

Homework Assignment: Chronology of Arabic Poetry

Below are excerpts or entire texts from the following poetic periods or “schools”:

- a) The pre-Islamic period (before 622 AD)
- b) Abbasid-era Modernism (9th–10th cen. AD)
- c) “Era of Literary Decadence” (period of Ottoman domination through the mid-19th century)
- d) Neo-Classical poetry (late 19th century to early 20th century)
- e) Romantic poetry (early 20th century to mid 20th century)
- f) Symbolist/”Tammuzi School”/Modernism, pre-1967 (1950s)
- g) Modernism, post-1967

Match the following poetic excerpts with the correct letter (a-g) according to the chronology above. Explain your reason for doing so by citing formal and thematic evidence from the texts themselves. Use your readings from Adonis’ *An Introduction to Arab Poetics* and Salma Jayyusi’s “Introduction” from her *Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry* to inform your argument (and provide citations). Be prepared to defend your opinions in class. Please hand in your chronology (1=a, 2=b, for instance) accompanied by a few reasons behind your thinking (typed, separate piece of paper, 2-3 sentences for each poem + citations from secondary texts).

1. _____

Lovely companionship of school, lovely those days.
Lovely the children, so full of fun, life’s reins restrain
Them for they are tender and young.
Smiles of the world they are, the fragrant scent
That breathes from the flowers of its sweet basil.
At sunrise, at sunset to and from school,
Taken like a flock to strange pastures
To an unknown shepherd with an unfamiliar crook,
To a future that binds the fetters of life,
Too strict for them and hard to bear.

Cheerful is the bell that rings for their release,
But not so cheerful when it calls them to work.
Soon that bell with be buried in a clock
Whose wheels always turn for us mortal men
Like a scorpion that lifts its sting to menace the young,
And to inject its poison into the old.

Many a bright scholar at school
has not done so well in the lesson of life.
And gone are his schoolmates, as if he had never
Known them at all, nor yet their company,
Till they all disappear, one flock then another,
and fade like a mirage in the desert.

2. _____

Assurbanipal loved me
He built for my love
A walled city
Thither he drove
The sun in chains
Fire, captives and slaves
And the Euphrates
River of paradise.
Half his heart was imprisoned
In the world-enchanted well
The other half devoured
By Assyrian eagles: thus
He loved me.
He was a storm
In destiny's hand he was
The axe that fell
On the skulls of kings
On cities and fortresses
Because I never could
Reciprocate his love
Trees withered and died
The Euphrates ran dry
The city disappeared
With its fires and ceremonies.
A stony rooster crowed
In place of it
Whenever the iron man
Returned from death kingdom
On his horse of rain and wind.
Through magic cities
Where high priests cast their spells
In their twilit temples
He looks for my face.
At the bottom of the world's
Enchanted well
He awaits my birth:
A gazelle that runs
Behind the chariots of banishment
In Assyria

3. _____

I quarreled with my love,
 my letters
came back marked "Unknown
 At This Address – So Bugger Off."
In solitude and tears,
 I damply prayed to Satan:
"Weeping and insomnia have got me
 down to ninety pounds
Don't you care

that I'm suffering?
 That I'm so depressed
 I've almost run out of lust?
 This obsession's getting in the way
 of my duty to Thee:
 My sinning is half hearted – I feel a fit
 of repentance coming on!
 Yes! Thou hadst better stoke up some love for me
 in that lad's heart (you know how!)
 or I'll retire from Sin: from Poetry, from Song,
 from pickling my veins in wine!
 I'll read the Koran! I'll start
 a Koranic Night School for Adults!
 I'll make the Pilgrimage to Mecca every year
 and accumulate so much virtue that I'll...I'll...
 Well, three days hadn't passed when suddenly
 my sweetheart came crawling back
 Begging for reunion. Was it good?
 It was twice as good as before!
 Ah, joy after sorrow!
 almost the heart splits with it!
 Ah, overdose of joy!...And of course, since then
 I've been on the best of terms
 with the Father of Lies.

4. _____

The daughter of Hittan bin Awf once had dwellings here
 But they are now like the writing embellished by a scribe as the title on some parchment.
 I stayed there seized with shivering and cloth with feverish heat
 as an attack of fever is wont to attack a man stricken with fever at Khaybar.
 Now ash-colored ostriches stay there,
 Moving as though they were bondwomen being urged home at dusk after collecting firewood.
 My two companions were a speedy, swiftly moving she-camel
 and [a sword] showing streaks not disliked by him who holds it
 I have lived a long time with those who acted with youthful folly -
 they were my friends with whom I used to associate.
 I have lived as a companion to those who were difficult and who needed to be reigned in
 and whose actions were feared by their closest friends.
 But now I have paid back on my own behalf what I borrowed from youthful folly,
 and the property in my possession has to-day an acquirer and a keeper.
 Each people of Ma'add has a habitation, a domain to which it can betake itself,
 and so too a neighboring land.
 Lukayz have al-Bahrayn and the whole of the coast;
 and if there should come against them some force from India threatening disaster,
 They fly away on the rumps of untrained camels,
 as though they are wisps of cloud that had shed their rain and were returning to a higher place.
 Bakr have wide tracts of land in Iraq, but, if they wish,
 a barrier, al-Yamama, intervenes as a defense.
 Kalb has the Khabt and the sands of 'Alij
 and can move to the rugged lava beds, there to fight.
 Iyad have moved to the lowlands in the Sawad;
 offering protection to them are Persian lancers seeking out those who would fight them.
 We are a people with no barrier in our land.

We are to be found with the rain; and we are a people who are victorious.
You can see our horses freely pasturing round our tents.
They are as numerous as the goats of the Hijaz, and our enclosures are unable to contain them.
Our horsemen, of Taghlib bint Wa'il, are stout warriors
and there are no mixed groups amongst them.
They rain blows on the leader of their enemy.
Though his helmet is shining, there are streaks of blood on his face.
A people like my people stand out in excellence among those
who are not rulers when crowds of men foregather with kings.
I see every people looking at them,
and the nobles of other tribes fall short of what they all can do.

5. _____

I try the dead lighter.
It is the dark.
And all I want from the world
now is a match
just one
not two!
But the flame
as it quickly expires
like history succeeds only
in scorching the edges
with its final breath.
This is really what happens.
Who knows in what ways
God is liable
to think?
So then:
I want to spend tomorrow morning
as though it were a new *dinar* [the highest monetary unit in many Arab states – Sam Liebhaber]
that lures me into dubious places
where I steal off from instant
to instant, like a wave
of conspiring figures
lashing the walls of secret
passages with the tongues
of their lanterns, till I find
you somewhere there
a creature of music who invites
me to play
all night long

6. _____

Is nothing lovelier than narcissus eyes sharing gazes at the assembly?
Pearls have split above a silk brocade revealing rubies on emerald stems,
Camphor eyelids adorned with saffron eyes, soft to the touch,
Like moons of night corralling black-bound suns atop a supple branch.
In gleaming shadows tear-filled eyes stare like the beholder, intent.
As wind engulfs them, they exude a musky fragrance. O what a scent!
Swaying towards each other, they mimicked two companions drawing near.

The friends fondly embraced at assembly just as narcissi entwined in the meadow.
As you drowse with wine, the narcissus regards you with unsleeping eyes.
Are not narcissi more charming in moonlight than daisy and chamomile at sunrise?
O Cup-bearer, your glances tasked with ensnaring souls,
You've fixed my heart twixt love-kindling looks and scornful words.

7. _____

Light! Light! Let it shine in our hearts, however dark the world may be.
Let it flow forth from our hearts, however somber the horizons may be.
Though I have only a hut in the valley, lit in the night by a meager candle,
my eye reflects in the hut all the light it beholds in the world.
And should the storm blow and uproot my hut as it uproots the trees,
carrying it to the river's mouth,
there is a cave there among the rocks impregnable to the storm,
and there is the light of the sun and stars.
And should the heavens darken and the planets and stars be eclipsed,
still in this human heart is light eternal.
Let light shine in our hearts, however somber the horizons may be.