Echoes of the Nile: By the Sudanese Poet and Scholar Abdullah al-Tayyib

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Today I want to tell you about a poetry that is entirely new, and yet, at the same time, steeped in the deepest antiquity. It is new because its author is a contemporary, still in the flush of youth — I do not think he has passed thirty by more than a little — and because his subjects are entirely contemporary ones, subjects we discuss whenever we meet one another, that our own writers write about and our own poets put into verse, subjects that trouble our own minds. He speaks of the contemporary Egypt we ourselves live in, and of the contemporary Sudan he himself lives in; he speaks of England, where he resided for years, coming to know her cities and villages, her rain and her fog, and a whole variety of his English hosts' own qualities; he grieves Germany's defeat in the last world war, despite having resided in England, and despite every tie binding him to the English. He describes a great many things familiar to everyone in these very days, so that there is nothing in his poetry's own subject matter that our own nature would recoil from, or our own taste reject. And yet, for all that, he remains steeped in the deepest antiquity — for he employs a language and a set of techniques only a very few can truly savour, those few who savour ancient Arabic poetry, and the most ancient of it at that.

This is the poetry we read from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic poets of the first two centuries — though I must qualify myself here when I mention the poets of the second century, since our poet does not employ the language of Abu Nuwas, or Muslim ibn al-Walid, and poets of their kind, and their own techniques; he employs, instead, the language of those among them who favoured a weighty, sonorous diction and style — poets like Bashar and Marwan ibn Abi Hafsa — and he may well favour the language of even stranger, more archaic poets than these two, and those who followed their own path. He does none of this deliberately; it is his own nature, taste, and upbringing together that drive him toward it. He feels no incapacity whatsoever to follow the path his own contemporaries follow, whether in the Arab countries or in the American diaspora — he feels, rather, a full capacity to do so, having tried it, and tried it at length — but he turned away from it, and turned away decisively, because he came to dislike it, found it constricting, and judged

it unsuited to his own nature, his own taste, and his own conception of beauty.

A Bedouin Upbringing

This is because he was, in the first stage of his life, Bedouin in his own origins and Bedouin in his own culture. He studied Arabic and mastered its study; he immersed himself in ancient Arabic poetry as no contemporary has immersed himself in it; he read Arabic poetry across its various eras, and studied it as a true master studies his own subject. Yet it was our own ancient poetry alone that captured the full favour of his heart, his mind, and his taste together. Nature created in him a poet of exquisite sensibility, turbulent feeling, sharp perception, refined temperament, and powerful imagination — but when he wished to give expression to his own true self, in a manner suited to his own nature and inclination, he explored various paths toward this, and none pleased him among these paths except the way of our own ancient poets, which he adopted, and pursued to its furthest reaches, as though he had been created for it, and it for him. What is remarkable about him is that he achieved, along this path, the most magnificent accomplishment and mastery any poet could hope to attain; more remarkable still, he bent modern civilization to fit his own ancient language, or bent his own ancient language to fit this modern civilization, matching the two together with a harmony in which you sense neither strain nor distortion.

You read him describing the features of life in England, and find in his description neither affectation nor strain — you find him, rather, proceeding with his own fertile nature, at ease and unforced, no description ever burdening him, no depiction ever exhausting him; it is you, the reader, who will often find it burdensome to keep pace with him, or follow him, since you will feel the need to pause, to understand this word or that in some dictionary of the language, or to trace this technique or that back to the familiar forms of expression you already know. You cannot even attempt to read him unless you are, first, a person of real resolve, and, second, someone possessed of precise, deep, and broad knowledge of the Arabic language, its own secrets and rarities, and its own techniques, wherever poets have twisted them away from their clear, familiar course.

There is nothing strange in any of this. I have already said he was Bedouin, his culture Bedouin, in the first stage of his life; and I would add that I know of no contemporary Arab who has studied Arabic poetry, its

metres, its rhymes, its finer points, and its music, as deeply as he has — he has studied all of this in the fullest, most comprehensive fashion, in a vast two-volume work, al-Murshid ila Fahm Ash'ar al-'Arab wa-Sina'atiha [The Guide to Understanding the Poetry of the Arabs and Its Craft].

The First Volume

I described the first volume of this book some two years ago now, so what wonder is there that its author should be drawn, by his own nature, toward the ancient poets' own approach in their own poetry, he who has been utterly, boundlessly captivated by ancient Arabic verse? He tells us he has read English poetry, across all its various forms and eras, and found it incapable of standing up to Arabic poetry — nor did he exempt Shakespeare's own poetry from this, however strange it may seem to compare Arabic poetry with English poetry, and with Shakespeare's poetry in particular, since the two poetries differ so fundamentally, and the grounds for comparing them neither hold together nor make coherent sense; it never occurred to any ancient Arab poet that a poet might take his own poetry in the direction Shakespeare took his, or Milton, or Byron, or any other English or European poet generally.

Everything about the two poetries differs, and comparing them is sheer folly — but this captivation with Arabic poetry has taken full possession of our poet, and driven him toward this excess, which leads nowhere in particular. It is time now for us to turn to our friend's own poetry, and pause before it briefly, in a way that will give you some picture of it — not an entirely precise picture, perhaps, but a genuinely close approximation. And I confess I find in this a certain effort, even though I love this poetry, find it genuinely sweet, and am well satisfied with it — exactly as I savour Jarir's own poetry, find it sweet, and am satisfied with it. Had I been a poet myself, I would never have followed our poet-scholar's own path, since I prefer to reach the hearts, and the tastes, of those who read me.

This Effort

And if I take on this effort myself, to bring this poetry closer to you, then the very least you can do is take on the effort, in turn, of reading, understanding, and savouring it, and coming to know, in the end, that ancient Arabic poetry still lives on in certain Arab quarters. It was alive at the beginning of this century, when al-Kazimi — God rest his soul — was composing his own splendid odes; and it lives on in these very days, as we

read this collection, and other collections our own accomplished poet has not yet published. We used to say that our own poets who lived at the end of the last century and the first third of this one — men like al-Barudi, Shawqi, and Hafiz — went too far, both for themselves and for their readers, in imitating the Abbasids. What, then, are we to say of someone who follows the path of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic poets themselves, neither imitating nor straining, but entirely his own?

Read with me these lines:

My heart was stirred at the mention of the Nile, my home grown far away —
in London, around me, every foreign tongue chattering.
The nightingales' own calling voice stirred me,
and flocks of birds, some faintly cheeping, others crying shrill.
Do you not see I have become, among these people, one who sings alone,
while my own friends betrayed me — though I never betrayed our friendship?
I have tasted fate's own turns of fortune, and troubles have visited me,
crowding in upon me, one calamity following another —
parting from loved ones, the loss of kin,
hopes that failed, and homelands left behind.
Yet the bitterness of these nights has never weakened my own endurance,
nor have time's own storms ever chipped away my flint.

The Full Rhyme

The very first thing even the least learned reader of ancient Arabic poetry will notice is this full, settled rhyme running through these lines. And anyone with even a passing acquaintance with Arabic literature will recall, on reading them — or on reading the very first line alone — an ancient poem attributed to Imru' al-Qays, composed in this same metre, and with this same rhyme, beginning:

Halt, let us weep, at the memory of a beloved, and an encampment
whose traces have long since been effaced by the passing years.

I have no doubt our poet had this ancient poem in mind when he composed these lines, or the fuller ode from which he has chosen these lines for us. Between him and his own poetry lies a kind of pact, one art itself holds over him, so that he cannot help but respond to it, and set

down whatever it dictates to him. Then, once the demon of poetry has released him, he looks back over what he has written, retaining what he chooses to retain, and erasing what he does not.

He can scarcely compose a single serious poem without looking, in one fashion or another, toward some ancient model.

Its Final Hemistich

Look, next, at the second line, where you will see a clear inclination toward the archaic: the calling voice of nightingales stirs him, and rouses his own feeling and his own longing for his homeland — but nightingales alone do not suffice him; there are other flocks of birds besides, some faint of voice, possessing what he calls wasi', which is, as he himself explains in his collection's own glossary, the cheeping of fledgling birds; others possessing arnan, a shrill, ringing cry. Consider these two words, wasi' and arnan: the poet regards them as pure, eloquent Arabic, beyond any reproach, genuine words of ancient poetry, and takes them up with real delight — indifferent to whether the contemporary reader can digest them or not, for he, like others of real authenticity in poetry, thinks first of his own art, and responds to it, before ever thinking of his reader, and what that reader can or cannot digest.

Look, too, at the third line, where you will see, in its final hemistich, a technique the ancient poets favoured, one grammarians paid the closest attention to, but one moderns neither favour, nor feel any reluctance to avoid, whether composing poetry or prose: I mean his own line, "wa-khana wa-ma khuntu al-mawaddata khullani" ["and betrayed — though I never betrayed our friendship — my own friends"]. He means to say: my friends betrayed our friendship, and I never betrayed it. He chose brevity in this beautiful technique, exactly as Imru' al-Qays did when he said:

Had I sought only the barest means of living,
a little wealth would have sufficed me, and I would have sought no more.

He means: a little wealth would have sufficed me, and I would not have sought a great deal of it.

And this zarafat and ahdan [in the fourth line] we recognize from ancient poetry, terms contemporary poets scarcely ever employ. The poet, naturally, means to say that misfortunes befell him, singly and in droves together.

The Bitterness of Nights

And in the final line, you find "murr al-layali" [the bitterness of nights], since the ancients used this same phrase in their own poetry, and he felt compelled to draw our attention to it; he took sawan [flint] as his own rhyme word, favouring weight and sonority of expression — and what, indeed, could be more solid and unyielding than flint? But notice what this rhyme word cost him: comparing himself to hard rocks that time's own trials cannot weaken. This is weighty, dignified poetry, favouring archaic words and archaic techniques alike, and yet conveying, through them, meanings genuinely close at hand, genuinely simple. And what could be closer at hand, or simpler, than a stranger among the sons of the Nile, in London, recalling his own beloved river, stirred by that memory, longing for the Nile, his own feelings roused by the nightingales' song and the calls of birds both great and small — this same longing, in his own exile, then leading him to lament his own isolation and solitude, not merely because he is a stranger, but because his own brothers have betrayed their pledge to him, and forgotten their friendship, while he remains one who remembers, and stays faithful to that same pledge. Nor does he lament his exile, and his brothers' own betrayal of pledge and affection, alone — he laments, alongside these, the very misfortunes that have befallen him, singly and in droves, meeting them with steadfastness, endurance, and patience.

All of these meanings, as you can see, are close at hand and simple, and deserve to be conveyed in words and techniques just as close at hand, just as simple, reaching the heart without hardship or effort. But what is to be done, when our friend was created for weightiness, not for ease? He naturally regards these very words and techniques as entirely close at hand, entirely simple, and might well say to us: you find these words and techniques strange only because you have never grown accustomed to them, neither in your own poetry, nor in your own prose, nor in whatever books and collections you are used to reading. And what, he might ask, would you say, had I instead favoured the vocabulary and techniques of Ru'ba and al-'Ajjaj, never once allowing you to read my own poetry except with constant recourse to dictionaries and grammars and glossaries of rare words, simply to understand each and every line?

Thank God he did not do this — had he done so, he would have been composing poetry only for himself, and for the very few like him, who could be counted on one hand.

Our poet loves the Nile intensely; scarcely a single ode or fragment of his poetry is ever free of mention of it. He favours the Nile above all else, and favours life in the Nile Valley above every other form of life, whatever the circumstances. And yet he is a poet who genuinely longs for the Nile, stirred by its very mention, yearning for it throughout his residence in England — and once he does return to the Nile, London herself comes to trouble him, along with whatever learning, beauty, and enchantment he came to know there. And what wonder is there in that?

Poets Feel Contentment

Poets feel contentment, and speak the best of what they know; they feel indignation, and speak the worst of what they know — and the Messenger of God said, long ago: "There is real magic in eloquence, and real wisdom in poetry."

Look, now, at other lines from this same collection, in which the poet describes his own longing for the Nile, depicting nature in a manner genuinely beautiful, magnificent, and moving to the heart, again following Imru' al-Qays's own path in metre and rhyme — though here employing far fewer archaic words:

In London I have neither companion nor wealth,
but by the Nile stand both my defenders and my critics.
I recalled the meeting of the Two Niles, as when
a flirting lover draws near a languid virgin's curtained chamber,
contending with her that she might yield, then turning away,
almost overjoyed, a companion to his own hopes.
When the surging White Nile stirs its own flood,
a clamour rises from bank to bank,
accompanied, from above, by light wisps of cloud,
so that you would take them for birds swooping toward pools of water.
How lovely those waterwheels, grown, by dawn,
to sob in melodies of tears, an eye brimming and streaming.
And palm trees, when the full moon rises behind them,
appear to onlookers like a bejewelled, adorned neck.
And thorny acacia, with light glimmering upon it,
in streaks like fine specks of dust shimmering in a mirage.
Would that I knew whether I might spend a single night
on those dunes where my home once stood, my loved ones all around me,

and whether I might ever hear again a bird's own song,
and, at dawn, the muezzin's call, and the reciter's chant.

Do you see how he describes the meeting of the Blue and White Niles, likening it to this Bedouin image, one so distant from us, so veiled from us by the passing centuries, that we would not recognize it at all, were we not accustomed to reading it in ancient poetry — one of the two rivers a languid virgin, the other hastening toward her curtained chamber, exactly as Imru' al-Qays does in his own famous ode rhyming in "l," which opens:

Ah, greet the morning, O crumbling ruin,
and may he prosper who once dwelt within your empty court.

And in it, he says:

The Nile's Tumult

I rose toward her, once her people slept,
rising as water-bubbles rise, state upon state —

almost like Umar ibn Abi Rabi'a, in his own ode rhyming in "r," which opens:

Is it on account of Nu'm's own people that you leave at dawn's first light,
or set out only as evening falls?

Look, too, at how he describes the tumult of the White Nile, with its surging waves, and the light wisps of cloud drifting above it, as though they were birds swooping down to drink of the water; and how he describes the waterwheels, weeping upon the riverbank like a grieving woman, her tears flowing freely; and look at the palm trees, with the full moon rising behind them, so that whoever sees them imagines a neck encircled by jewellery.

And look, too, at this magnificent poetic image — the acacia tree, with light glimmering upon its own thorns in fine, delicate streaks, as though it were a fire glimmering in a mirage.

Listen, then, to how the poet wishes, and asks himself: might he ever be granted the chance to spend even a single night upon those dunes where his own home once stood, looking out from there upon this same sweet nature that has taken hold of his heart; and might he ever be granted the chance to hear, even once, a bird's own song at the start of night and the end of dawn, the muezzin's own call, and the voice of one reciting the Qur'an in the last hours of the night, and at the break of

dawn.

There is no harm in the word tukha; he has already explained it for you himself, in his own collection's glossary, as meaning a light, thin cloud. The poet feels keenly that he stands a stranger in his own poetry too, since he favours weighty diction and dignified style, while his contemporaries have no love for this same weight, caring instead for this easy, simple, hybridized speech, one pure eloquence never adorns.

Listen, then, to what he himself says:

What have you to do with weighty eloquence, in my own age,
which loves, instead, debased and hybrid speech?
You make yourself clear through it, yet find no one listening;
another composes it besides you, and is never understood.
For those who possessed true eloquence have already been folded away
by this treacherous age, in its own grey dust.

Had the poet accepted correction from us, we would have given him back some part of his own grief — for he is genuinely capable of weighty, dignified speech, of magnificent diction and style, without ever entangling himself, or entangling us along with him, in tukha, or sabantah, or wasi', and other words of this same rough, heavy kind — words recorded in dictionaries so that we might use them to help understand ancient texts, but whose own currency on the tongue, even in the most beautiful and magnificent poetry, passed out of use long, long ago.

The languages people speak are a reflection of their own lives; when they take up language as a means toward art, they choose from it whatever is purest, cleanest, and finest — whatever touches the ear most gently, moves the heart most deeply, and suits taste most closely.

It is not enough for an Englishman to read Shakespeare's poetry, and take its vocabulary and techniques as models to imitate; nor for a contemporary Frenchman to read Racine's poetry, and compose his own poetry on that same model; nor for an Italian to read Dante's poetry, and adopt the vocabulary and techniques that were beautiful and pleasing in the fourteenth century, and remain beautiful and pleasing to this day, when read by the most distinguished scholars and men of letters — yet are never accepted from a contemporary writer or poet.

Arabic, like every other language, lives with the people who speak it, and submits to whatever stage and trials of life they themselves submit to — growing coarse when manners grow coarse, growing gentle and sweet when manners grow gentle and sweet.

Let our own accomplished poet tell me, then, how a contemporary reader, of merely moderate cultivation in Arabic literature, is meant to understand a line such as this, without turning to dictionaries, and without understanding the proverbs and examples handed down from Jarir's own poetry, and that of his contemporaries — and where do we stand, after all, beside Jarir and his contemporaries?

And so I went on taming my own soul after its wildness,
compelling it, until its bitterness held firm and settled.

Who among us could possibly understand this line, unless he were among those professors of literature who have come to know the language's own finer points, and immersed themselves in the poetry of the ancients — especially this phrase, "hatta istamarra mariruha" [until its bitterness held firm]? What harm would it have done the poet, had he simply chosen ease instead, saying: "until its strength grew firm, and it learned how to bear misfortunes, and endure them patiently"?

And the line that follows this one — how are we meant to understand it, without turning again to dictionaries:

just as I neared my thirtieth year, and there came upon
a man events whose own troubles [shuqur] were many —

in order to understand this word shuqur. The poet himself explains this word for us as meaning "matters" — so what harm would it have done him, had he simply used the word "matters" itself? It would have preserved his own metre and rhyme just as well, and changed nothing of the poetry's own beauty.

Drunk with youth, fierce-eyed as a lioness,
her glance struck death between my very limbs —

and this line, with the word sabantah in particular — how are contemporaries meant to understand it, without turning to some dictionary or other? And how are they meant to savour it, once they have understood it?

I confess I once came across this very word in an ancient poem, an elegy for Umar ibn al-Khattab — God rest his soul — and found myself in

real difficulty over it, since I was reading this poem in Italy, with the Arabic tongue nowhere near me, the sea itself lying between us, or, as the famous line puts it, the journey to Rome lying between us. I had not feared his death would come at the hand of a sabantah, a reckless, clumsy hand — the poet elegizing Umar there referring to the Persian slave who stabbed him.

Our own poet, by contrast, employs this same sabantah to describe a beautiful young virgin, intoxicated by her own youth — and what harm would it have done him, had he chosen another word conveying the same meaning, one that would not burden professors, students, and ordinary people alike?

For all of this, our poet remains, without any doubt, a truly singular figure — there is not one line, in his entire lengthy collection, that could be discarded or overlooked. He knows well enough, at times, how to grow sweet and gentle, when he plays, and toys with nature, or speaks to children — he has, after all, practised teaching, and is now a professor himself. But, sadly, whenever he does play, he soon grows weary of ease, and finds it constricting, saying, at the end of one of his own short pieces: "This is empty talk, and we would do better to discard it."

That piece is not empty talk at all — it merely seemed empty to him because it contained no tukha, no sabantah, nor anything resembling these words, words closer to the rare vocabulary lists of Abu Zayd al-Ansari than to anything else.

The poet has, too, a magnificent lyrical gift I would have loved to pause over, and linger over at length — but were I to do so, I would never finish, nor would the reader, nor would this piece find its proper place in al-Ahram.

It is the right of every reader genuinely cultivated in Arabic literature to read this collection; he will find in it a delight and a splendour beyond doubt, one we rarely encounter in contemporary poetry — though he will need to keep a dictionary close at hand throughout.

After all of this, I have one reproach for our accomplished poet — a reproach not free of bitterness, and of the disappointment a friend sometimes feels. What is this veiled criticism of Egypt in some of his poetry, or this fear that Egypt might monopolize the Nile at Sudan's own expense? When has it ever occurred to any reasonable person that Egypt could possibly monopolize some good thing at the expense of her own

neighbours, near or far?

History has never known Egypt, since her own most ancient eras, as anything but generous with herself, never reluctant to be generous toward others, even when her own life grew constrained. I know of no day on which Egypt ever monopolized anything at the expense of her own neighbours — and the poet himself, as far as I know, owes Egypt a great deal: it was through her own learning that he came to know Arabic, was cultivated in her, and attained, through her, whatever mastery of jurisprudence he has attained.

The poem in which he takes this veiled swipe at Egypt runs:

And I truly fear that I may see the Nile, one day,
become Egypt's own watering-place alone, hers to drink from and draw upon.
We [belong] to a fertile valley, and a homeland,
open plains whose hardship wearies even swift camels...

[NOTE: the source text grows garbled here, apparently repeating a corrupted variant of this same line — "□□□ □□□ □□ □□□□ □□□□□" — before continuing]

...and palm trees along its banks, their shade let down,
and we exchange, for this, our own garden after it —
whose fruit we once picked, and whose plenty we drank our fill of.

May God forgive you, my poet friend — how often you have spoken of betrayed affection, broken pledges, and the violation of brotherhood's own due! And here you are, entangling yourself in some part of what you yourself condemned in those brothers and friends who betrayed their pledge to you. Restrain, then, some part of your own forbearance, and do not obey mere passion, lest it lead you astray from God's own path; and recall what the ancient poet once said:

If you obey your own passion, passion will lead you
toward some part of what holds real power over you.

And yet, for all of this, I congratulate you on your magnificent poetry, and hope your own readers might savour it exactly as I have savoured it, and find in it the same splendour I myself have found — even if, for most of them, this will prove no easy thing.