

Reading With Theory: Selections from Arabic Literature

I. Opening lines from poem by Abu Tammam (d. 845 AD), in which he celebrates a military victory of the Muslims over the Byzantines, despite the dire predictions of the soothsayers who predicated defeat to the Caliph, al-Mu'tasim.

السَّيْفُ أَصْدَقُ إِنْبَاءٍ مِنَ الْكُتُبِ  
بِيضُ الصَّفَائِحِ لِأَسْوَدِ الصَّحَائِفِ فِي  
وَالْعِلْمُ فِي شُهْبِ الْأَرْمَاحِ لِأَمِيعَةٍ  
فِي حَدِّهِ الْحَدُّ بَيْنَ الْجِدِّ وَاللَّعِبِ  
مُنُونِهِنَّ جَلَاءُ الشَّكِّ وَالرَّيْبِ  
بَيْنَ الْخَمِيسَيْنِ لِأَفِي السَّبْعَةِ الشُّهُبِ

Transliteration:

*al-sayfu asdaqunba'an min al-kutubi*                      *fi haddihi al-haddu bayn al-jiddi wa al-la'ibi*  
*bidu al-safa'ihila sudu al-saha'ifi fi*                      *mutunihinna jala'u al-shakki wa al-riyabi*  
*wa al-'ilmu fi shuhubi al-armahi lami'atan*                      *bayna al-khamisayni la fi al-sab'ati al-shuhubi*

Translation (M.M. Badawi, *The Function of Rhetoric in Medieval Arabic Poetry*, 1978, pp. 47-48):

The sword is more truthful in tidings than books

In its edge lies the boundary between earnestness and sport

In the text (i.e. broadside) of bright swords, not of black pages

Is found the removal of doubt and uncertainties

And knowledge comes from the flames of lances flashing

Between the two five-fold armies, not the seven luminaries (i.e. stars).

II. From from W.B. Yeats' (1865-1939), "Byzantium" (1930):

....

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit  
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,  
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,  
Where blood-begotten spirits come

And all complexities of fury leave,  
Dying into a dance,  
An agony of trance,  
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,  
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,  
The golden smithies of the Emperor!  
Marbles of the dancing floor  
Break bitter furies of complexity,  
Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget,  
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

III. Excerpt from Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati's (d. 1999) "The Gypsy Symphony" (1974) - trans. Frangieh (1990), p. 153:

....

The gypsy cried: Wake up you pillars - temples - arches  
O prisms of light in the poem of the future - the prophecy - the voyage!  
He cried: Wake up you myth - the tribe!  
The virgin stretched her hand towards his and clasped it  
They danced together and became a flame  
The rose blazed in her hair.  
The gypsy cried: Burn, you beautiful one!

....

IV. Excerpt from Mahmoud Darwish's "Identity Card" (1964):

Write down:  
I am an Arab  
And my identity card number is fifty thousand  
I have eight children  
And the ninth will come after a summer  
Will you be angry?

Write down:  
I am an Arab  
Employed with fellow workers at a quarry  
I have eight children  
I get them bread  
Garments and books  
from the rocks..  
I do not supplicate charity at your doors  
Nor do I belittle myself at the footsteps of your chamber  
So will you be angry?