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Poetics and Modernity

We will only be able to reach a proper understanding of the poetics of Arab modernity by viewing it in its social, cultural and political context. Its development in the eighth century was bound up with the revolutionary movements demanding equality, justice and an end to discrimination between Muslims on grounds of race or colour. It was also closely connected with the intellectual movements engaged in a re-evaluation of traditional ideas and beliefs, especially in the area of religion.

The dominant view held that the state was founded on a vision or message which was Islam. On the one hand, this state was constituted as a caliphate, in which the designated successor not only followed on from his predecessor but preserved the heritage and conformed to it in both theory and practice; on the other hand, it was a state formed of a single community, meaning that unanimity of opinion was an essential requirement. Politics and thought were religious; religion was one and permitted no divergence.

This explains why for the most part those in power fought against these revolutionary and intellectual movements. Politically, they were considered as a rebellion against religion because they attacked the caliphate, which represented religious authority. From an intellectual and philosophical point of view, their adherents were seen as heretics and apostates, either for

restricting the role of religion in the teaching of virtue, or for denying the role of revelation in knowledge and saying that knowledge and truth were the business of reason. The authorities viewed the mystical elements in these movements as constituting an attack on the law and practice of Islam; this was because they made a distinction between ‘the evident’ (*al-zāhir*) and ‘the hidden’ (*al-bāḥin*), or between ‘the law’ and ‘the truth’, asserting that knowledge and truth come from ‘the hidden’, hence the possibility of achieving a kind of unity or union between God and existence and between God and man.

To put it another way, those in power designated everyone who did not think according to the culture of the caliphate as ‘the people of innovation’ (*ahl al-iḥdāth*), excluding them with this indictment of heresy from their Islamic affiliation. This explains how the terms *iḥdāth* (innovation) and *muḥdath* (modern, new), used to characterize the poetry which violated the ancient poetic principles, came originally from the religious lexicon. Consequently we can see that the modern in poetry appeared to the ruling establishment as a political or intellectual attack on the culture of the regime and a rejection of the idealized standards of the

ancient, and how, therefore, in Arab life the poetic has always been mixed up with the political and the religious, and indeed continues to be so.

The problematic of poetic modernity (*ḥadātha*) in Arab society goes beyond poetry in the narrow sense and is indicative of a general cultural crisis, which is in some sense a crisis of identity. This is linked both to an internal power struggle which has many different aspects and operates on various levels, and to an external conflict against foreign powers. It would appear that the return to the ancient has been more eagerly pursued whenever the internal conflict has intensified or the danger from outside has grown more acute. In Arab society today we find a powerful extension of this historical phenomenon which confirms our observation.

Perhaps this helps to explain why the current of modernity in Arab society sometimes flows strongly (as was the case in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries) and at other times abates and recedes (as it did in the following centuries), according to whether the double-sided conflict, internal and external, is at a high or low point. It may also explain why modernity has tended to be a force which rejects, questions and provokes without entering in any conscious, radical way into the structure of the Arab mind or into Arab life as a whole. Perhaps, finally, it may go some way to explaining the dominance of the traditionalist mentality in Arab life and in Arabic poetry and thought.

The retreat of Arab society from the ways opened up by modernity began with the fall of Baghdad in 1258. With the Crusades came a complete halt, prolonged by the period of Ottoman domination.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth — the time of Western colonialism and of contact with its culture and its modernity, the period known as the *nahḍa* (renaissance, a name which merits a detailed study in itself) — the question of modernity was revived and the debate resumed over the issues which it provoked. Opinions were divided into two general tendencies: the traditionalist/conformist (*uṣūlī*) tendency, which considered religion and the Arab linguistic sciences as its main base; and the transgressing/non-conformist (*tajāwuzī*) tendency, which saw its base, by contrast, as lying in European secularism.

It is the first philosophy that has prevailed, especially at the level of the establishment, encouraged by economic, social and political conditions, both internal and external. According to this interpretation, the ancient — be it in religion, poetry or language — is the ideal of true and definitive knowledge. This implies that

the future is contained within it: nobody who is a product of this culture is permitted to imagine the possibility of truths or knowledge being developed which would transcend this ancient ideal. According to this theory, modernity — as established in poetry by Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām, in thought by Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 910), al-Rāzī (d. 1210) and Jābir Ibn

Hayyān (d. 815), and in the nature of visionary experience by the mystics, and which assumes the emergence of new truths about man and the world — is not only a criticism of the ancient but a refutation of it.

In other words, to believe in the pronouncements of modernity is to believe in things that have not been known before. Seen in this light, the new reveals a certain failing or lack in the old. Modernity therefore constitutes an attack on the fundamentals. On this basis we can understand the connection made between innovation in poetry, which violates the ancient, and heresy, and also why words like *ḥadīth* (modern) and *iḥdāth* (innovation), originally religious terms, could be carried over into the domain of poetry.

This traditionalist culture is embodied in the uninterrupted practice of an epistemological method which sees truth as existing in the text, not in experience or reality; this truth is given definitively and finally and there is no other. The role of thought is to explain and teach, proceeding from a belief in this truth, and not to search and question in order to arrive at new, conflicting truths.

It was therefore natural that this culture should reject a theory that was fundamentally opposed to it, especially those aspects of it which might have led people to doubt its religious vision and its cultural and intellectual apparatus.

Because of the dominance of this ‘fundamentalist’ knowledge at the level of the establishment and those in power, the Arabs find themselves — in spite of all the changes of the past fourteen centuries — moving on a stage where history is repeating itself with just one objective: the continual actualization of the past.

The reason this approach has gained in ascendancy is because ‘modern’ Arab thought has not confronted it in an analytical and critical manner and dismantled it completely. Perhaps it has not dared to, or perhaps it has preferred to work some kind of magic to make it vanish into thin air, which has quickly had the opposite effect. This may go some way towards explaining why ‘modern’ Arab thinkers have adapted to the shock of modernization from the West by treating modernity primarily as a technological achievement. For this reason modernity in Arab society has continued to be something imported from abroad, a modernity which adopts the new things but not the intellectual attitude and method which produced them, whereas true modernity is a way of seeing before it is production.

From an artistic and poetical point of view the dominance of traditionalist or fundamentalist culture led to a return to the values of pre-Islamic orality. Most of the poetry written after the so-called Arab renaissance (*nahḍa*), by such poets as al-Bārūdī (1838–1904), Shawqī (1882–1932) and their contemporaries, was no more than a ritual consolidation of this return. The poets who opposed the ancient, claiming to be modernizers, did not turn to

Arab modernity as manifested in the poetry of Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām or the mystic writings, nor did they refer to the theorization of the new poetic language carried out by al-Jurjānī. Instead, they began to imitate modern Western poetry.

Thus the crisis of modernity appeared at its most complex during the *nahḍa*, a period which created a split in Arab life, both theoretically and practically. On the one hand, it was a revival of forms of expression developed in past ages to respond to present problems and experiences, which was also a resuscitation of old ways of feeling and thinking and methods of approach. It therefore helped to establish these forms as absolute inviolable

principles, to be eternally perpetuated as the single true poetry. The result was that the Arab personality, as expressed through this poetry, appeared to be a bundle of self-delusions, and Arab time to stand outside time. On the other hand, at the level of practical politics and daily life, the age of the *nahḍa* was set in motion in a state of almost complete dependency on the West.

In this way the period laid the foundations of a double dependency: a dependency on the past, to compensate for the lack of creative activity by remembering and reviving; and a dependency on the European-American West, to compensate for the failure to invent and innovate by intellectual and technical adaptation and borrowing. The present reality is that the prevailing Arab culture derives from the past in most of its theoretical aspects, the religious in particular, while its technique comes mainly from the West.

In both cases there is an obliteration of personality; in both cases, a borrowed mind, a borrowed life. This culture teaches not only the consumption of things but also the consumption of human beings.

Since the 1950s the cultural background of Arab poets and critics has derived from two divergent traditions: that of the self (ancient, traditionalist) and that of the other (modern, European-American). These two traditions blur or blot out the values of modernity and creativity in the Arab literary heritage. The first does so on the pretext of a return to original sources; the second does so perhaps out of ignorance, or is so dazzled by the other that it cannot perceive its own particular nature, and what distinguishes it from the other.

I should acknowledge here that I was one of those who were captivated by Western culture. Some of us, however, went beyond that stage, armed with a changed awareness and new concepts which enabled us to reread our heritage with new eyes and to realize our own cultural independence. I must also admit that I did not discover this modernity in Arabic poetry from within the prevailing Arab cultural order and its systems of knowledge. It was reading Baudelaire which changed my understanding of Abū Nuwās and revealed his particular poetical quality and modernity, and Mallarmé's work which explained to me the mysteries of Abū Tammām's poetic language and the modern dimension in it. My reading of Rimbaud, Nerval and Breton led me to discover the poetry of the mystic writers in all its uniqueness and splendour, and

the new French criticism gave me an indication of the newness of al-Jurjānī's critical vision.

I find no paradox in declaring that it was recent Western modernity which led me to discover our own, older, modernity outside our 'modern' politico-cultural system established on a Western model.

The problem here is that the modern Arab poet sees himself in fundamental conflict both with the culture of the dominant political system, which reclaims the roots in a traditionalist manner, and with the images of Western culture as adapted and popularized by this system. The system separates us from our Arab modernity, from what is richest and most profound in our heritage. It is in collusion with the prevailing traditionalist tendencies and also with the cultural structures which came into existence in the climate of colonialism, imposing this relationship with the technical and consumerist forms of Western achievement upon us.

The most disturbing aspect of the problem is that the modern Arab poet lives in a state of 'double siege' imposed upon him by the culture of dependency on the one hand, and the culture based on a foetal relationship with the traditionalist past on the other.

What makes this aspect of the problem more serious is the position of the Arabic language itself. The Arab has grown up in a culture which views language as his speaking image, and himself as its feeling, thinking reflection. It is a union of reason and

sentiment, the chief symbol and assurance of Arab identity. It is as if language 'created' the Arabs, through instinct in the *Jāhiliyya*, revelation in the prophecy, and reason in Islam; as if originally in the Arab consciousness language was the Supreme Being itself, and its science the science of this Being. From the 'materialness' of this created language the rhythm of existence explodes and its essence pours forth. In this context we can understand the significance of the case endings (*i'rāb*): they represent the purest principle of language, the sign of unity between the static and the moving, the spoken word and the breath. If language is the rhythmic musical form of nature, then this form only reaches a proper state of wholeness and unity with inflexion.

Language, viewed from this perspective, is not a tool for communicating a detached meaning. It is meaning itself because it is thought. Indeed, it precedes thought and is succeeded by knowledge. This implies that the criterion of meaning was contained in language itself, and was defined by the rules of language.

The problem here is that this language which is regarded in theory as the essence of Arabness appears in practice to be an amorphous heap of words, which some use imperfectly, others abandon in favour of a dialect or foreign tongue and few know how to use creatively. It is like a huge storehouse which people enter, acknowledging their need for it, only to escape from it on some pretext or other. A gap exists between the language and those who speak it. What was once an end is now only a means. How can there be any

accommodation between a past which made language the essence of the human being, and a present which sees it only as an instrument and does not hesitate to call for its structure to be modified and for dialects to take its place? If we remember its relation to the sacred, and more precisely to the Qur'ān, can we not see in the current ignorance surrounding its usage or in the call for it to be modified by dialectal structures which separate it from the sacred, a sort of declaration of a changed awareness and identity?

The problematic of modernity at the present time thus becomes clearer at the level of language. What was the first sign of the presence of the Arabs and their creativity is being corrupted and degraded. The Arab of today is in the process of forgetting the fundamental element through which he knew existence, and which established his presence in history. He has lost the sense of language, as defined by Ibn Khaldūn, and appears ignorant of what has given him his identity, or of who he is.

In the light of these considerations it would appear that modernity is the problem of Arab thought in its dialogues with itself and with the history of knowledge in the Arab tradition. If we are to treat the problem of modernity, we must first re-examine the structures of Arab thought. To question modernity, Arab thought must question itself. Arab modernity can be studied only within the perspective of Arab thought, on the level of principles and actual historical developments, within the framework of its specific assumptions, using its epistemological tools and in the context of the

issues which gave rise to the phenomenon and have resulted from it. To study it from a Western perspective would be to distort it and distance oneself from the real issues.

Having acknowledged this, however, we come up against a crisis which, because it has gone on for so long, has become almost a natural phenomenon. I would formulate this crisis as follows: there is a desire in Arab society to separate religion from any form of authority, but there is a contrasting eagerness on the part of the authorities to see religion as one of the foundations of Arab life, its most nearly perfect system, inasmuch as it is divinely revealed, and therefore the key element in guaranteeing the security and stability of the political regime. For this reason politics and religion are bound together in an almost organic relationship.

Thus it is easy to understand why the freedom to ask questions, especially on strictly religious matters, under a regime which relies for its existence on this link, is almost non-existent. In practice politics becomes a sort of submission (*islām*) and an act of faith in the existing regime; anything else is tantamount to rebellion and blasphemy.

This crisis is made more problematic because many of the so-called modern intellectual tendencies striving to separate religion from political power are based on a closed intellectual structure which refuses to accept divine religion but puts another positivist 'religion' in its place.

This crisis constitutes the nucleus around which the dominant structure of thought in Arab society is formed. Both the elements of it which are related to the politico-cultural order and those which characterize the opposition are firmly anchored in the belief that truth is given *a priori* in a text-source which is perfect and definitive. This article of faith, religious or ideological, serves as the all-inclusive founder text; the existing regime, together with its supposed alternative — the opposition which is eager to replace it — is the power which watches over it. Culture is the text which transmits and interprets. Poetry preaches and teaches or instructs and delights. Knowledge is no more than a mirror image of the truths in the all-inclusive founder text.

The flaw is not in the text but in the human being who does not understand it properly or deviates from it. This text contains truth and knowledge. Because it is unique the truth must be unique, because it is its truth, and the same goes for the knowledge. Therefore it is a text which is equated with power. According to this view, truth is always to be found at the heart of power, never outside it. Al-Māwardī (d. 1058), writing in the eleventh century, comments that when a religion loses its authority, its truth is erased. Truth and power form a unity so the division or alteration of power is a division or alteration of truth, which threatens not only truth or power but the Islamic community (*umma*) itself.

This being the case, it is natural that in the eyes of its adherents this text should be absolute, irreplaceable

and not open to criticism. The past is defined according to the time when the text came into existence. It is the crucible where all times meet. It is not measured in time, but is itself the measure of time. Decadence lies in distance from this text, failure to adopt it, or deviation from the path traced by it. The *nahḍa* was not an awakening but a return to the past and a firmer attachment to the text. Did not a renaissance in Arab thought, ancient and modern, always represent a return to the prophetic text, the text of the leader and teacher?

This completes the picture of the blockade imposed on us by this crisis: prevailing Arab thought with its two strands, the 'ancient' and the 'modern', is radically opposed to modernity. It is through this crisis-ridden structure of thought that our 'modern' connection with the West and its modernity has been achieved. This has led us to concoct an illusory, specious modernity which is embodied on the practical, day-to-day level in the importation of modern manufactured goods of every kind, and on the level of poetry in plagiarizing forms of expression from languages whose particular genius is intrinsically different from that of Arabic. Thus the intellectual principles which gave birth to modernity are lost to us, their substance wiped out: the unbridled commitment to discovering the mysteries of nature and the unknown aspects of being in deed and word, not for the sake of any return to the past, but to find out more, to proceed, searching and questioning, towards a horizon open to infinity.

The technical, mechanical aspect of modernity is turning our lives into a desert of imported goods and consumption, eating away at us from within and distracting us from thinking about our own distinctive powers of invention. In literature, and in poetry in particular, it generates superficial, naive conceptualizations that interpret modernity simply as a way of arranging and combining words, a mirror held up to everyday life, or an attempt to catch the spray as it flies off the rolling waves of time.

This superficial modernity which is predominant in our societies, engendered partly by a fear of confronting the true state of Arab culture and partly by an understanding which stops at appearances, gives rise to many illusions. I will limit myself to discussing those which act as obstacles to the development of modern poetry.

1

The first is temporality. There are those who see modernity as the quality of being directly connected with and alive to the present moment. To seize the movement of change in this moment is proof of modernity. It is obvious that these people view time as a series of regular uninterrupted leaps forward, so that what happens today is necessarily an advance on what happened yesterday, and what happens tomorrow is an advance on both. The mistake of this tendency is to turn poetry into a style, ignoring the essential point that the most modern poetry goes beyond the present moment, or goes against it. Poetry does not acquire its modernity merely from being current. Modernity is a

characteristic latent in the actual structure of the poetic language.

The second illusion is the desire to be different from the ancient at all costs. Those who adhere to this belief think that merely to be different from what has gone before is proof of modernity. This is an instrumental point of view which turns creativity into a game of opposites, like the doctrine of temporality. One sets 'ancient' time against 'new' time, the other the 'ancient' text against the 'new' text. Thus innovation in poetry resembles waves on the surface of the water, vanishing one after another, despite the fact that a brief glance at the poetry of Abū Nuwās or al-Niffarī, for example, reveals it as more modern than much of the 'counter-poetry' of poets who are alive today.

The third illusion is identification. The West is supposedly the source of modernity. There is no modernity outside Western poetry and its standards: to be modern it is necessary to identify with Western poetry. From this there arises an illusion about norms where standards of modernity in the West, springing from a specific language and experience, become the standards for a language and experience of a different nature. This amounts to looting at a personal, linguistic and poetic level, and is the way to complete alienation.

The fourth illusion is a technical one concerning prose as a poetic form. There are those who believe that simply to write in prose, because it is different from the old metric writing and conforms to models of poetic prose in the West, is a way in to modernity.

Some go so far as to say that all metric writing is derivative and old-fashioned and all free verse is innovatory and modernist. This is the reverse of the traditionalist concept that metre in itself is poetry, and prose of whatever kind is the antithesis of poetry. The emphasis is placed not on the substance of poetry but on its external form. Neither metre nor free verse is enough in itself to ensure that the final product will be poetry. We all know verse which has metre and rhyme but is nothing to do with poetry, and supposedly poetic contemporary free verse which is similarly devoid of poetry.

The fifth illusion concerns content. Those who subscribe to this illusion believe that every poetic text which treats contemporary issues is necessarily modern, a claim which does not stand up to examination for a poet can treat these themes according to his intellectual understanding of them, while his artistic approach and manner of expression remain traditional. This is a fault which is all too evident in modern Arabic poetry; from the Iraqis, al-Ruṣāfi (1875–1945) and al-Zahāwī (1863–1936), and the Egyptians, Ḥāfīz Ibrāhīm (1872–1932) and Aḥmad Shawqī, up to the present, there are numerous examples, as there are in the work of all those poets who express their ‘modern’ ideological beliefs in their poetry.

The poetics of modernity in Arabic was born within a three-stranded movement: there was the urban-sedentary dimension with its own values and symbols (as opposed to the desert and bedouin life), given

unique expression and anchored firmly in the literary consciousness by the poetry of Abū Nuwās; the linguistic-metaphoric dimension or the rhetoric of metaphor (as opposed to what may be called ‘the rhetoric of reality’ of pre-Islamic poetry), expressed for posterity in the poetry of Abū Tammām and the mystic poets; and finally the dimension of interaction and assimilation with non-Arab cultures.

This modernity thus progressed beyond the normative and instead of referring to past authorities began to assert its uniqueness and individuality. It started to innovate, continually renewing the image of things and man’s relationship to them, as well as ways of using language and styles of poetic writing. I would stress again that we must place some of the mystics, especially al-Niffarī and Abū Hayyān al-Tawhīdī (d. 1010), firmly at the heart of this modernist movement, and help rescue them from neglect or oblivion and restore to them the consideration they deserve.

2

This modernist poetry aroused a storm of criticism amounting in some cases to outright rejection, which was instigated by members of the traditionalist establishment culture and other patrons of the old. The reasons for this criticism can be summarized as follows: the poetry was seen as an attack on the values of the ancient and authentic, and it was this which led to Abū Nuwās being accused of belonging to the Persian-inspired, anti-Arab *Shu‘ūbiyya* movement; it was also seen as an attack on the authentic in poetic expression, held to exist in its exemplary form in

ancient poetry, which was why Abū Tammām was said to have ‘Corrupted Arabic poetry’.

3

Thus modernity in Arabic poetry had its origins in a climate which brought together two independent elements: awareness of the new urban culture which developed in Baghdad in the eighth century, and a new use of the language to embrace this awareness and express it in poetry. It developed in a spirit of opposition to the ancient, at the same time interacting with non-Arab currents. The whole thrust of Arab civilization testifies to this, for it is a synthesis of the pre-Islamic period and Islam, from whence it derives its origins and heritage, and of other cultures — Persian, Greek and Indian — through adoption and interaction, permeated by the most ancient elements deposited in the historical memory: Sumerian, Babylonian, Aramaean and Syriac.

The effectiveness of Arab creativity at this time demonstrates that no culture exists in isolation from other cultures — they give and take from each other; they influence and are influenced. It also shows that the first condition for this process of interaction is that it should be characterized by creativity and particularity at the same time. This combination carried Arab-Islamic civilization at its most mature to the West by way of Andalusia.

The historical context outlined above demands a re-examination of the course of modernity and the

problems it has encountered in its present stage. Such a re-examination must start from an awareness of past events with all their religious, social, political and cultural complexities. This is the only proper way of opening up horizons for understanding the self and the other, allowing us to have a new vision of ourselves and the world, and showing the path we should take in order to build the future. Without this, modernity in Arab society will always be a commodity imported in some underhand way. The society itself will remain a carriage rumbling and swaying along in the wake of the train of Western hegemony, lost between a blind acceptance which robs it of its identity, and an equally blind adherence to the traditionalist past, which robs it of its inventive spirit and prevents it from being a presence in the living reality.

Consciousness of the self forces us to acknowledge that our ancestors' many and varied achievements are not enough in themselves to answer our present problems or lead us to discover a new epistemology. This does not imply a denial of their achievements or their role in the historical process of the production of knowledge. Rather, we should acknowledge that we are confronting issues of which they were unaware; we are therefore bound to approach them in different ways, especially in an age which has witnessed such a tremendous explosion of knowledge. To continue to operate using the old forms of knowledge and within the old boundaries, using the old methods of approach, is to abandon knowledge in its present state, and therefore to abandon knowledge itself.

Continuing in the old ways does not necessarily mean preserving our heritage or holding on to our authenticity. Authenticity is not a fixed point in the past to which we must return in order to establish our identity. It is rather a constant capacity for movement and for going beyond existing limits towards a world which, while assimilating the past and its knowledge, looks ahead to a better future.

What we should take hold of and imitate is the flame of questioning which animated our ancestors, so that we can complement their work with a new vision and new approaches to knowledge. This requires us to dissect their views and intellectual achievements and assimilate them critically so that the new develops out of the old but at the same time is something completely different. This is the only way of ensuring a profound and constructive continuity between the old and the new.

Consciousness of the other assumes a realization on our part that the opposition between the Arab-Islamic East and the

European-American West is not of an intellectual or poetic nature, but is political and ideological, originally a result of Western imperialism. This is why when we reject the West we should not reject it as a whole, but only this ideological aspect of it. Similarly when we reject the automated nature of its technology, this does not mean that we reject technology absolutely or the intellectual principles which led to its invention, but only the way the West uses it and imposes it upon us, in an attempt to buy us and turn us into mere

consumers and our countries into market-places. We can learn from the creative energy of the West and its intellectual inventions and construct a dialogue with them, as the West itself did in the past with the products of our civilization. In this way our awareness of the other implies that its achievement is not all devoid of value. There is much in it which we can benefit from, not only in understanding our particular problems, but also in the production of knowledge.

Without such an awareness our political and ideological opposition to the West risks becoming an opposition to its culture and civilization. The desire to consolidate this latter form of opposition, whether it comes from the West or the Arabs, and is deliberate or involuntary, reveals another desire — that of asserting the notion of ‘Western superiority’, thereby perpetuating the false dualism of the civilized West and the backward East. I say false dualism because it is conceived on the basis of superficial criteria — the criteria of the mechanical and the technical — whereas there no longer exists a ‘West’ and an ‘East’, each forming a self-contained conceptual unity. The West contains many ‘Wests’ more decadent than any Arab decadence, and the Arab East has many ‘Easts’ more advanced than the most advanced of these Wests.

Seen from this perspective, the world today lives in the climate of a single universal civilization, but one which has its own specificities, obvious or hidden, that depend on the level of creative presence in the various peoples. This suggests that modernity is also a climate of universal

forms and ideas and not a state specific to one people. If there is a disparity between the West and the Arab world in the practice of modernity, it is a quantitative disparity of the first order, generated by science in the narrow sense of the word. The level of scientific development is the main characteristic of modernity in the West and the factor which distinguishes it from the East. Modern Western science constitutes a complete epistemological break with the old world, especially with its religious and metaphysical dimensions. It is the area where thought advances unimpeded, more advanced today than yesterday, tomorrow than today. The truths it offers are not like those of philosophy or the arts. They are truths which everyone must of necessity accept, because they are proven in theory and practice.

Science, as a system of knowledge, is constantly self-critical. It moves beyond existing frontiers, does not know words like stasis or retreat, and represents continuous progress because it never ceases to question and search.

The need to transcend the past, or erase it, is therefore self-evident in scientific procedure. The past is error, and authority is sought not from what is past but from what is to come. Western science, with its intuitions and practical results, is the most revolutionary development in the history of mankind.

What does this scientific revolution contain, from a theoretical point of view, of particular relevance for us

Arabs? I will try to summarize this in the following four points.

First, science changes human consciousness, engendering in it a new acceptance of astonishing facts which cannot be refuted because of the influence of scientific methodology and the idea that progress is natural and inevitable.

Second, scientific inquiry knows no restrictions or obstacles and refuses to accept any area as inaccessible to it. Scientific research is carried on regardless of the implications for ideas, morals, traditions or other aspects of life.

Third, science completely changes the way in which the past is viewed. In its eyes the past is not only error but also ignorance. Whatever parts of it will not stand up to scientific investigation are rejected as worthless.

Fourth, science makes people open to the idea of a future radically different from anything they have known before, and therefore ready to accept the ending of the past. However hard a person tries to reject science, on either a rhetorical or a technical level, he is doomed to failure. Today scientific invention and discovery are the most important signs of power and superiority. Mechanized industry is spreading to take its place alongside the most deeply rooted traditions and in the most backward societies. Scientific and technical progress are universal realities which cannot be ignored or avoided. They have gradually come to

occupy a place in our ideas and awareness, to invade our lives and announce the collapse of the ancient world.

The Arabs have been much influenced by the scientific perspective and the cultural changes brought about by it. To be more precise, I should say that we have been affected in our intellectual awareness and our conscious minds, while our unconscious continues to teem with other things which have escaped the boundaries of scientific rationalism. We continue to come up against this paradox, to which I have already referred: why does Arab society rush to avail itself of the technical achievements of science, and reject its intellectual principles?

Scientific awareness created anxiety and insecurity in us, whereas our unconscious gave us certainty and reassurance. We considered science as a gain at the level of external progress, but a loss in terms of progress in the internal world of intimate human affairs; our consciousness of science therefore thrust us forcefully

towards the future, while in our hearts we followed an ill-defined path back to some notion of the past where human warmth was more in evidence.

In this climate (and I will confine myself now to talking only about what happened in modernist poetry) we began to pose our artistic questions in relation to science. For example, what does progress mean in poetry? Nothing. The idea of progress is fundamental to science but quite separate from artistic creativity.

Thus we found something which was incompatible with science as progress but was not an irrelevance. We began to deduce that scientific progress was not synonymous with progress as a whole and was therefore not to be used as a norm. Another sort of progress exists on a different level nearer to man and more expressive of the inwardness of his being.

We began to see that the aesthetics of the age we were living in was founded upon and motivated by an idea of resistance to the merely mechanical and technical side of science. This resistance saw a modernity of greater humanity and stature in certain elements of the past. Because the applications of technology were relatively homogeneous, they led to a uniformity and sameness which gave life itself a mechanical dimension. Poetry, on the other hand, affirmed difference, giving movement, ebullience and variation to life.

Thus we were split in two, our rational consciousness on the side of science and the future, and our hearts on the side of art and the past. It was as if we were reviving what science had neglected, disregarded or tried to kill off, and this split in us reflected the conflict between freedom and necessity, in this case represented by art and science.

From the perspective of this conflict, I started to see (I speak here only of my own experience and what I say does not necessarily apply to other writers) something inimical to the spirit of poetry in every move to make poetic creation subject to a

rationalist scientific precept: one that seemed to say, the future before all else. I began to search for alternative forms which, while not rejecting the notion of the future, did not put an absolute ban on the past. They were forms which, on the contrary, embraced the past in some way: legend, mysticism, magical and non-rational elements of the literary tradition, the mysterious regions of the human soul. I used them to move away from the cold rationalism of science, in my efforts to reveal truths which are more sublime and concern humanity in a more profound way than scientific truths. This return to older sources was not passé, as some commentators described it. It was an attempt to reflect upon and comprehend human existence as a whole, beginning deep down where the reality of this existence was least cluttered by extraneous factors and man lived directly with the land and talked to it in a language which operated at the level of sensation and physical contact, inarticulate cries, instinct and sex. Such a way of proceeding is obviously the opposite of the rational, direct, clear approach, plunging deep into the obscure and terrifying areas which escape the grip of science and rationalism, but where great creation has its beginnings, suspended over the abyss of the undefined and the limitless.

It was therefore a rediscovery, or an attempt to create a starting-point from which to investigate the possibilities for a new direction in human affairs. I saw in legend especially something which afforded me this timeless perspective from which to view the human condition and strengthened my feeling of being one

with mankind — a constant present. Through using legends, I was able to witness and journey among the earliest visions conjured up by the human imagination, the earliest motivating forces of behaviour, the first questions and the first inventions.

Thus I began to follow a path which was the opposite both of the scientific path, in the purely technical sense, and of the rationalism on which science is based, or which it gives rise to. Progress began to take on a different meaning in my mind. I gradually became aware that the essence of progress is human, that it is qualitative not quantitative, and that the Westerner who lives surrounded by computers and exposed to the latest in space travel is not necessarily more advanced in any profound sense than the Arab peasant living among trees and cattle.

As a result I came to believe that the progress of a society is not represented merely by economic and social renewal, but more fundamentally by the liberation of man himself, and the liberation of the suppressed elements beneath and beyond the socioeconomic structure, in such a way that human beings at their freest and most responsive become both the pivot and the goal.

Technology and rationalism, and, let us say, modernism, have placed human beings within a closed 'mechanical' system. This leads them to focus on their immediate material existence, where all their powers are directed towards dominance in the external world,

involving the control and exploitation of the other. It disregards their intimate natures, their passions, needs and desires, and betrays them while declaring that it alone is faithful to them.

The human being is a sublime creature, and there is nothing for him in this modernist technology except the materialism of an attachment to manufactured things, and to quantity. Technology does not cover the whole of existence; it only responds to the needs of an insignificant part of it. Moreover, man is not defined by quantity.

I saw poetry increasingly as the most important means available to humanity of breaking the hold of modern technology and its instrumental rationalism. If technology is the relationship which human beings have established with nature, through scientific rationality, then poetry is the relationship which one human being establishes with the individual essence of another, through nature. When there is no poetry in a period of history, there is no true human dimension. Poetry, according to this definition, is more than a means or a tool, like technology: it is rather, like language itself, an innate quality. It is not a stage in the history of human consciousness but a constituent of this consciousness.

I came to believe that modern technology, with its mechanical, repetitive reliability, had deprived nature of its significance for us and was now robbing the future itself of meaning. The future was no longer that

unknown quantity, anticipated with hope and joy, but had begun to appear like a past which we mechanically relived. As a result some forms of the ancient appeared strange and fascinating, compared to the monotonously recurrent forms of modern technology, and the past, especially aspects of it which were officially suppressed or not widely known about, seemed magical and unfamiliar. I felt that we were in deep need of something that went beyond the technological in the direction of those areas which have been more or less obliterated from human memory, and towards the invisible which, however doggedly we try to unveil it and however deeply we penetrate it, remains invisible. Poetry keeps human beings open to the invisible, the hidden, the infinite unknown, always on the threshold of what is to come; at this point, which is both in time and outside time, poetry becomes a bridge joining what a man was, what he is here and now, and what he will be tomorrow in an all-inclusive movement which goes beyond the mechanical, blind indifference of technical progress and embraces the changing unknown.

It appeared to me then that poetic modernity had been incorporated into history, which meant that the concept which I was in the process of discovering became 'ancient'. Perhaps the book which most urgently needs writing today is a history of modernity in Arabic poetry from the eighth century up to the middle of the twentieth.

Modernity as a concept whose fundamental characteristic is opposition to the ancient had ceased to exist. The modern in poetry was not in opposition to

the ancient. Gibrān (1883–1931) and al-Sayyāb (1926–64), both ‘moderns’, share a poetic house with the ‘ancients’ Imru’l-Qays and Ṭarafa Ibn al-‘Abd (538–64), and with Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām who were ‘modern’ in relation to the pre-Islamic poets but are today considered ‘ancient’ when judged in terms of chronological time. All of these poets come together, beyond the simple categories of modern and ancient, in the single melting-pot of poetic creativity, to form what I would call the entirety of authentic Arabic poetry, or, from a historical point of view, ‘the second modernity’.

When applied to the poetry of Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām, modernity meant two things: first, renewal, which was not a rejection of the pre-Islamic tradition, but an affirmation of renewed life; and, second, artistic and intellectual methods of organization in the aesthetic context of this renewal, at the levels of both vision and expression.

The ‘modern’ in poetry from the beginning of this century up to the publication of the periodical *Shi‘r* (Poetry; founded in 1956) was just a maturing and enlarging of perspective, which resulted in the discovery of hitherto unknown dimensions of modernism and led to a re-examination of the definition of poetry itself. The theoretical treatment of this question represented the peak of *Shi‘r*’s achievements, in addition to the publication of a body of poetry which set new standards for the way poets approached their subject, and for the understanding and evaluation of poetry. What is advocated in poetry

today is merely a continuation of the path established by *Shi'ar*.

This continuity of the poetical order confirms that Arab poetic modernity is a part of history and that the modern is also ancient; since nothing radical has been added to it, it cannot be said that the concept of modernity in poetry has altered.

However, just as we witnessed a tyranny of fashion in poetry after Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām, that is, a tyranny of form, so we are witnessing the same thing today. Although fashion is an attitude which always accompanies modernity, it is at the same time a method and a technique imposed by the world of industry, a world which dominates us and the rest of the globe to an ever greater degree. Young people everywhere are seduced by fashion — it is an expression of their desire to assert that they have broken away from their parents, or from the past as represented by the stable traditional establishment which appears to them, from the undisciplined turbulence of modern life, to be stagnant and unresponsive to their aspirations.

The overriding characteristic of fashion is its artificiality; by this I mean that, like anything artificial, it is transient and ephemeral. Second, fashion cancels out what has gone before: today's fashion is superior to yesterday's. To embrace the natural involves going outside the self in order to penetrate the self more deeply and be restored to a wholeness; to espouse the artificiality of passing styles, on the other hand, means

deserting the self to be tossed here and there like a leaf in the wind. The first way takes in all ages and all times, but the second delights in gliding over the surface of the moment. So the artificial, in the shape of a whimsical notion about artistic form, seems to become part of the past at its inception, and fashion for fashion's sake is outmoded or 'ancient' in advance.

Therefore it became clear to me that modernity was both of time and outside time: of time because it is rooted in the movement of history, in the creativity of humanity, coexisting with man's striving to go beyond the limitations which surround him; and outside time because it is a vision which includes in it all times and cannot only be recorded as a chronological event: it cuts vertically through time and its horizontal progress is no more than the surface representation of a deep internal

movement. In other words, modernity is not only a process that affects language; it is synonymous with its very existence. Modernity in poetry in any language is first of all modernity of the language itself. Before you can be a 'Modern' or an 'ancient' in poetry you have to be a poet, and you cannot be a poet until you feel or write as if you are your language and it is you. As language is a vocal, musical and social value, it has a history and a past. Without a knowledge of this past, modernity is not possible. Moreover, the language of modernity can have no value independent of the history of the creative genius of the language. In any language, the establishing of a new artistic value relies first of all on a comprehensive understanding and

assimilation of whatever is of value in the history of that language.

The artistic difference or divergence to which modernist poetic writing gives authority can only be defined within the artistic context of a given language, and the conflict which occurs at this point is only in fact a process of accommodation. The old and the new in poetry are two faces of a single creativity. The new in Arabic poetry, for example, however unequivocal its formal break with the past may appear, is nevertheless identifiably Arab in character; by this I mean that it cannot be understood or evaluated within the context of French or English modernism, or according to their criteria, but must be seen in the context of Arab creativity and judged by the standards of artistic innovation particular to Arabic.

I will conclude with some observations which provide a framework to our understanding of the particular nature of poetics and modernity in Arabic. First, I want to stress that modernity requires not only freedom of thought, but physical freedom as well. It is an explosion, a liberation of what has been suppressed. To think and write what is truly new means above all to think about what has never been thought about and write what has never been written: that huge, constant area of suppression — religious and cultural, individual and social, spiritual and physical. This implies that modernity is an immersion in history, a kind of writing which subjects this history to constant questioning, and a form of self-awareness that exposes writing itself to

constant scrutiny within the framework of a continuous exercise to discover the powers of language and investigate the possibilities and limitations of experiment. The Arabic language and Arab society are not two primitive plants but have firm roots reaching deep into history; it is these roots which provide the context for and the means of achieving modernity. Thus a knowledge of the origins of their 'ancient' forms, the changes they underwent and the problems they encountered, especially with regard to the mysteries of the particular genius of the language, is essential to an understanding of the 'modern'. For an Arab poet to be truly modern his writing must glow like a flame which rises from the fire of the ancient, but at the same time is entirely new.

If Arab poetic modernity is partly based on the liberation of what has been suppressed — that is, on the expression of desire — and on everything that undermines the existing repressive norms and values, and transcends them, then ideological concepts like 'authenticity', 'roots', 'heritage', 'renaissance' and 'identity' take on different meanings. Traditional notions of the continuous, the coherent, the one, the complete, are replaced by the interrupted, the confused, the plural, the incomplete, implying that the relationship between words and things is constantly changing: that is, there is always a gap between them which saying or writing the words cannot fill. This unbridgeable gap means that the questions 'What is knowledge?', 'What is truth?', 'What is poetry?' remain open, that knowledge is never complete and that truth is a continuing search.

The essence of this is that modernity should be a creative vision, or it will be no more than a fashion. Fashion grows old from the moment it is born, while creativity is ageless. Therefore not all modernity is creativity but creativity is eternally modern.