

## **Al-Ahram Weekly, 12-18 August 1999, Issue No. 442**

### **Points of reference, Ahmed Abdel-Moeti Hegazi**

I knew Abdel-Wahab Al-Bayyati for more than 40 years. And strangely, given the peripatetic nature of his life, we met for the first and last time in Cairo. I was 22 years old and he 31 when, in the winter of 1957, we met for the first time. The last time was earlier this year, when we both participated in a symposium held at the Cairo International Book Fair to celebrate 50 years since the emergence of free verse in Arabic.

The last time I spoke to Al-Bayyati, though, was a few weeks ago, when I was in Paris, invited by the Institut du Monde Arabe to coordinate a festival of Arabic poetry scheduled for March next year. I suggested that a committee be formed bringing together people who might contribute to the success of such an event, and took it upon myself to contact Mahmoud Darwish, André Michael (the Arabic literature professor and head of the College de France), Gamaledin Ben Sheikh and, of course, Al-Bayyati. We spoke over the telephone -- I in Paris, he in Damascus -- and he was full of energy as usual, and was as quick as ever to comment on the symposium in which we had both participated, and on the controversy that had ensued.

Between our first and last meeting a great many miles have, of course, been covered. And for many of them we were fellow travellers, for I accompanied Al-Bayyati on many journeys, and visited him in many of the different places he would occupy -- the hotels and institutions, cafés and airports where he set up his temporary residence.

During his first stay in Cairo -- a stay which lasted for several months -- Al-Bayyati would come often to the offices of Rose Al-Youssef magazine, where he would invariably find Hassan Fouad, Salah Abdel-Sabour, Salah Jahin, Ahmed Bahaeddin and myself, or else we would meet in a café, restaurant or the hotel, usually with fellow writers or mentors such as Ihsan Abdel-Quddous, Kamel El-Shinnawi, Louis Awad and Naguib Mahfouz.

This early acquaintance was interrupted by the July 1958 Revolution in Iraq, and we only resumed seeing each other when he left Moscow for Cairo in 1964. Then our relationship slipped easily into an earlier pattern -- a daily meeting in one of the downtown cafés, usually Café Riche or Lappas, and a night out once or twice a week, which would last till dawn.

Al-Bayyati's second stay in Cairo forged a unique link between him and Egypt, far more than that of a guest -- or even a refugee -- in a host country, or the one that was offering asylum. In the 1970s I left Egypt for Paris, while Al-Bayyati returned to Iraq, only to leave again, this time to Madrid as a cultural attaché. From the mid-1970s to the late 1980s we would meet in Paris, Madrid, London and Delphi in Greece. And in each of these cities we would resume the life that we had led in Cairo. As for the last few years, they found us meeting in Jeddah, in Dubai, Masqat, Beirut and Cairo. And now we shall never meet again, in any of the world's capitals, for Al-Bayyati has left, never to return.

His final journey did not come as a complete surprise to me, though he was neither excessively old, nor had he been suffering any serious illness. Perhaps he could have lived several more years, had he not insisted on continuing with the daily routine to which he had adhered since he was 30, occupying the places he had chosen in his favoured cafés, whatever the city.

Certainly, he was a man of fixed habits: in every city he had a favoured café. Once chosen, the café remained fixed, and it was there that he would smoke and read the papers, meet his friends and meditate until it was time for him to rest, regaining his energy for the long night ahead. For half a century he remained faithful to this routine, a routine sufficiently flexible to accommodate the many journeys, the celebrations and the conflicts, that punctuated his life.

Indeed such battles, such celebrations, were an inevitable part of the manner in which Al-Bayyati lived his life, for he was a man who wrote, spoke, attacked his rivals and defended himself before going to bed. And in the morning he would wake to reap all that he had sowed the day before -- the friendships, enmities, losses and gains which nourished his daily programme, and which he would resume with relish.

Throughout the constant movements of his life Al-Bayyati's body remained faithful. He did not fall ill, nor did he suffer much physical pain. His constitution was perfectly adapted to his habits. The only time, perhaps, his body took him by surprise was the last time when, in his sleep, he exhaled a final breath. It was almost as if his body was too frightened to ask him permission to leave or retire, lest Al-Bayyati should deny that final release.

There are some things about Al-Bayyati's life that will always appear mysterious to me, not least the manner in which he managed family relationships. It seems, in hindsight, almost as if he had signed a contract with his family, with his wife and children, that they would share his name, and the admiration that he engendered, and in return they would grant him permission to lead the life he wished to lead, in Cairo or Moscow, Baghdad or Madrid. If only all poets could attain such a situation.

In a piece such as this, I find myself wondering whether I should write more on Al-Bayyati's poetry -- and though I know this is probably the case I find it impossible to ignore the friendship I forged with the man, as much as the poet, a friendship that spanned four decades. And so I have resolved to leave any lengthy discussion of his work to others, to those critics who know only the work and are therefore capable of a greater objectivity than I. But I, who knew the man as much as the poet, find it impossible to rid myself of that knowledge, just as I find it impossible to ignore. Nor do I believe, for a moment, that Al-Bayyati was always the same person, or always the same poet.

Al-Bayyati the young man was, after all, very different from Al-Bayyati the old man, just as the 1950s poet is very different from the poet writing in the 1970s or 80s. But I am no critic. I am a poet who looks at other poets' work from the perspective of my own, and take what I would best like to write as a standard, a basis on which to judge what I read. And I am a man with my weaknesses and strengths, advantages and defects, like all other men.

How then can I be objective about Al-Bayyati and his poetry, when I know for a fact that Al-Bayyati himself was never objective with anyone, not even with himself, and certainly not with other poets?

But objectivity, in the end, was never really an option for those who lived through the period in which Al-Bayyati lived.

He was not the first pioneer of modernism in the Arabic poetry movement, being preceded by Egyptians, who drifted away from poetry to other occupations, such as Ahmed Zaki Abu Shadi, Khalil Shayboub, Ali Ahmed Bakathir, Louis Awad and Abdel-Rahman El-Sharqawi, as well as Iraqis such as Nazik Al-Mala'ika and Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab. Amongst his compatriots, Al-Mala'ika, born in the early 1920s, suffered the strange fate of being viewed as a veteran since she achieved renown so early in her career and so, perhaps, among them all, it is to Al-Sayyab that the credit for championing free verse must go, a credit which he deserves by virtue of his great talent and the brilliance of his more mature poetry. Yet Al-Sayyab's initial experiments were of average quality, and his early withdrawal from the ranks of Iraqi communists triggered a vicious campaign directed against him. A vacuum was left which Al-Bayyati, by dint of both his poetry and shrewdness, managed to fill.

Al-Bayyati thus came to prominence in those strange years, the 1950s, years which overflowed, as he himself once said, with real poets, impostors, forgotten heroes, victims, as well as falsifiers of history and hacks. How then do we subject Al-Bayyati to any objective interpretation? How do we separate the work from an image that was first propagated, that first came to public attention, in the 50s? How do we view a poetry that changed in the light of a myth that has remained?

The 1950s are Al-Bayyati's glory years, a decade in which his language matched his movement and his prophesies were consistent with his times. In Al-Sayyab he had a rival, whose shadow was constantly on the retreat, and in every other respect he was treated with sympathy and surrounded by admiration. And in my opinion these were the years in which Al-Bayyati wrote his best poems -- simple works, admittedly, but works which are imbued with the heroism of the times, a time with which he was perfectly in harmony. Even if his subsequent poems appear to be more mature and profound, more laden with signs and symbols, they seem often to be fabricated, more painfully, self-consciously constructed.

When we used to meet, particularly if it was late at night, I could not help but recall a beautiful poem of his, a poem that I have known by heart since first I heard him recite it more than 30 years before:

Like a drop of rain,/I was alone,/My love, like a drop of rain./Do not be sad./Tomorrow I will buy you the moon,/The forenoon sun /And an orchard./Tomorrow if I return from my travels,/If the rock in my breast buds./But today I am alone,/My love,/Like a drop of rain.

Based on a simile, a single, simple, inspiring simile, it has no trace of ostentation or false grandeur. But despite its simplicity, the image remains extraordinarily rich, a complex evocation of solitude, isolation and purity, a wonderfully succinct way of encapsulating so many aspects of the human condition. Al-Bayyati manages in a few phrases to invoke not just the melancholic mood inspired by the rain, to suggest the alienation of being lost in a foggy city far away from home, but to do so in lines of quite startling purity.

In this poem and in others written during the 1950s, Al-Bayyati's art, in my view, reaches the highest degree of perfection. But the perfection of art is closely bound up with the circumstances that produced it, and they were circumstances that would change in the 1960s and 1970s, years in which the poet would alter his language, and allow artifice and fabrication a place.

Is it, perhaps, the deceptions of those later years that crept in to the poet's language, that began to inform much of his verse? I want, really, to say that Al-Bayyati the poet is but one aspect of a myth. And the role he played in our lives is not restricted to his poetry but impinges on the cultural and intellectual tenor of our times. Al-Bayyati, then, is more than his poetry, he is an emotional reference, a coordinate whose absence will make it more difficult than ever to navigate our lives.

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**Abdel-Wahab Al-Bayyati :Prometheus at the Sheraton, *Profile by Youssef Rakha***

One of the last remaining pioneers of modern Arabic poetry, Al-Bayyati does not readily oblige. Surrounded by friends and protégés, he flits through the lobby of the Sheraton, dodging journalists. "Is it twelve already?" he says when I finally manage to corner him. "I'll be back in a minute." My three-day quest will not be concluded until he makes another phone call. But the effort pays off. Al-Bayyati's conversation turns out to be like his poetry. In a few words he

can conjure up a whole world -- diverse, meaningful, engrossing. "I'm not normally late for appointments but it is very difficult nowadays. Sometimes when I wake up," he confides, "I'm so dizzy I can hardly see." Reluctant to talk about his early life, he decides to have a coffee before we start.

"Writing is a difficult art," he says. "It not only requires talent, but also thought and linguistic ability. Without these the human being could never become a writer. At the beginning, in the early stages of youth, the writer -- or the person who wants to become a writer -- must perfect his instruments. Perfecting one's instruments is accomplished through reading the literary heritage and following the school curricula. We sometimes underrate the latter, but they are essential to the initial formative stages. If people possess various feelings and sensations, even commendable ones, but have not mastered the art of writing, they cannot write a text or an article. When one writes one is not fooling around or simply inventing things. Rather one is capturing things. Capturing the atoms that make up the universe. Capturing and crystallising thoughts, moulding them into literary form. Writing is also a mental exercise, which starts with a very simple thing, and gradually, day after day, turns into something complex."

The same could be said of Al-Bayyati's life. He started off as a simple enough schoolteacher, and had his first collection of poems, *Mala'ika wa Shayatin* (Angels and Devils), published in 1950, the year of his graduation from Dar Al-Mu'allimin (the Teachers' College) in Baghdad. By 1954, though, he was an editor in one of the most widely circulated cultural magazines, *Al-Thaqafa Al-Jadida* (The New Culture) and, due to his involvement in radical communist politics, had aroused enough suspicion to be fired from his job. He set off on a long journey, that took him first to Damascus (where he now resides after four decades of wandering), Beirut, Cairo and many Western capitals. "I've always searched for the sun's springs," he explains in unmistakable Bayyati fashion. "When a human being stays in one place, he's likely to die. People too stagnate like water and air. Therefore the death of nature, of words, of the spirit has prompted me to keep travelling, so as to encounter new suns, new springs, new horizons. A whole new world being born."

Travelling, as such, must have implied much more than political survival. Even when he could return to his country following the Iraqi Revolution and declaration of the Republic in 1958, Al-Bayyati often chose to stay abroad.

He travelled far and wide, and his encounter with Spanish culture, as a cultural attaché in the 1980s, to which he paid tribute in several poems, was a particularly enriching experience "I don't travel for the sake of tourism and entertainment. Nor to settle down. It is rather a cure for the soul, it is the spiritual nourishment that allows me to go on writing in a genuinely creative way. Of course," Al-Bayyati rebounds, "my relations with Iraqi governments were never conciliatory. I belong to the Iraqi people. I cannot separate myself from the people." And it is the Titan's faithfulness to the people, whom he aided against the tyranny of Zeus, that endears Prometheus to Al-Bayyati's heart. Had he adopted a pseudonym from Greek mythology like the Syrian poet Ali Ahmed Said ("Adonis"), Al-Bayyati undoubtedly would have called himself Prometheus: The Fire-Thief came with the seasons/Carrying the will of the ages -- the rivers... "Over the years there were dire disappointments. False dawns. But this is not restricted to the modern age, it has gone on since the days of Sumer and Babylonia. The Iraqi people were subject to attacks both from outside and within. They paid a flagrant price, the price of deceit and betrayal, tyranny and dictatorship. And the tyrants were just as cruel, just as criminal, as the invaders. Even more so. At least the invaders, after they destroy and rob and violate, tend to go away and leave the people alone. But the tyrants stay on."

Unlike most Arab intellectuals of his generation, Al-Bayyati was not born in the countryside,

but in the heart of Baghdad in 1926, a fact that may explain the metropolitan sense of history that has characterised his writing. Throughout his life he would continue to live in cities, remaining close to the centre of political upheavals. His rites of passage, however, seem to have been quiet events, giving no indication of his present influence and fame.

"Very early on," he recalls, "circumstances made it possible for me to read classic books, thanks to the library of my grandfather, who was an imam and a religious man. I was tormented by the fact that I couldn't fathom the meaning of some of the texts we read. Once, I remember, he was reading from *Al-Futuhāt Al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Conquests) by Ibn Arabi, and Ibn Arabi's language at that time was incomprehensible to me. So I resorted to listening to my grandfather's voice [and how its tone changed] while he recited the sentences and phrases, and managed to understand. As the words turned into movements and signals, I continued trying to make out what they meant. And I would ask my grandfather, 'Is this what it means?' He would say, 'How did you know?' And I would tell him, 'From the movement of your lips.' Later, one summer day in the afternoon when I was still a secondary student, I experienced a strange feeling and wrote a poem of 14 lines in the classic style. Three days later, my Arabic teacher borrowed my textbook so he could read to the class, and by coincidence found the poem folded inside it. He came up to me and asked who had written the poem, and when I told him it was I, he said, 'Is that possible? Leave it with me and tomorrow I will give you my opinion.' The next day he had discovered two mistakes, not grammatical, but in the rhyming scheme. Nonetheless he praised the poem a great deal and even asked the class to give me a round of applause, calling me 'The Poet' from then on. I felt very embarrassed and hid my face in the book. The word seemed too great for me at the time. It placed a burden on my shoulder. I began to feel responsible and didn't write anything for a year, during which I read and read."

Al-Bayyati pauses to greet the Palestinian poet Samih Al-Qasim, who takes his seat near by. "I read the *turath* (the classic literary canon) twice," he continues, "once at the beginning of life, when I rejected much and accepted little, and once in middle age, when I accepted much and rejected little. And when I read it for the third time in the last few years, I discovered new springs of which I had taken no notice. I started hovering around them. As I benefited from the *turath* and its texts, I discovered a new vision. Some restless characters in our literary history had only been dealt with in a perfunctory way, or were classed as ordinary, when in fact this restlessness of theirs constituted a very special quality of mind. Abu Nuwwas or Abu Tammam, for example. I was always seeking out this restlessness, which was present in their poetry in a very subtle way and to which historians of literature paid no attention. But when it comes to writing, what concerns me first and foremost is life, human experience. This is why I focus on my own experience, benefiting from all that I come across, be they people or countries, books or lives, all of which resemble atoms that combine to form a vision.

As for Marxism," he responds, "I read it as a philosophy, without subscribing to it directly as an ideology or political system, without ever joining a party. Of course, I am a leftist, a rebel since the start of my life. But I've protected the core of my vision. A human vision is not a transient thing, it is not the rise of a political order and the decline of another. And since my rebellion is related to the rebellion of all ages, and to culture as the root and the essence, my poetry was not affected by what was going on around me, despite many a temptation, especially during the rise of the international left when I lived in Moscow." Marxism has certainly not prevented him from investigating the spiritual side of existence, and even affirming Sufi feelings: Who gave you the right to seek out God in the City of Love... "I remained independent. I must admit that in the 1950s and early 1960s, during the rise of the left, my poetry was somewhat

affected by politics, but only indirectly. Because I experience life and live among people, and I have to think about whom I address. For example, I do not write for people who pray in a mosque. I write for people who live and die in society, and I have to offer them my vision..."

As for the Book Fair, Al-Bayyati is glad to be there. "It is an Arab gathering whose most important virtue is bringing people together, readers and writers and friends," he says. His latest published poem, *Nussous Sharqiya* (Oriental Texts), which appeared in *Akhbar Al-Adab* this week, is an additional source of pride. "It came of itself, this experiment, in which you will find classical poetry, modern poetry and prose side by side. It's all in the same language, as you will notice when you've read it. I mean, one doesn't feel any sense of discontinuity because parts of it are metrical while others are not. I write freely. I do not restrict myself to any one style. For example I have a book which will be published soon in Damascus called *Yanabi' Al-Shams* (Springs of the Sun), which is in verse. But at the same time there is another one, *Tahawulat Aisha* (Aisha's Transformations), which is written entirely in prose, but when you read it you feel that it is poetry..."

By now I am much obliged, and Al-Bayyati wants to make yet another phone call. "I can go back to Damascus with a clear conscience," he says, "now that I've given you this interview." One question, however, remains to be answered, and a very important one at that. What do women mean to Al-Bayyati? And why do they have such a strong presence in his poems? "In a recent poem that I dedicated to Hafez Al-Shirazi," he tells me, "which was also published in *Akhbar Al-Adab*, you'll notice that woman is very predominant, the main theme of the poem, but she is not simply a woman. She is a creature of light, a mythical, realistic, idealistic, materialistic, historical, a-historical creature. Some art critics believe that colour is the most essential aspect of paintings. A painting, they say, is colour. I say that the poem is a woman."

#### **Al-Ahram Weekly 14 - 20 October 1999 Issue No. 451**

**When the sea changed its colour Youghiyar Alouanah Al-Bahr ( The sea changes its colours), Nazik Al-Malaika, Cairo: Afaq Al-Kitaba (Writing Horizons) series of the Cultural Palaces Organisation, 1999. pp211**

Recent celebrations in Egypt of the career of the Iraqi poet Nazik Al-Malaika, one of the pioneers of free verse, have drawn attention to the poet's connection to the country, such as her decision to live in Egypt during a period of convalescence last year. On this occasion Al-Malaika, for reasons best known to herself, put up a barrier against the press, which few journalists were able to penetrate. This meant that Al-Malaika's presence in the country, went largely unmarked. However with the publication of this book this situation has changed, and we now have available a selection of Al-Malaika's work that justly represents her fame. Al-Malaika herself chose the contents of the selection, and the bulk of the poems she has chosen were written 25 years ago in 1974. Yet, as is the case with all real, sincere poetry, they have kept their direct appeal: 'My love/My rapture was a sea/Which changed its colours, the sockets of its eyes turning black and green/It threw its waves ahead, forged pearls/Flowed into springs, landed on shores/Created tides, made islands/Scattered, across the blue of the gulf, a blond archipelago.' Besides the poetry, the book also includes a fascinating autobiographical sketch, in which Al-Malaika reveals various aspects of her life. Born in 1923 in Baghdad, Nazik Al-Malaika completed her secondary education in 1939, before proceeding to earn a BA degree in literature from Baghdad Education College. Her attachment to poetry, however, had begun many years before her years of formal study, and she tells us in her autobiography that she composed her first poetry in Classical Arabic at the age of 10 under

the tutelage of her father, who was himself a poet. Her family was very important to her in her early years and later, and it was her father who gave her a secure foundation in the Arabic language. Concerned by the presence of grammatical errors in his daughter's early work, he undertook her education himself, something which he had every qualification to do, since in addition to his own poetry he was also the editor of a 20-volume encyclopedia. He, however, was not the only writer of talent in the family since Al-Malaika's mother, who wrote under the pseudonym Omm Nizar Al-Malaika, was also a poet. The young Nazik thus grew up in an intensely literary environment. "My father laid out a wonderful smooth path before me," she writes here, "when he provided me with books containing the principles of grammar and the classics of our literature. Thus it was only natural for me to be the only student in the Arabic department to choose the various schools of grammar as a topic for my dissertation. My supervisor was a great professor, the late Mustapha Jawad, and he had a profound effect on my intellectual life. The manuscript of my dissertation is still in the college building and carries the corrections that he made on it in red ink." In her autobiographical sketch Al-Malaika also recounts the influence that the modern poetry of Mahmoud Hassan Ismail, Badawi Al-Jabal, Amjad Al-Tarabolsi, Omar Abu Risha and Bishara Khouri initially exerted on her. She participated at college meetings, where she would read aloud her work that was already being published by newspapers and magazines. Since then, however, like many another poet, she has largely disowned these early works and has not included them in later books and collections. However one memory of this period remains vivid to her, and that is of sitting alone for hours in her parents' back garden, playing the oud and singing the songs of Omm Kulthoum and Mohamed Abdel-Wahab. In 1947, Nazik Al-Malaika published her first collection of poetry, *A'shiqat Al-Layl* (Lover of the Night). A few months later news of the cholera epidemic that was then sweeping Egypt arrived in Iraq, and this had a great emotional effect on the young poet. Later she wrote of this time in her autobiography, and specifically remembered events on Friday 27 October, 1947. "I woke up," she writes, "and lay in bed listening to the broadcaster on the radio, who said that the number of the dead in Egypt had reached 1,000. I was overwhelmed by a profound sadness and deep distress. I jumped out of bed, took out a pen and paper, left the house, which was always noisy and busy on a Friday, and went to a construction site close by. Since it was a holiday, the whole place was deserted, and I sat on a low fence and began to compose 'Cholera', a poem that has subsequently become well-known. I had heard that the corpses of dead people in the Egyptian countryside were being carried crammed together on horse-drawn carts, so as I wrote I imagined something of the sounds of these horses: 'The night is silent/Listen to the effect of groans/In the depth of darkness, below the silence, on the dead.'" It was under these circumstances that Arabic poetry was first freed from the rigid strictures of traditional rhythmic forms and rhyme schemes. Only the *tafila*, a looser, more flexible metric division, was retained. Nazik Al-Malaika must take much of the credit for this emancipation and, for her part, from that day on she wrote only what she called 'free' verse, rather in the manner of that written by other earlier experimenters in certain European traditions. In 1949 in her introduction to her second volume of poems, *Shazaiya wa Ramad* (Shrapnel and Ash), she explained the new theory of metre which she had introduced into Arabic poetry and her own practice of free verse. The essay gave rise to a series of attacks on Al-Malaika by proponents of the older poetics, however Al-Malaika, who was not only a poet but was also a theorist, grammarian and musician, defended herself ably. Her years of study and early foundations in the Arabic language meant that she was able eloquently to defend the new practice. Throughout her life Al-Malaika exhibited a seemingly unquenchable thirst for knowledge of all kinds. As a student she registered in the oud department of the Fine Arts Institute, attended classes in the acting department and took Latin, while she was still a second-year undergraduate at university. To

this day, she tells us here, she still plays her oud and sings the songs of Mohamed Abdel-Wahab, Omm Kulthoum, Fairouz, Abdel-Halim Hafez and Nagat. She studied French with her younger brother without the aid of a teacher, and her love of English literature allowed her to earn a scholarship to study at Princeton University, New Jersey, which was then a predominantly male institution in which Al-Malaika was one of the very few female students. In 1954 Nazik Al-Malaika travelled again to the United States, this time to earn a Masters degree in Comparative Literature. Besides her studies, it was at this time that Al-Malaika began to write an autobiographical account of her life. In 1961 she married her colleague in the Arabic department at the Education College in Baghdad, Abdel-Hadi Mahbouba, who was himself a graduate of Cairo University.

Reviewed by Mahmoud El-Wardani