

A CLOUDY SCENE FROM AFAR

1

In the mid-sixties, the poet Mustafa Jamal al-Din read a good poem to the audience at the Festival of poetry. These are the opening lines of the poem:

بغداد ما اشتبت عليك الأعرى إلا ذوت، ووريقُ عمرِك أخضرُ
مرت بكِ الدنيا وصبحك مُشمسٌ ودجتْ عليكِ ووجه ليلك مُقمرُ
وقستْ عليكِ الحادثاتُ فراعها أن احتمالك من أذاها أكبرُ

O Baghdad,

However hard times twist their boughs around you,

They wither, and the leaves of your life is green again.

The world witnessed your bright morn,

And in darkness, the face of your night was illuminated by the moon.

Catastrophes were harsh on you, but they were amazed

To find that your endurance of agonies exceeded their power to harm.

Baghdad here is more powerful than Time. When history turns the shine day of Baghdad into a dark night, it has her full

Fawzi Karim*

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moon. And history becomes panic because, when history is too harsh, Baghdad becomes more resilient.

This can be a real image if Baghdad with its harsh history were without Baghdadis, without people. This was certainly a poet's dream, which had nothing to do with the reality.

"The Monument of Freedom", by Jawad Salim, in the heart of Tahrir Square, tells the story of an artist's dream too. The leftist dogma allowed him to be hopeful.

History stands in the face of art and poetry, and remains at odds with them. The artist and the poet do not respond to history, but to their imagination. This is essential in poetry and art. But the imagination here is packed by the

commandments of the leftist doctrine, which call for optimism.

The historical fact says that the themes of the "Monument of Freedom" must exchange their locations. The first dark section, full of the dead, must be the third. And the third lighted section, so full of accomplishments, must be placed as the first. This is what we have seen in reality. I believe that art and poetry do not deal with history but with myth. They must go beyond history, not follow in its footsteps, and contribute to the distortion of the truth.

2

Baghdad cafes were filled with voices of poets of modern Free Verse in the forties and fifties. These poets were like all the poets of the world then felt alienated in the margin of the community that failed to understand them, and amid prevailing culture which does not welcome them. They were the poets of questions, the poets of exile.

If the past is critically assessed, it will reveal that the mid-century was a special moment both in Iraq and in the Middle East more generally and a time when people had faith in the future.

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3

The thing that beautified this feeling of alienation and made it tolerable is a sense of kinship between all arts in their circle: poetry, painting and music were gathered in one café or one bar; exactly the way they did in the West. Jawad Salim, the great painter, used to paint the covers of the poets' books, and critic Najib al-Mani' read to them the latest news of classical music from the Gramophone magazine, which was distributed in Baghdad at the time. The political System was a monarchy, with a parliament not without some impurities, and if one of the poets were taken to court because of a poem, the ruling will depend on the accounts of other poets and writers as witnesses. And this event will be to the accused advantage. The middle class was at the height of its formulation and growth, and contact with Western civilization and culture was substantial.

4

Several young poets and writers, under

the influence of Western culture, saw that the objective of the poem is to expand the horizon of the human vision. After acquiring such vision, the truth becomes more mysterious and more impossible. Then the sense of pain seizes them, and they realize that the poem does not give answers to questions, but it is a maze that raises more questions. Poetry is like philosophy, but here it is the heart that thinks, not the mind. You can read all that in Badr Shaker al-Sayyab, Nazik al-Malaika, Buland al-Haidari, Mahmoud al-Braikan... in their first and second books.

Baghdad was then free from the impact of heavy waves of the so-called left-wing political awareness and revolutionary slogans, which began after the establishment of left-wing parties: internationalist, pan-Arab, nationalist, and Islamist. They did not want the poem to wonder inside the maze and ask questions. They wanted the poem to answer, because the poem must know what it wants!

5

Baghdad was then free from the impact of heavy waves of the so-called left-wing political awareness and revolutionary slogans

The cafes and bars in Baghdad were the warm houses of the poets and writers. Every group had their own café, like Maqhaal-Zahawi, and Maqhaal-Barazili and others. The only thing that differentiates between the groups in these cafes is the amount of distance and closeness to modernity, how far they were from modernism, and how close they were to it. The 'Great Idea,' as Dostoevsky called it in his novel *The Devils*, did not dominate modernism yet.

The dreams of the poet's commitments confused a very sensitive poet, Badr Shaker al-Sayyab, damaged his health.

6

In the early fifties, the effect of the leftist political movement was felt, and the waves of political awareness started to flow. The poem became committed, and knew what it wanted. This new wave of poetic commitment was represented in two good poets Abdul Wahab al-Bayati and Saadi Yousef, in succession. The first represented the internationalist orientation of the committed poem, and the second was occupied with Arab political concerns. And most of the other poets trailed after them. The wings of "socialist realism" began to overshadow

the Iraqi poet. Poetic dreams became a huge balloon, the more puffed with smoke of illusion the higher it would rise. The dreams of the poet's commitments confused a very sensitive poet, Badr Shaker al-Sayyab, damaged his health. But this pathological oversensitivity granted him an opportunity to go beyond history and create his own myth.

7

Our 1960s generation came under the impact of the collapse of those hopes, which coloured the poems and ideas of the 1950s and called for the commitment of the poet and writer. Now every group with certain dogma had their own café – poets of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, poets of the central leadership of the party, poets of Trotskyism, poets of Maoism, poets of Arab nationalism, poets of Ba'athism, poets of nationalism ... etc. If we read the titles of the poetic works published in the late sixties, we'll see how deep is the disappointment in

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these titles: Bereavement Ashes, Dead on the Waiting List, Nothing Happens no One Comes, Silence Does not Make the Dead Tired ... etc.

This makes clear how much the poets of my generation believed in dogmatic political action, and how much this dogma turned the poet from his world as a poet of the Maze (poet of questions and uncertainties) to a poet of red or green Banner. Even "modernity" itself wore a mask of sacred doctrine and had proponents and enemies.

8

There are two poets who have become the subject of my interest since the seventies. One belongs to the first generation, and the other to my generation. Both were not major poets; they emerged among the ordinary people in the streets, cafes and bars of the city. And these people in the streets, cafes and bars, knew them very well, and they were very familiar with them, telling stories about their lives and about their poetry. I raised them with time to

the level of icons, because they were free to be poets and human beings at the same time. There is no gap between the poet and the man in them, between the heart that feels and the mind that thinks. They did not write their poems under the banner, and did not sanctify a 'Great Idea.' They were beautifully drunk by their individual dreams and alcohol.

I present them this way because they were free from the impact of the political parties that believed the poem must be committed to that something which I don't think existed.

9

I became a very close friend of the poet Hussein Mardan in 1970, when I was in Beirut. I returned to Baghdad in 1972.

I wrote a long poem about him, and I used his name as a title. I read it to the audience in the garden of the Union of Writers, and Hussein Mardan was sitting in the first row. There were three lines in the poem I felt so direct and emotional, referring to Mardan's secret love for a woman in the Ministry of Culture:

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political action,**

نحن نعرف معنى الزيارة
لرواق الوزارة،
ونعرف معنى الهوى المستحيل.

We do know the meaning of the visit
To the corridors of the Ministry
And the impossible love.

Therefore, I deleted them. I found the poet after the reading so sad and angry. He told me that he was waiting only to hear these three lines.

The poem was published as an elegy, in al-Adab magazine in Beirut. When the magazine reached Baghdad, Husain Mardandid not see it. He died in the hospital by a severe heart attack in 1972 (he was 46 years old).

He was not a major poet, but the unity between the poet and the man in him was a rare feature in our Iraqi time. He stayed too far away from the new convictions that the poet must be a voice of the political vision.

He was "at the top of Everest, eating cactus," as he wrote in one of his essays. He was the last romantic man and poet, who wrote the

poem based on his own spiritual experience alone. He was a popular man and poet among his own people. He was a rebellious, misfit lover, even if without a woman.

10

The other poet, but from my generation this time, was Abdul Ameer al-Husairi. He came to Baghdad from Najaf with the 1958 revolution. He carried in him a high poetic talent, but he lost it in alcohol, when he lost hope like all others in his generation. He died young in 1978 (36 years old). I used to see him nearly every night, in Gardenia Bar where I use to drink. He started his daily journey at the evening from al-Midan Square where he lived in a cheap hotel for free, and then cut off al-Rashid Street to the Eastern Gate, then to the end of Abu Nawas Street, and across these two very long streets he made sure to visit every single bar. All customer tables in the bars knew him, but he did not stay long at any given table; he stopped only to sip one glass of Araq and leave. People would see him as a live poem walking on two legs. I see Abdul Ameer al-Husairi as a symbol

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**I see Abdul Ameer al-Husairias a symbol
of his generation: the sixties.**

of his generation: the sixties. The difference between him and the rest was that they were hoping to change the world, while he hoped to change himself. Both did not achieve success.

I wrote two poems about him, a short story, some paintings and drawings, and a few pages in my book 'The Return to Gardenia'.

Notes

- * Fawzi Karim, Iraqi poet, writer and painter. He has published many books of poetry, including *Where Things Begin* (1969), *I Rise My Hand in Protest* (1971), *Madness of Stone* (1977), *Pestilential Continents* (1995), *Collected Poems in two vols.* (2001), *The Foundling Years* (2003), *The Last Gypsies* (2005), *The Night of Abe al-Aláa* (2008). His most important books on criticism are *The Emperor's Clothes* (2000), *Incoherence of the Sixties Generation: The whims of the intellectual and the risks of political action* (2006). His books on music are, *The Musical Virtues* (2002), *Companionship of Gods* (2009). On autobiography, *Copper City* (1995), *Return to Gardenia* (2004).

