



A Translation of Abdel-Muneim Ramadan's "Walt Whitman's Funeral," and Some Notes on Whitman in the Arab World

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A TRANSLATION OF ABDEL-MUNEIM RAMADAN'S
 "WALT WHITMAN'S FUNERAL," AND SOME NOTES ON
 WHITMAN IN THE ARAB WORLD

WE PRESENT HERE a translation into English of Egyptian poet Abdel-Muneim Ramadan's (b. 1951) "Walt Whitman's Funeral" [*Janâzat Walt Witman*], a remarkable 2012 poem that underscores the complex role that Whitman has played in the Arab world. As an aid to understanding the poem, we first offer a brief history of the Whitman-Arab relationship.

The Mahjar, or "emigrant" poets, were a small group of Lebanese and Syrian writers in the United States, affiliated with the New York-based Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Hudâ*. The group flourished in the 1920s. They did not have a project in common except to break with the patterns of traditional Arabic poetry. *Mahjar* in Arabic does not name a particular common project: it simply means the diaspora of Arabs around the world. The poets were scattered: Khalil ("Kahlil") Gibran (1883-1931) lived in Boston, Ameen Rihani (1876-1940) primarily in New York, and Mikhail Naimy (1889 -1988) in Walla Walla, Washington, but also New York, as well as, during the first World War, France (where he served in the American army). They had one thing in common: they absorbed American poetry, and their distance from a strict critical establishment (back home in Syria and Lebanon) gave them freedom to experiment. Whitman's name comes up often in their critical writings, and they seem to have agreed that it was Whitman's influence that allowed them to redefine Arabic poetry.

Rihani, writing in the preface to his 1923 collection *Hutâf al-Awdiya* [*Hymns of the Valleys*], makes Whitman's innovations a pivotal point in literary history:

Milton and Shakespeare liberated English Poetry from the bonds of rhyme; and the American Walt Whitman freed it from prosodic bonds such as the conventional rhythms and customary meter. But this freed verse has a new and particular rhythm, and a poem composed in it may follow numerous and varied metres.¹

He emphasizes the force of the break:

This type of new poetry is called *vers libres* in French and *free verse* in English, that is, free, or more properly, freed verse (in Arabic *al-shi'r al- hurr wa al-muṭlaq*).²

“Free” versus “freed” verse: Mounah Khouri’s translation of Rihani’s essay (*al-hurr* as “free” and *al-muṭlaq* as “freed”) captures something latent in the Arabic. *Al-hurr* is “free” in the political sense. *Al- muṭlaq* is perhaps “freer”: Hans Wehr’s dictionary offers “unlimited, unrestricted, absolute.”³ Similarly, in English “free,” a simple adjective, is a static state; “freed,” a passive participle, is a state that results from an act of will. The translation takes that break with tradition a step further in intensity.

Later in the same essay Rihani translates Whitman’s “To Him That Was Crucified” (*Ilâ al-maṣlûb*). Rihani was a Christian, but the effect of the poem is not sectarian. The vision of a utopian devotional community (“We walk silent among disputes and assertions, but reject not the disputers nor any thing that is asserted”) may matter more than the Christ-figure of the title.

Naimy, in a 1949 article, “Walt Whitman: Father of Free Verse,” recapitulates the same argument in more specific terms—clearly directed towards the conservative Arabic critical tradition:

The United States today leads the way in the world of industry, politics, war, and economics. It has not until recently, however, distinguished itself in any branch of art, literature, or philosophy, except in the free-verse movement. It was the American poet, Walt Whitman, who first advocated for this poetic genre and the first who practiced it with the might of a genius, the sincerity of a believer, and the enthusiasm of one who bears a new message. I have searched for a suitable Arabic word to describe this sort of baffling eloquence, that is something between poetry and prose, and I could not find a better word than *al-munsariḥ*.⁴

Munsariḥ is the name of a specific Arabic meter, one of many. Naimy’s point is that it is used only infrequently:

I do not mean that this word has anything to do with the Arabic poetic meter (*al- munsariḥ*) with the same name. There is in the word, however, the implication of freedom, liberty, and lack of restraint. In this genre, the poem flows to its

target with ease and with no restriction. Its main feature is that it is not bound to any rhyme or rhythm, but rather flows naturally, with musical rhythm and poetic ring.⁵

Later in the essay, he characterizes Whitman's style in less technical terms:

It flows, as he himself would say, the way a bird flies or a fish swims. It is devoid of ornament and embellishment. There is no metonymy or metaphor or embroidery in it, only naked words that enter into a close union, eliciting the images, the thoughts, and the feelings that the poet aims to instill in your mind, and to stir up in your psyche. At times his long sentences create a sense of boredom, especially when he uses a lot of parenthetical clauses, but you cannot but feel the power, the faith, and the sincerity that pervade his poetry.⁶

This is followed by translations into Arabic of passages from Whitman's "Salut Au Monde!" Naimy concludes with a parallel between English history and the future of Arabic. The free-verse moment in English would have ended, he suggests, like other fads, if it had not been "for the genius of a great poet like Walt Whitman."⁷

It may be that in the Arab world the most influential translations of Whitman into Arabic were those of Yusuf Al-Khal (1917-1989), in his 1958 collection *Dîwân al-shi'r al-Amrîkî* [*Anthology of American Poetry*]. The anthology is extensive, erudite, and well-versed in both cultures. It includes forty-two poets, beginning with Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, and ending with Karl Shapiro and Robert Lowell. Al-Khal was (with his better-known colleague Adonis) among the collaborators in the project of the influential Beirut journal *Majallat Shi'r* (1957-1964, 1967-1970). Al-Khal, who had lived in the U.S., working at the then newly formed United Nations, must have spent a lot of time immersing himself in American poetry as well, and Whitman plays a major role in his introduction:

With Walt Whitman, in particular, American poetry relinquished imitation and the use of banal subjects, seeking instead its inspiration from life itself and from suffering life's experiences. Whitman opened life's windows wide onto himself gulping down its experiences and freeing his imagination from the old modes and outworn styles. . . . Not only did Whitman liberate American Poetry (and all poetry) from the rigidity of form, but he was also able to rid it of the inherited banality of content. . . . His poetic revolution had a far-reaching effect on

the future of Arabic poetry everywhere, and thanks to him, the free verse movement took flight, liberating poetry from timeworn rhythmic patterns and forging personal rhythms that enabled the poems to express their own experiences. . . . Thanks to him, Arabic literature discovered this poetic style by way of Ameen Rihani and Gibran Khalil Gibran.⁸

His choice of poems is interesting because it isn't obvious: from *Calamus* "In Paths Untrodden"; from *By the Roadside* "I Sit and Look Out"; from *Drum Taps* "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim"; and sections 6, 7, 18, 21, and 68 from *Song of Myself*.

When Adonis refers to Whitman in his 1973 poem "A Grave for New York" (*Qabr min ajil Niû Yurk*), he uses him as an emblem of a lost America. A series of five verse paragraphs calls out to Whitman explicitly as a threatened memory ("Whitman, / I notice letters to you flying in the streets of Manhattan . . . Whitman, / I do not see you in Manhattan, and I saw everything . . . Whitman, / 'The clock indicates the moment'. . ."). "The clock indicates the moment" (Adonis's "*Al-sâ'a tu'lin al-waqt*") is from "Song of Myself" at one remove. This is because Adonis's citations from Whitman, as Shawkat Toorawa points out in the notes to his English translation of "Grave," are clearly drawn from Roger Asselineau's 1956 French version ("L'horloge indique l'heure"). The fifth of the paragraphs concludes:

Whitman,
let it be our turn now. I make a ladder of my gaze. I weave my steps into a pillow,
and we shall wait. Man dies but he is more eternal than the grace. Let it be our
turn now (93).

He writes as if it could be our turn now, as if there is still hope that Whitman's prophetic optimism could be revived.

In Abdel-Muneim Ramadan's 2012 poem, "Walt Whitman's Funeral," Whitman is at the center but not as an actor. The action swirls around him. The American Civil War has been superimposed on Iraq, and Whitman is on what seems a modern battlefield, but the point is not his reaction to it, either confusion or acceptance. Rather, our attention is on a series of cameos. Kindred spirits and historical figures, most of them Iraqi, fill our field of vision. A series of historical figures, primarily Arab poets, most of them in an oppositional relation-

ship to their own time, are placed in confrontation with Whitman, just long enough to sketch a poetic relationship with him. Khalil Gibran, for instance, seems to be, in Ramadan's vision, working to replace him ("stabbed him with a wooden cross"). Al-Mutanabbi, the poet who famously claimed the role of prophet, seems to share an aesthetic of freedom with Whitman ("Walt Whitman met him behind the Statue of Liberty"). Whitman recognizes Abu Nuwas, the poet famous as a libertine and a poet of wine, not just as a kindred spirit but as a source of admiration ("Walt Whitman squats in homage before Abu Nuwas").

Whitman's mute dialogue with his surroundings proceeds in fragments, but these pieces add up to a single vision. In "Grave for New York," Adonis hopes to continue Whitman's vision, but not Ramadan. It is as if "Whitman's Funeral" were testing Whitman's relevance to an Arab poet at this moment in history and declaring it invalid. It is a melancholy narrative. Whitman's one real act in the poem is to die. Evidently this time he has witnessed a war that has overcome his own characteristic optimism.

What follows is our translation of Ramadan's poem.¹⁰ "Walt Whitman's Funeral" speaks for itself, but it might be worth knowing that the poet, like many Egyptian artists and writers, has provided a prominent voice to the national dialogue in post-Mubarak Egypt. It may be useful for readers outside the Arab world to know that Ramadan has spoken against the notion of the poet as a spokesperson for others and argued that the individual body is the most authentic reference of poetry.

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Walt Whitman's Funeral
Abdel-Muneim Ramadan

So finally, atop the fender of a tank,
lounges Walt Whitman.
Finally he observes the streets of Baghdad.
He sees above him birds of paper.
He ponders how the caliph's palace was constructed
and how airplanes destroyed it.
Walt Whitman is not afraid of rivers.
After all, he drowned there before.
Walt Whitman is not afraid of palm trees.
After all, he let a palm tree approach and enfold him.
Walt Whitman is not afraid of a woman's abaya,
not afraid of perfume, rouge, or camisole
because he never loved a woman.

Those who accompany Walt Whitman
will disperse before sunset.
Those who make Walt Whitman's dinner
wish he were a vegetarian.
Those who dislike Walt Whitman's poems
write secret poems
about what robots think
and what they like to do,
and write more poems about how valleys breathe,
the songs of wood cutters,
the sweat of plants.
Walt Whitman met Lorca at the cathedral in New York.
He met him near the casement
and on the lake, in front of the altar.
He met him in the hallway.
He met Lorca¹¹ before he ran away.
Walt Whitman met Al-Mutanabbi behind the Statue of Liberty.
I met Walt Whitman as I was mixing
charcoal, moss, fruits, grains and roots
to cook up something good to eat.
I met him as I lifted the translucent cover from my face.
Some wanted to kill Walt Whitman.
Gibran stabbed him with the wooden cross.
Al-Hussein¹² planted in his heart a wilted rose
seven thorns
and a tortoise.
Mahdiyya,¹³ daughter of the Mahdi, wore a white dress
and a headscarf.

She danced on his grave.

After reading *Leaves of Grass* the Virgin Mother wiped her mouth.
The Virgin Mother embraced her own image in the hand mirror.
and became aware of the fingers of sleep rubbing the little ponds
and black elder
and the grass.

The concubines are looking at the mute waiter.

The concubines are the lucky ones.

Yet despite glory,
despite the song of memory,
no one reads the Old Testament.

Walt Whitman spread out on his thighs the Song of Songs
and ordered the cardinals out of the graveyard.

Everything is futile, mere grasping at the wind.

Walt Whitman is no longer lonely.

Walt Whitman is still looking for a lover who resembles him.

Here's what his lips should look like,
and his eyes

his eyes, his chest, his legs, his feet.

The senator said to him Search among the pilots.

The pope said to him Search among the angels.

The police said to him Search for the Bedouins.

The novelists advised him to go back to the Mississippi
or travel to Tangiers.

The soldiers shouted in his face:

Poet,

Monster.

The boss's wife smiled and removed her mouth from the picture.

The minister of defense told him that the earth was spacious and black,
that the sky was spacious and blue.

Walt Whitman was not surprised.

He knows that his abode is in the earth,
that his house is waiting in the sky.

Walt Whitman requested that a mulberry tree keep him company everywhere
he goes.

So finally, atop the fender of a tank,
lounges Walt Whitman.

Finally he observes the streets of Baghdad.

When he rests, he looks at himself
and at that tree.

Sometimes he does not see himself.

Sometimes he sees that tree as a wild boy,

sometimes he sees it as his twin sister,

sometimes he sees it as a tall ship,

the tall tower

and the tall gallows.

Walt Whitman is still dreaming.
The tree is still a tree.
His fingers still avoid pressing the buttons of nightmares.
Walt Whitman frees himself from the months,
April, May, June, etc.
Walt Whitman squats in homage before Abu Nuwas,¹⁴
in front of al-Rusafi,¹⁵
in front of al-Jawahiri.¹⁶
He never asks about Nazik al-Mala'ika.¹⁷
He passes without stopping under the statue of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab.¹⁸
He strips himself of hours, of minutes of seconds.
He ends up naked.
He shivers. He can't find the pages he's read all his life,
he shivers and can't find the ceilings he slept under,
he shivers without a glance at the opposite shores,
he shivers. He can't find even one of his enemies.
Walt Whitman climbs the mulberry tree.
He puts his neck between its branches.
Walt Whitman dangles there.
He's afraid his fingers will press the buttons of nightmares.
The carpenters are preparing a coffin for Walt Whitman.
The grave diggers are looking for an unused plot
suitable for Walt Whitman's corpse.
The children are thinking up a game to quiet his soul.
Christ is composing desperate, unruly hymns.
The poets receive condolences. They write elegies.
The sun grows sad and leaves.
And night with its heavy weight falls upon the earth
and strips itself of time,
plucks Baghdad up by the roots.
Walt Whitman's corpse turns green and then it rots.
It rots while the songs from virgins' mouths sing
"Rise from the grave Whitman,
rise from the grave Walt."
Walt Whitman died.
He turned into the fender of the tank where he was sitting.
The streets of Baghdad rose into view.
The paper birds reappeared
as black shoes
smaller than the soldiers' feet,
smaller than the cold.
And the air can hardly disturb them.
The air is thin like sewer lines,
like gas lines,
like chemical fertilizer.
And Walt Whitman stretches out on red earth.

He looks at his own corpse with its soiled hair.
 He looks for a long time.
 He notices the place the gun fell,
 the corner where the camera appeared,
 and he notices what's left of the desert.
 He finishes dying
 without taking in it the slightest pleasure.

NOTES

- 1 Mounah Khouri, "Prose Poetry: A Radical Transformation in Contemporary Arabic Poetry," *Edebiyât* 1.1 (1976), 130.
- 2 Khouri, 130.
- 3 Hans Wehr, *Arabic English Dictionary: The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. M. Cowan (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1994 [4th edition]).
- 4 Mikhail Naimy, *Al-majmū'a al-kāmilah* (Beirut: Dār al-'ilm li al-malāyīn, 1987), 412.
- 5 Naimy, 412.
- 6 Naimy, 418.
- 7 Naimy, 418.
- 8 Yusuf Al-Khal, *Dīwān al-shi'r al-Amrīkī* (Beirut: Majallat Shi'r, 1958), 8-9.
- 9 Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said), *A Time Between Ashes and Roses*, trans. Shawkat M. Toorawa (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 164-167. Originally published as *Waqt bayna al-Ramād wa al-ward* (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1972).
- 10 Our translation originally appeared online in *Words without Borders* (August 2012), wordswithoutborders.com, as "Funeral for Walt Whitman." Our translation of Ramadan's essay on Whitman, "Whitman and Me: Notes on a Poetic Education," appeared online in *Words without Borders* in November 2014.
- 11 Federico Garcia Lorca (1888-1936); Abdel-Muneim Ramadan has in mind Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York*, published posthumously in 1942.
- 12 Al-Hussein (d. 608 CE), son of the Prophet's nephew 'Alī, killed at Karbala. He became a fundamental figure in the development of Shi'ism.
- 13 Mahdiyya (b. 869), "daughter of the Mahdi," evidently the daughter of the twelfth imam in Shi'i theology.
- 14 Abu Nuwas (756-814), influential, innovative poet of the 'Abbasid Period, famous for his wine poems.

- 15 Ma'ruf al-Rusafi (1875-1945), Iraqi poet and novelist (in Turkish and Arabic).
- 16 Al-Jawahiri (1899-1997), Iraqi, pre-modern poet. He was known particularly for the phrase “the wounds of the sacrificed are mouths.”
- 17 Nazik al-Mala'ika (1923- 2007), also an Iraqi poet. Her poetry collection *'Ashiqat al-Layl* (*Love of the Night*, 1947) was an early introduction to free verse.
- 18 Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-1964), influential early Arab modernist. An excellent study in English of his centrality in the development of the new poetry is Terry DeYoung's *Placing the Poet: Badr Shaker al-Sayyab and Postcolonial Iraq* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).