

writings and aided 20th century scholars in the publication of much of his unpublished work.

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Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Shābbī

(1909 – 1934)

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Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Shābbī was one of those rare
 figures who managed to capture the spirit of
 their time in memorable metaphors and encapsu-
 late it in their lives and personalities. He was
 able to give expression to a period marked by
 the rise of the liberationist spirit in his native
 Tunisia and the yearning for emancipation from
 colonialism and underdevelopment which swept
 across much of the Arab world in the first half of
 the 20th century. And nowhere was this truer

than in a poem which was on the tip of millions
 of tongues, taught in schools from Morocco to
 Yemen, sung by some of the most influential
 Arab stars, written on protest banners, shouted
 by students in the face of French and English
 occupiers, and more recently against their own
 governments. The couplet even entered the
 folklore of global protest music and poetry and
 was adopted by the International Solidarity
 Movement. The opening lines of the poem now
 form the closing part of Tunisia's national an-
 them and adorn an archway in the poet's native
 city, Tozeur.

*If one day people should embrace life,
 Fate is certain to respond.
 The night will surely dissipate
 And chains will be broken.*

Yet despite their global appeal, the humanistic
 spirit they embody, and their seeming timeles-
 ness, these words were the product of a specific
 historical context and a personal temperament
 fashioned by colonialism and the movement of a
 poetry which was undergoing transformations of
 profound proportions. In poetry as in criticism,
 al-Shābbī needs to be understood within schools
 of thought and poetic composition known as
al-Dīwān, *al-Mahjar* and *Apollo* (see the articles on
Jubrān, **Nu'aymah**, and **Abū Shādī** in this
 volume). Al-Shābbī sought to rebel against
 Arabic tradition in the way that European Ro-
 mantics had rejected classicism. He was a poet's
 poet, rather like the French Arthur Rimbaud,
 keenly conscious of his mission as poet and as
 visionary. At a time when contact between the
 Arab East and North Africa was minimal, he
 served as a bridge, gaining fame and a canonical
 status across the Arab world in the 20th century.
 With such reputation and impact, it may appear
 that he had a prolific input and a long life. The
 reality is quite different. The poet produced just
 over one hundred poems and lived for only 25
 years. In fact al-Shābbī's impact was such that
 there is more poetry about him than by him. (By
 1994, no less than 140 poems celebrating the
 poet have been recorded.) He also kept a diary
 and published several pieces of literary and
 cultural criticism.

Abū 'l-Qāsim ibn Muhammad ibn Abū 'l-

Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm al-Shābbī was born on 24 February 1909 in the district of al-Shābbiyyah in Tozeur, an oasis town in the South West of Tunisia. His family is said to have settled in the area 300 years earlier after they were expelled from power as rulers of the renowned city of al-Qairawān. Among famous members of the family were Ahmad ibn Makhlūf al-Shābbī, founder of the al-Shābbiyyah *tarīqah* (Sufi path) and a famous scholar. The poet's father was a traditional judge (*qāḍī*) who had received a religious education in Tunisia and degrees from the al-Azhar mosque-university in Cairo where he met the famous reformist, Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905). Following the father's appointments, the family moved around Tunisia quite frequently, giving the poet exposure to life across the country. He lived in Silyānah and Tālah in the centre; Gafsa and Gābis in the south; and Majāz al-Bāb, Zaghouane and Rā's al-Jabal in the north. As a result, he did not really live in his native town until the last five years of his life. Al-Shābbī studied at Quranic schools before moving to the Islamic university in Tunis, al-Zaytūnah, in 1920 from where he graduated in 1928. In accordance with his father's wishes he then joined the School of Law and started training in Tunis in 1930. In the capital, he stayed in student accommodation, frequenting the Khaldūniyyah and al-Sādiqiyyah libraries and spending vacations with his family wherever they happened to be. Al-Shābbī's education was exclusively in Arabic. Although he was always keen to read foreign literature in translation, he suffered from his lack of knowledge of a foreign language at a time when most of his friends were bi-lingual. "I know that I can only fly in the world of literature on a single wing," he wrote in a letter dated 22 February 1933. He hated his legal studies in Tunis, and focused instead on literary activities and attempts to reform education at al-Zaytūnah.

When his father died in December 1929, the poet became the head of the household. He married soon afterwards and had a child by 1931. But despite the need, he refused to take up a job saying:

I am a poet and the poet must be free like a bird

in the forest. Legal jobs in particular stifle the spirit and destroy the songs of the heart and personal serenity.

In Tozeur, he often spent time near a water-spring on the outskirts of town (now a shrine to him and an obligatory stop for tourists), reading or socializing with friends, walking in the oasis, or attending Sufi ceremonies, all of which he reports in letters to his friend at the time. He also helped found the Association of Tozeur Students and tried to start a fund to help writers publish their work.

Some of al-Shābbī's ideas about poetry are scattered in articles, letters and private diaries. In his introduction to the Egyptian poet Abū Shādī's collection *al-Yanbū'* (The Water Spring), published in 1932 and solicited by the latter, al-Shābbī gives a useful overview of contemporary Arabic poetry and advocates innovation. He does however express his firm belief that respect for the rules of the Arabic language and its roots should be maintained. In 1931 he considered Jubrān's rebellion against the rules of Arabic "a mistake which will be outweighed by the intellectual revolution he left behind." In a veiled criticism of Abū Shādī, he mentions that the latter is prolific without saying much about the quality of his work. But in a letter dated 19 December 1933, he explains that the Egyptian poet appears hurried, opting for quantity over depth. In 1929 al-Shābbī caused a memorable stir across the cultural landscape in Tunisia with his lectures on "al-Khayāl al-shi'rī 'ind al-'arab" (Poetic Imagination among the Arabs). Reports say that hundreds of people from all orientations attended the talk and were soon divided into supporters and detractors of the poet. The lectures were the third in a series of daring talks which brought out into the open a conflict between two sides, known as the conservatives (*al-taqlīdiyyūn*) and the modernizers (*al-mujaddīdūn*), that marked the cultural scene in Tunisia at the time. In the literary field, al-Shābbī spear-headed the second group, whereas his friend, al-Tāhir al-Haddād, led a parallel debate about the rights of women and the working class. A year later, al-Shābbī published his lectures in book form through the subscription system prevalent at the time. By then, he had become part of the

poetry scene, but a poet with no collection to his name. This was in fact his first book.

al-Khayāl has been seen within a number of contexts. One is the controversy which arose from skepticism regarding the origins of pre-Islamic poetry, introduced by the Egyptian Tāhā Husayn in his famous work on the subject (1926) and the hostile responses that it had aroused across the Arab world, including Tunisia. Scholars have suggested that al-Shābbī's real target was a book entitled *al-Khayāl fī 'l-shi'r al-'arabī* (Imagination in Arabic Poetry) that had been published in 1922 by Muhammad al-Khadhr Husayn (1873-1958), who was *mufī* of al-Azhar in Egypt but Tunisian in origin. He too had previously attempted to refute Tāhā Husayn's ideas in a work entitled *Naqd kitāb "Fī 'l-shi'r al-jāhili"* (A Critique of the book "On Pre-Islamic Poetry", 1927). A further context was the rising influence of Western ideas, particularly Romanticism.

Al-Shābbī, clearly aware of the polemical nature of his ideas, presents them as personal beliefs rather than research findings, although he does so in a methodical, clear, learned and stylistically polished piece. He divides imagination into two types. One he calls "technical" because it involves verbal skills which can be learned, such as metaphors, imagery, and other forms of verbal mastery. Imagination here plays an ornamental role. The second type of imagination and the main thrust of the lectures is called "poetic" and is used by human beings to understand themselves and the world around them. Philosophy, religion, and myth all come under this category. Al-Shābbī focuses on myth, nature, woman and narrative poetry as subjects of his analysis and draws comparisons between Arabic and Western literatures.

According to al-Shābbī, the earliest form of imagination was myth, since it constituted the first formulation whereby human consciousness created meaning in life and the world. "Myth may be considered the childhood of poetry during the childhood of the human kind." After establishing this premise, he moves on to ask whether Arab culture has had its own myths. He declares that myths are rare in the early history of Arab civilization and wonders whether it is a

question of record. In other words, could it be that narrators have neglected to transmit any myths to us? The answer provided is no, since there was in fact very little for them to preserve. It seems, al-Shābbī suggests, that, unlike the Greeks and Romans, the Arabs neither cared about their myths nor included them in their poetry. For him, even the few Arab myths and deities that existed—and he gives several concrete examples—show a lack of imagination. For instance, the deities of the ancient Arabs were "simple statues," revered ancestors or deities borrowed from neighboring cultures. They did not invest these gods with life or integrate them into their concerns and aspirations. The goddess Ashtar, borrowed from the Assyrians by both Arabs and Greeks, is an example of the varying uses of myth. Al-Shābbī suggests that while the Arabs turned Ashtar into a statue the Greeks called her Aphrodite and created around her stories and genealogies that were unknown even to the Assyrians. The Greeks, he concludes, seem to have associated their deities with ideas, feelings or forces of nature, and constructed stories and poems around them, whereas the Arabs failed to do so. Al-Shābbī's ideas fall within the way his contemporary Arab intellectuals tried to analyze their own history and culture in comparison to Western civilization. By giving this prime importance to myth, al-Shābbī, like others in his generation and even the one after it, such as the Egyptian Tawfiq al-Hakīm and the poets Adonis (i.e., 'Alī Ahmad Sa'īd, b. 1928) and Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (d. 1964) tried to understand and explain why Western literature and philosophy have developed at a pace unmatched by their Arabic counterparts. But the poet, unlike al-Hakīm for instance, was not interested in applications such as the representation of myths in theatre or dramatic poetry. His interest was in the foundations themselves.

Al-Shābbī goes on to point out the close link between poetic imagination and nature. In other words, nature in a nation's poetry is related to the environment that shapes that nation. Arab poets, he argues, have excelled in their nature poetry, particularly with regard to the environments they know best, the desert in early poetry,

and mountains and meadows in the poetry of Spain (al-Andalus), to cite just two examples. However, the Arabs did not establish a poetic relationship with nature; rather they talked about it like "story tellers." al-Shābbī gives ample citations from Arabic poetry on the subject and compares them with 18th and 19th century European Romantics, particularly Lamartine and Goethe. His conclusion is that Arabic poetry was naïve while its western counterpart was marked by depth. Al-Shābbī's own poetry, as we will see shortly, attempts to redress this perceived problem.

The third issue is the relationship between poetic imagination and women, not from the point of view of how women dealt with imagination—in fact women poets are completely absent from al-Shābbī's otherwise impressive anthology in this book—; rather, he focuses on how poetry portrayed woman. The Arabs, he suggests, have given woman a very high position, to the point that no poem has really been free from reference to this theme. The initial part in the structure of the canonical *qasīdah* (Arabic ode) is often about a woman. However, he thinks that this presence was limited to the woman as body and one of life's pleasures, not as a soul or an inspiration. There are, he argues, social and historical reasons for this position. One such is the fact that the culture links women to guile (*kayā*); the other is that women never had "real freedom" at any point in Arab history. Al-Shābbī contends that the Arabic literary heritage includes a good deal of poetry devoted to erotic love (*ghazal*) but not about love itself, except perhaps in the case of Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 896) and, more recently, Jubrān. With regard to narrative, he notes the presence of this genre in the poetry of Mankhal al-Yashkarī and Imru' al-Qays (d. circa 540), but suggests that these narratives were part of the overall structure, not an independent genre as one would find in Greek and Roman poetry. 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah (d. 712) was an exception, but his example was emulated by his successors. In prose, narrative either focused on moral exemplars and wisdom or else on literary humor and linguistic entertainment (such as the *maqāmah* genre).

After this general analytical overview, the

poet concludes that Arabic poetry has been 'materialistic,' unwilling to look into the essence of things or explore the unknown. This, he insists, should not be seen as meaning that this literature did not express the aspirations and worldview of the Arab people across the ages, but rather that this literature "is no longer appropriate to our present-day spirit, our mood, hopes and wishes." The pre-modern tradition should not be emulated because such an act would pull the culture back into the past at a time when it should be looking to the future. But before it can move onwards, the culture needs to become conscious of the fact that the past does not fill "our hunger nor does it cover our naked bodies." al-Shābbī therefore sees his own task as one of disseminating this consciousness.

The key point, made again and again, is that Arab writers should not look to the past for answers to present-day problems. Instead, inspiration should be sought in Western culture. The basic reason for this inadequacy and the "shallowness" of Arabic poetic imagination, he argues, is related to the Arab spirit, which he describes as "rhetorical" and "materialistic." The Arabs made no distinction between poet and orator; both were expected to express the spirit of the tribe and defend its honor. Likewise, poetry remained largely unchanged for centuries. Sections of the culture maintained a religious understanding of literature, overvaluing pre-Islamic convention as a dogma not to be changed while others understood literature solely as a form of entertainment. Both tendencies focused on form and expression. In addition, the Arabs did not translate the literatures of other nations and thus failed to benefit from them. They avoided Greek and Roman literatures, not only because they perceived them as idolatrous but also because they had an arrogant sense of the value of their own literary culture. Modern-day life demanded a drastic departure from this tradition.

We need a new fresh literature which expresses the hope, life and feelings inside us; when we read this literature, we should find in it a representation of our very heartbeats, the movement of our souls and the yearnings of our hopes and

dreams. Ancient Arabic literature cannot provide such things; it was not composed for us, the people of the present era, but for hearts now silenced by death.

Critical reactions to *al-Khayāl* vary a great deal. It has been called a pamphlet against tradition; a manifesto for new poetry written in the rhetoric of missionaries; an immature study of Arabic poetry; a prelude to a modernism which cuts ties with tradition; a study of the absence of poetic imagination among the Arabs. Others considered it an extreme case of infatuation with the West, particularly the European classical age and Romanticism, and even a form of self-hate and masochism. But some critics have argued that it would be wrong to look for al-Shābbī the critic in this book because his intention was to mount a vigorous rebellion against a stagnant culture rather than to provide an objective analysis of its history. For them, *al-Khayāl* marks a moment of intellectual struggle against repression of opinion and forces that, according to the poet, were impeding creativity and progress. The book is not so much about Arabic poetry as it is about the position that Arabs have adopted towards their poetic tradition and how they have understood the function and mission of poetry in the past. Some of the ideas expressed in *al-Khayāl* can also be found in al-Shābbī's poetry, making the book both a summary of the poet's work until 1929 and a manifesto for what he would write thereafter.

Some of al-Shābbī's biographers have suggested that from 1928 he went into a deep depression as the result of the death of a woman he loved; but information about this is vague and widely contested. In letters to friends and in his diaries, the poet often mentions his nightmares, extreme sensitivity, and frequent bouts of weeping. He talks of a loss of hope and feelings of worthlessness and despair. "In this life," he wrote to his life-long friend Muhammad al-Hilwī on the 22nd of February 1933,

nothing makes me sadder than the thought that I am going to die before fulfilling the mission for which I feel I was born.

In moments of despair, al-Shābbī thought that

Tunisia was too small for him, and that people in general were beneath the mission he had for them. He called himself an unknown prophet, a visionary who saw the right path and felt the need to lead the people to it through poetry and willful action. In periods of greater hope, he expressed his belief in the will of the people to change their destiny and regained his sense of belief in the validity of his own mission. It is in this sense, one critic has observed, that Romanticism for al-Shābbī was a life experience as much as it was a mode of poetic expression.

In 1933, despite depression and illness, he started editing his poetry for publication as a collection, a project that involved both copying and amendments and one that was to remain unfinished until 20 years after his death. It seems that that his connection with the group of poets who worked around the Egyptian journal *Apollo* and the poet Ahmad Zakī Abū Shādī gave him both a natural home and renewed impetus. In fact, al-Shābbī had started writing poetry at the age of 15, but, fearing his father's disapproval, had not published his work until three years later. Appearing first in Tunisian newspapers and magazines, it was then published in the Cairo-based journal, *Apollo*, where from 1933 eighteen of his best-known poems appeared and were the subject of two critical articles in 1934. It is through *Apollo* that he would become known across the Arab World. In 1933, encouraged by Abū Shādī, he selected 83 poems to form a collection (*dīwān*). As he reports in his letters, he started gathering subscriptions ahead of publication. But when the book was finally published in 1955, it contained 91 poems. The 1984 edition increased the number to as many as 132 pieces, but *The Collected Works* published in 1994 included only 105 poems dated between 1 August 1924 and 20 August 1934. These discrepancies reveal serious disagreement as to how much of al-Shābbī's poetry should have been allowed to circulate. The poet himself discarded or amended several poems. For example, his most famous poem, "Irādāt al-hayāt" (The Will of Life), appeared in three different versions: 60 lines in the version published in 1935; 58 in the book by Karrū published in 1952; and 63 in the 1955 collection. In addition, there are 29 in-

stances of internal differences in wording between the earlier and later versions. This controversy over poems and versions is indicative not only of the disputed poetic quality of particular poems, lines or expressions, but also of a contested image of the poet himself. Some editors have been motivated by the desire to increase the volume of what al-Shābbī published so as to boost the size of his anthology, while others have preferred to remove poems that might reflect negatively on his reputation. A third group has aimed to abide by the poet's own selection, since he seemed determined to weed out a large number of poems that he had published earlier because he considered them naïve and worthless (as he himself notes in a letter dated 19 December 1933).

Some critics have noted that al-Shābbī never really speaks of a specific location or time. Likewise, no specific woman is mentioned in his love poetry, making woman in his work an archetype or an ideal rather than a specific lover. The latter is debated, and an early love story was alleged. (A 2005 television drama about the poet's life plays up this story, giving more definition to the woman by dressing her in a specific regional costume). This enabled his poetry somehow to transcend its geographical and temporal origins, namely Tunisia in the late 1920's and early 1930's, and it may help to explain why his poetry was more widely read 20 years after his death (and even up till now) than was the case during his own lifetime. Beyond the canonical nature of his poetry, the appeal remains largely untouched, no more so than in his most famous poems. Five of these, each representing an aspect of the poet's art and thought, will be treated in some detail below. School curricula in Tunisia and elsewhere, as well as singers, have made other poems famous. Among them, we find "Yā ibna ummī" (My Mother's Son, 20th Feb. 1929), "Shakwā al-yafīm" (The Orphan's Complaint, 31st Aug. 1926), "al-Nabī al-majhūl" (The Unknown Prophet, 21st Jan. 1930); "al-Jannah al-dā'i'ah" (The Lost Paradise, 9th Jan. 1933); "Falsafat al-thu'bān al-muqaddas" (The Philosophy of the Sacred Snake, 20th Aug. 1934) and "Ilā tughāt al-'ālam" (To the Tyrants of the

World, 8th Apl. 1934).

Critics divide al-Shābbī's work into two distinct phases, perhaps taking their cue from the poet himself; in a letter he states that his attitude changed from a view of a life of despair and pain to one involving sarcastic smiles and strong belief, especially at the time when he wrote "al-Sabāh al-Jadīd" (The New Morning). According to some critics, the poem even shows a move away from tones of confession and mourning, often mixed with loud and direct rhetoric, in order to focus on sound, rhythm and allusion. At the level of form, al-Shābbī makes full use of the Arabic meters in all their variety, using 9 out of the 16, something that is rare among modern poets. About one third of the poems are multi-rhymed. The five poems discussed below are: "al-Sabāh al-jadīd" (The New Morning); "Irādat al-hayāt" (The Will of Life); "Nashīd al-jabbār aw hākadhā ghannā Brūmīthyūs" (The Song of the Mighty One, Or Thus Sung Prometheus); "Salawāt fi haykal al-hubb" (Prayers in the Temple of Love) and "Fī zill wādī al-mawt" (In the Shadow of the Valley of Death).

Many critics have termed "Prayers in the Temple of Love," written 13 October 1931, "a poetic event" in modern Arabic literary history; it remains a favorite in anthologies of love poetry. The origin of the poem and the motivations behind it remain unclear. The poem starts with the description of the beloved in a series of similes, none of which is concrete, unlike the traditional tendency in Arabic poetry where woman's body and high birth are celebrated in the opening section of the ode.

*You are gentle as childhood,
As a dream, a melody, a morning light.
Gentle as the laughing sky,
As a moon-rich night.
Sweet like roses,
Or a newborn smile.*

Further on in the poem, there is a description of the body in terms of music and rhythm rather than shape and feel:

*You sway in the world,
Like melody of divine perfection.
Your steps are drunk with song,*

Your voice echoes the distant sound of a flute.

The beloved is described as someone who can save the poet from the disintegration of his soul and descent into despair. The woman here is akin to the poetic muse; she even assumes attributes of the divine, a life-giver who is called upon to save the poet from an alienating existence among people who do not appreciate beauty and the purity of love. The poem concludes with a supplication that, by regenerating the poet's voice and art, she not extinguish the hope created by her beauty. The prayers in her temple are bound to be answered:

*For a great God does not stone a slave
When he is kneeling down in ardent worship.*

"The New Morning," written 9 April 1933, is often cited as a key example of al-Shābbī's attempts at innovation in Arabic poetry, involving both form and rhythm. The poem has varied rhyme, in itself a reflection of a departure from the mono-rhymed classical Arabic poem. It is also made up of a set of three lines, called *qaflah* or *qarār* (refrain), repeated after two sets of 4 quatrains, creating a lyricism and musicality through repetition with variation. On the page, the poem looks unusual as it comes close to, but does not emulate, the sonnet in Western poetry, being three sets of 11 lines each, rather than 14. The poem is further admired because of the profound meanings that it conveys. Here the poet sees light not as representing life on earth but rather as a deliverance from it through death or a form of permanent existence beyond suffering. The refrain goes like this:

*Let wounds heal!
Let sorrows recede!
For the age of weeping is gone,
The time of madness too.
And from beyond the ages,
Morning has broken.*

Wounds and sorrows are transcended by turning life's pain into a song (al-Shābbī titled his collection *Songs of Life*):

*In death's gullies,
I buried my pain.
To the vanishing winds,*

*I scattered my tears.
Out of life,
I made a melodious organ.
And played on it
Across the expanse of time.*

At the end, the poet sails in the "great ocean", answering the call of the new morning and bidding farewell to life's troubles and "weary spaces."

Yet, despite the appeal of meditative pieces and love poems, al-Shābbī remains best known for his 'political' poetry. This should not be understood to mean a specific political line or affiliation with a given agenda or party. In fact, the poet did not really belong to any political institution or group. His poems gave expression to the general desire for freedom from colonialism; they were hymns to liberation and rebukes against tyrants rather than calls for specific action. His most-quoted poem, "Irādat al-hayāt" (The Will of Life), written a year before his death (16.9.1933), was said to have resulted from an encounter with the nationalist, al-Tāhir Sfar, in 1933 in the mountainous region of 'Ayn Drāhim where al-Shābbī was convalescing and where both men discussed the rising tensions with the French. But to his readers the poem did not come as a surprise, since it had been preceded by a number of other poems on the same theme, dating back to the poet's earliest published work. For example, "To a Tyrant" written on 17 February 1927, displays an equally revolutionary spirit but does not contain the element of a dialogue with nature, which is the structuring principle of the later poem. The poems show belief in the power of the people, reveal the transient nature and fragility of domination and repression, and, above all, express an unwavering hope in freedom as the ultimate outcome no matter what the suffering and setbacks involved. "To the Tyrants of the World" ("Ilā tughāt al-'ālam," dated 8 April 1934—just a few months before the death of the poet) is further imbued with references to nature. The poem contains one of his most quoted lines:

*Beware! For under dying ashes, lives fire.
Whoever sows thorns is certain to harvest
wounds.*

Yet, despite the general nature of the appeal early on in his career, the poet left no doubt that occupied Tunisia was his preoccupation. In the poem "Beautiful Tunisia," written when he was 18, he says:

*This is the age of darkness,
But I have glimpsed the morning beyond it.
Beautiful Tunisia! I have ridden the waves
of your love.
Deep love is my covenant with you,
And I have tasted its bitter sweetness.
[...]
Time has dissipated the glory of my people
But life is certain to adorn them with glory
once again.*

It is in fact this certitude that guides the poet's seemingly unstoppable belief in the power of the people in "The Will of Life." Here, the poet takes his anguished questions and doubts to nature, and she responds with resounding certainty:

*If one day people should embrace life,
Fate is certain to respond.
The night will surely dissipate
And chains will be broken.*

After a statement of the overall message (This is what life said to me/This is how her hidden spirit spoke), there follows a dialogue with various elements of nature. Storms, forests and the seasons are interrogated, and the secret of life and its progress from the darkness of Winter to the brightness of Spring is revealed. The message is unequivocal:

*Across the universe it was proclaimed:
Ambition is the flame of life,
And the spirit of victory.
If souls reach for life,
Fate is certain to respond.*

Read within the context of a society where fate is a matter for God alone, the poem challenges a deep-seated belief in pre-ordained destiny. The statement was nevertheless embraced by a revolutionary Arab world, particularly during the colonial period and at the height of pan-Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1987,

when the Prime Minister of Tunisia removed President Bourguiba from office, one of the first steps he took in order to transform state discourse was to amend the national anthem by adding to it al-Shābbī's opening lines.

In a poem entitled "Falsafat al-thu'bān al-muqaddas" (The Philosophy of the Sacred Snake, dated 20 August 1934), al-Shābbī explains the colonial strategy of assimilation which was the dominant strategy of the French in education, religious conversion, language policy and cultural measures. In a clear reference to the biblical story of the tempting snake, he introduces the poem with a short statement where he calls assimilation "the philosophy of educated power." He then goes on to explain that in the dialogue between the snake and the bird in the poem, the former uses mystical philosophy to convince the bird that its death is a necessary sacrifice in order to achieve permanence. The poem describes a bird chirping away on a spring day when it is attacked by a snake. The bird realizes that he has been attacked because he remains weak as long as power resides in the hands of the mighty. The snake then tries to convince the bird to sacrifice itself in order to contribute to a more noble cause, gaining everlasting existence by becoming part of a bigger whole and a more powerful being. The bird resigns itself to death, but not before showing that it fully understands the ploy:

*Let nature, for whom I have sung
The dreams of youth and wonder, bear witness!
Peace is a forged truth,
Justice is the language of the dying fire.
There can be no equality unless the forces
are equal,
And terror is met with terror.*

The poem is a direct reflection on, and a rejection of, the argument advanced by the French that small colonies can achieve power and progress only by becoming part of the victorious French empire.

This intellectual political poem exemplifies al-Shābbī's tendency to write contemplative and philosophical poetry. He did so perhaps under the influence of Jubrān and readings in classical

Arabic literature, particularly the poet Abū 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arī (d. 1057). With the poem "Fī zill wādī al-mawt" (In the Shadow of the Valley of Death; written on 5 April 1932), al-Shābbī presents a more sustained view of life. Here the poet questions the purpose and logic of life. He complains of emptiness and strives to experience death in the hope of discovering the meaning of existence, not unlike the poem "The New Morning" discussed above.

Yet, despite his engagement with contemporary issues, innovative style and poetic skill, al-Shābbī's key distinction was his belief in poetry, in the role of the poet, and in his own mission in life. He wrote numerous pieces about poetry itself, the bard and art in general. In fact, rarely in his collection do we find a poem that does not refer in some way to poetry, song or the poet as such. This tendency links al-Shābbī with a new consciousness in the Arabic literary scene: by emphasizing lyricism and the self, it gives additional focus to the art of poetry itself. Putting into practice the ideas he had earlier discussed in *al-Khayāl*, al-Shābbī compared himself to an unknown prophet, a visionary who is meant to show the way. He also saw himself as someone who would remain alone and misunderstood because of his particular nature. All of which led him to adopt a variety of stances towards other people. He saw himself as a constructive force but also as destroyer; as a man destined to lead but also as a solitary figure who must shun society. The poem "al-Nabī al-majhūl" (The Unknown Prophet; dated 21 January 1930), illustrates this movement between the two impulses. It starts with a desire to destroy and uproot:

*Oh, people! I wish I were a wood cutter,
So that I may strike roots with my axe.*

People are incapable of understanding the sheer depths of what it is the poet is urging them to embrace:

*You do not grasp reality,
Except through touching and feeling.*

The poet presents beauty and hope to the people as flowers and music but they respond by stamping on his heart and roses. He then decides to

leave them:

*I am going to the forest
To spend life alone, in despair.*

But when the poet turns away from people, they accuse him of being possessed and shun him like a devil:

*Expel the non-believer from the temple,
He is the source of all evil.*

Between the poet and his people stand inherited ignorance and deep mistrust. The poet is fated to live torn between two realities, "a prophet according to life itself" but a "madman" in the view of his folk. The only solution is communion with nature, for she alone understands the poet. It is this element above all else that makes al-Shābbī one of the key figures of Romanticism in the Arabic tradition.

But reaction to people's neglect can also take the form of hardened will and a stronger belief in the poet's mission. In this aspect, al-Shābbī can be linked to a long Western tradition of the poet as a Prometheus, particularly in its modern articulation where the Greek hero is freed from his chains. "Prometheus Unbound" by Shelley comes to mind. In "Nashīd al-jabbār aw hākadhā ghannā Brūmīthūs" (The Song of the Mighty One, or Thus Sung Prometheus; written on 15 December 1933, the use of Greek mythology links al-Shābbī with a tradition that was to develop soon after his death whereby poets would recall local mythology in their art, and even in politics, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. The movement involved such figures as al-Sayyāb (d. 1964), Sa'īd 'Aql (b.1912), and Adūnīs/Adonis (i.e., 'Alī Ahmad Sa'īd, b. 1930). In the poem, al-Shābbī recalls the images from the original myth, such as the eagle, Prometheus' defiance of the Gods, and his commitment to arts and beauty. The poet proclaims that he will transform pain—by this time al-Shābbī was actually very ill—and rejection into poetry and music.

*Despite illness and enemies,
I will live upon soaring summits,
Like a proud eagle.*

The poet thrives in the face of adversity and is

strengthened by hardship and solitude, laughing off people's chatter and worldly interests. The direct occasion for this poem was a particularly bad setback: the poet lost his luggage and assumed he had lost his collection of poetry (as he records in a letter dated 19 December 1933). A graphic illustration of these famous lines, which have become a slogan of defiance and resistance in the face of adversity, now adorns the sandy hilltop just outside the poet's oasis town; the monument features the statue of a giant eagle spreading its wings on top of a mound, with the line of poetry written underneath.

Despite problems, not least of which was the difficulty the editors of the journal *Apollo* encountered in reading his North African handwriting, al-Shābbī became widely read in the Arab East. "He was almost an Egyptian poet," commented the critic Muhammad Mandūr. Others even considered him the strongest of the *Apollo* group in "poetic power, intensity of feeling and rebellion of spirit." For his part, al-Shābbī preferred *Apollo* to other Egyptian journals. He wrote to al-Hilīwī on 22 February 1933 that the newspaper *al-Siyāsa al-usbū'iyah* represented the arrogance and Pharaonic tendencies in Egypt whereas *Apollo* represented a more inclusive group of young people who had yet to be touched by fame, and who genuinely supported modern poetry.

At home in Tunisia, al-Shābbī had powerful opponents, but also enjoyed the unwavering support of friends and fellow reformers. Al-Hilīwī had an unquestioned belief in al-Shābbī's genius and so had all his friends, as is revealed in their letters and accounts. They also appear to draw inspiration from his courage and the sincerity of his critical opinions and poetry. In a letter dated 26 March 1930, al-Hilīwī says,

You are the unknown prophet among your people; but history, yes history, will ensure that your name will be eternal and that future generation will crown your head with glory long after you and I have passed away.

In a letter dated 10 December 1933, al-Hilīwī joked that in the current context, al-Shābbī would be Lamartine, and al-Hilīwī himself

would be his friend and critic, Saint Beuve. He went on:

The voice of reason then returns me to reality, although I believe that you are the Lamartine of Arabic poetry.

By then the poet was quite well-known. But ironically, until the age of 20 al-Shābbī had made his impact on the local cultural scene not so much through poetry as through criticism. Aged only 22, al-Shābbī had already been diagnosed with an enlarged heart; he was advised to avoid stress and to travel to mountainous regions for cleaner air, something that he did throughout the year 1932-33. However he was often very ill; he was hospitalized in 1933 and confined to bed for four months in 1934. In October of the same year, he fell ill again and died in hospital on 9 October at the age of 25.

For some unknown reason, al-Shābbī kept a diary in 1930. He wrote summaries of his activities and reflections on ideas and feelings in an elegant style. The diary confirms contemporary sources, letters and testimonies about the poet and his time. It reveals a thriving literary scene in the city of Tunis and offers insights into the poet's daily life, his routine, and the esteem that he enjoyed among his contemporaries. He was at the heart of this activity, a founding member of the The Literary Club, in close touch with key figures like Zayn al-'Ābidīn al-Sunūsi (1901-1965) and 'Uthmān al-Ka'āk (1903-1976), along with theatre groups and other cultural figures. He and his peers received ideas from Egypt and the Arab East with a blend of eagerness and a desire to compete. Tāhā Husayn's book on pre-Islamic poetry (1926) led to further studies written within the same spirit in Tunisia. Egyptian journals were always read with great interest. Al-Shābbī was clearly well read; he was courted by the literati of his day and consulted by colleagues. He found his company among liberal young people, some of whom were explicitly atheist, as he notes in the entry for 20 January 1930. He avoided traditional figures and, whenever the occasion arose, poured scorn on their literature and ideas. We also learn that he was accused of blasphemy because of his ideas, particularly those expressed in *al-Khayāl*.

The diaries—and one never really knows if they were destined for publication since their style is so polished— provide glimpses into the poet's temperament, which oscillated between spontaneous anger, melancholy, sensitivity, and an overwhelming intensity of feeling and expression. Al-Shābbī emerges as someone engrossed in the poetic life, a course to which he believed himself destined. He used to take daily walks in the lush fields and gardens around the city, always accompanied by a book and pen and paper. When he was made aware of the burdens of life and responsibility, something from which he had been sheltered by his father—added to which was the prospect of social prestige and a career that awaited the son of a respected and well-connected judge—he totally rejected such a prospect. It also emerges from the diaries that he cared deeply about the fate of Arabic and scorned writers in the Arab East for mixing standard Arabic with colloquial in their stories, creating what he called a "bastard" language. Just like his compatriot Mahmūd al-Mas'ādī, he wanted popular ideas and expressions to be incorporated into standard Arabic and made to fit its grammar and syntax.

Seventy five years on, al-Shābbī's position remains unrivalled in Tunisia's poetic scene, even becoming a major complex that confronts aspiring poets. If anything, his status has now been so integrated in the fabric of the culture and even its institutions that interest in him can only increase. The yearly commemoration of his death at his home-town in the month of October keeps this interest alive and ensures that it proliferates. Al-Shābbī has become even an integral part of the economy of the town, the show-piece of a local economy based on tourism. He is also anthologized and studied in all the major books on the subject of Arabic poetry. In fact, it was this wide reputation that created a tolerance for his more daring poetry. His credentials as both a nationalist poet and an integral part of the re-

vival of Arab culture made accusations of blasphemy leveled against him seem cheap. His opponents who are unable to ignore his poetry have even resorted to amending what they consider objectionable elements in it. His ideas about poetry are now decidedly dated and largely academic, but his status as an Arab poet and a Tunisian icon remain unquestioned. There are over 40 books about him in Arabic, hundreds of shorter studies in a variety of languages, more than 30 songs, a musical, a television drama, statues, streets and schools bearing his name, poetry prizes as well as other forms of commemoration.

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