

Literatures, “Elite” And “Folk”. Junctions and Disjunctions*

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The Language Factor

The veneration in which the classical form of the Arabic language has long been held needs no exposition. First honed in an impressive corpus of orally transmitted pre-Islamic poetry, it was then hallowed in the Holy Book of Islam, which repeatedly describes itself as an Arabic Qur>ān whose exact wording is never to be altered.

The Linguistic Bifurcation

Yet change is inevitable in any living language. <Amr ibn-Baḥr al-Jāḥiz (c.776-868 or 9) has recorded for us variations in the speech of Bedouins and of city-dwellers, all of which he deemed to be authentically Arabic and relevant to literary expression.¹

Al-Jāḥiz’s linguistic tolerance appears to have been shared by at least some of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries, and sketchy references to experimentation with verse forms and diction have survived, but soon after this generation a *sine qua non* for admission to the literary canon came into being, too absolute

* In this article I confine myself to a widely accepted system of transliteration, except that I use > for *hamza* and < for ح. These are easier on my octogenarian eyes than the widely used single quotation marks; but I also plead with my colleagues to adopt them because they are not so easily confused with apostrophes and single quotation marks, and above all because they stand for Arabic phonemes like all other letters of the alphabet, and ought not to be treated as if they were punctuation marks.

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¹ Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn an-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm*, ed. Gustave Fluegel. Leipzig: 1871, tr. B. Dodge. Columbia U.P., 2 vols., 1970 ; vol., 2, 174.

and too widely accepted to need formulation until it was challenged in modern times. It fell to the leading modernist of his generation, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973), to articulate most cogently and persistently the case for the retention of old-age standards, which he deemed necessary for the preservation of the Arab cultural heritage and capable of meeting modern needs, whereas he branded its colloquial form as a corrupt dialect incapable of giving voice to the concerns of advanced intellectual life².

Two Literatures : (1) Early Manifestations

Nevertheless, the unyielding distinction made between the intellectual and artistic activities of the elite and comparable pursuits of the common folk solely on the ground of their media of expression ensured that they ran separate courses and left separate records.

The course run and the heights reached by the high literature are too extensive and too well-known to be surveyed here, but germane to the present discussion is a complex of observations to be drawn from the work of pre-modern critics, revealing the tastes and priorities of the elite before it altered course in the nineteenth century. They are : (1) that poetry was treated as the heart of all literary expression, (2) that content and style were deemed to be entirely separable, and precedence was given to expression rather than content, and (3) a taste for verbal ornamentation grew, and led to the creation of an entire branch of rhetoric known as *badi'* which was concerned not with imagery but with word play; and though many deserved subtler treatment, it is mainly on their mastery of words that poets were assessed.

Also consistent with the key position given to poetry is that few prose writers commanded the attention of the critics, and when they did, it was again for their skill in handling words that they

² See *inter alia* his *Ḥadīth al-ʿArabi*, vol 1, Cairo, 1937, p.5-7; *ibid.* vol. 3, 1957, p. 12-18 ; *Mustaqbal ath-Thaqāfah fī Miṣr*, Cairo, 1938, p.236 ; *Khiṣām wa Naqd*, Beirut, 1963, p. 8-87.

were celebrated. As for features distinctive of prose genres, such as narrative structure, they attracted no critical attention of any kind.

The entire record of folk literature, on the other hand, has suffered from neglect, not to say disdain. It was of course primarily oral, and as such unstable and impermanent, and on the rare occasions when a folk composition was committed to writing, this was by some anonymous scribe who made it at least minimally conformable with classical syntax. This process was less intrusively applied to prose compositions than to verse, where scansion and rhyme would have had to be adjusted. This is to say that the very process by which the development of folk literature could become known was bound to produce a fragmented and skewed record, and at the outset the role of poetry was obscured.

In the prose genres, especially the narrative, both the high and the low literatures could have been well served by inherited material. But the literary establishment was uneasy about any narrative fiction intended only for entertainment, if only because of a derogatory reference in the Qur>ān (31:6) to "*one who buys idle stories in order to lay men astray from the path of Allah.*" Accordingly, pedigreed writers made abundant use of anecdotes, but these were presented as historical or edifying. Nevertheless, in Abū-<Alī at-Tanūkhī's (940-84) *al-Faraj ba<d ash-Shidda*, (Relief after Hardship), some of the narratives bear a close resemblance to those we find in the universally known folk collection, *The Thousand-and-One Nights*.

In the end, the only narrative genre established and creatively pursued in pre-modern elite literature was the *maqāma*. Badī< az-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (968-1008) was long credited with having invented it; but his contribution is better understood as having given an artful and highly ornate expression to a kind of anecdote, long popular about the *ṭufaylīyyūn*, characters who used their wits to make a living off their betters.

Nowhere was the gap wider than in two areas of creativity in which the elite writers took no part at all. One was the epic, in which folk artists have created more than ten narrative cycles³ cantered in the exploits of a warlike hero. These epics, though they have no fixed text but are told or sung in each performer's words, have enjoyed more than a passing vogue: a manuscript entitled “<Antar” is listed — and described as “coarse” — in the tenth century *Fihrist* of Ibn an-Nadīm⁴, and the Hilālī saga is still recounted in Egypt, and has been acknowledged by UNESCO as “a masterpiece of the intangible heritage.”

The other creative endeavour peculiar to folk artists was a variety of theatrical activities possibly starting as early as in the eighth century and ranging from pageants to shadow plays to dramatized monologues to rudimentary playlets⁵. These left no literary record other than three bawdy shadow plays by Shams ad- Shams ad-Dīn Muḥammad ibn-Dāniyāl (d. 1310) mostly in classical Arabic.

Two Literatures : (2) The Andalusian Experience

Yet in time folk literature did break the surface of literary history. That was in Islamic Spain, and the service rendered is but one part of the notably distinctive contribution Andalusia made to Arabic literature, presumably because beside the Iberians who thoroughly integrated with Arab/Islamic culture, were many who merely added a competence in spoken Arabic to their native tongue and were attracted to popular features of the incoming literature. So it is that texts that must have been known, and indeed been generated further East, such as the legend of Alexander and a popular

³ See, Lyons et Malcolm, C (1995), *The Arabian Epic*, 3 vols, Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn an-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm*, ed. Gustave Fluegel. Leipzig: 1871, tr. B. Dodge. Columbia U.P., 2 vols., 1970; vol., 2:174

⁵ A great deal of relevant information is conveniently brought together by Shmuel Moreh in his *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World*. New York University Press, 1992.

account of the Prophet's ascent to the heavens⁶ surfaced only in Andalusia and have survived not in their Arabic originals but in European translations.

More directly relevant here is that Andalusia gave full recognition to Abū Bakr ibn <Abd al-Malik ibn Quzmān (c.1086-1160), a man of some learning, well connected and well-acquainted with classical poetry, but celebrated for his multi-rhymed compositions in the vernacular, some clearly intended to be accompanied by comic theatrical activity⁷. The specific prosodic form he used was known as *ṣajal*, but later the term stretched to cover all verse compositions in the regional vernaculars of the Arabic speaking world.

Two Literatures: (3) Hybrid forms

What needs to be stressed here is that the distinctiveness of the Andalusian literary scene is not that it created unprecedented literary forms, but that it led the way to scholarly recognition of a phenomenon active throughout the Arab world.

Indeed once Ibn Quzmān had opened the door to literary activities that overstepped the strict limits of the literary canon, eminent authors in the heartlands began to catalogue parallel genres long known to them. First of these authors was Ṣafīyy ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī⁸ (1278-c.1349) who described and illustrated — mainly by compositions of his own — several long current genres distinguished mainly by their prosodic forms but to some extent also by their function. This — and perhaps some socio-economic readjustments that developed as trade guilds prospered and the Arabic language lost its supremacy in the Mamlūk age — made it acceptable for an established poet occasionally to compose some

⁶ Cerulli, Enrico (1949), *Libro della Scala e la questione delle fonti arabo-spagnole della Divina Commedia*, Vatican.

⁷ Moreh, Shmuel (1992), *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World*, New York U.P., p. 2-141.

⁸ *Die Vulgärarabische Poetik* —, ed. W. Hoenerbach. Wiesbaden, F. Steiner, 1956,

verse in the vernacular; but such exercises were looked upon as mere witticisms, and were usually excluded from the poet's *dimān*.

It must be stressed that none of this — neither Andalusian *zajal* nor its parallels in the heartlands — is folk literature, nor does it signal an acceptance of folk compositions into the literary canon. At most, it may reflect some aspects, mainly prosodic, of the practice of folk artists, but always with reservations. Some of the leading exponents of what came to be known as the 'seven arts' including Al-Ḥillī himself ⁹ downplayed the importance of their material. Besides, folk narratives in prose, epics, and theatrical representations inspired no parallel developments in elite writing. And from Arab literary critics neither prose nor verse compositions of lowly origin received any attention before the twentieth century.

Two Literatures: (4) the Moderns

In modern times, the old elite attached to traditional Islamic values subsists, but it has been elbowed into second place by a new one that has come to accept — in a modified form — most of the literary and many of the social values of the West. Influenced by Western political isms too, it sees itself as the guardian of the common people's interests, the guarantor of their future. It remains elite, however, albeit a benevolent one.

And its attachment to the classical language remains strong. In fact, almost by default, the vernacular has gained a foothold in the theatre and in the dialogue of novels and short stories. But as late as in 2000, a collection of the poems of Aḥmad Shawqī (1868-1932) entitled *ash-Shawqiyyāt* and edited by <Alī <Abd al-Mun<im <Abd al-Ḥamīd excludes all his *zajal* compositions.

Otherwise the use of the vernacular by literate authors is relegated to a category known as *adab <āmmī*, vernacular literature² widely accepted at all levels of society as a valid and enjoyable but

⁹ *Op.cit.*, p. 136.

separate form of expression, especially as it has expanded to include much humour and biting social satire. It is a convenient grey area which may serve as limbo for what is inadmissible to the canon, sometimes also as purgatory for what may be on its way to promotion.

Folk literature also is now dignified as *adab* but qualified as *shu'bi*, literally "popular." And since the middle of the twentieth century it is accepted at least as a valid subject for academic enquiry if not as an integral part of Arab perception or artistry.

Two literatures : Their interactions

This quick delineation of the historical record opens the way to a consideration of how the two literatures have interacted.

Before the nineteenth century, the Arab elite proved its openness to outside influences by drawing freely on the Greek, the Persian, and the Indian civilizations, but having set up a rigid barrier against linguistic corruption, it scarcely heard the rumblings in its underbelly. And its very success made it resistant to change. Yet, on the few occasions when it lowered its guard against seepage from the lower levels of society, its literature was enriched — with the development of the *maqāma*, with the Andalusian innovations, such as the interrelated *zajal* and *mumwashshah*.

The folk literature, on the other hand, dips into any source that flows its way, including what trickles down to it from on high. Its carriers are respectful of the elite, sharing with it its basic religious tenets and mostly yielding to it the regulation of the social order. The Sufi brotherhoods have been a major conduit for interchanges. Accounts of their holy men have been bread and butter for folk artists. Even illiterate adherents learned some litanies to be repeated by rote. Did any compositions by elite poets, at least when they stooped to using the vernacular, actually pass into the repertoire of folk artists? If only because the authorship of a folk text is seldom recorded, specific evidence of direct indebtedness is not to be expected, except on rare occasions.

But one such rare and precious occasion occurred when Mayy Ziyāda (1886-1941) recorded the texts of several popular songs that Syrians and Egyptians sang unaware that the lyrics had been composed by the established poet Ismāʿīl Ṣabrī Pasha (1854-1923) or by the aristocratic, secluded, and highly cultured <Ā>isha Taymūr, daughter of a Pasha and wife of a Pasha, who wrote poetry in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish but also in the Egyptian vernacular¹⁰.

This does not amount to a great deal of cross fertilization. There is, however, a broader sense in which, through the medium of expression, the two literatures may be said to have been interactive. For all that they are decried as debased forms of the language, the regional vernaculars derive some benefit from the umbilical cord that still connects them to the mother tongue. Any religious activity, any dealing with the authorities, the merest modicum of formal education, will engender some awareness of the classical language, of its authority, its prestige, its relevance. Only where these circumstances cease to apply, as in Malta, has the local form of Arabic developed into a separate language. Elsewhere the spoken forms of Arabic have remained relatively stable, fairly intelligible in neighbouring regions, their peculiarities sufficiently well known as to lend themselves to humorous or to stylistic word play, exploiting differences encountered across borders.

Already mentioned is the pre-modern elite's delight in all word play, the most prominent variety being the paronomasia, the *jinās*, which became increasingly elaborate and increasingly recherché. Whether by conscious imitation or by a parallel unfolding of a tendency to value language for itself, the folk poets have created a similar device which they call *ṣabr*, 'the flower'. It consists of a multisyllabic pun, but one achieved by a deliberate distortion of the pronunciation, in which only the consonants remain true and

¹⁰ In *al-Aṣmāl al-Kāmila*. Beirut: Muṣassasat Nawfal, 1982, vol. 1, p. 357-8.

anything may happen to the vowels, to the *hamza*, or to germination.

It is roundly condemned by a pillar of the establishment, <Abd al-Ghanī an-Nābulusī (1641-1731) in his *badī'iyā*¹¹ for its distortion of the language but both the kinship with and the estrangement from classical norms are demonstrable.

All these marks of linguistic kinship, however, loom large only because the old elite made language —indeed a form of the language perpetuated only by formal education — the sole criterion for the differentiation of the two literatures; and their modern successors have not entirely freed themselves from these priorities. This has had the effect of eclipsing vitally relevant issues, such as social relevance or artistic attainments.

The opening of folk material to modern academic research is sure to remedy this lack. A great many texts from different regions of the Arabic speaking world will need to be unearthed and studied before clear patterns can be detected and described. In the meantime, one cannot fail to notice — and to be disturbed by — instances of estrangement between the producers of the two literatures, especially when one stratum of society goes through a rapid revision of its values and the other does not. Both the elite and the common people, for example, profess their adherence to Islam, but in modern times the learned have moved substantially towards a liberal interpretation of it and the common people have not. The first Arabic book advocating the emancipation of women, for example - Qāsim Amīn's (1863-1908) *Taḥrīr al-Mar'ah* - was published as early as 1899. Yet to this day, in Egypt at least, the favourite topic among folk singers is the "honour crime" - the revenge killings in family vendettas and even more commonly the slaughtering by a father or a brother of a woman who has offended against the strictest of sexual codes. The practice seems

¹¹ *Op. cit.* (see note 12), p.13. His condemnation of the *zahr*, is found in his entry on *tawriya*, 'double entendre' (p. 188) and not the one on the paronomasia.

closer to the Jāhiliyya than to Islam, but it is perceived as lawful, and the perpetrator is usually shown to be praised by the judge before whom he appears¹², although in reality the law of the land does not condone his deed but finds it necessary to take a lenient view of it. Elite writers on the other hand seem to be embarrassed by the persistence of such violence. But neither of the two social strata is inclined to inveigh against the standards of the other.

Perhaps the best summing up one can reach at this point is this: Growing out of the same root, the literatures of the elite and of the common folk have grown not in step but also not at odds with each other. And there is a sense in which they complement and accommodate each other. During the thousand years or so from the eighth century to the eighteenth when the high literature nursed its linguistic aestheticism, it could scarcely have remained so puristic if there had not been an outlet in folk literature for the intrusive realities of daily life. And during the two centuries of radical readjustment since then, it could not have moved at such a vertiginous pace had the humbler folk not had the possibility of keeping their feet on well-trodden paths, not repudiating long cherished usages and assumptions but allowing them to unfold their potential. For, as Lord Tennyson put it:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways
Lest one *good* custom should corrupt the world

¹² See my *Popular Narrative Ballads of Modern Egypt*, p. 293-322, especially, p. 284, line 165.