THE CAREER OF MUṢṬAFA̱ IBRA̱HI̱M 'AJA̱J

by PIER CACHIA

A GIANT OF EGYPTIAN POPULAR LITERATURE

For about a thousand years, perhaps even longer, Arab creativity has found outlets not only in lofty compositions retaining the syntax (if not always the vocabulary) of the language in which the Qur'a̱n was revealed, but also in the coining of proverbs, the singing of songs, the recitation of poems, the telling of tales, and the presentation of rather rudimentary playlets and puppet shows, all in the local dialects. Yet the immensely powerful and constant attachment of Arab intellectuals to their 'classical' language was such that only texts couched in this idiom were deemed worthy of serious attention, and it is these alone that Arab scholars and Orientalists alike habitually call 'Arabic literature' without further qualification. Anything expressed in the colloquial, when not openly scorned, was looked upon as mere entertainment; more often than not the text went unrecorded, the artistry unrecognized, the author unremembered. Modern Arabs have altered their attitude to the language quite substantially in some respects, but – perhaps for the very reason that they are caught up in momentous social and intellectual changes – only a handful of scholars amongst them have begun to give serious attention to this 'popular literature' which they are used to treating with more familiarity than respect.

The character of this literature, and above all the lines of demarcation between it and the literature of the educated élite, are not as easy to determine as may seem at first sight. Its reliance on the colloquial as the medium of expression is probably its most constant trait, but it cannot be identified by this alone since the colloquial has also come to be used in some plays, novels, and

poems which are undoubtedly élitist. It has some of the features associated with European folk-literature in that the bulk of it is orally transmitted by rural artists of little or no formal education, addressing crowds at religious festivals; but that it excludes neither city dwellers nor pen-and-paper compositions is obvious from the career of Muṣtafa̱ Ibra̱hi̱m 'Aja̱j.[1]

About the man we have only scraps of information. His full name was Muṣtafa̱ ibn Ibra̱hi̱m ibn Muṣtafa̱ ibn as-Sayyid aṣ-Ṣari̱f al-Ḥaṣṣa̱b, but he was known as aṣ-Ṣayḫ Muṣtafa̱ Ibra̱hi̱m 'Aja̱j and in at least one of his publications he claimed to be descended from the Prophet through al-Ḥusayn. He appears to have been of Upper Egyptian stock, and to have started his career late in the 19th century, for he has several verse compositions in praise of Khedive 'Abba̱s Ḥilmi̱ II, who ruled Egypt from 1892 to 1914, and another celebrating the war in the Sudan, which ended in 1898.[2] By singers who still remember him, 'Aja̱j is said to have died in or about 1936.

[1] The transliteration used here is intended to reduce the number of footnotes required when texts in the colloquial are transcribed. It is basically Brockelmann's, except that: (a) ج is represented by j, (b) غ is represented by ǵ, and (c) all diacriticals affecting actual pronunciation are placed *under* the letters. Diacriticals are placed above letters only to identify the form in classical Arabic where this differs from the colloquial; they may therefore be ignored by readers who are not interested in such correspondences. The diacriticals in ḋ, d̈, ṡ, s̈, s̆, ṫ, ẗ, and z̈ indicate that the letters are pronounced d, s, t or z in the colloquial, but correspond to ض, ذ , ص, ث , ش , ط , ث, and ذ respectively in the classical; ā, ī, ū indicate that a vowel pronounced short in the colloquial is long in the classical, and ă, ĭ, ŭ signify the opposite; *e* and *o* correspond to the classical diphthongs *ay* and *aw*; but variations in short vowels are so many and affect dictionary hunting so little that they have been disregarded, as has the occasional elision of the glottal stop, which is not unknown in the classical. The Arabist should not find it very difficult to recognize the classical *bihi* in *bi̱h* or *'ada̱buka* in *'az̈a̱bak*. Finally, it should be noted that j and q (ج and ق in the classical) are pronounced g and in some parts of Egypt (mostly the North) and j and g in others (mostly the South).

[2] My information has been culled from obscure itinerant singers, and from six undated booklets published by 'Aja̱j, entitled *al-Fann al-'aji̱b fi̱ muna̱ja̱t aṭ-ṭabi̱b; Ḥusn al-maqa̱l al-kabi̱r fi̱ l-mawa̱wi̱l wa l-azja̱l; Murawwiq al-miza̱j fi̱ l-mawa̱wi̱l l-ibn 'Aja̱j; Mun'is al-'ali̱l fi̱ l-azja̱l wa l-mawa̱wi̱l; Nu̱r aḍ-ḍiya̱ wa l-ibtiha̱j fi̱ fann al-mawa̱liya̱ l-ibn 'Aja̱j;* and *an-Nu̱r al-waḍḍa̱ḥ fi̱ l-mawa̱wi̱l al-mila̱ḥ*. These are so inaccessible to most readers that I see no point in pinpointing the derivation of each statement or quotation.

It is clear that he had a fairly substantial education of a traditional Islamic type; but the claim made for him by some present-day singers that he studied at the Azhar for fifteen years and had the title of *'a̱lim* is probably exaggerated, for he appears to have commanded only modest employment: in most of his booklets he describes himself as a *ka̱tib* – i.e. a clerk, or probably a letter-writer – in Bu̱la̱q, and in one as an employee of the railway yards in Bu̱la̱q. It is not impossible, however, that he was content to hold a humdrum job that ensured his material needs while he sought an outlet for his creativity and ambitions in popular literature.

Such artistic devotion is not unparalleled in a field that offers few glittering prizes. As has already been noted, the intellectuals seldom take these popular arts seriously. Even in rural communities, villagers with a stock of good songs or good stories naturally enjoy the admiration and approbation of their fellows and may make some extra money by performing at local festive occasions; but to earn a living as full-time performers they generally need to take to to the road, going from one local saint's day celebration to another, and being then regarded as little better than vagrants, so that not a few of the 'full-timers' are either gypsies or men who started by running away from home early in life and serving a long apprenticeship with some itinerant singer before branching out on their own.

Either because he was not endowed with a good singing voice or because he was entitled to a higher social status, 'Aja̱j was never a professional performer; but he was a prolific pen-and-paper versifier. He did occasionally compose in classical Arabic and in accordance with the conventions of classical Arabic poetry; but his efforts then were confined to a few lines laden with the rhetorical artifices with which, by the late 19th century, the new modernistic élite was already becoming impatient. Here for example is a couplet in the *basi̱ṭ* metre[3] which combines a pun on the word *ḫa̱l* (which may mean either a beauty spot or a maternal uncle) with a fanciful reference to the canonical law of inheritance:

li-lla̱hi ḫa̱lun 'ala̱ ḫaddi l-ḥabi̱bi lahu̱
  bi l-'a̱ṣiqi̱na kama̱ ṣa̱'a l-hawa̱ 'abatu̱
warratṯuhu̱ ḥabbata l-qalbi l-qati̱li bihi̱
  wa-ka̱na 'ahdi̱ 'anna l-ḫa̱la la̱ yaritu̱

[3]A combination of short and long syllables which gives the following pattern for each hemistich: ⏓ –⏑– / ⏓⏑– / ⏓ –⏑– / ⏑⏑–

Ah for a beauty-spot on the cheek of my beloved which
Plays havoc with lovers, as passions will!
To it I have bequeathed the core of a heart that has died for it,
Although I knew that a maternal uncle is not entitled to inherit.

He was much more prolific, however, in the colloquial, using a variety of post-classical metrical forms, in most of which what is a hemistich in classical poetry forms a complete unit, and in this paper will be called 'a line'. One of these was the *zajal*, which is generally held to have been invented in Andalusia round about the 11th century and which is not restricted to any one rhythm or rhyme scheme but which maintains a strictly regular stanzaic pattern within the one poem, the stanzas being further bound together by having the same closing rhyme. Thus in an exhortatory poem abounding in Qur'anic echoes 'Ajaj apostrophises his own soul in a series of stanzas each consisting of a sestet of alternating rhymes followed by a couplet ending in -im; one of them reads:

yā nafs(i) di d-dunya mata' il gurur
(soul, this world is of the stuff of delusion
mā tbaddilis fiha l-malih bi l-asa
Do not barter what is good in it for sorrow.
hofi 'aleki min 'ažab il-qubur
How I fear for you the punishment of the grave[4]
wi tutraki ya nafs(i) mitnakkasa
Lest you should end, O soul, hanging your head in shame.
ya nafs(i) di l-aqwam nahar il-harur
O soul, the nations on the day of the burning sun
yithasbu fiha r-rijal wi n-nisa
Shall be called to account, both men and women.
ya nafs(i) leh fi 'lik dawaman žamim
O soul, why are your actions always open to rebuke?
mus ha(yi)fah min yom hisabuh 'azim
Do you not fear a day of mighty reckoning?

Another form used by 'Ajaj is the *murabba* or *waw*. The metre is basically ⏑– –/⏑– –/⏑– – and the lines are arranged in quatrains with alternating rhymes; but the rhymes are occasionally elaborated into paronomasias achieved by deliberate distortion of the normal pronunciation. The commonest liberties taken are with the

[4] A reference to the belief that the dead will be interrogated and punished in the grave, by two angels called Munkar and Nakir, during the night immediately following burial.

quality and length of vowels and the gemination of consonants; advantage may even be taken of dialectal variations, 'j' and 'q' being made interchangeable on the strength that both may be pronounced 'g' even though this never happens in the same locality. The result is often a succession of riddles which audiences brought up on such mental gymnastics delight to solve, but which outsiders miss completely, assuming that the native artists are indulging in mere repetition. In the following example – part of a long poem by 'Ajaj praising God and warning man of his accountability – the correct form of the words used in the paronomasias is added, between square brackets, at the end of each line:

ya 'abd(i) 'in kan ḥisabak [ḥisabak]
O man, if your account
ḫafif ris 'addet naji
Is feather-light, you will be let in, saved.
wi rabb il-ḫalayiq ḥisabak [ḥass bik]
The Lord of Creation is aware of you.
illi 'amin bih naji
The believer communes with Him.

w in kan żunubak kef ijbal [jibal]
But if your sins are like mountains,
maskin ya ṭul 'ażabak
Poor man, how long will be your torment!
malik yiqūl lak kef ijbal [aqbal]
An angel will tell you: 'How can I admit [you]?
ṣuf fi jahannam 'azabak ['aza' bik]
Go seek in Hell some solace in you!'

It is in the *mawwal* or *mawaliya*, however, that 'Ajaj displayed the greatest verve. This is a type of metrical composition,[5] usually sung, known to have existed at least since the 12th century A.D. Initially it consisted of a monorhyme quatrain of *basit*,[3] but over the centuries it has been expanded so as to produce fixed form poems with the following rhyme-schemes: aaaxa, aaazzza, or aaabcbcbczzza, the last line in the thirteen-line *mawwal* often having an internal 'z' rhyme as well. Furthermore, the elaboration of all rhyme-words into the paronomasias we have already encountered in the *murabba'* has become the rule rather than the exception.

[5] A fuller exposition of the development of the Egyptian *mawwal* is to appear in the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 8 (1977).

'Ajaj has composed innumerable *mawwals*, especially of the thirteen-line variety, his favourite themes being the praise of God and of the Prophet, somewhat hackneyed reflections on the wickedness of man, the corruption of society, and the vanity of worldly ambitions, and love-songs more often than not in the form of appeals to the physician to alleviate the pangs of unrequited passion. He is unique in that he has also used both the seven-line and the thirteen-line *mawwal* as stanzas in long narratives, mostly recounting stories of the prophets. He was fond of producing strings of *mawwals* related in some formal way, as by having each *mawwal* start with a different letter of the alphabet. The following, which has a rather rare touch of humour, is one of a series of *mawwals* each of which incorporates a popular proverb in its last line:

ya ḥilw[6] ana ḫill (i) ṣadiq fi l-widad jarban [jarribni]
O fair one, I am a true lover; in affection try me.
ḫudni ḥabibak 'ana ṣayif ḥadak jarban [qurb bayyin]
Make me your beloved, for I see in you a clear [disposition to] intimacy.
alfat wi qāl li l-'awazil fī l-waṭan jarban [jarru ben]
He turned round and said: 'Trouble-makers at home have caused a rift'.
fa-qult(i) luh ya ḥabib kuff il-malam w inẓur
I told him: 'Beloved, refrain from reproaching, and consider:
min il-'awazil wi la tiḫsa hasud wi qarib
From among trouble-makers, fear not the envious or the watchers;
w iskun fī bustan ḫali mn il-'ida winẓur [w inzar]
Dwell in a garden void of enemies, where you may be visited.
w aṣrif 'alek mal min 'ibbi kitir wirajib [wara jebi]
I shall spend on you much wealth – out of my bunched shirt, when my pocket has been emptied!
w illi yi 'ārḍak 'aḍāyquh fi l-ma'aš w inẓur [w 'anẓiruh]
Should anyone oppose you, I shall make life difficult for him, threaten him.
w armih 'ala tall(i) 'ali fi jabal wirajib [wara jubb]
Cast him on a high hill, on a mountain beyond a chasm.
alfat wi qāl li maniš 'awiz j udud wi la barr [burr]
He turned round and said: 'I want neither coins nor grain;

[6] It is a convention in Arabic poetry, both classical and popular, to use the masculine gender in references to the beloved.

la 'int aqablak wi la 'andi buhur wi la barr

I shall no longer meet you, nor have I sea or shore [for you to visit]'

fa-qult(i) luh ruh ma fīksi lā her wi la barr [birr]

So I said: 'Go, then! There is in you no goodness or generosity

'umr id-dihan 'al-wabar lam yinfa 'il-jarban

Ointment over fur never cured the mangy!"

For the diffusion of these compositions, 'Ajaj resorted to the printing press. Still in circulation are cheaply printed and undated booklets each consisting of between 40 and 50 pages, all issued by a printer in the vicinity of al-Azhar, called Sa'id 'Ali l-Husuṣi; in my collection are six such booklets, into which are squeezed over 13,000 lines. According to one present-day professional singer, all that the author would get for one such booklet would be an initial payment by the printer of five to fifteen pounds. 'Ajaj seems also to have taught his art to others. It is indeed by word of mouth that many popular songs are transmitted, the learner paying a few piastres for each addition to his stock-in-trade, whether or not his informant is also the originator of the song. I have not been able to ascertain whether 'Ajaj retailed his compositions in this way, but he did have devoted disciples. One Mahmud 'Abd al-Baqi related[7] that he had run away from home at the age of 11 and attached himself to 'Ajaj for three years – presumably paying his way by serving him – then remained in close association with him to the end of his days. He claimed to have memorised the contents of 39 quires, each holding more than 200 *mawwals* by the master; and that after satisfying himself that his pupil was also able to compose, 'Ajaj gave him in 1934 a written certificate declaring him a master of the art and appointing him his deputy 'from Imbabih to Jirja', a stretch of territory spanning six of Upper Egypt's eight provinces.

Such reminiscences by Mahmud 'Abd al-Baqi tally with those of others active in popular literature to this day. Are we to infer from 'Ajaj's own standing, the certificates he delivered, the appointments he made, that he was at the head of some nation-wide hierarchy, perhaps a guild-like organization? If any such existed once, there is no trace of it to-day. But even if the titles he bestowed has prestige value only, they imply that his own reputation was solid

[7]In an interview recorded in 1959 by the Folk Arts Centre in Cairo; I am indebted to the Centre and to its Director Mr. Husni Lutfi for supplying me with much valuable information.

and widespread.

The question arises, however, whether the compositions of this literate, city-based man who reached his widest public through the printed word are genuinely 'popular'? The fact is that – his own background notwithstanding – he addressed himself not to the Western-educated modernistic élite, but to a humbler public comprising not only the rural illiterate masses but also many who had a modicum of education but remained attached to the traditional values of an Islamic society. He wrote in the language this public understood and remained within the artistic conventions it recognized; he even pandered to its prejudices. For example, whereas the trend in modern élitist literature has been to play down religious loyalties that might prove divisive of the nation,[8] 'Ajaj in his version of the story of Abraham persistently calls the idolatrous opponents of the patriarch 'Nazarenes' although he must have known that the term was as anachronistic as it was provocative. In the face of the prestige he had in his lifetime and the fact that he is still remembered with respect by itinerant singers a generation after his death, it would be sheer dogmatism to exclude him from the canon of popular literature.

What is even clearer is that he has no place in the ranks of élitist writers. And it is an indication of the gulf that still separates the two literatures that he figures in no study or anthology purporting to deal with the whole of modern Arabic literature.

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[8] See M. Badawi, 'Islam in Modern Egyptian Literature', and P. Cachia, 'Themes related to Christianity and Judaism in Modern Egyptian Drama and Fiction', in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 2 (1971), pp. 154-194.