“TO FLEE FROM ALL LANGUAGES”: THE GAP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE WORKS OF MODERN ARAB POETS

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So here I am, in the middle of the way having had twenty years—Twenty years largely wasted... Trying to use words, and every attempt Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.... And so each venture Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate With shabby equipment always deteriorating. (T.S.Eliot, East Coker, “The Four Quartets”)

IN HIS ESSAY “THE RETREAT FROM THE WORD” which discusses, among other issues, various aspects of the multifarious interactions between language and reality in Western modernist literature and poetry, George Steiner sagaciously points out that:

The crisis of poetic means, as we know it, began in the later nineteenth century. It arose from awareness of the gap between the new sense of physiological reality and the old models of rhetorical and poetic statement.

Steiner maintains that in order to articulate the wealth of consciousness opened to which modern sensibility is exposed, true modernist Western poets sought to break out of the traditional confines of syntax and definition. They strove to restore to language its fluid, provisional character; and they hoped to

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give back to the word its power of incantation—of conjuring up the unprecedented—which it possessed when it is still a form of magic. Modernist poets recognized that traditional syntax organizes our perceptions into linear and monistic patterns, which distort or stifle the play of subconscious energies, the multitudinous inner life of mind. Language, according to modernist writings is therefore inadequate to capture, represent, and do justice to the quality and intensity of the inner life.²

Most romantic poets flaunted an unyielding confidence in their poetry’s power of clairvoyance, which enables it to bridge the unbearable gap between language and the poet’s “self.”³ This is how Elizabeth Wilkinson summarizes the Romantic notion regarding language and “self” as she discusses German Romanticism and particularly the works of both Goethe and Schiller:⁴

Art, for Goethe and Schiller, is expressive of the life that goes on within us all the time but which we are never able to communicate as it is lived. This inner life, in the form we experience it, is not accessible to language. When we reduce it to concepts and propositions, it has already changed its character. In vain do we struggle...to convey the rhythms and contours, the feel of this inner life, not only the feel of our emotions, of our joy or our grief, but the feel of our thinking too, its involutions and convolutions, its ramifications and tensions...It eludes all language save the language of art.

Modernist poets, however, are acutely aware that their quest for transcendence, or ‘ultimate meaning’, is almost always impeded by the arbitrariness of language, by the unstable relationship between signifier and signified. Throughout the twentieth century, Western modernist poets consistently strove to explore a variety of techniques to surmount this poetic barrier. There was, for instance, the imagist venture which sought to discover an innovative poetic idiom that would better suit the modern situation, particularly in view of the gap between language and experience, that had been widening ever since the wane of high romanticism. Ezra Pound’s definition of the “image” as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” reflects the need to regain this lost equilibrium between word and reality, not by way of abstraction and discursive statements (which only leads one back to the same old impasse), but by finding adequate metaphors, concrete word pictures for the newly realized reality.⁵

In this article, I contend that one of the aims of modernist Arab poets is to demonstrate how their poetic works unremittingly endeavor to eradicate or conceal the gap between language and the reality it purports to embody. To use T.S. Eliot’s words, it is the importunate attempt to “make the modern world possible for art.”⁶ Nonetheless, these poets also painfully admit that they often face “unnarratable moments” which highlight the inherent inadequacy of representational language to put their sensory experience into words. Thus, they
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acknowledge that even though language and “reality” are inextricably intertwined, the former possesses a certain constraint, which they cannot surmount despite their poetic endowment. Here I pay special attention to representations of this gap in the works of the preeminent modernist poet, Adūnīs (the pen name of the Syrian ‘Alī Ahmad Sa‘īd, b.1930). In his book of essays, *al-Nass al-Qur‘ānī wa Âfāq al-Kitāba* (“The Quranic Text and the Horizons of Writing,” 1993), Adūnīs seeks to delineate his conception of the poetic quandary which confronts every modernist poet or author. Commenting on Steiner’s discernment of language and reality, Adūnīs incisively maintains that: 

The vitality of both the individual and his language is measured by his ability to find the intimate balance between his inner world and the outer world, and by his ability to eradicate the boundaries between expression itself and things he wishes to express [...] In our present time, the relation between language and “things” has become more and more perplexing. The infinity of “the place” (as far as matter and space are concerned), the relativity of time, the atomic structure of matter, the wave/particle of energy... all these cannot be expressed by words. Therefore, there is a growing rupture between language and the world. It is as if the words we use are lost: they are the past that has been surpassed by the outbursts of the present.

The modernist awareness that language is afflicted with an innate inability to genuinely portray “the things” (*al-Ashya‘*)—the objects of reality in Adūnīs’s poetic diction— pervades the works of many prominent modernist Arab poets. We will return to Adūnīs’s poetic works later in the article; to start let us rather consider a short poem by the renowned Syrian poet Nizar Qabbānī (1923-1998), in which he attempts to express his view regarding the relationship between words and his intimate experience. The poem, entitled *Lugha* (“Language”), appears in his volume of poetry *ashhadu An lā Imra‘ā Illa Antī* (“I Bear Witness that there is no Woman but You”, 1979),

> Every time a man falls in love  
> Must he use the same words?  
> Every time a woman wishes to embrace her lover  
> Must she sleep with grammarians and philologists?  
> Because of all of this  
> I have said nothing to the one I love  
> I packed the things of love in a suitcase  
> And fled from all languages.

Qabbānī, who was commonly referred to as *Shā‘ir al-Mar‘ā* (“The Poet of Woman”), employs the theme of love between a man and woman— a theme
so prevalent in his work—to grapple with a deeper question: can a woman or a man use words to express the feelings of affection they have for each other? The title of the poem already implies that Qabbānī intends to address the question of language and experience, and to find a “solution” to his poetic predicament. For Qabbānī, it is this haunting and distinctively modernist predicament that he attempts to explore in this outwardly simple poem. In his eyes, there is only one solution: he chooses silence, hoping that it will best express the intensity of his feelings.

I would like to argue that in the case of the modernist Arab poet, the notion of silence as a powerful tool which best articulates the intensity of the personal emotions derives from two different sources. The first is Sufi poetry that promulgates the notion of *samāʿ* ("Silence") as the ultimate expression of one’s most inner feelings. In the above poem, we can detect that Qabbānī’s notion of silence derives from the poetic works of the renowned Sufi poets who tackled this issue, most notably the pre-eminent Persian mystic and poet Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (1207-1273), whose writings had a profound impact on Qabbānī’s love poetry.

In Masnawi, his most celebrated volume, al-Rūmī often appeals to a “sublime silence” (Ḥāmosh in Rūmī’s diction) in the last line of almost every one of his love odes (Ghazals). To him this is a silence from which may emerge a true understanding of the spiritual realities that words can never adequately describe; accordingly, we find that one of the most famous ending lines in his volume is: “I put a lock on my mouth.” In an article that examines the motif of silence in al-Rūmī’s poetry, Firoozeh Papan-Matin argues that:

In referring to this silent language, the poetic language turns into a metalanguage that conceives itself to be a sign of inarticulation. Language, in this capacity, turns against itself, commits suicide, in order to be reincarnated in silence.

The second source highlights the notion that silence possesses a powerful, suggestive force and is a reference to the futility of words in attempting to convey a higher dimensional existence was first expressed in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1922). Wittgenstein presents us with a two-level view of language. There is the world of meaning, where thought can be formulated and put into words and propositions. Language at this level is assertive, saying ‘This is how things are.’ However, there is another world of meaning, a higher one, where all matters of value exist. Although we can speak of their manifestations in the realm of language, such matters are themselves ineffable. Wittgenstein tenaciously contends that only through silence are we able to comprehend them. He then concludes with his famous assertion that: “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must pass over in silence.”

By choosing to be silent and to “flee from all the languages”, Qabbānī’s speaker is determined to follow the path of both the Persian mystic poet and the renowned Austrian “philosopher of language.” Moreover, it seems that the poet
is aware that this determination is one of the key features of modernist poetry. In his essay “Silence and the Poet”, George Steiner considers poetic modernity as an attempt to enact or “show” the limits of the expressible, the threshold of meaning, by allowing the silence of language, where language can only express its inadequacy, to emerge as such.\textsuperscript{15}

It is decisively the fact that language does have its frontiers […] it is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvelously fails us, that we can experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding us […] Where the word of the poet ceases, a great light begins […] The poet seeks refuge in muteness.

The agonizing realization that language can never fully articulate the emotional complexities of the individual is also made plain in the following poem by the Iraqi modernist poet Fawz\textsuperscript{i} Kar\textsuperscript{im} (b. 1945). The poem, entitled \textit{Gh\textsuperscript{h}ayat al-Kalam} (“The Purpose of Speech”), is included in his volume \textit{Qas\textsuperscript{a}id min Jaz\textsuperscript{a}ra Mahjura} (“Poems from a Forsaken Island,” 1995):\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{quote}
When one of us watches the trees
Withering, he recalls a winter day
In his life that vanished
Like a forest in the night.
And when he listens to the water running through the trees,
He remembers a tune that was forgotten
Under the heavy stole of his life
This is how I keep on walking down the long road back
Between sublime sights and palm fronds
In al-Karkh
I know that the purpose of speech is
Silence. Watching the sunset
Is my purpose.
And all those who flee will join me.

Like Qabb\textsuperscript{a}n\textsuperscript{i}, Kar\textsuperscript{im} employs a seemingly ordinary poetic image in order to delve into the question of the gap between language/speech and one’s most intimate inner feelings. Kar\textsuperscript{im}’s speaker begins his poem by portraying an image of a person gazing at the withering trees and harks back to a certain day in his life, which will never return again. He then strives to illustrate the feelings of glumness and futility which engulf this person in the face of these sights of nature. At this point, he turns to describe his own twilight walk, surrounded by the characteristic landscape of al-Karkh, a neighborhood of Baghdad on the western bank of the Tigris River. But when we reach the poem’s closure, the speaker pauses and unfalteringly asserts: “I know that the purpose of speech is silence.” He abruptly decides not to continue describing the feelings that encompass him as he watches his city’s landscapes. Instead, he declares that his
sole purpose now is to gaze at the sunset, for even the feelings that such a sunset evokes cannot be expressed by language. He further affirms that all those who flee from speech (like Qabbanî’s speaker who “fled from all languages”) will eventually join him to mutely view the sunset.

In the last stanza of the poem, Karîm employs a thematic device which Barbara Smith calls “The unqualified assertion.” In her celebrated book, Poetic Closure, which consists of a study of how poems end, smith argues that in a poem’s closure, an utterance tends to sound particularly valid when it is delivered in the form of an unqualified assertion. She further maintains that such an unqualified assertion conveys a sense of the speaker’s security, conviction and authority. And since the speaker did not guard or cover himself with implicit or explicit reservation, readers assume that he had no need to do so. Smith points out that in his unqualified absoluteness, the poet’s assertion is effectively “the last word.” It has a quality of ultimateness and stability, as if nothing further need or could be said. Moreover, these assertions not only reinforce our sense of the speaker’s conviction, but are themselves expressions of comprehensiveness, culmination, or finality. They imply that a point has been reached beyond which nothing further can or will be said because all that could be said has been.

On a first reading, Karîm’s assertion that “the purpose of speech is silence” seems to be an obvious overstatement, but, as Smith demonstrates, the occurrence of hyperbole at the conclusion of the a poem is often a reflection or a signal of emotion climax or extremity, a point at which the speaker is apparently striving for the ultimate, consummate, and most comprehensive of the motives and emotions that have occasioned the poem. What is most significant here, of course, is the implication that, having reached that point, he cannot and need not go further. The poet’s unqualified assertion brings the poem to a point where any further development would be superfluous and anticlimactic.

The prominent Lebanese poet Unsî al-Ḥajj (b. 1937) also uses the theme of love to deliver the notion that despite the fact that language is a most powerful descriptive tool, it often falls short in its ability to effectively embody a poet’s inner being. This view is reflected in the last stanzas of al al-Ḥajj’s long poem entitled Mâthâ Sanâ’ta bil Dhahab, Mâthâ Fa’al’ta bil Warда (“What Have You Made with the Gold, What Have you Done with the Rose,” 1970), included in a volume which carries the same title.

Carry me toward all the languages so my lover will hear me...
The world is white
The rain is white
The voices are white
Your body is white and your teeth are white
The ink is white
And the paper is white
Heed my call, heed my call
I call you from the mountains, from the gullies
I call you from the trees’ lap, from the clouds’ lips
From the rocks and the springs...
Heed my call when I come, hidden and blurred
Heed my call, heed my call, banished and estranged
My heart is black from loneness and my soul is red
But the board of the world is white
And words are white.

In the above lines, al-Hājj dexterously interweaves the theme of love and longing with the theme of the inadequacy of words to accurately give voice to the speaker’s emotions and sensations. The speaker begins by imploring his addressees to carry him “toward all the languages” so his beloved one could hear him. He describes all the tangible and physical objects of the world/nature as “white”, that is to say simple, one-dimensional and easily describable by words (which are themselves “white”, as the speaker proclaims in the poem’s closure). The grim predicament that the speaker grapples with is the fact that whereas all concrete objects of reality can be poetically illustrated, it is impossible to use words to describe his intimate feelings and his inner tumult. His inner world, elusive and extremely multifaceted, is depicted as “black” and “red”, as if to sharply contrast it with the plain “white board of the world.” Like Qabbāni’s speaker, al-Hājj’s chooses not to go any further in describing his pining for his lover. Instead, it seems that he also “seeks refuge in muteness,” and thus provides an effective closure to the poem. By doing so, al-Hājj subverts the straightforward and traditional definition of what function language serves: referring to the outside world and denoting things, objects, actions and people. For him, the individual’s inner reality lies well beyond any representation.

The poet’s futile struggle to verbalize his experience is perhaps best articulated in the works of Adūnīs. In the sixth and last stanza of his long poem Simīyā’ (“Semiology”), included in his volume Mufrad bi-Sīghat al-Jam’ (“Singular in the Plural Form”, 1975). While reflecting on his inner creative process, Adūnīs pens the following lines:

I write the things that cannot be written
which do not pertain to the ordinary
And which cannot be uttered...
I do not write. I hallucinate about my condition and
about myself
I utter the thing that vanquishes me,
the thing that my body draws me to...
I do not write

Why is it every time I try to clarify I become more and more obscure?
I do not write.
My heart curves over me
I gather it together with my lips and eyes
I cry for help
And whisper to my innards
I know that I do not know
But from where can I learn?
And I know,
But how can I speak?
I do not speak,
But why and in which way will I surrender?

Why is it every time I try to clarify I become more and more obscure? ...
I do not write
I yearn for something that I do not belong to
I belong to what denies me

I calmly declare disappointment and utter: “desperation is more worthwhile”...
I do not write...
Neither the sign tells the truth
Nor the phrase comes true...
I do not write
Why is it
Every time
I try to explain
I become more and more
Obscure? ...

O you wretched alphabet, O twenty-nine reeds, with what can I further burden you and what forest can I plant in you?
I heave myself behind you
Me, the wild root.

The stanza’s opening already leaves the reader with no doubt as to the speaker’s view regarding the unbridgeable gap between language and the individual’s intimate experience. While ruminating upon the intimate feelings invoked by the creative process he is immersed in, the speaker candidly and straightforwardly professes that such feelings cannot be put into words. In his view, everything in our reality can be expressed in words, except for the abstract elements of his consciousness, which “do not pertain to the ordinary” and thus “cannot be uttered.” Poetic writing that attempts to illuminate “the self” therefore becomes a form of hallucination combined with a cry for help. The speaker, who agonizingly recognizes the grave impediment imposed by language, strives to use all his mental faculties to face it, but to no avail. He admits defeat and borrows Socrates’ famous aphorism—“I know that I do not know”—to bluntly manifest his distress. He then sums up his fruitless endeavor using the anaphora “Why is it every time I try to clarify I become more and more obscure?”

At this point, the speaker expresses his desperation and divulges that he no longer writes; instead, he chooses to contemplate the vacillating and precarious relationship between language and personal experience. Adûnîs’s
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speaker obliquely alludes to Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of language, which maintains that the relationships between “signifier” and “signified” are completely arbitrary. He thus loses all faith in “signs” and dismally concludes: “Neither the sign tells the truth nor the phrase comes true.” At the Stanza’s closure, it seems that the only thing left for him to do is to painfully address the “wretched alphabet” and admit that he cannot instill it with a new vigor, which would enable him to represent his emotions during the creative process.

This harsh admission is particularly salient in the case of Adūnīs, who consistently envisages the main goal of the modernist poet as an unremitting endeavor to “charge”, or imbue language with new meanings. But in this poem’s closure, Adūnīs’s speaker confesses that every so often, he is unable to do so. He thus again addresses the alphabet and declares: “I heave myself behind you.” By doing so, he “joins” both Qabbānī and Karīm’s speakers and becomes silent. Adūnīs himself frankly admitted in one of his early interviews, that this “shortcoming of language” is one of the most intricate quandaries he tackles during the creative process, to a point that it almost discourages him from writing poetry.

In another long poem entitled Qasidat Thamūd (“The Poem of Thamud”, 1976), Adūnīs reaffirms his view that language— and poetic language in particular— is exceedingly feeble in conveying the true essence of “things”.

How deep is my ignorance...
I surrendered as if I were a child
Would this ignorance help me? But
Where will I come from and how will I renew the form of words and the innards of language
So I will be able to utter the things?

There is a wound
Growing between the world and the words...
But
Where will I come from and how will I renew the form of words and the innards of language
So I will be able to utter the things?...

Here is the poet! He was sleeping like a stranger...
What will he do?
The age of words/inspiration has died. The tone
Of this age had also died...
Sometimes it happens that I surrender to the roads,
Fall into the abysses
Or weary out like dust.

As a quintessential modernist poet, Adūnīs intratextually refers to his aforementioned poem, “Semiology”, to further accentuate the feelings of hopelessness and frustration that besiege him while confronting the inadequacy of language. He opens the stanza by attesting to the depth of his “ignorance”
when it comes to attempting to bridge the gap between language and his personal experience. Despite his enduring and somewhat grueling attempt, Adūnīs’s speaker confesses in this particular stanza that he chooses to give in to the boundaries and constrictions of language and to ultimately surrender “like a child.”

But at this point, when it seems that the speaker is prepared to admit defeat and become silent, he declares: “how will I renew the form of words and the innards of language so I will be able to utter the things?” This persistent rumination, which reflects Adūnīs’s “commitment” as a modernist poet to consistently infuse language with groundbreaking, revolutionary and innovative meanings, ends up in the sorrowful conclusion that “there is a wound growing between the world and the words.” This stanza, which oscillates between the need to yield so often to the constraints of language and the indefatigable desire to surmount them, best encapsulates, in my view, the convoluted predicament of the modernist poet. The poem thus also unfurls a poignant meditation on the multifaceted vicissitudes of the poetic process, as well as on the poet’s keenness to restructure “the innards of language” in order to serve his poetic purposes. Adūnīs’s speaker again concludes the stanza by surrendering to impediments of the poetic process and declares: “The age of words/inspiration has died”, as if to manifestly contrast himself with the archetypal romantic notion of “divine inspiration” as an internal force that enables the poet to overcome any obstacle he might stumble upon during the creative process.

During his long poetic career, Adūnīs also attempted to enunciate his concept of the language-reality relationship in his discursive writings. In his essay al-Lughā wa al-Haqīqa (“Language and Essence”), included in his aforementioned book al-Nass al-Qur’ānī wa-Āfāq al-Kitāba, Adūnīs chooses to portray his poetic conundrum by presenting it in the form of a dialogue between him and an anonymous “friend”:

I doubt that you are able to write whatever you want [...] and if you are not able to write what you truly desire, what is the benefit of your writing? There is no culture without writing. What value does one possess if he cannot give voice to the constituents of both his body and mind?

This friend almost dumbfounds me. How could I respond or defend myself? Especially when writing is my vocation and my profession. What would I do if I did not write? I exist in this world as a writer owing to the power of writing. What would be the meaning of my continuance in life if I were stripped from everything that has created me and has endowed me with an efficient presence? It is as if he said: “the things that you write about do not require confrontation and examination... It is the superficial, the mundane and the trivial. There is another world, spacious and rich, but it is hidden and veiled.
The poetic image of the poet trapped in the quagmire of language noticeably permeates Adūnīs’s later works. In his long poem, *al-Qaṣīda Ghayr al-Muktaṭima* (“The Incomplete Poem”, 1993), it seems that Adūnīs’s speaker has come to terms with the “scantiness of words”, and inscribes the following lines using an overly inconsolable tone:

What would it help me

to unite with my time or to renounce it?

My language leaps against me, gets far from me, and my pathways abhor me, but

would silence help in this sandy noise which is planted everywhere?...

I know what will the sand will say to me and I remain in silence.

I do not know how to speak, how to reply – my speech is like diving into what I am ignorant of, my answers testify against me.

Around me there is a silence that denies me, but I agree with it and my poetry also agrees with it

I have dealt with matters of poetry, with matters of prose, but I do not know how to deal with my own matters...

I did not speak.

In my lips lie canals, in my lips lie caves

I did not speak and my mouth is a grave.

Language here ceases to function as a useful descriptive tool in the hand of the poet, and rather becomes the poet’s “adversary”, an antagonist that “testifies” to the speaker’s “ignorance”, as Adūnīs puts it. The realization that certain dimensions of human existence are entirely unutterable impels the speaker to mourn over the death of language and the death of his illusion about the “authority of language.” The stanza’s closure is perhaps the ultimate admission of the poet’s stinging defeat: here, once more, he chooses to seek refuge in silence: “I did not speak and my mouth is a grave.”

In face of the poet’s inability to use language as a powerful and evocative tool, the question remains what, then, provides the poet with the impetus for writing poetry? And what, if anything, is the purpose of poetic writing? I believe the answer to this persistent question can be found in Adūnīs’s poem *Qasīdat al-Bahlūl* (“The Clown’s Poem”, 1977), in which he likens the creative process to a “clown's journey”:

The clown has gone out to track the death of darkness...

How will he utter his flow of desires?

What can poetry do when its legs are in chains

And the walls of darkness lie over its eyes?

...
Why is it every time he wishes to say the truth
the word turns him into a liar?...
What would happen to the clown if he would shout:
"O world, my hands are like birds and your hands are
the trap
I am getting out of your face to get inside the poem’s
face"...
The clown’s language now lies in its prayer niche
A nightgown covers its navel-
It had sought refuge in the place where the alphabet
is.

Though this poem ostensibly focuses on the futility of the poet’s
language to bridge the gap between the word and the world ("O world, my
hands are like birds and your hands are the trap"), I believe that we should pay
attention to the “solution” that Adūnīs finds for his predicament. After the
“clown” despairs of language (for it “turns him into a liar”), he decides to seek
“refuge where alphabet is”. Since language fails absolutely as a mimetic mirror
in the domain of feelings, its sole purpose becomes language itself. His poetry is
transformed into metapoetry, a poetry that reflects upon itself and focuses on its
own language. He thus confronts “the world” and concludes: “I am getting out
of your face to get inside the poem’s face.” By consenting to be “ruled” by
language, it seems that the speaker puts into practice Heidegger’s famous
assertion that “man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language,
while in fact language remains the master of man.”

This view regarding the purpose of modernist poetry is also expressed
in Adūnīs’s dialogue with his above-mentioned “friend” who persistently raises
the question of poetry’s worth:

—"What is the benefit of your writing?"
—"It is enough that it bears witness to what cannot be uttered.
It is enough that it is aware of the existing rupture between
language and the body."

Adūnīs further accentuates this view while discussing the poetics of the
renowned French modernist poet Stephane Mallarmé (1842-1898). In the
following lines he put across his view regarding the purpose of poetic language,
while lamenting language limitations:

There are ways to circumvent this [predicament]. Mallarmé,
for example, does not use language to bring the world closer to
him but rather to keep it far away. Therefore, there is no
predicament: language in this case is the world, and
revitalization in his case is the continuous rape of the words of
language in the bed of language. Mallarmé defends himself by
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asking: “Can language convey the essence of a thing or the essence of the world?” He replies: “Absolutely not. Language cannot go past the surface. The rest remains far away, wrapped by silence.” It is as if true essence lies outside language.

The throbbing awareness that the inner world is quite inaccessible to probing by our common language, and that it is language that constructs “reality” and ourselves more than the other way around, propels many modernist Arab poets to incorporate into their works the subtle equilibrium between poetic language and the vividness of both sensations and emotions. Language’s lamentable inadequacy on one hand, and the realization that “there is nothing outside the text”, on the other, impels some Arab modernist poets to discover new means of poetic expression. These poets’ efforts to offset and counteract the limitations of language begin with the use of silence as a potent tool for signifying the intensity of the poet’s feelings. The notion of silence counterbalances the inefficacy of language: it unveils the intensity of the poet’s inner experience. In this regard, perhaps the following passage, taken from Roland Barthes’ celebrated book Mythologies, best elucidates the significance of silence in modern poetry:

All told, of all those who use speech, poets are the least formalist, for they are they only ones who believe that the meaning of the words is only a form, with which they, being realists, cannot be content. This is why our modern poetry always asserts itself as a murder of language, a kind of spatial, tangible analogue of silence.

However, silence is not the only “remedy” for bridging the gap between language and experience. The fact that language fails to effectively portray the complexities and subtleties of inner life thrust Arab modernist poets, like Adünis, to reflect upon the “true” power of language. This power lies in language’s ability to reflect upon itself, exploiting the playfulness and anarchy inherent in it once it is severed from the instrumental need to signify. Such poets become indefatigable commentators of their own poetic process, and many of their poems thus become a meta-poetic investigation into the nature of poetry.

Prominent Linguist Roman Jakobson defined poetry by the predominance of what he called “self-reference.” The term has wide implications, but basically refers to the way poetry foregrounds itself as an artifact of language as opposed to referential discourse, which tends to efface its own artifice to better represent itself as a transparent window onto the world. According to Jakobson, the most extreme form of self-reference may be where “the medium IS the message.” In the poems discussed, we discover that this form of self-referentiality indeed becomes a key feature in the works of many Arab modernists. The following lines from Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Man With the Blue Guitar” perhaps expresses this modernist notion best:
Poetry is the subject of the poem
From this the poem issues and
To this returns
Between the two
Between issue and return, there is
An absence in reality.

It seems that many modernist Arab poets feel that their self-reflective poems also fill an ontological void, which they reexperience as “an absence in reality” — outer reality and particularly inner reality — even if it means that their poetry becomes more and more solipsistic.

ENDNOTES


10. On this impact see for example: “An Interview with Nizâr Qabbâni”, in *al-Bayân*, 5 May 1974, 12.


23. At the beginning of another poem entitled al-Waqt (“The Time”, 1982), Adūnīs describes language and alphabet in a similar manner:

“The shreds of history lie in my throat
And my face carries the victim’s marks
How bitter is language now, and how narrow is the door of alphabet.”


34. *Al-A’māl al-Shi’rīyya*, 80-81.
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