Summary

<summary></summary>**Unsī al-Ḥājj** (1937-2014) was a Lebanese poet largely recognized as the pioneer of Arabic prose poems (qaṣīdat al-nathr) thanks to his renowned but controversial first collection, *Lan* (1960), as well as one of the major contributors to the modernist poetry magazine *Shi ͑r* (1957-1970) which is considered a turning point in the history of modern Arabic poetry. He was also a veteran journalist, a job that he carried on for half a century. His name is especially associated (from 1956 to 2003) with the *al-Nahār* newspaper, where he started to work in 1956, and of which he was editor-in-chief from 1992 until his resignation in 2003. He published six collections of poetry, three volumes of chronicles (*Kalimāt*), and two volumes of aphorisms (*Khawātim*). He also translated into Arabic contemporary French poets and several plays performed by Lebanese experimental theatre troupes. He was a major protagonist of Lebanese intellectual life, maintaining a special relationship with celebrated artists such as Fayrūz and the Raḥbānī brothers, and also with famed painters and stage directors. For a whole generation of Arab poets and writers, he is an emblem of Arab modernity and an authentic school of liberal thought.

Main entry

Unsī al-Ḥājj (1937-2014) was a Lebanese poet, writer, journalist, literary critic and translator, widely recognized as the pioneer of Arabic prose poems, and one of the pillars of the modernist magazine *Shi ͑r* (*Poetry*, 1957-1970).

He was born in Beirut on 27 July 1937 to a Christian maronite family (in the village of Qaytūlī, Jazzīn district in Southern Lebanon). He attended Carmelite and Franciscan schools in Beirut, then the Lycée Français and Madrasat al-Ḥikma. He lost his mother when he was seven, causing him a great grief which can be easily caught in his works. His father, Louis al-ḤājjI l étudia chez les Carmélites, les Franciscaines, au Lycée Français et à Madrasat al-Ḥikma. Son père, was editor-in-chief of *al-Nahār* newspaper and managing editor of *Ṣawt al-Ajyāl,* later renamed *al-Majalla* magazine.

From an early age, between 1954 and 1957, he felt a strong impetus to shake the intellectual milieus by introducing an innovative approach to poetry and literary critique. He published essays (including one on the famous Lebanese singer Fayrūz); critiques of Lebanese short novels, and of the traditional Arab conception of literature; biographies, particularly on Western musicians and writers (Fryderyk Chopin, Ludwig van Beethoven, Blaise Pascal, Wolfgang von Goethe, Gabriela Mistral, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Leo Tolstoï, Auguste Renoir); free translations of some extracts of travel literature (Le Conte de Lisle, James Cook, Jacob Roggeveen, Jean Richepin). He also published some of his own short stories and several poetical texts in local literary magazines such as *al-Wurūd*, *al-Adīb*, *al-Ḥikma* and *al-Majalla*.

In 1956, he began working for the culture columns of the newspaper *al-Ḥayāt*. He was nineteen when he published a pamphlet against the rigidity and sterility of *turāth* (the Arab cultural heritage), which compelled him to resign from the pan-Arab newspaper. He then joined the *al-Nahār* daily and worked there for nearly half a century.: de rédacteur de la ru brique « Starting as an editor of the culture column,*», il devient responsable de sa page culturelle, crée son Mulḥ aq littéraire en 1964, supervisewhich he soon* which he soon transformed into a daily cultural page, he created in 1964 al-*Mulḥaq*, the Nahār weekly cultural supplement. From 1984 to 1987, he also supervised in Paris thesa version international e à Paris de 1984 à 1987 , et devient son rédacteur en chef Arab and International editions of *al-Nahār*. From 1992 until 2003, he was *Nahār*’s editor-in-chiefde 1994 à 2003., providing a fresh outlook as well as a big push to modernize the daily, in both content and form.

A al-Nahā r, il rencontre Yūsuf al-Khāl (1917-1987) qui l'associe à l' aventure de s a revue Shi ͑ r (1957-1970) dont il devient rapidement un des piliers comme critique, traducteur (Prévert, Artaud, Breton, Yacine) , poète et éditorialiste . C 'est dans Dā r Majallat Shi ͑ r que paraissent Lan (1960 ), véritable *défense et illustration* du poème en prose arabe (ayant suscité un vif débat littéraire encore actuel) , et dans son sillage, al-ra's al-maqṭū ͑ (1963) .In 1956-7, he was approached by Yūsuf al-Khāl (1917-87) who convinced him to collaborate in his modernist magazine *Shi ͑r* (which ran from winter 1957 to autumn 1970, with an interruption in summer 1964 and resumption in winter 1967). Particularly attracted by the renewal of writing as well as a greater freedom of thought, which were the credo of Yūsuf al-Khāl, he very soon became one of *Shi ͑ r*’s pillars and probably its most radical protagonist, thanks to a prolific activity as a critic (fourteen essays on contemporary Arab literature), translator (from French: Jacques Prévert, Antonin Artaud, André Breton, and Kateb Yacine), poet (more than forty innovative poems), editorialist (two striking editorials) and editorial secretary.

Dār Majallat Shi ͑r (the Shi ͑r publishing house created by Yūsuf al-Khāl in 1958) published and endorsed his first two iconoclastic collections: *Lan* (*Won’t*, 1960), and *al-Ra's al-maqṭū ͑* (*The Severed Head*, 1963). Both were written in the same vein, characterized by hermeticism and provocation, but the first one, *Lan*, raised a heated literary debate in the 1960s. *Lan*’s introduction was considered as both a defence and an illustration of Arabic prose poems, while its ground-breaking and inventive poems were for Unsī al-Ḥājj what *Les Fleurs du Mal* was for Charles Baudelaire: modernity put into practice. This collection represents a key turning point in modern Arabic poetry: detaiing intimate sorrows instead of focusing on national or pan-Arab causes in a context marked by a political and ideological commitment ; adopting the French prose-poem frame when the majority of Arab poets defended a conventional form of Arab poetry based on archaic Arabic prosody. Indeed, Unsī al-Ḥājj declared that ‘the subversion is vital and sacred’ on both the thematic and formal levels.

Starting with the third collection, *Māḍī l-ayyām al-ātiya* (*The Past of Days to Come*, 1965), Unsī al-Ḥājj revealed an innovative lyricism, intentionally deferred, which clearly broke with the revolt and subversion of the first collections. This turnaround significantly marked also the fourth collection, *Mādhā ṣana ͑ta bi-l-dhahab mādhā fa ͑alta bi-l-warda* (*What Have You Made with the Gold, What Have You Done with the Rose*, 1970), a book of love-passion. The turnaround reached its acme in the fifth collection, *al-Rasūla bi-sha ͑rihā l-ṭawīl ḥattā l-yanābī ͑* (*The Messenger with her Long Hair Reaching the Wellsprings*, 1975), a masterpiece of lyricism, a kind of *Canticle of Canticles* (that Unsī al-Ḥājj reedited and introduced in a breathtaking new Arabic version in 1967).

After a long silence on account of the Lebanese civil war, the five collections of Unsī al-Ḥājj were reissued in 1994 by Dār al-Jadīd, producing a resounding impact on the Arab literary landscape, and reigniting the debate about *Lan* and Arabic prose poems. In the same year, a sixth collection, *al-Walīma* (*The Banquet*), was published, in which his writing was at the same time expressed tormenting retrospection and staged a *mise en abyme* of poetic writing, both helping to create a unique poetic art.

On the artistic level, Unsī al-Ḥājj contributed during the 1960s to the development of the vanguard theatre movement in Lebanon, with translations of plays by William Shakespeare, Eugene Ionesco, Albert Camus, Bertolt Brecht, Fernando Arrabal or Friedrich Dürrenmatt, which were staged by Baalbak Troup, Roger Assaf, Berge Vaslian, Nidal al-Ashkar, Shakib Khoury, or Mounir Abou Debs, among others. He had a special relationship with Lebanese diva Fayrūz and the Raḥbānī brothers, and several painters who portrayed him or illustrated his poems (Paul Guiragossian, Rafic Charaf, Mahmoud al-Zibawi and Fadi Barrage among others).

En totale rupture avec la conception classique de la poésie arabe, son écriture déploie un univers imaginaire singulier qui lui vaut, tour à tour, les qualificatifs de iblīs al-ḥadātha et de rasūl al-ḥubb , et qui se reflète également dans ses célèbres chroniquesBreaking Breaking away from the traditional conception of Arabic literature, his poetry unveils a peerless imaginary universe, celebrating refusal, revolt, freedom and love: an approach that earned him among critics the epithets of *iblīs al-ḥadātha* (demon of modernity), and *rasūl al-ḥubb* (prophet of love). He ratified the inconsistency implied by these epithets, declaring: ‘The harmony of my hyphenated words distinguishes me.’ His poetry, indeed, reveals an aesthetics all its own, reflected also in his eagerly awaited columns in literature, arts, social issues and politics, *Kalimāt kalimāt kalimāt* (*Words, words, words*, published in *al-Mulḥaq* and in *al-Nahār* newspaper between 1964 and 1987, and collected in three volumes by Dār al-Nahār, 1987-8chez Dār al-Nahā r), et dans ses aphorismes, Khawātim (réunis dans deux volumes chez Dār al-Rayyis , 1991 et 1997 ), qu'il poursuivit de 2003 à 2014 tous les samedis dans le journal al-Akhbār, duquel il fut conseil ler de rédaction.), and also in his philosophical meditations and aphorisms, *Khawātim* *1* and *2* (published in *al-Nāqid* magazine in the 1990s, and collected in two volumes by Dar el-Rayyes, respectively 1991-7) ; while *Khawātim 3* were published serially every Saturday from 2006 to 2014, in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbār*.

At his A sa mort le 18 février 2014 à Beyrouth, c'est une figure emblématique de la modernité poétique arabe qui s'éteint, et un pilier de la vie intellectuelle libanaise à laquelle il léga en outre des traductions arabes de pièces de Shakespeare, Ionesco, Camus ou Brecht, mises en scènes par Roger Assaf , Berge Vaslian et Nidal al-Ashk ar.WiWHis death in Beirut on 18 February 2014, the Arab world lost an emblem of modernity, while Lebanese intellectual life lost one of its major protagonists, one who embodied an authentic school of liberal thought for a whole generation of poets and writers.

**Selected list of works**

Poetry collections

*Lan* لن *(Won’t)*, Dār al-Jadīd, Beirut, 3th edition, 1994.

*Al-ra’s al-maqṭū ͑* الرأس المقطوع (The Severed Head), Dār al-Jadīd, Beirut, 3th edition, 1994.

*Māḍī l-ayyām al-ātiya* ماضي الأيام الآتية (The Past of Forthcoming Days), Dār al-Jadīd, Beirut, 2nd edition, 1994.

*Mādhā ṣana ͑ta bi-l-dhahab mādhā fa ͑alta bi-l-warda* ماذا صنعت بالذهب ماذا فعلت بالوردة(What have you made with gold, what have you done with the rose)*,* Dār al-Jadīd, Beirut, 2nd edition, 1994.

*Al-rasūla bi-sha ͑rihā l-ṭawīl ḥattā l-yanābī ͑* الرسولة بشعرها الطويل حتى الينابيع(The Messenger with hair long to the springs)*,* Dār al-Jadīd, Beirut, 2nd edition, 1994.

*Al-walīma* الوليمة(The Banquet), Riad el-Rayyes Books, London, 1994.

Miscellaneous

*Ghuyūm*غيوم (Clouds), long poem published in the magazine *al-Qaṣīda*, n°1, autumn 1999, London, pp5-15

*Nashīd al-anāshīd* نشيد الأناشيد(*Canticle of canticles*), edited and introduced by Unsī al-Ḥājj, Dār al-Nahār li-Nashr, Beirut, 1967

Essays collections

*Kalimāt, kalimāt, kalimāt* كلمات كلمات كلمات *(*Words, words, words), 3 volumes, Dār al-Nahār li-l-nashr, Beirut, 1987-8.

*Khawātim 1* خواتم*,* Riad el-Rayyes Books, London, 1991.

*Khawātim 2* خواتم*,* Riad el-Rayyes Books, London-Beirut, 1997.

Translated works

Ounsi El Hage, *La messagère aux cheveux longs jusqu’aux sources, et autres poèmes*, Sindbad/Actes Sud, l’Orient des livres, Paris, 2015.

Ounsi El Hage, *Eternité volante* (anthologie), Actes Sud, Paris 1997 ;

Unsi Al-Hadj, *Die Liebe und der Wolf. Die Liebe und die* (anthologie Deutsch-Arabisch), Schiler Verlag 1998 ;

Further Reading

Dounia Badini, *Une figure de la modernité poétique libanaise : Ounsi el-Hage*, coll. ‘‘Sources-cibles’’, ed. Univ. Saint-Joseph, Beirut 2007;

Dounia Badini, *La revue Shi ͑r/Poésie et la modernité poétique arabe. Beyrouth (1957-1970)*, Actes Sud, Paris 2009 ;

ʿAbd al-Karīm Ḥasan, *Qaṣīdat al-nathr wa-intāj al-dalāla: Unsī al-Ḥājj namūdhajan* قصيدة النثر وإنتاج الدلالة: أنسي الحاج نموذجا, Dar al-Saqi 2008.