"*Seeking Glory in the Dunghills*": Representations of the City in the Writings of Modern Arab Poets

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the image of the city as represented and conceptualized in the works of prominent modern Arab poets, mainly since the 1950s. In this article, I will argue that the attitude of these modernists toward the city is characterized by a unique ambivalence. On the one hand, many of them (particularly those who migrated from provincial towns and rural areas to a capital city) unequivocally depict the city or metropolis as a harsh and cruel prison. On the other hand, these same poets recognize the immeasurable possibilities and the immense cultural space the big city offers its inhabitants, especially its poets and artists. Accordingly, a more incisive reading of their works reveals that modern Arab poets are also enthralled and captivated by the modern city. They feel that they have to put up with the metropolis, awe-inspiring as it may be, distant from the "first sky" as it may be, because it allows them to confront paradox and incongruity, thus eliciting creativity. Therefore, as far as most Arab modernist poets are concerned, their having being uprooted from their home village has put them face to face with "the other". In their eyes, it is exactly this challenge to their comfortable and somewhat stolid existence that propels them to the forefront of artistic creation.

1. Introduction

The cities break up
The land is a train of dust
Poetry alone knows how to marry this space.
(Adonis, *The Book of Siege*)

In an essay titled *Semiology and the Urban*, Roland Barthes attempts to portray the complex and multifaceted interaction between the city and the text. In the following passage, he encapsulates his view of the city: [1]

> *The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it*

To use Barthes' terminology, this paper is an attempt to discover how modernist Arab poets "speak"- or better "write"- their city. It goes without saying that different "readers" and "writers" of the same city necessarily create different texts, and as scholars point out, discussions of the cityscape among contemporary urban semioticians such as Walter Benjamin, Umberto Eco and the Roland Barthes finally boil down to the question: whose city? [2]

This article focuses mainly on the image of the city in the poetic and discursive works of some of the most prominent poets from the Arab literary renaissance of the 19th and early 20th centuries until the present time. I would like to pay special attention to the works of prominent modernist Arab poets since the 1950's, who, interestingly enough, were born in rural areas and later immigrated to the city.

2. The City in Classical and Neo-Classical Arabic Poetry.

Commencing with the rise of Islam in the 7th century, classical Arabic poetry underwent an extended process of urbanization and acculturation, which was completed by the 10th century. As Joseph Sadan and other scholars have pointed out, one the main themes that consistently pervade classical Arabic poetry is the distinct dichotomy between city and country life, or to be more specific, between the urban-sedentary and Bedouin-nomadic way of life.[3] Classical Arab poets who advocate the nomadic ways of life aggrandize the Bedouins' innate wisdom, their sagacity, their remarkable eloquence, and their spiritual supremacy over the educated and supposedly sophisticated city dwellers. The Bedouins are commonly described as intrepid warriors and as being able to endure gracefully the hardships of desert life. For this reason, their image has long stood in stark contrast to the image of the pampered urban Arab. On the other hand, pro-sedentary literature harshly attacked the Bedouins and sought to portray them as unrefined and ignorant, incapable of comprehending

or appreciating the refined urban life. They were generally described as poor and uncouth, someone who has yet to be redeemed by urban life.[4]

The urban-sedentary tendency was given a unique expression and was firmly anchored in the works of many prominent Abbasid poets, most notably, Abu Nuwâs (762-810), a wine poet of Persian origin. In his poetry, he celebrates the increasing splendor of Baghdad and praises the Persian cities (even after their obliteration). At the same time, he harshly decries the Bedouin's deprived existence.[5] In the eyes of Abû Nuwûs, there is no room for comparison between the glorious urban civilization of Persia, symbolized in his poems by the palaces of Persian kings, and the Bedouin ascetic way of living, symbolized in his poem by the drinking of camel's milk. In the following lines, for instance, the poet responds to those who criticize him for his harsh anti-Bedouin attitude: [6]

Critic, relent!
Your hope for repentance
Will meet with disappointment.
For this is the life,
Not desert tents,
Not camel's milk
How can you set the Bedu
Beside Kisra's palace?

Similar to Abû Nuwûs, al-Buhturî (821-897), another highly-acclaimed Abbasid poet who was also an inhabitant of an increasingly urban culture, grew restless with the nomadic way of life and with the ways it was represented in pre-Islamic poetry. In his most famous poem- and perhaps one of the most famous poems in all of classical Arabic poetry, *I have preserved my soul from what pollutes my soul*, al-Buhturi describes his journey to al-Mada'in, the site of the Sassanian Persian imperial ruins about twenty miles southeast of Baghdad. Though less blatant than Abû Nuwûs, al-Buhturî uses both the trip and his descriptions of the royal palace to sing the praises of the urban civilization of the long lost Persian imperial dynasties; but even more important is the fact that by doing so, he obliquely

states that he no longer wishes to be associated with the "poetics of the desert" to which he held an ingrained aversion. [7]

After almost three centuries, the long-lasting struggle between the urban and the nomadic in classical Arabic poetry was ultimately won by the city's exponents. It would not be an exaggeration to assert that in the eyes of most prominent classical poets, the Arab city with its monuments, green spaces and its springs and rivers - became the embodiment of Paradise on earth.

Neo-classical Arabic poetry, which marked the beginning of *al-Nahda* (the Arab literary renaissance of the 19th century and the early 20th century), was in fact a return to the themes, images and poetic diction of Abbasid poetry. Though most critics and scholars regard the neo-classical school as the first phase of modern Arabic poetry, it did not offer a new poetic approach toward the city, and did not change the longstanding and deeply-rooted attitude toward urban life. The neo-classical Arab poets, headed by the Egyptian Ahmad Shawqî (1868-1932), continued to allude to every Arab (and Western) city they toured as Paradise, using almost the same phraseology as classical Arabic poetry. Accordingly, in Shawqi's poetry (which best represents neo-classical poetry in its heyday) we find, for instance, the following verses in which he refers to Damascus while using Edenic imagery: [8]

I believe in God and exalt his Garden
Damascus is an absolute joy, gardens of Eden and sweet sage
In Damascus, the river of Barada, which flew and stormed, welcomes us like Ridwan who welcomes you before (you enter) Paradise.

In one of his most famous poems, which was written during his exile in southern Spain, Shawqî expresses his yearning for Egypt after being banished from it by the British governor. In the following lines, he depicts both Egypt and Cairo's landscape and monuments, again using the Edenic images: [9]

Egypt though it hid its affection (for me)
is a stream of Paradise which serves us camphor.

This glorifying approach is evident in the poetic works of almost every prominent neo-classical poet. The classical poetic conventions, which were fully and without reservation espoused by most of the highly acclaimed neo-classicists, prevented them from expressing any sort of criticism toward the increasingly urbanizing cities in the Middle East. Far-reaching and radical changes in the attitude toward the city occurred only with the emergence of a new generation of young Arab poets in the late 1950s and later on in the 1960s and 1970s.

3. Representations of the City in Modern Arabic Poetry.

More than one factor has contributed to the forging of a new attitude toward the city and urban life in the works of the modern Arab poets. An element of great importance has been the increasing openness of this young generation of poets to Western poetry and to the manner in which the Western city has been portrayed. As Shmuel Moreh has indicated, most of these poets were deeply influenced by T.S. Eliot's criticism of the modern city, as reflected in his most celebrated poem *The Waste Land* (1922).[10] Eliot depicted life in the modern city as insufferable, evoking strong feelings of spiritual emptiness, alienation and palpable estrangement among the city's dwellers. The harsh drabness of modern life and the gloomy representation of urban existence are mostly evident in the following famous lines from the poem's first stanza, entitled "The Burial of the Dead":[11]

> *Unreal City*
> *Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,*
> *A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,*
> *I had not thought death had undone so many.*
> *Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,*
> *And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.*

Nonetheless, Eliot also maintains that one of the prime duties of the true modernist poet is to employ his art for the exploration of the multifarious interaction between urban life and poetic discourse. In his well-known essay *What Dante Means to Me*, Eliot states that as a

modernist poet, he constantly strives to discover "the poetical possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid elements of the modern metropolis, of the possibility of the fusion between the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric, the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic."[12]

In his book of essays *My Life in Poetry* (1969), the Egyptian Salâh abd al-Sabûr (1931-1981), one of the prominent young Arab poets whose early poems were written in the spirit of "Socialist Realism," attempted to delineate Eliot's influence upon both him and the young generation of Arab poets. Commenting on one of the most powerful and famous poetic image from *The Waste Land*, which portrays an unpalatable lovemaking scene between two young inhabitants of the Western city, abd al-Sabur pens the following: [13]

> *Is this life? No, it is barrenness and aridity. For the modern city has violated all sublime human values. It transformed solitude the most productive element which the individual possesses into tediousness and dejection. It transformed love into corniness, frivolity, and irritation similar to a skin disease's irritation. It transformed music into a somber spiritual drone.*

Another fundamental factor that propelled this sweeping change in attitude toward the city was the fact that the great majority of these modern young poets were born in rural areas, and commenced publishing their poetic works upon their immigration to a capital city. The cultural and mental shock inflicted upon them by the city was undoubtedly overwhelming and was strongly reflected in both their poetic and discursive writings. An emblematic example of the way the city was conceived by these poets can be found in the following lines, written by the Iraqi poet Abd al-Wahhâb al-Bayâtî (1926-1999), one of the key figures among the poets of the 1950s. In these lines, al-Bayâtî describes his arrival to Baghdad and his first encounter with the city:[14]

> *I come from the country. There I used to live, sometimes living it, always returning- until 1944, the year I joined the Teachers College. My first shock was when I discovered the reality of the city. It was false, spurious*

> *[…] It was no more a city than a clown is a clown by virtue of sticking on his clothes every color or patch he can find. I felt that the depth of the real city that had lived for several centuries on the banks of the Tigris, and which was born among and was contemporary with great civilization, had died and disappeared forever. I hadn't expected such a city to return, but I had expected it to have some continuation like that of the river which springs from and flows towards the great sea, embraces it and is absorbed by it. For this reason, my revolt against the city was a rejection of its existing perceptual form. It was not an emotional rejection, but formed the nucleus of a revolt which generated the revolution.*

These two factors the influence of Eliot and the rural origins primarily accounted for the deep-seated change in the representation of the city in the fifties; their impact on the way modern Arab poets perceived urban life can be clearly observed in almost every volume of poetry that was published from this period on. The city became the ultimate embodiment of evil and iniquity on earth. In addition to the fact that it represented alienation and seclusion it was portrayed as a place in which true justice no longer exists, a place in which indignant and vindictive residents to take the law into their own hands. In the following lines from the poem *The City's Poem*, included in the volume *Chronicles of a Professional Politician* (1970), al-Bayâtî dolefully describes his own dreadful encounter with Baghdad and its dismal reality:[15]

> *When the city became naked*
> *[…]*
> *I saw in its sad eyes the gallows being set up*
> *the jails and the incinerators*
> *Anguish, loss and smoke*
> *I saw in its eyes: man*
> *is glued like a mail stamp*
> *to everything*
> *I saw: blood and misdeeds*

match boxes and jerked meat
I saw in its eyes the childhood and the lost orphan girl
seeking in the dunghills
for glory,
for a dying moon
above the houses' cadavers.
I saw the man of tomorrow, exposed in the warehouses' facade
wrapped with grief and bleakness,
handcuffed. The policeman,
the sodomite,
and the pimp
spit in his eyes.

But despite this distasteful depiction of the city, al-Bayâtî's speaker does not wish to leave it and does not lose hope that he will be able to bring change to his city. Instead, he feels that he is challenged to create poetically the utopian "Noble City", a term coined by the distinguished medieval Arab philosopher al-Fârâbî (870-950). In his poem *The Moon of Shiraz* (1975), he seeks the help of Aaisha, who, among other things, is also a legendary muse, who artistically inspires him to "paint" a new city:[16]

I own her… I reside in her
I worship her
With her feather, I paint noble cities in which poets pray.

This ambivalence attitude towards the city can be also found in the works of Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb (1926-1963). Al-Sayyâb, al-Bayâtî's colleague and the most highly acclaimed poet among a group of leftist Iraqi poets, portrayed yet other aspects of urban existence in Baghdad. As another poet who was also born in a small village in southern Iraq, al-Sayyâb bewailed the complete loss of intimacy, familiarity, and genuine affection between the citizens of the city. In his famous poem *The Brothel House,* included in his celebrated collection *Hymn to Rain* (1954), al-Sayyâb likens Baghdad to a huge brothel, wholly

dominated by moral dissipation and sexual debauchery. After depicting the profligate life of the metropolis, he summarizes his view of modern Baghdad: [17]

Is this Baghdad?
Or is it Gomorra that has been
revived, but its revival
was indeed death?

But alongside this menacing and ominous perception of the city, we can discern in other poems by al-Sayyâb that he also expresses compassion and empathy for the very same city. In his celebrated poem *Christ after Crucifixion*, also included in *Hymn to Rain*, the poet uses Jesus as a poetic persona and depicts him as lord of nature and redeemer of the wretched of the earth. The following stanza is salient to our discussion, for it reveals the poet's veiled affection for his city, an affection expressed in his ability to heed the city's subdued "wail":[18]

I listened. The wail was
Crossing the plain between me and the city
Like a rope pulling at a ship
As it sinks to the seabed.
The dirge
Was like a thread of light between dawn and midnight,
Upon a grieving winter sky.
And the city, nursing its feelings, fell asleep

This attitude towards Baghdad can be also found in the works of Sa'dî Yûsuf (b. 1934), a key figure among Iraqi modernist poets. Yûsuf was born in the small village of Abû al-Khasîb in southern Iraq and migrated to the Iraqi capital when he was 18 years old. Like to his colleagues, Yusuf was overwhelmed by both the harsh social reality and the chaotic rhythm of life that dominates the Iraqi metropolis. In the poem *The New Baghdad*, included in the volume *All the Nights* (1976), Yûsuf gives voice to a kaleidoscope of impressions of

the big city, while likening it to a woman. The feelings of distress, melancholy and deprivation noticeably pervade the following lines: [19]

She comes to me with a bowl of soup
when I am besieged by
fumes
of cheap arak.
She comes to me in dusty noons.
And with each sunset night snatches
she comes to me with
an evening star.

In the cafes she sits to bitter tea.
In the market she sells cheese
and buffalo livers.
She dusts her used-clothing stores,
searching for bones in a bowl of soup,
for milk to the lips of a child
and a glimmer in a pair of eyes
and something a woman does not yet know
and streets where water never greens.

At night
she roams among houses abandoned by the poor
and churches where a muffled mass fades
and huts where poor girls faint.
At midnight
she returns to her enchanted shelter
behind muddy streets,
carrying the bread of the dead,
myrtle flowers,

slivers of buffalo liver
and two bones for a bowl of soup.

At dawn she stops by all her houses,
waking all her children,
dragging them to the street,
the thousands waiting to march on Baghdad.

Yet, in a poem entitled *A Calling Card*, included in his volume *Distant from the First Sky* (1970), Yûsuf, like the Iraqi poets who preceded him, also expresses deep compassionate and empathy towards his city. Similar to both al-Sayyâb and al-Bayâtî, he sees the big city as a place of human bereavement, but at the same time as a space that triggers his poetic creativeness. In the following lines from the poem, he describes a numinous nocturnal journey of an anonymous vagrant in the western Baghdad district of al-Karkh: [20]

The year 2000, in the middle of the night, in the garden's gate
A wanderer has passed, his footsteps burdened by
The bullets of the long lost life. They tell the story of how they died.
This is the land:
He wonders: where is the city?
Did it go away or plunge into the underworld?
Or did it fly to the place where the larks fly?
He wonders: have the living people died?
Or maybe its dead people have dispersed and then were revived?
The city
Is like a dry branches of palm, vestiges of a ship
The wind whistles on its dusty banks, whistles sadly
In a place where the Tigris is not red and the Euphrates is not yellow.
O land, he knows what has been said once about the soil
of its graves: it is a wasteland.
But something is still being born inside of you,

Pure as water running through leaves, and it imbibes the elegies of
your
Residents and their songs.

It is clearly evident that Yûsuf does not even attempt to diminish the feelings of despair and hopelessness that strike the nocturnal vagabond as he wanders the streets. For Yûsuf, these feelings are normal and unavoidable. Nevertheless, at the end of the stanza, he turns to the city and proclaims that, in his eyes as a poet, despite its misery and death, "something is still being born" inside its commotion. The source of this "birth" is the very same misery and death, the "residents' elegies," to use the words of the poem. The notion of *Weltschmerz,* bleakness, is a potent force that encourages creativity and brings forth poetic inspiration; it is used by Yûsuf to elicit a sense of ambivalence towards the city.

The murky representation of the city as a harsh prison that dehumanizes its residents became a key motif that permeates the works of almost every modernist poet in the Arab World. In the following lines from his celebrated poem *The Book of Genesis*, included in his poetry volume entitled *The Coming Testament* (1975), Egyptian poet Amal Dunqul (1940-1983), portrays the modern city supposedly the symbol of an enlightened civilization as both a primeval and a merciless place in which no resident is sheltered from its cruelty and bestial atmosphere:[21]

And I said:
Let justice be on earth, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth
I said: Does the wolf eat the wolf? The sheep eat the sheep?
Do not place the sword against the necks of these two:
The child or the old man
And I came to see the son of Adam
Slaying the son of Adam, setting
cities ablaze, thrusting his dagger in the wombs of pregnant
women
tossing his children's fingers as silage to horses …

Justice became death, the handgun its measure
its children were crucified in the squares or hanged in the city's corners.
And I said:
Let justice be on earth, but it was not
Justice was now the possession
of those who sit on thrones of skulls with shrouds for mantles
And God saw this was not good.

It can be easily observed that Dunqul incorporates biblical language and its idiomatic phraseology with the purpose of constructing a poetic image epitomized by sheer havoc. This havoc foreshadows an apocalyptic ending and effectively elicits a feeling of disgust and revulsion towards the modern city. Dunqul, who was born in a small village in Upper Egypt, migrated to Cairo in his early life, and in spite of his prolific literary output, he suffered a life of wretchedness and unrelieved poverty.

The image of a metropolis that spiritually devours its inhabitants pervades many of his poetic works. It is true that the Romantic Arab poets who preceded Dunqul and his colleagues portrayed the image of the city in a similar manner. However, it should be emphasized that they did so purely to make an unsophisticated and rather simplistic comparison between the pastoral country life and the boisterous life of the industrial city. Dunqul, as a true modernist poet, goes far beyond this one-dimensional comparison and transforms the image of the city into a multifaceted allegory encompassing diverse dimensions of modern human existence.

However, Dunqul also senses that the turmoil that dominates the city evokes his innate creativity and triggers his poetic inventiveness ("the pen within my heart," in his words). He conveys this notion in the following lines from his poem *Stories of the Silvered City* (1971), in which he describes his encounter with the Egyptian capital: [22]

The city was boisterous
I carried nothing except a pen within my heart

I was carrying nothing except… my pen.
In my hand there were five mirrors
Reflecting the light that beamed from my blood to the city
Then I knocked on the city's door.

Salâh abd al-Sabûr, whom I have already mentioned, is yet another “poet of Cairo.” He migrated to the Egyptian capital from the town of Zaqaziq in the Delta, and like Amal Dunqul, he also uses dreary and downcast poetic images to portray the city in which he has chosen to reside. These images are evident in the following lines from the poetic cycle entitled *Sailing through Memory* (1981): [23]

I have resided in it years ago seeking joy and bread
going down the sandy, narrow path
down the canal that wore straps made out of its withered flowers
as mourning clothes […]
Moving from one sad village to another […]
I have arrived in it in the middle of summer […]
Its voice, under the whips of sun and sand,
was groaning
and groaning
and groaning [...]
The ears of the men and the observers fail to hear it
Those who can hear it are the city’s lost dogs,
some of its lunatics,
and the poet …

Similar to al-Sayyâb’s avowal that he could hear the city, Abd al-Sabûr, too, avows that the inimitable capacity to hear the city’s “groaning voice”, its “deep streams,” is granted only to a handful of creatures: the city’s dogs, its dying people, its crazy residents, and the poet. This unique capacity to sense the “true” city impels the poet to also reflect upon the interaction between urban life and the poetic process. He is confident that by divulging the

distressing truth of urban life as he sees it, he can achieve two goals: he can ingeniously create a utopian city (or as he calls it "the lightening city"); and through this creation, he can attain "poetic redemption." This notion is ingeniously reflected in a poem entitled *The Poem* of *Exodus* included in the volume *The Dreams of the Old Knight* (1964), in which Abd al-Sabûr describes a mystical journey from the city to the desert:[24]

I am leaving my city, my old residence
leaving in it the vicious burdens of my life […]
in my journey's anguish lies my redemption
and death in the desert will be my resurrection
If I die, then I'll live as I wish in the lightening city
the city of clarity, abundant with lights
the sun will not forsake the noon hour
O, lightening city
city of visions which imbibes light
city of visions which churn with light
are you just an illusion into which the roads converge?
or are you the truth?
or are you the truth?

The city, which transforms into the "city of visions," is now also a source of poetic inspiration despite its despondency and desperate. The "vision", the most important element which the modernist poet needs for his inspiration, now becomes embodied in the city. Moreover, when this vision is combined with the "madness," which assails the poet the minute he encounters the pandemonium and mayhem of urban life, he senses that he can poetically articulate the experience he undergoes. This notion is expressed in these following lines from his poem *I Have Survived* in which he seeks refuge in madness when he is confronted with the city:[25]

Tell me what to do
I implore you […]

If you are wise tell me how to become mad
to feel the pulse of this mad universe
[…] after that I shall not ask it for wisdom

Abd al-Sabûr's resolve to become "crazy" in order to confront the city's uproar is inspired by the poetics of Adûnîs (pseudonym for Alî Ahmad Sa'îd, b. 1930), the most prominent modernist Arab poet. Adûnîs regards "madness" to be that crucial quality the poet possesses when he faces modern life. This is how Kamal Abu-Deeb elucidates Adonis' "madness":[26]

It is sufficiently clear […] that Adonis's madness is not insanity, it is not the dislocation of mental faculties, the ascendancy of chaos over order, of the irrational over the rational, of the profane over the sacred. Madness is an intellectual position, a position of rejection and total commitment. Madness is the power to create new relationships, a fresh language, to give things new identities, to "seduce the universe" […] For, without a total, comprehensive revolution; without changing the structure of reality, of society and the culture, without destroying "the time of ossification" and instituting "the time of creativity", all efforts to bring about a new world will be in vain. As, indeed, they to a great extent have been.

Deeply stirred by this "madness," which propels him to surmount the pessimistic reality of his city, Abd al-Sabûr's speaker realizes that despite the city's "ailing pulse," he chooses to reside in it: [27]

But I love it, I love this city
How slender is the space between love, mercy and ill will
I love to live inside its flesh and blood
To feel its ailing pulse in its hidden veins

The ambivalent approach towards the city is also evident in the poetic works of Khalîl Hâwî (1925-1982), a Lebanese modernist poet and one of the more inventive and idiosyncratic voices in modern Arabic poetry. Hâwî was also born in a provincial area (the small town of Shwayr) but many of his poems take place in Beirut, to which he migrated. In his poem *The Chant of the Beirut's Nights*, included in his volume *The River of Ashes* (1962), he expresses his complex attitude toward the liberal Lebanese capital:[28]

The jinn is fuming inside of us
Sins and crime seduce us:
"In Beirut lies a world not like this world"
"Toil and monotonous death"
"It has an enchanted inn"
"Wine, a bed made of fine scents"
"It is for the bemused ones,
who are walking in the deserts' mazes
in the cursed corridors
and in the city's brothels"

Hâwî attributes his love-hate relationship with the city to the *jinn,* the muse who instigates the creative process, according to the classical Arab poetic tradition. In the poet's eyes, the Lebanese capital is a place of "toil and monotonous death", infused by a spirit of sexual gluttony, hedonism and decadence. Despite this, the big city in his eyes is also tantalizing and beguiling. Accordingly, though feeling lost and misplaced, the poet is lured by his "fuming jinn" to the sordid, underground world of his city. In the eyes of the befuddled poet, the exploration of the city's "cursed corridors" becomes both the source and the quintessence of his poetic inspiration.

The image of Beirut as brooding and ominous yet stimulating and enticing also pervades the works of the Palestinian poet Mahmûd Darwîsh (b. 1942). In his long poem entitled *Beirut's Poem* (1983), Darwish defines the Lebanese capital as a city of history's "gold and fatigue". To him, it is a city of war, grimness and anguish, but it is also his

"mistress", who is constantly entrancing and inspiring. In the following lines from the poem, Darwîsh attempts to depict the Lebanese capital as he senses it:[29]

An apple for the sea, marble narcissus flower,
Stone butterfly, Beirut
Shape of the soul in the mirror
Description of the first woman, smell of early mist
Beirut is built of gold and fatigue
Of Andalusia and Damascus
Silver, seafoam, bequests of earth in the plumage of doves
Death of a cornstalk
Vagrancy of a fugitive star between my love and me
Beirut I did not hear my blood before I uttered
The name of the mistress
Who sleeps across my blood, who sleeps…
[…]
A gray horizon scattered in the distance
Circle path of mother-of-pearl, not roads
And from Hell to the Atlantic
From the gulf to Hell right left and center
I saw nothing but a scaffold
With single rope for two million necks
[…]
Is Beirut a mirror that we can break
to enter into the fragments
Or are we mirrors for the drizzle to shatter?
[…]
A moon shattered over the bench of darkness
Beirut is lily of rubble
A first kiss […]
Stone poem

Collision between two nightingales hidden in the heart
A bereft sky
Thinking on a stone
A rose that can be heard, Beirut
A voice that separates the victim from the sword
A little boy, who flung away the regulation and commands
And the mirrors
Then fell asleep.

This complex ambivalence towards the city is perhaps best expressed in the works of Adûnîs. Born in the small Alawite village of al-Qassabin in northern Syria, Adûnîs migrated to Damascus to study philosophy at its University. His oeuvre, compromising poetry, discursive essays and literary criticism, is imbued with both his individuality and his pioneering and futuristic vision. True to his modernist poetics, Adûnîs skillfully interweaves in his "cities' poems" innovative metaphors with original poetic diction to create modernist images, which capture his ambivalent approach to urban life. In his earlier poem, Adûnîs depicts the city of Damascus as a deformed and rigid entity which has yet to be revived. In two different poems, both entitled *The City* and included in his celebrated volume *The Songs of Mihyar the Damascene* (1961), Adonis conveys his ambivalent poetic vision of the Syrian capital. In the first poem, Adûnîs gives voice to his dim perception of the city:[30]

To smoke, it has leaned to smoke
It is the wind's pontoon.
Its face is a frog and it has two fingers
It will not touch the centuries of spring
It will not feel the morning's river.

In the second poem, in a grieving tone, Adûnîs also obliquely alludes to the lost splendor of old Damascus: [31]

The candles were blown out above my forehead

The candles were lit above the city
And the city
Is a man whose forehead is not reached by light
And the city
Is a stone receding and becoming vestiges of a ship.

Conversely, seven years later, in his volume *The Stage and the Mirrors* (1968), Adûnîs expresses a more “compassionate” approach towards his city. Though still portraying it as a withered entity, he now realizes that because Damascus is such, it can spark his poetic inspiration. He delineates this notion in two different poems from the aforementioned volume. The first poem, entitled *The Names*, expresses an optimistic view regarding the interaction between the city’s gloomy atmosphere and his poetic vision:[32]

I will name the change: “captain of your new days”
O, city of Caliph and his successors
I will name
Your clogged, buried face:
"a star", and the poem:
"The strange knight’s halo
surrounding your new days".

In the second poem, entitled *Damascus*, Adûnîs depicts the city as a woman and his creative process as a physical interaction between himself and her:[33]

You glanced at me-
I came to you like an orphan gullet
Seeking for food. I weaved its twilight-like voice from a cursed language
The world is sinking and opening its old door of wisdom
And I came; I have a star and a light that is spoken to:
O star, bring me back the Zoroasters

And you, O light: consent!
For the universe is made out of paper and wind
And Damascus is the jasmine's navel
Pregnant
Spreading its scent
As a roof
And waiting for its infant.

In his one of his most celebrated poems, *This is My Name* (1969), Adonis seeks to encapsulate his unique vision of the city. He deftly weaves innovative poetic images and original diction to sketch his vision of the city. The city is indeed a place of wretchedness and poverty, but the poet still regards it as the true embodiment of his "madness," his poetic source of inspiration:[34]

I entered your pool. I have a city beneath my sorrows. I have what renders the green branch a snake and the sun a black lover, I have...
Come forward poor of the Earth cover this age with rags and tears cover it with the body which seeks its warmth...the city is arches of madness
the revolution should give birth to its own children I held. I buried millions of songs and came (are you in my grave?) Give me your hands to feel follow me.
My time has not come yet and the cemetery of the world has come
For all the sultans I have ashes
Give me your hands, follow me...

The city in Adûnîs's eyes is a place of startling extremes and stark contrasts. Despite its fiery and turbulent atmosphere, it remains, first and foremost, the unequivocal and unquestionable source of poetic inspiration and creativity: easy to mentally get lost in, easy to love and hate, and easy to be overwhelmed by.

4. Summary

Modern cities, perceived at once as engines of human progress and as places of human misery and degradation, are the undisputed crossroads for cultural interaction and artistic creativity. City living fostered the formation of new literary traditions, and thus encouraged the development of new outlooks towards urban life. In this paper, I have argued that the attitude of modernist Arab poets toward the city is characterized by unique ambivalence. On the one hand, many of the poets discussed here express an unequivocal view, depicting the city and the metropolis as a harsh, cruel prison. On the other hand, these poets recognize the immense possibilities and the immeasurable cultural space the big city offers its inhabitants, especially its poets and artists. Accordingly, in a more penetrating reading of their works, we discover that most of the modern Arab poets are also enthralled and captivated by the modern city. They feel that they have to put up with the metropolis, tumultuous though it is, distant from the "first sky" though it is, because it allows them to confront paradox and incongruity, thus eliciting creativity. Therefore, as far as most modernist Arab poets are concerned, their having being uprooted them from their home village has put them face to face with "the other". In their eyes, it is exactly this challenge to their comfortable and somewhat stolid existence that propels them to the forefront of artistic creation.

I would like to end this paper with the following citation, taken from Italo Calvino's masterpiece *Le città invisibili* ("Invisible Cities," 1972). The quote, in my view, best encapsulates the unique ambivalence in the attitude of modern poets and writers toward the city. The novel is a surreal fantasy in which Marco Polo invents dream-cities for the pleasure and diversion of Kublai Khan. Most are more metaphysical than actual, yet all contain the possibility for real cruelty, real emotion, and real discovery. When the Mongol emperor asks for the significance of his fragmentary urban images, Polo replies: [35]

> *With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed,*
> *but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire, or,*

its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else... You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours... Or the question it asks you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx.

Notes

[1] Roland Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," in *Rethinking Architecture* ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 165.

[2] Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

[3] See: Shmuel Moreh, "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Poetry: From Shawqî to al-Sayyâb," in *Asian and African Studies* 18 (1984): 161-185. Also See G.E. von Grunebaum, "Aspects of Arabic Urban Literature," in *Islamic Studies* VIII/4 (December 1969): 293.

[4] See: Joseph Sadan, "Milk and Wine: A Conflict between Archaic Classicism and Modern Realism in Medieval Literature," (in Hebrew) in *Ha-Sifrut* 21 (October 1975): 119-134.

[5] Ibid., 130-133.

[6] The English translation is taken from Philip F. Kennedy, *The Wine Song in Classical Arabic Poetry (*Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 223.

[7] See: Richard Serano, "Al-Buhturî's Poetics of Persian Abodes," in *Journal of Arabic Literature* 28, (Fall 1997): 68-87.

[8] Ahmad Shawqî*, al-Mawsû'a al-Shawqiyya* (Cairo: Dâr al-Kitâb al-'Arabî, 1994), Vo. 5, 311 (All the English translations of the poems are the author's own, unless otherwise stated). In another poem devoted to the Syrian revolt against the French in 1925, Damascus is depicted as "realms of Paradise"; Ibid., Vo.4, 197. See also Moreh, 161-164.

[9] *Shawqî*, 317. Ridwan is the Islamic name of the custodian angel of Paradise.

[10] *Moreh,* 168.

[11] T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 65.

[12] T.S. Eliot, "What Dante Means To Me," in *To Criticise the Critic and Other Writings*, (London: Faber&Faber, 1965), 126.

[13] Salah abd al-Sabur, *Hayâtî fî l-Shi'r* (Beirut: Dâr al-'Awda, 1969), 91-92.

[14] 'Abd al-Wahhâb al-Bayâtî, *Tajribatî al-Shi'riyya* (Beirut: Manshûrât Nizâr Qabbânî, 1968), 11-12. The English translation of the poem is taken from *Moreh*, p.169-170

[15] 'Abd al-Wahhâb al-Bayâtî, *al-A'mâl al-Shi'riyya al-Kâmila* (Beirut: Dâr al-'Awda, 1979), Vo.2, 281-282.

[16] Ibid., Ibid., pp.322

[17] Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb, *Diwân Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb* (Beirut: Dâr al-'Awda, 1971), 452. More on al-Sayyâb's gloomy depiction of Baghdad see: *Moreh*, pp. 179-184.

[18] Ibid., 457.

[19] Sa'di Yûsuf*, Al-A'mâl al-Shi'riyya* (Damascus: Dâr al-Madâ, 1995), Vo.1, 105-106. The English translation of Yûsuf's poem is taken from: Khaled Mattawa*, Without an Alphabet Without a face* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2002), 62-63.

[20] Ibid., 337-338.

[21] Amal Dunqul, *al-A'mâl al-Shi'riyya al-Kâmila* (Beirut: Dâr al-'Awda, 1985), 269.

[22] *Ibid*, p.137

[23] Salâh abd al-Sabûr, *Al-Ibhâr fî al-Dhâkira* (Cairo: Dâr al-Shurûq, 1981), 37-39.

[24] Salâh abd al-Sabûr, *Al-A'mâl al-Shi'riyya al-Kâmila* (Beirut: Dâr al-'Awda, 1972), 235-237.

[25] An unpublished poem, cited in 'Izz al-Dîn Ismâ'îl, *al-Shi'r al-'Arabî al-Mu'âsir* (Beirut: Dâr al-'Awda, 1972), 366-367.

[26] Kamal Abu-Deeb, "The Perplexity of the All-Knowing," in *Mundus Artium* 1/10 (1977): 178-179.

[27] Abd al-Sabûr, *Ibhâr*, 42.

[28] Khalîl Hâwî, *Al-A'mâl al-Shi'riyya al-Kâmila* (Beirut: Dâr al-'Awda, 1972), 23-24.

[29] Mahmûd Darwîsh, *Diwân Mahmûd Darwîsh* (Beirut: Dâr al-'Awda, 1994), 194-223. The English translation of Darwîsh's poem is taken from Salma Khadra al-Jayyusi, *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 204-209.

[30] Alî Ahmad Sa'id, *Al-A'mal al-Shi'riyya al-Kâmila* (Damascus: Dâr al-Madâ, 1996), Vo.1, 247.

[31] Ibid., 255

[32] Ibid., 465.

[33] Ibid., 464.

[34] Ibid., Vo.2, 221-240.

[35] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, translated by William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1974), 43-44.

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