door, leaving the nation with no choice but to open it. However, history shows that human communities confront innovation with suspicion and caution, accepting it only after a long period of resistance, as though an overwhelming urge pushes them to protect themselves from this mysterious visitor. Innovators, of course, protest such hesitancy toward renewal and accuse the public of stagnation, folly, and an inability to appreciate creativity. But a deeper look at the sociology of communities would convince us to be more forgiving of the reluctant public. For this vigilance is, in fact, nothing but a sign of the authentic and cohesive character of the nation, which resists collapsing in the face of every new idea. Otherwise, it would no longer be a nation, nor would it be capable of preserving its heritage [تراث; *turāth*]. From a biological point of view, vigilance is a self-defense mechanism that the human body deploys in order to confront transgression and mitigate the perils of

the unknown. When accepting a new opinion, we in fact destroy and then rebuild ourselves so that the foreign object can coalesce with the other objects already stored in our minds. Therefore, we cannot liberally accept every opinion we encounter. Far from it. We need to be judicious and resistant. Our biological nature imposes such a cautionary reaction on us vis-à-vis new ideas, just as it imposes rules for health vis-à-vis fever, cold, or hypertension. In both cases, preservation entails conditioning the body to gradually accept a new state without causing harm or strain. Every new opinion shakes the nation's intellectual and psychological core, because the nation cannot accept new ideas instantly, but must instead adjust and reshuffle its former content so that the old and the new may coalesce.

Not surprisingly, then, the inception of the free verse [الشعر الحر; *al-shi'r al-hurr*] movement in Iraq in 1949 was initially resisted.<sup>2</sup> The literati as well as the public dismissed the experiment as an ill-intentioned heresy [بدعة; *bid'a*] intended to destroy Arabic poetry. The idea of writing an Arabic poem based on the foot [تفعيلة; *taf'ila*] rather than the hemistich [شطر; *shaṭr*] shocked the public, because the new method asked the readers to accept a fundamental change in their understanding of poetry.<sup>3</sup> Because of the richness of its culture, the Arab public rejected the new style and stood strong in the face of this sudden demand. It could not

accept the change until after a period of scrupulous examination. The Arab readers were accustomed to the structure of classical poetry, which combined three or four feet in a fixed hemistich. Suddenly, they opened their eyes one morning to see before them poems whose hemistiches did not conform to a fixed number of feet: for example, a two-foot hemistich could be preceded by a one-foot hemistich and followed by another with four feet. In addition, the public was used to having each line in a poem consist of two hemistiches. But now they were reading poetry that intentionally destroyed the integrity of the poetic line, did away with its semantic and formal independence, and extended it across several lines of the poem. This was a glaring violation of traditional Arabic prosody. Traditional prosodists [العروضيون; *al-'arūḍiyyūn*] maintained a strict distinction between, say, the meters of الكامل [*al-kāmil*] and مجزوء الكامل [*majzū' al-kāmil*].<sup>4</sup> But the new poets combined the two meters at will, treating them as one meter when needed, because they have the same foot structure.

In reality, however, what the free verse movement did was to innovatively reimagine some of the traditional rules of prosody. The aim was to grant the modern poets greater freedom of expression by allowing them to shorten or lengthen each line according to what they wished to express. The movement did not originate from a disregard for prosody, despite the allegations of those who have no proper knowledge of its workings. On the contrary, *al-shi'r al-ḥurr* was the product of the modern poet's astute attention to the details of traditional prosody. Such consideration revealed to the poet a wonderful trait in six of the Arabic meters that rendered them pliable enough to be used to generate a new metrical style.<sup>5</sup> This style is still based in tradition, but adds to it the novelty of our age. Unfortunately, though, the Arab public rushed to reject and mistrust the nascent form. The opposition's favorite accusation was the charge that the young poets innovated a new method of writing poetry in order to avoid the difficulty of conforming to the established Arabic meters. In other words, the innovation was meant to cloak the laziness of these young poets and to disguise the

shallowness of their poetic talents. The critics claimed that freedom from prosodic restrictions represented both a surrender to ease and a recourse to self-indulgence since, they presumed, anyone could write free verse, not just poets.

But how can one claim that exercising freedom is easier than obeying restriction? We might indeed say that the opposite is true, for freedom necessarily involves responsibility. Anywhere and everywhere, humanity has been keen on maintaining restrictions. It has been dragging its chains, clinging to them even as they continue to groove its neck and arms for no purpose other than the fact that these chains shield against the hassles, responsibilities, and dilemmas of freedom. In fact, if we ponder this question further, we realize that chains are nothing but paved, obstacle-free roads that provide humanity with a sense of safety and stability. They are like the high walls of prison that protect the inmates confined within them from the possibility of erring. Lazy minds enjoy chains because they spare them the hardship of choice and the anxieties of independence. That is why societies have imposed strict rules, instituted unyielding regulations, and drawn detailed plans for every course of action in life. Freedom is dangerous because it entails taking risks in which human beings jeopardize their comfort and well-being. Only those who have extreme self-confidence can overcome the fear of risk-taking. If restriction represents a clear road on which no one can get lost, freedom leaves a person alone before tens of roads from among which they choose the one that suits their circumstances and appeals to their desires. And they know that some of these roads could lead to doom and destruction. That is why most human beings prefer safer lives shackled with chains. Maybe deep inside, they see freedom as a risky gamble, or even a pact with the devil. This saddens the pensive mind. But, as I have just said, humans prize happiness and safety above all else. And they have the right to do so.

That said, I do not need to depend merely on this theory of freedom in order to refute the allegations of the opposition to the free verse movement. After all, the free verse that fills many books and

newspapers today itself lends us the evidence we need to prove that freedom is more difficult than restriction. If we were to conduct a detailed statistical study comparing the metrical mistakes in modern poetry before and after the rise of free verse, the results would show that the poets who write free verse are easily susceptible to making metrical mistakes to a degree that pains the heart. Nizar Qabbani and Fadwa Tuqan, for instance, write free verse as well as poetry based on classical meters.<sup>6</sup> And both make mistakes only in their free verse poems. Traditional prosodists would grin when faced with this curious fact, for no one questions the poeticity of Qabbani and Tuqan, and they are universally praised for their creativity and attentive ears. But the territory of free verse is treacherous. It lays traps along the way. If the poets are not careful, they can easily jump from one meter (like *الرجز* [*al-rajaz*]) to another (like *السريع* [*al-sari*] or *المنسرح* [*al-munsarih*]) simply because these meters begin with a similar foot structure.

### Free Verse Is a Social Flux

The central question in the minds of those who objected to the “heresy” [بِدْعَة; *bid'a*] of free verse was why the devious youth adopted a movement that aimed to turn Arabic meters upside down. They came up with a number of answers. Some said that the youth were obsessed with being strange and contrarian. Others presumed that the new generation was too lazy to adhere to the conventional two-hemistich structure and handle the demands of traditional monorhymes. A third group even deemed the Arabic free verse a copy of European poetry and dismissed it as having nothing to do with Arabic poetry. I, in fact, see how these allegations contain half-truths. There is wisdom even in folly, of course, and half-truths often accompany even the most ambiguous and rushed assessments. But the rush to dismiss the free verse movement ignores how societies develop and pays no heed to the movement’s fundamental connection to Arab society. If it were not homegrown, and born out of societal imperatives, this movement, which has attracted a whole generation of practitioners and

readers over the past long and slow decade, would not have survived. This movement did not spring out of nowhere, nor was it devoid of local roots, links, or causes.

Indeed, let us ask a more basic question: What causes a movement to form in a particular age in the first place? Undeniably, people who initiate movements of innovation in a nation do so in response to a spiritual need that burdens their being, urging them to fill a void they feel. Such emptiness emanates from serious cracks in the structure of the nation. Although the creative individuals might not be fully aware of these fractures, they still strive toward renewal to make up for what has cracked. In so doing, they are driven by environmental imperatives that they cannot resist. They feel a relentless internal pressure that pushes them to innovate. The urge to create is like the force of gravity that causes water to flow downhill, filling up the first crack it encounters before moving on to fill up any other cracks or crevasses it encounters on its path. This analogy is not all that far-fetched, if we consider what sociology teaches us about the powerful effect of social currents on the human mind. Along these lines, I would also mention that what some have been calling for under the slogan “literature for life” boils down to this same idea as well: that society is the root cause behind any literary movement.

However, the most compelling evidence that the free verse movement was necessitated by a decidedly social need is probably the failure of all the attempts to kill it in its infancy. The waves of the free verse current continue to intensify, to the degree that the third Arab Writers Conference in Cairo was compelled to recognize it officially and include it in its program.<sup>7</sup> No attack, no matter how forceful and persistent, would be capable of obliterating a movement that emanated from the core of the Arab individual’s social circumstances. Our movement is not a foreign frivolity that can be annulled with articles of condemnation or statements of boycott. It is an inevitable flood that is destined to fill voids and cause rifts, as I have suggested above. Indeed, we may think of the free verse movement as a sum of social factors enabling the Arab nation

to refashion its rich, deep-rooted intellect in response to modernization. It is arguably only one among a number of reform and renewal movements that are emanating from our lives today in all fields.

Many social factors joined forces to bring about the birth of *al-shi'r al-hurr*, but here I will elaborate on only four of these factors. They all, as we shall see, relate to the general social tendencies of the modern Arab individual, and they are based in both the characteristics of classical poetry and the particularities of free verse.

### 1. Desiring Reality

Free verse allows the modern Arab individual to escape romanticism and enter the sphere of reality, which prizes seriousness and hard work. When the modern poet looked at the traditional two-hemistich style, she found it contradictory to this desire for reality: on the one hand, classical verse constrains the poet to monorhymes and limits her to using a fixed hemistich length, and on the other, it is overburdened with lyricism, ornamentation, and artificial aestheticism.<sup>8</sup> The modern poet deemed these constraints to be a form of indulgence. They were a waste of intellectual effort in pursuit of useless formalities at a time when the individual had the urge to build, create, and engage with the issues of our time. The modern poet hates wasting her efforts in erecting empty poetic edifices filled with an unbearable degree of pomp. Such unshakable edifices repel the active mind by stifling creativity. The modern poet wants to move and charge ahead. The problems of the age call on her, and she does not have time to waste on the luxury of constraints and the frivolity of monorhymes. The obligations of work and productivity press her to create for herself a style that is more liberal and less glorified. In this respect, indeed, she is like a simple farmer who would find wearing fancy attire constrictive. She needs simpler apparel that allows her to move freely in order to carry out her work. It is in this spirit that the modern poet forged ahead with creating free verse: a form that is simpler than the classical style and freer of vain solemnity.

And then there is the issue of lyricism. The high musicality of the classical meters lends an air of

emotional and imaginative hyperbole to these meters. This exaggerated lyricism goes hand in hand with formal constraint. As soon as poets fall into the bind of the monorhyme and hesitate at a certain line, they are overcome by the feeling that they could not move on until they write a frivolity at the behest of the beautiful but tyrannical queen—the monorhyme—that sits at the end of each line, insisting on being its most distinctive part. Probably this practice of indulgence and frivolity is what makes classical poetry appear weighed down by the aphoristic imagery of amber and silken drapes drawn by soft maidens whose only function in life is to be spoiled and sleep through the afternoon. As an active member of society, the modern poet deplures such lethargy and rejects imposed aestheticism. She wants her poetry to be reflective, positive, and expressive—goals that the exaggerated lyricism of the classical meters hinders. She eschews this emotionally musicalized tone because it does not suit her stride toward productivity and activity. And she wants to set herself free from the flacon of dreams and from the illusions of *The Arabian Nights*; free verse offered an escape from the weight of the clichés of concubines and Aladdin's lamp. The modern poet seeks reality even if it is coarse. She reaches out to touch the truth even if it bruises her hands and causes them to bleed.

It is the freedom of free verse from the solemnity of the classical meters, as I have said, that makes free verse well suited to represent a life whose ultimate goal is not tangible beauty. Such freedom allows for poetry to have as its aim the expression of purposeful meaning rather than the construction of superficial aestheticism. Taking a sociological look at the origins of the free verse movement reveals its roots in the modern poet's desire to shatter illusions and look with unclouded eyes at the new Arab state of affairs.

### 2. Longing for Independence

The modern poet wants to establish her individuality by carving a new path for poetry, where her modern subjectivity stands out against that of the classical poets. She wishes to independently create

something for herself, inspired by the needs of the age. She no longer wants to be a mere follower of Imru' al-Qays, al-Mutanabbi, and al-Ma'arri.<sup>9</sup> She is, in this regard, like a teenager who, eager to prove her independence from her parents, starts rebelling against them. In other words, the free verse movement has psychological roots as well: it is like a sixteen-year-old who wants to be treated like an adult, not a child.

This burning desire for independence is part of what drives the modern poet to take a closer look at herself in search of untapped talents and traits that, when developed, can distinguish her from the older poets. In revolting against the traditional poetic molds, the new poet found an outlet for her desire for independence and creativity. Undoubtedly this tendency explains the extremism of some of today's budding poets. These poets have mistakenly dismissed the classical meters altogether as lacking in merit, looking down at the poetic rules that have consolidated over the long and rich course of Arabic poetic and linguistic traditions. It is not difficult for the balanced critic to forgive these poets' foolhardy stance against the hemistich and their irresponsible handling of the rhyme once she appreciates the psychological reasons behind their extremism.

### 3. Rejecting Models

Modern thought tends to spurn what I call "models," and it does so in both life and art. By a model [نموذج; *namūdhaj*] I mean any fixed unit that gets repeated without change or variety. We can see the idea of the model, for example, in the classical Arab art on the walls of mosques, palaces, domes, and minarets. The ornamentation involves the repetition of a fixed abstract unit or of a group of regularized units within a larger arabesque. This repetition is governed by a meticulously maintained symmetry. This foundational symmetry was the basis for both classical art and classical poetry. The line (or the hemistich) represented a unit, and it was the poet's duty both to maintain the self-sufficiency of this unit and to ensure consistent spacing between each of the repeatable units

throughout the poem. When the budding poet evaluated the two-hemistich system in the light of her modern inclinations, she found that it forced her to follow a restrictive, geometrically calculated form in which every hemistich is of equal length on the page. Of course, a formally geometric system of this sort requires a corresponding geometry in the mind, regardless of what the context might call for. Molds, after all, impose their shape on the material that is cast in them. And since the columnar poem requires consistent lengths and uniform spaces,<sup>10</sup> the material that the poet deals with has to be molded into a preset shape because of a covert connection between form and content that causes them to influence each other.

The most noticeable result of this coercion in the classical Arabic poem is the tendency for phrases to end at the end of the hemistich or, in instances where a phrase continues beyond the first hemistich, at the end of the line, where the lofty monorhyme builds a high wall through which meaning can hardly pass. According to the classical Arab critics, a well-written line is one that is self-contained in form and content, independent from the other lines of the poem. This system does not allow poets to use a phrase that is shorter than a hemistich, then, and they have to rephrase what they intend to say accordingly. Thus, the symmetrical hemistiches resulted in phrases that were more or less equal or, in the case of a phrase spanning a line, divided into two equal parts. These constraints do not appeal to the modern poet, who prioritizes meaning and whose phrases may be as short as two words. Occasionally, the modern poet wishes to extend one phrase over two or three lines. She might end a phrase in the middle of a hemistich and start another one that ends in the middle of the following hemistich. These moves allow the poet to produce a certain effect or generate the psychological reaction she seeks. More importantly, this practice represents life, because this is what we do in our daily lives. If we listen to a common man telling a story, we will notice the profound effect that varied phrase lengths have on his listeners. The traditional structure consisting of monorhymes and equal hemistiches prevents the poet from bringing about such effects.

Certainly, the modern poet has recognized the necessity of not determining the length of her phrases with a strict geometric mentality. In our age, the desire to seek freedom, break chains, and exhaust the possibilities of one's intellectual and spiritual life is no longer anomalous. Indeed, one of the sensibilities of the modern mind is its disdain for symmetries and models. Whenever it comes across a repetitive, formational symmetry, it seeks to introduce chaos into some aspect of it in order to disturb the model and break its monotony. There are many examples of this inclination around us in buildings, programs, and, indeed, lives. The free verse movement was nothing but a response to this tendency to walk away from the idea of the symmetrical, repetitive model. Life itself does not follow one pattern, and its events are not constrained by a fixed symmetry. They happen without preset schemes. Even language, the source of all thought and poetry, does not conform to models. We speak according to need: sometimes we need many words to express an idea, sometimes only a few, depending not on some imposed geometric system but rather in accordance with the meaning we wish to convey. This is why the modern poet revolted against the rigid two-hemistich structure and turned to a foot-based style that enabled her to end phrases however meaning and expression warranted.

#### 4. Privileging Content

Generally speaking, the modern Arab individual prioritizes content over form. We can observe this general tendency in different aspects of our lives, and it is linked to the age's drive toward creativity and productivity. Modern philosophy teaches that content and form are two aspects of a single core. Any attempt to sever one from the other would necessarily result in the destruction of the core. Contemporary Arabic criticism should champion this intrinsic unity between form and content, because separating the two would endanger the mind and the being of the Arab nation. However, literary and social movements do not submit to reason; they are governed, instead, by the laws of

social progress. The modern age followed a dark age in which Arabic poetry was intensely dominated by strict formalism, empty artificiality, and tropes that bore little relevance to lived experience. The modern poet found herself a successor to generations of poets who reveled in writing riddles, non-dotted poems, and poems ending in playful rhyming. Those poets cared very little about conveying meaning to their readers, obsessing instead over creating abstract forms of no value beyond their superficial aestheticism. The modern poet's reaction to this aestheticism was to pay greater attention to content and to do away with formal artificialities. The free verse movement was a manifestation of this tendency, which, at its core, was a revolt against the privileging of form over content in poetry. The modern poet refuses to tailor her phrases to conform to the limits of the hemistich structure; instead, she strives to grant control to the meaning she wants to convey. As I have just mentioned, the traditional metrical system champions the integrity of the form over the expressive truthfulness and affective excellence of content. Moreover, the two-hemistich system is authoritarian, for it forces the poet to sacrifice meaning in order to conform to a certain metrical structure. And the tyrannical monorhyme becomes a distraction, compelling the mind to wastefully overwork itself in search of expressions that would fit a certain superfluous rhyme. This authoritarianism champions form over content. Our age, however, wants to engage life itself and create from it models that take advantage of its rich intellectual and emotional energies. The tendency to prize form over content agitates the modern poet. This is the reason behind the excessive use of free meters among some younger poets, who sometimes appear to have abandoned the classical meters altogether.

Admittedly, there are many factors behind the birth of *al-shi'r al-hurr*, but I think that these four issues were the main features that characterized the advent of the movement. Of course, we may look at the movement from other angles and see in it, for example, the aversion of the youth toward the glorified aura that the Arab critics often grant

to the classical literary tradition. Whereas the old critics saw perfection in tradition, the current generation may view the very idea of canonization as a form of stagnation, since it implies finality—an idea that renders further effort useless and creative work meritless. Perhaps our generation has grown weary of the themes of old poetry, and when it encountered the specters of the past nidified on the classical meters, it decided to abandon them for a time in order to build a new poetic entity with new meters. It decided to do so until complete independence was attained, before looking back at traditional forms with fresh eyes and returning to them with deeper understanding.

That said, I must emphasize that the free verse movement, in its purest form, is not a call to abandon the traditional metrical structures altogether. Nor does it aim to present itself as an alternative to the Khalili meters.<sup>11</sup> All *al-shi'r al-ḥurr* aims to do is create an additional, newer style to tackle some of the complex issues brought about by the new age. I will not be breaking any news when I emphasize that some issues are, indeed, better treated using the classical metrical forms than the free verse style. Therefore, I see no rationale behind the tendency among some budding poets to write all their poetry in free verse. However, extremism exists in all social and literary movements. In fact, we might go further to say that every movement starts off extremist before dialing back toward moderation, after being pruned by experience and polished by necessity. I am certain that many of the poets who now use free verse excessively will revert in the coming years to moderation and balance, and that they will write some of their poetry in traditional forms.

Today, however, I worry about the movement. I am disturbed by the extremism that accompanies it, and I am troubled by the fury and the partisanship of some of its ardent supporters. They mistakenly seem to think that combating our literary heritage is one of the objectives of the free verse movement, as if it were even possible for us to create something for which our talented ancestors had not paved the way for a thousand years. I want to reiterate: in order for the movement of *al-shi'r al-ḥurr* to have a lasting legacy, the modern poets need to

recognize their heritage as the wellspring that has led them to making things new. Disowning tradition and seeking excessive distance from the past are symptoms of a nation's lack of self-confidence. Although such feelings may be understandable at this juncture in history, the Arab individual has a rich heritage and will not be overcome by them for long. I am sure that, in the near future, the Arabs will regain control over their affairs. When this happens, the free verse movement will look like a small drop in the expansive ocean of Arab literary history. Only then will the Arab individual realize, for the first time, that the meters she invented have reached maturity and have themselves become a vital part of her ineradicable literary heritage.

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. For Arabic terms and titles, I have followed the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.
2. Al-Mala'ika insisted that the Arabic free verse movement started in 1949, the year her important book of poetry *شظايا ورماد* (*Shazaya wa-Ramad; Splinters and Ashes*) was published. In her introduction to the fifth edition of *قضايا الشعر المعاصر* (*Qadaya al-Shi'r al-Mu'asir; The Issues of Contemporary Poetry*), al-Mala'ika maintained that all previous attempts at writing free verse, including hers, were only "harbingers" (أرسلات; *irhāsāt*; my trans.) predicting the inception of the free verse movement in 1949 (16).
3. A traditional Arabic poem (قصيدة; *qaṣīda*) consists of a succession of two-hemistich lines, each ending with the same rhyme (قافية; *qāfiya*) throughout the poem. *Al-shi'r al-ḥurr* did away with this two-hemistich structure and allowed the lines to end with different rhymes.
4. The study of poetic meters is called عروض (ʿarūḍ). The rules of ʿarūḍ were codified in the eighth century by al-Khalil bin Ahmad al-Farahidi (718–86), of Basra, Iraq. The meters are sometimes known, after al-Farahidi's first name, as البحور الخليلية (*al-buḥūr al-Khaliliyya*; "Khalili meters").
5. Al-Mala'ika maintained that not every meter was compatible with *al-shi'r al-ḥurr*. She identified a handful of meters with "repeatable" feet in which free verse can be written (*Qadaya* 68). *Qadaya al-Shi'r al-Mu'asir* contains an essay, "العروض العام للشعر الحر" ("Al-'Arud al-'Am li-l-Shi'r al-Hurr"; "The General Prosody of Free Verse"), that details the free verse metrical rules.
6. Two celebrated Arab poets: the Syrian Nizar Qabbani (1923–98) and the Palestinian Fadwa Tuqan (1917–2003).
7. The third Arab Writers Conference was an especially important cultural gathering that took place on 9–16 Dec. 1957

in Cairo, under the auspices of the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser.

8. Although al-Mala'ika uses the "neutral" masculine pronoun in this and a few other statements below, I have replaced it with third-person feminine pronouns in the translation since al-Mala'ika seems to be talking about herself in these places. Using the feminine pronoun as a neutral pronoun at the time would have been considered grammatically incorrect and would have potentially undermined and detracted from al-Mala'ika's argument. In places where the reference is not to al-Mala'ika and the referent's gender is unknown or irrelevant, I have replaced the masculine pronouns with "they" as a neutral pronoun.

9. Here the author names three canonical Arab poets who wrote some of the most celebrated traditional *qaṣīdas*. Imru' al-Qays, who is said to have lived in the sixth century, wrote one of the *mu'allaqāt* (معلقات) poems, the seven finest examples of pre-Islamic Arabic verse. Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi (915–65) and Abu al-'Ala al-Ma'arri (973–1057) lived during the golden age of poetry in the Abbasid caliphate (750–1517).

10. Classical Arabic poetry is sometimes referred to as الشعر العمودي (*al-shi'r al-'amūdī*; "columnar poetry") because of the shape of the poem on the page, which consists of two equal columns created by the succession of symmetrical two-hemistich lines.

11. Another name for traditional meters. See note 4 above.

## TRANSLATOR'S WORKS CITED

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