

4. MAMLUK POETRY: FORGOTTEN BY THE UNIVERSAL SPIRIT?

The article by Salma Jayyusi prompts two questions: First, why does a scholar who has earned indubitable merit in several fields of Arabic literary history choose to write about one on which she is poorly informed and for which she displays a disquieting lack of empathy? And second, why do the editors publish an article that falls far short of scholarly standards?

We have to deal with this article in more detail for several reasons. First, its position as the first chapter of the book and its title “Arabic Poetry in the Post-Classical Age” (pp. 25–59) suggest that it is meant to be one of the central articles of the volume. Second, it is an aggregation of virtually all common prejudices against Mamluk and Ottoman literature.³²

The first phenomenon that strikes the reader is Jayyusi’s concept of literature, which is completely ahistoric. It is inconceivable to her that the perception of a literary period is necessarily shaped by the literary background and the value system of the critic. These factors are subject to change and therefore the perception of whole periods of art are constantly undergoing change. One need only point to the term “gothic,” which was coined as a derogatory term, while the Gothic period is considered nowadays one of the greatest periods of European art history. In a similar way, the term “baroque” was created to denounce the art of a whole period, and not too much time has elapsed since the time when baroque literature (quite similar to much of Arabic poetry) had been considered a senseless aggregation of silly word-play, and baroque opera as the most idle thing that has ever appeared on the stage. In the meantime, Gryphius, Marino, and Donne have taken their proper places in the history of literature again, and many opera lovers are of the not-entirely-unjustified opinion that the revival of baroque opera was one of the most exciting occurrences on the stage during the last fifty years. For any historian of art and literature who deserves this name, it has become commonplace not to rely blindly on personal taste, but to critically question the standards she/he is applying to the object of research. Not so for Salma Jayyusi. While the Arab critics of the period in question were quite aware of the fact that the taste of the audience changes through the centuries and that to appeal to a certain taste is not yet enough to qualify a text as good or bad, Jayyusi does not consider such changes significant, and thus neglects a significant aspect of the way modern scholarship has come to consider literary history. Instead, literature is the manifestation of an essence that is not subject to historic change. Jayyusi does not ask about the background of a poetic text. Her only concern is if the text is part of “the poetic”—Jayyusi uses the word with the definite article—or rather,

³² It is amazing how exactly Jayyusi’s article corroborates the list of prejudices against Mamluk poetry that I drew up in my article “Mamluk Literature: Misunderstandings and New Approaches,” *MSR* 9, no. 2 (2005): 105–32.



"the genuinely poetic" (p. 57). In her essentialist conception, it is "the essence of poetry" (p. 29) or the "poetic essence" (p. 41), imbued with "the essence of a free Arab spirit" (p. 38) to capture the "human essence" (p. 29), "the essence of life" (p. 29).

According to this conception, the history of poetry is simply the history of the realization of the immutable "poetic essence." Consequently, the expectations and reactions of contemporary audiences are of no importance whatsoever. Thus Jayyusi can say in her critique of Ibn 'Unayn's style with its alleged "use of new and still unidiomatic words and the coining of new derivatives" that "such a technique manages only to shock the reader's sensibility with its alien effect, stunting any possible achievement of emotional and rhythmic fulfillment in the poem" (p. 44). But what if Ibn 'Unayn's readers were not shocked? What if they considered the poem perfectly emotionally and rhythmically fulfilled (whatever "rhythmic fulfillment" may mean exactly)? For Jayyusi this would make no difference at all, because the audience of this decadent age, estranged as it was from "the poetic essence," had no ability to judge what is shocking and what is not. Even worse, this very audience prevented the "poetic essence" from coming to light. Unnoticed by this audience, however, there was something great and unchangeable in the background, something like "the broad, ever living memory of Arabic poetry" (p. 51). "Ever living"? Obviously not, since the sentence in which this phrase occurs deals with poems by al-Shābb al-Zarīf that even Jayyusi finds "gentle and musical." However, she asks, "one wonders why the poems in question failed to enter the broad, ever living memory of Arabic poetry" (p. 51). But how can she know how actively al-Shābb al-Zarīf's poems were memorized during the Mamluk period? Judging by the many quotations of his poems in anthologies, I would guess that they were memorized for well over several centuries. Even though it may have been memorized by thousands of people over several centuries, all this is of no relevance whatsoever to the author, who evaluates the poetry of this period against the standard of an unchanging "poetic essence." Stating that there was "no single poetic genius" during the period in question, Jayyusi then proceeds to modify this statement in a most revealing way: "Many such were surely born, and yet the development of their talents was hampered by the standards and expectations in vogue during their lifetime" (p. 39). Poetry, in this conception, has nothing to do with its time and audience, but is an unchangeable entity that incarnates itself in poetic geniuses. Society's only role in this model is to help or to hinder the poetic essence in its natural growth in its genius.

Jayyusi arrogates for herself the competence to define the aesthetic criteria according to which all poetry of all periods must be measured. This is not only contrary to the established premises and methods of literary scholarship, but, even more, the criteria applied by Jayyusi sometimes seem bizarre. So we read in



a short passage on p. 27, headlined “An unstable world,” that pre-Islamic Arabia was a stable world, whereas the advent of Islam with its “unique capacity to maintain an a-racial attitude” shattered this very stability and planted the seeds of instability. “Once converted, a new Muslim was accepted into the community of believers without undue regard for origin, race or color. But while this may be regarded as a superior quality in Islam, it was not conducive to a continuation of the old stability.” (p. 27) Re-reading the passage time after time, I cannot help but read as its central message that in principle, it is the racial egalitarianism of Islam that brought about the mess of the “period of decadence.” This basis of Jayyusi’s conception of literature helps us to find the place where, according to this conception, the “poetic essence” and the “ever living memory” of Arabic poetry has been situated all this time, concealed, but still present: it is in the Arab race itself, in which there has always been the “enduring latent power of a once great poetry” (p. 59), though this could not manifest itself in times of “extraneous linguistic intrusions” (p. 37), and therefore “its vigour diminished . . . hemmed in by the circumstances of Arab life” (ibid.). Little surprise then that it is the pre-Islamic period against which the Mamluk and Ottoman poets have to be measured, because this was the only period in which “a free Arab spirit, linking creative expression to the roots of the soul and imbuing it with the vision and meaning of life and living” (p. 38) could unfold. The author goes on to portray a picture of the pre-Islamic Arabs that is similar to the way the pure and heroic ancestors were portrayed during the many outbreaks of ideological madness during the European twentieth century: “How estranged had the Arabs of the urban centuries become from the values of the Arabs . . . who had aestheticized their contradictions through the eloquent sayings of the poets . . . tenderness, devotion and selflessness towards women and love, but also a defiant and boastful self-centredness in tribal hostilities . . . , generosity and hospitality, but also a relentless aggression bent on plunder and the use of force for survival? This was the law of the desert, of scarcity and aridity, and it organized their life, gave it shape and challenge, and filled it with nostalgia, a constant sense of loss, a perennial craving for the impossible, for a constantly receding point of anchor, for a love that will be never required . . .” (p. 38).

So there we are, with the pure Arab spirit of the *jāhiliyah*, which was revived to a certain degree by al-Mutanabbī to yield a second climax of Arabic literature (p. 27), and to be destroyed by the foreign intruders of the period of decadence. But the “true poetic spirit” lived on in the Arab race. Blinded by her nationalist ideology, Jayyusi claims in an amazingly anachronistic way that even in the dark times of decadence there “was a basic concept of Arab literary identity . . . , and it made poetry and literature not a regional but rather a national cultural output” (p. 39). Thanks to this everlasting Arab spirit, poetry could be revived by “the great



neoclassicist" "Aḥmad Shawqī . . . and the poetry of some leading modernists such as Adūnīs . . ." (p. 38), totally irrelevant as all this is to a history of the literature between the Abbasid and the modern period. In her article on poetry of the Mamluk and Ottoman period, Jayyusi mentions more poets from the periods before and after than from the period in question itself. She praises al-Akḥṭal, Abū Tammām, al-Buḥṭurī, al-Mutanabbī, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (p. 33); she hails Shawqī, Gibrān Khalīl Gibrān, Badawī al-Jabal, Adūnīs, Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb, Maḥmūd Darwish (p. 38), but does not mention al-Maḥḥār, al-Shihāb al-Ḥijāzī, al-Āthārī, al-Damāmīnī, al-Ḥājirī, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Ḥammāmī, al-Qīrātī, al-Talla‘farī, al-‘Azāzī, Ibn Maṭrūḥ, Ibn Qurnāṣ, ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Mawṣilī, or Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī, to mention only a few major Mamluk poets that are treated nowhere in the volume.

Instead we learn that the "universal poetic spirit" is embodied in the Arab race and manifested itself in the poetry of the *jāhiliyyah* and the few centuries during which its "power" still lasted. But already the Umayyad period (on which Jayyusi has made some lucid notes in her contribution in the Cambridge History of Arabic Literature *‘Abbasid Belles-Lettres* volume) is marred by the "‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘ah . . . syndrome" (p. 49), an abominable degeneration that consists of enjoying one's life without feeling guilt. In the typical schizophrenia that characterizes many pro-Western intellectuals of the Arab world, who hail Western liberal modernity and at the same time are stuck in puritan Victorian morality, she complains: ". . . rarely do we encounter a genuine spiritual conflict in poems where the poet describes wine drinking and frolicking. On the contrary, the treatment of the subject is often lighthearted, and the notion of sin and punishment is not usually a disturbing, heart-wrenching experience" (p. 29). Again and again she laments the "failure of the era to uphold moral ideals" (p. 43) and grumbles about the "poets of decadent morality (*mujūn*) with whom the age abounded" (p. 47). And indeed, a period during which people enjoyed life, sex without guilt, and racial harmony—what a horrible world this must have been!

This urban, tolerant, and cosmopolitan culture, a culture of refinement, sophistication, and elegance, a culture of friendship, love of beauty, and wit, is not Jayyusi's world. She yearns for a culture of primitive heroism ("poems pulsating with life and pregnant with the vision of glory and infallibility," p. 27), of puritanism and sexual guilt, in which a fascination with beauty has to be rejected for not being "a decisive avowal of an exclusive emotion" (p. 51). Love is a "universal experience" (pp. 48, 51) the true nature of which is as unchangeable as the "poetic essence." For all times and cultures it is true that it "is always the particularity and exclusivity of love, its transcendence of beauty and physical qualities, that really matters. The whole period, it must be said, exhibits this deficit, the love it offers being more dependent on physical passion and desire than on any absorbing and abiding attachment" (p. 51). Throughout the article,



Jayyusi displays a strange obsession with the subject of sexuality, which is raised in half of the pages of the chapter; see pp. 29 (“sex”), 35 (“homosexuality,” “promiscuity,” “sexual satiety”), 38 (“perverse and graphic sexual depictions”), 39 (“homosexual poetry”), 41 (“heterosexual and homosexual”), 42 (“homosexual,” “sexual promiscuity”), 43 (“sexual imagery of a graphic and repellent quality”), 44 (“reckless sexual escapades”), 47 (“decadent morality”), 48 (“erotic encounters,” “addiction to pleasure”), 51 (“physical passion and desire”), 53 (“homosexuality,” “polygamous outlook on love and sexuality”), 54 (“homosexual and heterosexual”). Jayyusi does not consider the social and mental history of love and sexuality, and ignores studies that have been written on this subject in recent years. Instead, the subject of sexuality is raised mainly to defame the period as morally decadent and to contrast it with her prudish concept of heroism. This heroism is “virile” but asexual. It is revealing that whereas sexuality is only mentioned in a degrading way, “virility” is seen as the main quality of poetry. The words “virility” and “virile” occur five times throughout the article (pp. 26, 29, 31, 40, 41). “Virility,” however, was not a goal sought by Mamluk and Ottoman Arabic authors, whereas “elegance” was. However, the word “elegance” does not appear even once in Jayyusi’s article.

Given this attitude towards her subject, an impartial scholarly treatment of any of its aspects cannot be expected. Her only concern is to draw as negative a picture of the period in question as possible. Therefore, there is little point in trying to refute her attacks against Ibn Sanā’ al-Mulk (too much “sexual promiscuity” and therefore—?—too many “intricate figures of speech,” p. 42), Ibn ‘Unayn (“reckless sexual escapades,” p. 44), al-Bahā’ Zuhayr (“lacks a vision of life or of the future,” p. 48), al-Shābb al-Zarīf (“lacks the necessary immediacy,” p. 51), al-Ḥillī (considers “wine drinking and homosexuality . . . a source of amazement,” p. 53), and Ibn Nubātah (“senses little depth or philosophy of life,” p. 56). For every one of them Jayyusi manages to find a criterion according to which the poet in question cuts a poor figure. Further, to depreciate the later Mamluk and Ottoman poets, she states that “‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā, the scholar best known for his specialization on the Syrian poets of this era, closes his study with al-Shābb al-Zarīf.” Did this great scholar, the indefatigable fighter against prejudice and the protagonist of a revaluation of the Mamluk and Ottoman period, deserve this treatment? Did he deserve to be mentioned as a crown-witness for the feeble state of Ottoman literature while his pioneering work on ‘Umar al-Yāfi³³ is not mentioned a single time in the whole volume? His is, by the way, the only book-length study known to me that is dedicated to an Arabic poet of the Ottoman period, and since it is furthermore a good study, it should be a central point in

³³ ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā, *Quṭb al-‘Asr ‘Umar al-Yāfi* (Damascus, 1996).



every discussion of Ottoman Arabic poetry. In the entire volume under review, however, *neither* al-Yāfi *nor* ‘Umar Mūsá’s study on him are mentioned even once! And what is true for ‘Umar Mūsá’s study on al-Yāfi is also true for his groundbreaking study on Ibn Nubātah,³⁴ perhaps the best contribution to the history of Mamluk literature in the Arabic language, which Jayyusi ignores. Since I cannot believe that a person writing about Mamluk literature who knows the name of ‘Umar Mūsá has never heard of this scholar’s principal work, which first appeared in 1963 and is available now in a third edition, I can only conclude that she does not mention it on purpose because it contradicts her thesis. Thus, the most important monograph ever written on a poet of the Mamluk period is in all probability *purposely omitted* from this volume, which claims to be a standard work on this period!

It is quite clear by now that Jayyusi tries to portray everything in the darkest possible colors, and everything that cannot be portrayed in an outright negative fashion is nevertheless seen against a negative background. So nature poetry is not a sign of the love of nature or a new, individualistic, and completely non-medieval perspective on nature, but only an “escape . . . from tiresome external demands” (p. 36), “a refuge from the burden of eulogy” (p. 37), and we learn that flower poems (p. 36: read *zahrīyāt* instead of *zuhriyāt*) “lacked any active communication with the human condition” (p. 37). Though I do not know exactly what “to actively communicate with the human condition” means, it is clear enough to me that it probably cannot be accomplished by flower poems or Chopin waltzes. But I cannot see how this speaks against them. I, for my part, do not play Chopin waltzes in order to communicate with the human condition but to find a charming entertainment, and I read flower poems to enjoy poetic imagination and to be surprised by a pointed literary conceit. It is, after all, not the task of a work of art to communicate with the human condition or the world spirit, but with the audience.

It is Jayyusi’s practice to prescribe for every theme, form, and genre what it *should* do in order to be able to criticize the poets for not having done exactly that. Jayyusi never asks what the poets themselves wanted to accomplish, which, of course, is the only standard according to which they can be measured. For just as one cannot blame Chopin for not having composed Beethoven’s ninth symphony, one cannot blame Ibn Qurnāṣ for not having composed al-Mutanabbī’s ode on al-Ḥadath. Ibn Qurnāṣ, by the way, is the author of some of the most charming nature epigrams of the period. His name does not appear anywhere in the volume under review. His *Dīwān* is unpublished, but al-Ṣafadī, who held him in great esteem, quotes him quite often in his *Al-Kashf wa-al-Tanbīh ‘alá Waṣf al-Tashbīh*, ed. Hilāl

³⁴ ‘Umar Mūsá Bāshā, *Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣri: Amīr Shu‘arā’ al-Mashriq* (Cairo, 1963, 3rd ed. 1992).



Nājī (Leeds, 1420/1999), which is a rich source of Mamluk nature poetry, and is not mentioned by Jayyusi.

Let us have a brief look at what Jayyusi has to say about nature poetry. In her enthusiasm for *jāhili* virility, Jayyusi cannot find much worth in Abbasid descriptive poetry. Though “fully artistic, fully inventive,” it was nothing but “a solution for poets who had reached the end of their tolerance of the age of poetic utilitarianism” (p. 37). It is not easy to make sense out of this utterance. At least it is clear that, according to its author, descriptive poetry of the Abbasid period is not of great value. But if it is so in Abbasid times, it must be even worse in Mamluk times. Therefore Jayyusi continues: “During the period under study, poets continued to compose such miniatures with inventive, though often dispassionate, skill.” What makes her assume that Ibn Qurnāṣ felt less passion towards dewdrops than al-Ṣanawbarī did? Jayyusi continues: “Yet the search for novelty did not abate, as these purely descriptive examples were independent of other themes.” On p. 30, this literature is disparaged for its “repetition,” and now it is faulted for its “search for novelty”—what could these poets have done to satisfy Salma Jayyusi? What, after all, is wrong with descriptive poetry that is descriptive? And the rest of the sentence is simply wrong, for among the most impressive longer nature descriptions of the Mamluk period were the introductory parts of hunting poems and letters. Different from Abbasid hunting literature, a Mamluk hunting *urjūzah* or a *risālah ṭardīyah* inevitably started with a long description of the breaking of dawn and the awaking of nature, until the hunting party set forth on their hunt. Here description is not at all “independent of other themes.” Jayyusi, however, does not treat Mamluk hunting literature. And so she continues: “As greater affectation seeped in and the impact of external forces became overriding, poets became increasingly preoccupied with linguistic devices applicable to all themes. Gradually a greater artificiality can be seen in the use of poetic conceits and the vast array of figures of speech fashionable at the time” (p. 37). Even granted that by “linguistic devices” she means “stylistic devices,” the sentence does not become much clearer. As we have known since antiquity, stylistic devices are used to bring about a certain effect on the audience. The theory of rhetoric, however, has no “overriding external forces” or “inseeping affectations” on its agenda. But even if the reader tries to make some sense out of this statement, it is still wrong, since al-Ṣafadī’s, Ibn Nubātah’s, and Ibn Qurnāṣ’s descriptive poetry is by no means more mannered and loaded with stylistic devices than that of the Abbasid period. On the contrary, while young Ibn Ḥabīb tried to show off by imitating the Abbasid metaphor-based *conchetto* (simply to demonstrate that he could do this as well),³⁵ most other authors used a simpler style or used *tawriyah*

³⁵ See Thomas Bauer, “‘Was kann aus dem Jungen noch werden!’ Das poetische Erstlingswerk des Historikers Ibn Ḥabīb im Spiegel seiner Zeitgenossen,” in *Festschrift Hartmut Bobzin*, forthcoming.



society, her chapter on eulogy (pp. 32–34) lacks substance, and to declare that the “postclassical” poet was “a mere pawn at the mercy of princes and leaders who controlled his livelihood” (p. 36) reveals her lack of knowledge about the social role of poetry during these periods. Surprisingly, she considers Ibn Ḥijjah’s *Khizānat* (sic, instead of *Khazānat*) *al-Adab* “a study of the poetic art of al-Sharaf al-Anṣārī” (p. 50). Her translations are at best whimsical, sometimes wrong. The only poem she quotes in the section on Ibn Nubātah is an epigram in which the poet asks for a pair of earrings. The epigram is quoted for no other reason than to disparage Ibn Nubātah and to show that he “was dedicated to the act of asking, sometimes shedding part of his dignity” (p. 56). But here she is quoting a poem she does not understand. Every experienced reader of Mamluk poetry will realize immediately that this two-line epigram has a point at the end of the second line that consists of a double entendre. Clear as this is, the point of the epigram is not easy to understand in this case. There may be an obscenity behind it. In any case, the humorous nature of the epigram is corroborated by the fact that the poem is the first poem of the section *al-mudā‘abah wa-al-mujūn* in Ibn Nubātah’s collection of epigrams entitled *Al-Qaṭr al-Nubātī*.³⁹ The whole poem, therefore, is nothing but a joke. Whereas I am ignorant of the double meaning of the last words, Jayyusi is even ignorant of her ignorance.

Jayyusi opines that her “study has been primarily devoted to a process of degeneration” (p. 59), but her contribution, with its arguably racist and homophobic overtones, is an example of the degeneration of Arabic studies. The same is true for Muhammad Lutfi al-Yousfi’s article on “Poetic Creativity in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries” (chapter 2, pp. 60–73), which I will pass over in silence not only because it treats the Ottoman period, but also because to claim that the process of decadence started with the advent of Islam is simply absurd, and to publish this rubbish is an academic scandal. These two articles are a slap in the face of every serious scholar in the field of Mamluk and Ottoman poetry. In the blurb (p. i) we read that this book will be “a unique resource for students and scholars of Arabic literature for many years to come.” Let us hope that this threat will not come true!

³⁹ Bibliothèque Nationale MS 2234, fol. 179r–v.

