

Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych. 2022 [2023 for the open access e-book]. *The Cooing of the Dove and the Cawing of the Crow. Late ‘Abbāsīd Poetics in Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī’s Saqṭ al-Zand and Luzūm Mā Lā Yalzam*. (“Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures,” Volume 43). Leiden: Brill. 380 pages. Hardcover. € 126.14. ISBN: 978-90-04-49927-0 (print), 978-90-04-49928-7 (e-book).

*The Cooing of the Dove* is a beautiful, carefully designed and informed example of text criticism hallmarked by one of the leading experts in the domain of ‘Abbāsīd literature. The scope is deliberately narrow, as Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych chooses to focus on selected poems from the vast literary production of al-Ma‘arrī. The monograph is divided into two parts dedicated to al-Ma‘arrī’s major diwans, *Saqṭ al-Zand* and *Luzūm Mā Lā Yalzam (Al-Luzūmiyyāt)*, situated, so to speak, on the watershed of the ‘Abbāsīd period. They exemplify the transition from the High ‘Abbāsīd *qaṣīdah* to the post-classical aesthetics. Pinckney Stetkevych follows the individual evolution of the poet, passing from what she defines as his ‘poetics of engagement’ to ‘poetics of disengagement.’ In parallel, she proposes two approaches to the task of reading and interpretation: the collection of *qaṣīdahs* belonging to al-Ma‘arrī’s youth is the object of ‘performance/performative-based’ reading, while the diwan of his maturity appeals for a ‘Stylistics-based’ method putting in the limelight such aspects as rhyme and prosody.

I read Pinckney Stetkevych’s book from the perspective of a World Literature scholar, that is probably somehow apart from the book’s main target public, i.e. the specialized Arabists. Nonetheless, it corresponds to the author’s hope that her detailed and informative interpretations “will open the gate to further readings of these poems, other poems by al-Ma‘arrī, and Late ‘Abbāsīd Arabic poetry in general” (p. xii) in a broader academic community, including the adepts of comparative literature. Certainly, what attracts me to her topic and remains constantly present as a background of my appreciation of the book is the vast tradition of studying al-Ma‘arrī in colonial and postcolonial scholarship. The figure of the Syrian poet played an important role in the shaping of the European perception of World Literature. On the other hand, his legacy, opening the post-classical Age of Decline (*‘aṣr al-inḥiṭāt*), played an important role in the reevaluation of Arabic past by the thinkers and scholars of the Nahḍah. Those facts of intellectual history still contribute to the considerable visibility of al-Ma‘arrī’s poetry. It serves as one of major orientation points in the vast landscape of global literature and literary history. The state-of-the-art monograph is particularly useful in this context, bringing the errancy of the early comparativists back to the level of specialised close reading in a focused critical framework.

The value of the study lies not only in philological precision of description, but also in the conclusions on the innovative use that al-Ma‘arrī makes of the old *qaṣīdah* paradigm. Pinckney

Stetkevych persuasively shows that “it is precisely the ‘rigidity’—or ‘conventionality’—of the *qaṣīdah* tradition that allows for such subtle multivalency of expression and nuanced possibilities for interpretation” (p. 38). In this way, the book contributes substantially to the crucial research task in global literary studies that consists in tracing the outlook of the evolution of major non-Western literary genres, such as *qaṣīdah*. Its definition and description as “a ‘ritual’ of allegiance, a bond of mutual recognition and obligation” legitimizing the patron’s rule (p. 13) is extremely thought-provoking. Al-Ma‘arrī’s poetical creation and reflection on poetry is put in the context of a larger debate on *ṣan‘* (artistry, artifice) versus *ṭab‘* (innate talent). In a comparativist’s perspective, the explanations and translations of Arabic literary and rhetorical terms are particularly useful. Also the ample contextualisation of al-Ma‘arrī’s motifs such as the night journey in terms of literary antecedents, including a richness of textual quotations in Arabic and excellent English translation, is an advantage for the reader wishing to acquire a deeper perception of the literary tradition stretching from the pre-Islamic to Late ‘Abbāsīd and post-classic periods.

Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (973–1057), born in Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān, southwest of Aleppo and blinded at a young age by smallpox, used to be presented as a deeply pessimist ‘philosopher’ by the older interpretative tradition searching for ‘ideas’ inscribed in his literary texts and fostering a discussion of his allegedly ‘irreligious,’ ‘deist’ or even ‘atheist’ views. The ascetic poet who adopted the sobriquet of *rahīn al-mah̄basayn* (inmate of two prisons, i.e. his blindness and his house)—adding to these a third one, his body—is often described as an anti-natalist (defender of the view that the best for a child is not to be born at all, so his or her suffering would be spared). Pinckney Stetkevych refuses to participate in the debate concerning al-Ma‘arrī’s philosophical outlook, stressing her commitment to strictly literary reading, focusing on his value as a poet and the specific qualities of his poetic idiom, developing in the constant shadow of an ‘anxiety of influence’ and the sense of coming short of the noble legacy left by his predecessors, both the creators of the *badī‘* poetry of the ‘Abbāsīd Modernism and those belonging to the previous generation of poets that produced a figure of such a stature as al-Mutanabbī. *Saqṭ al-Zand* gathers the worldly poetry of a young, ambitious man keen to find his place in the literary high-life of Baghdad, who nonetheless faces a bitter failure and returns to his seclusion in the provincial hometown. *Al-Luzūmiyyāt*, on the other hand, reject the worldly entanglements of the *qaṣīdah* in search for a personal expression of the secluded poet, that goes from pious to ironically irreverent. In his quest for literary mastery, al-Ma‘arrī works on the rhyme pattern of the *qaṣīdah*, adding increasingly complex strictures: complicating the double rhyme with the vowel endings of all the letters of the alphabet. In this way, he tries to outdo his predecessors in formal complexity to produce not only an unrivalled

textual masterpiece but also a novel genre, the *luzūmiyyah*, characterised by the multiplication of abstract, formal constraints.

Pinckney Stetkevych's approach focuses on the double treatment of literary conventions: firstly, the compliance with the rules and expectations of the court genre in the diwan composed by the poet in his youth, and secondly, the formal experimentation of maturity. The young poet entangled in social obligations and such challenges as he could find at the court (rather than in the lasting poetic tradition) produces a 'performative' poem that is to shine as a demonstration of mastery in the immediate time and circumstances of its creation. To interpret such a kind of literature, Pinckney Stetkevych proposes a unified theoretical approach of her own making, that she calls the 'poetics of engagement.' She relies on the earlier work concerning ritual, the performance-performative approaches, as well as Bourdieu's conceptualisation of symbolic capital. She also builds upon the classical T.S. Eliot's reflection concerning the articulation of tradition and 'individual talent,' persuasively contrasting this approach with the Arabic reflection on the factors of inborn inclination and learned craft in poetry. In this way, the author analyses the treatment of nocturnal passages (*qīṭa'*) that are al-Ma'arrī's original development of the traditional motifs of the *nasīb* (the opening section of the *qaṣīdah*) dealing with the lyrical motif of night journey leading to the final praise (*madḥ*) of a notable figure. The further analysis deals with yet another traditional form, the *ʾikhwāniyyah* (fraternal poem), configured as a 'response,' either to a praise of the poet formulated by a fellow or to a mistreatment of a friend. Finally, it takes the form of a self-defense, as the poet answers to alleged insults and strives to restore his dignity and worth.

Chapter 3 deals with "Elegy as Performance," exploring the poetic expression of mourning. The analysis focuses on two contrasting poems. The first one, written on the occasion of the death of a young, little-known Ḥanafī *faqīh*, exploits the traditional motive, the cooing of a dove as a figuration of memory and mourning recollection. On the other hand, the death of the Shi'ī notable al-Sharīf al-Ṭāhir, whose two sons were reputed poets, serves as a display of the 'poetic' capital of al-Ma'arrī before the elite of Baghdad. In this elegy, al-Ma'arrī chose to use a highly surprising, unsettling, and thus resounding theme: that of the cawing crow that becomes a novel figuration of a mourner. Finally, in the last chapter of this part of the book, the author deals with the performance of nostalgia and yearning in two opposed settings: firstly, the yearning of the aspiring poet for his native Syria and then, after the failure of his ambitions and the rejection suffered in the capital, his yearning for Baghdad.

The second part of the monograph, focused on *Al-Luzūmiyyāt*, describes al-Ma'arrī's quest for technical virtuosity. This solitary work paradoxically conserves the performance dimension, yet as the poet himself states it, the compulsion is no longer derived from social servitudes, but is self-imposed,

as an internally motivated quest for perfection. The ‘poetics of disengagement’ that the poet formulates in his seclusion implies a radically abstract program of poetic constraints, based on double rhyme and alphabetical order. The choice of the word imposed by the rhyme brings about syntactic and morphological consequences that require a careful appreciation in the micro-scale of a single verse and the poem as a whole. In parallel, the use of the mythical figures from the Arabic tradition, rather than names of live political or social protagonists, anchors this kind of literature in the domain of mythopoesis. Chapter 5 brings a particularly striking analysis of a brilliant poem using the term ‘Ṭasmū’ as the rhyme word. This polysemic term, that can be translated both as ‘spontaneous generation’ and ‘constriction’ is further referred to the extinct Arab tribe Ṭasm, remembered on the occasion of an overheard narration about excavations in Damascus. What brings those heterogenous elements into a whole is the traditional topos of *ubi sunt*, characteristic of the *nasīb*. The reading of the word *ṭasm* not as the name of a tribe, but as a synonym of ‘erasure, obliteration,’ built up into *ṭasmū* (‘constriction’), moves the poem from tribal lore into the abstract domain of lexical exploration and experimentation. This and other similar examples show how the play of end-vowels (such as case-ending) serves the construction of the multiple layers of textual meanings. Finally, Chapter 6 explores the constraint (*luzūm*) of the double -b-d rhyme that serves as a formal reason to associate three proper names: those of the poets Labīd ibn Rabī‘ah and ‘Abīd ibn al-Abraṣ, as well as Lubad, one of the seven vultures of the pre-Islamic sage Luqmān. The poetic legacy and the legends evoked in this way lead to moral recollections.

In the Conclusion, the author delves in the reflection of al-Ma‘arrī concerning his both diwans and the profound reasons why he chose to treat them as antithetical. The poet’s own appreciation of *Al-Luzūmiyyāt* as the crowning achievement and his personal challenge to the fellow poets of all ages contrasts with the Arab-Islamic reception that traditionally praises *Saqṭ al-Zand* much higher. This appreciation remained very powerful throughout the Arabic literary history, even if it is largely due to the influential opinion of a single person, the Andalusian scholar Ibn Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī (d. 1127). This contradiction permits to formulate an interesting question concerning the repercussions of the programmatic work. Paradoxically, al-Baṭalyawsī himself projected retroactively the form of an alphabetically ordered collection proposed in *Al-Luzūmiyyāt*. He edited a compilation of *Saqṭ al-Zand* with some interspersed poems from the later diwan to complete the pattern of the alphabetic list of rhyme letters, so the postulate of formalism utterly prevailed.

Overall, the focus proposed by Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych shows that the scholarship concerning al-Ma‘arrī is far from exhaustion, even if the topic has already an extremely abundant bibliography. With great clarity and persuasiveness, the author puts in the limelight the peculiarity of

late ‘Abbāsid aesthetics and facilitates the reader’s access to the intricacies of the eleventh-century quest for the essence of poetry. Her approach strikes the reader of global literary studies as fresh and innovative, suggesting new paths of analysis not just in Arabic poetry, but also in the vast field of non-Western comparative literature.

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