**Al-Bayati, Abdul-Wahab (1926-1999)**

SUMMARY

Iraqi poet Abdul-Wahab Al-Bayati was one of the foremost pioneers of Arabic poetry during the twentieth century. His poetry was revolutionary in poetic form and political content. A key figure in the Iraqi Free Verse Movement, alongside Nazik Al-Malaika (1923-2007) and Badr Shakri Al-Sayyab (1925-1926), Al-Bayati defied the formal constraints of traditional Arabic poetry by experimenting with innovative rhyme schemes and metric patterns. His poems articulate a radical leftist commitment to revolutionary change across the Arab World. Such political views forced Al-Bayati to leave Iraq in 1955 and live more than half his life in exile, moving between various Arab and European countries. Over the rest of his life he maintained a difficult relationship with his homeland, an experience that had a major influence on his writing. Al-Bayati published more than twenty collections of poetry and a three-act play. He died of natural causes in Damascus.

Photograph of Abdul-Wahab Al-Bayati. Taken from:

<http://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/225/abdel-wahab-al-bayati/>

MAIN ENTRY

Abdul-Wahab Al-Bayati was born in Baghdad. Throughout his life his writing was shaped by a turbulent relationship with his homeland and its shifting socio-political structures. He graduated from the Teacher’s College at Baghdad University in 1950 with a degree in Arabic Language and Literature. In the same year he started work as a teacher and published his first collection of poetry *Mala’ika wa Shayatin* (*Angels and Devils*). This collection, considered indicative of a romantic phase in al-Bayati’s poetry during which he largely adhered to the conventions of traditional Arabic poetry, produced a muted reception. In the early 1950s Al-Bayati also worked as a contributing editor to the popular newly founded cultural magazine *Al-Thaqafa Al-Jadida* (*The New Culture*), but the political content of the magazine meant it was quickly closed down. Al-Bayati was dismissed from his teaching position and briefly imprisoned. Upon his release, he published his second collection of poetry, *Abariq Muhashshamah* (*Broken Pitchers*) (1954) which was innovative in its use of the *taf’ila* (free verse) form. Many point to this collection as a key text in the development of a modernist movement in Arabic poetry, alongside the work of Nazik Al-Malaika and Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab. The collection was also radical in its leftist political content. The revolutionary nature of al-Bayati’s political writing, and his anti-government activity, forced him to flee Iraq in 1955, leaving his wife and family.

Al-Bayati remained in exile until 1958. During this period, while he was moving between Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, he published two collections of poetry, *Al-Majd lil-Atfal wa al-Zaytun* (*Glory to Children and Olives*) (1956) and *Ash’ar fi al-Manfa* (*Poems in Exile*) (1957). Both are examples of a social realist phase in Al-Bayati’s work and are representative of a wider movement in Arabic poetry during the 1950s, referred to as *Adab al-Muqawamah* (resistance literature). This literary movement sought to assert an Arab identity at a historical moment when Arab states were collectively threatened by a series of political events, most notably their defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The poetry produced by Al-Bayati during these years reflects upon his own experience of exile, his sympathy with the Palestinian struggle and the political role of a poet to resist oppression and social injustice.

After the 1958 revolution in Iraq, Al-Bayati returned to Baghdad and worked for the Ministry of Education. A year later he was appointed Iraqi cultural attaché to Moscow and remained in this post for two years before leaving to teach at the Asian Peoples’ University in Moscow. Al-Bayati moved to Cairo in 1964 and the following year published his ninth collection of poetry, *Sifr al-Faqr wa al-Thawra* (*The Book of Poverty and Revolution*) (1965). This collection is identified by many as the peak of his poetic career. Here, Al-Bayati developed upon his use of poetic masks in earlier poems and employed a range of historical personas to reflect upon contemporary politics within the Arab World. This literary device allowed him to articulate his revolutionary political views indirectly, avoiding an overtly didactic role as poet.

The collection also inaugurated an increasingly existentialist phase in Al-Bayati’s writing.

Al-Bayati returned to Iraq after the 1968 coup when the socialist Ba’ath party assumed control but was soon forced to leave again when threatened by a political campaign against liberals. In 1972 he returned to receive honours from the new government and in 1980 was appointed Iraqi cultural attaché to Madrid by Saddam Hussein. He left this position following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, after which he spent his final years in Jordan and Syria. In 1995 Al-Bayati’s Iraqi citizenship was revoked after he attended a cultural festival in Saudi Arabia. During these years, Al-Bayati continued to write and publish poetry. Collections such as *Qasaid hubb ala Bawwabat al-Alam al-Sab* (*Love Poems on the Seven Gates of the World*) (1971), *Qamar Shiraz* (*The Moon of Shiraz*) (1976), and *Bustan Aisha* (*Aisha’s Orchard*) (1989), indicate Al-Bayati’s increased concern in his later life with themes of Sufism.

In addition to his poetry Al-Bayati wrote a three act play, *Muhakamah fi Nisabur* (*A Trial in Nishapur*) (1963), which, although not particularly successful, offers an interesting example of his use of poetic masks in its depiction of Umar al-Khayyam. He also published a book of prose, *Tajribati al-Shi’riyyah* (*My Poetic Experience*) (1968), a literary biography, *Kuntu Ashku ila l-Hajar* (*I Complained to the Stone*) (1993) and a an autobiography, *Yanabi al-Shams* (*Springs of the Sun*) (1999). His work has been translated into various languages and has received international acclaim.

**Selected List of Works**

**Poetry**

*Mala’ika wa shayatin* (1950)

*Abariq muhashshamah* (1954)

*Al-Majd lil-atfal wa al-zaytun* (1956)

*Ash’ar fi al-manfa* (1957)

*Sifr al-faqr wa al-thawra* (1965)

*Al mawt fi al hayat* (1968)

*Qasaid hubb ala Bawwabat al-alam al-sab* (1971)

*Qamar Shiraz* (1976)

*Bustan Aisha* (1989)

*Al-Bahr ba’id asma’uh yatanahhud* (1998)

**Collections of Poetry Translated into English**

*Lilies and Death* (1972) (translated by Mohammed B. Alwan)

*The Singer and the Moon* (1976) (translated by Abdullah al-Udhari)

*Love Under Rain* (1985) (translated by Desmond Stewart and George Masri)

*Love, Death, and Exile* (1990) (translated by Bassam K. Frangieh)

**Plays**

*Muhakamah fi Nisabur* (1963)

**Prose**

*Tajribati al-shi’riyyah* (1968)

*Kuntu ashku ila l-hajar* (1993)

*Yanabi al-shams* (1999)

**Further Reading**

Stewart, Desmond (1976), *Poet of Iraq, Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati: An Introductory Essay with Translations*, London: Gazelle Publications.