CRITICISM IN TRANSLATION

Poetic Imagination among the Arabs

ABŪ AL-QĀSIM AL-SHĀBBĪ

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY DIMA NASSER

Introduction

It is difficult to categorize a figure as enigmatic as Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī (1909–34). In the early 1900s, the Tunisian poet engaged both evolving anticolonial, liberationist thought and European philosophical and poetic influences. He was a language purist and a fierce defender of classical prosody. Yet he considered himself a visionary modernizer, distinct from traditionalists in the Arabic literary sphere (Omri 294; Ostle 2). He was shaped by an Islamic education at the Zaytūna but was also influenced by French and English Romanticism, which he encountered in translation through the Sādiqiyya and Khaldūniyya libraries (Ostle 1–2).[1] His brief life and works, which include poems, criticism, letters, lectures, and private memoirs, suggest an intellectual dynamism and interdisciplinary awareness that deserve further critical attention. He is remembered today for revolutionary poetry that combines romantic imagery with a progressive vision of Tunisian life and literature (Husni). Many of his poems have circulated past his lifetime—especially "Irādat al-ḥayāt" (1933; "The Will to Life") and "Ila ṭughāt al-ʿālam" (1934; "To the Tyrants of the World"), the lines of which were chanted and inscribed on signs and walls during the 2010–12 Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings.

Less attention is paid to his critical writings, especially the 1929 collection of essays he published in book form titled الخيال الشعري عند العرب (*al-Khayāl al-shiʿrī ʿind al-ʿarab*; *Poetic Imagination among the Arabs*). Although al-Shābbī was well-known in Tunis's poetry circles, *al-Khayāl* was his only book published during his lifetime. The original lectures had provoked his audience two years prior (Omri 294–95; Ostle 2). In them, he delivered a radical polemic against the Arabo-Islamic literary tradition, centering on a perceived lack of imagination. Subsequent lectures assessed this "poetic imagination in relation to Arab mythology, Arab attitudes to nature, to women and to narrative literature, [ending] with a general discussion of Arabic literature and (predictably, for the period) the Arab spirit or Arab mind" (Badawi 158). Situated between the two World Wars, this castigating work must be read relative to a rising wave

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of Islamic reform during the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century *nahḍa*. These turn-of-the-century modernization movements sought to reconcile inherited Islamic traditions, seen as archaic and ineffectual, with economic and sociopolitical problems brought on by colonialism and modernity (Sharabi). M. M. Badawi's remark on intellectuals from this period "predictably" gesturing at a quintessential Arab spirit or mind is key: it positions al-Shābbī among what Hisham Sharabi describes as "articulate urban Arab intellectuals," whose formative attachments to indoctrinated Islamic attitudes and values were "now compounded with an intellectual awareness sufficient to [be freed] from the bonds of popular piety" (17). While it was common among an earlier generation of Arab intellectuals to gain exposure to European culture by traveling to European cities, this was not the case with al-Shābbī. Although well-traveled within Tunisia, he never journeyed beyond the borders of the French protectorate. Instead, his interdisciplinary formation was the product of confrontations between institutional Islam and rapidly infiltrating colonial policies. Despite his critiques, al-Shābbī offers an insightful history of metaphor and imagery in the Arabic poetic tradition in the first essay, "The Imagination," which suggests the richness within what he calls "the poetic imagination."

Local traditionalists nonetheless faulted al-Shābbī's heavy indebtedness to Western philosophies, lack of scholarly references, intensely personal stakes, and an underdeveloped social consciousness. These attacks, however, do not detract from the compelling nature of his arguments and the captivating rhetoric of his prose, which lend this work the distinct, enduring tone of a manifesto. Having internalized his shortcomings, al-Shābbī relates in his prefatory author's note his willingness to further substantiate his opinions. But his short life would soon end, making this publication even more valuable.[2] It is unfair to accuse *Poetic Imagination among the Arabs* of being an immature study of Arabic poetry, primarily because it never claimed to be a study of it. More recent scholarship has suggested his manifesto was meant as a provocative statement about traditional approaches to Islam, poetry, and Tunisian society in the late 1920s, specifically targeting the perceived stagnation of Zaytunian pedagogy (Husni 82).[3] Although his poetry remains relevant in twenty-first-century social movements, translations are sparse, excluding his prose from the realm of world literature and criticism. The translation of his first essay into English offers insight into the poet's critical formation.[4] His visionary writing enriches our understanding of his complex position vis-à-vis Tunisia and the Arab world's seething anticolonial sentiments at the brink of World War II. It grants us insight into the intellectual history of Arab nationalist thought, allowing us to juxtapose al-Shābbī's vision with those of his contemporaries, thereby offering a nuanced picture of various standpoints among public intellectuals across emerging Arab nations. His contribution to discourses on the poetic imagination situates him within a vast constellation of Arab literary innovators. It constructs an important bridge between North Africa and the Arab East for studies of poetic modernisms, which have focused disproportionately on mid-century movements in Beirut and Baghdad (Khouri; Thompson 219–20). Situated among a transgenerational cadre of experimentalists that includes Jubrān, Lewīs ʿAwaḍ, Adunīs, Nāzik al-Malā'ika, and Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, al-Shābbī's poetic and cultural criticism secures his place within a transnational genealogy of innovators in modern Arabic poetry and critical thought.

Notes

1. The Khaldūniyya Institute, established in 1896, supplemented Zaytunian education. The Sādiqiyya Association, established in 1905, impacted the future political elite of Tunisia.

2. After being diagnosed with a heart condition, al-Shābbī vigorously set about collecting and publishing his works through platforms like *Apollo* (Omri 297). Even so, his belated introduction to Cairo only posthumously propelled his work to a larger readership.

3. Al-Shābbī was active in forming both a progressive Muslim youth organization and the Sādiqiyya Ancients literary society. His ideas on educational reform and literary freedom largely intersected with growing political movements against French occupation and Islamic stagnation.

4. Ronak Husni recently translated al-Shābbī's book into English (*Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī's Arab Poetic Imagination: A Critical Evaluation and Translation*, Routledge, 2025).

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Poetic Imagination among the Arabs

We now demand a life
that is robust, bright, full of purpose
and youth. Let he who asks for life
revere the future lying at its heart . . .
And he who reveres the past and forgoes the
future is among death's children and the
dwellers
of miserable graves.

Author's Note

This book transcribes the talk I gave in the Khaldūniyya Hall on the twentieth of Shaʿbān last year. I have handed it over for printing without any edits, additions, or omissions, except for some commentary explaining what might be mispronounced or misunderstood, so that the reader might understand what I intend to say or suggest. I know that many of the opinions in this book need explanation, elucidation, and justification, and perhaps more thorough examination and research, and I may revisit them in the near future should the fates permit. But for now, I believe this printing fulfills the wishes of many of my young, enlightened brothers. With this book, I address their youthful enthusiasm and call upon them to lead Tunisian literature along life's beautiful, rosy path.

Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī

The Imagination:[a] Its Emergence; How It Was Initially Understood; Its Categorization

Noble gentlemen,

The literary club at the Sādiqiyya Association asked me to speak about the Arab imagination; I obliged because I have always been drawn to the subject. And so I stand before you today, ready to deliver my address.

Before I outline the direction of this pursuit, I want to clarify my opinion on the imagination's emergence, categorization, and perception.

You may share or disagree with my opinion on the imagination. I do not know whether I alone have arrived at such an opinion or others have considered it before. But what I do know is this: I firmly believe in the soundness of my opinion and its undeniable truth. Such faith and conviction have led me to this discourse.

This opinion centers on three main points that shall clarify the end. First, for man, the imagination is as essential, inevitable, and indispensable as are light, air, water, and the sky. It is necessary for his soul, heart, mind, and emotion so long as life and humanity persist because the imagination emerges in the human spirit as it inhabits the world; it is motivated by instincts that drive human tendencies and desires. The imagination is alive and eternal; it does not and cannot fade unless the world perishes and the days scatter about in a valley of void.

Second, when the first man[1b] used the imagination in his sentences and compositions, it did not appear as figurative language. Instead, he used his imagination with complete confidence, undisturbed by doubts of having uttered false truths. When he said, for instance, "the wind has died" or "the night has fallen," he had no metaphorical meaning in mind. He, in fact, believed the wind had died and the night had come, brought on by a thousand feet and wings. This is demonstrated in ancient myths, in which wind and night are two of many powerful deities. Such was the ancients' way with natural phenomena: they blew into them the stuff of life at will. Depending on the nature of those phenomena, people shared adversities and bounties, partook in the joys and sadness of existence—as it were—held rituals and performed obligations for the gods, and immortalized them. Countless were the gods of man. This [polytheism] was the surest sign that man was indeed pious, for he always thirsted for that primary source of life from which humanity, over centuries, drank waters both clear and muddy. Acquiring merely a sip settled his spirit; his conscience rested at ease.

You have thus witnessed the extraordinary effort man has exerted to quench his own thirst, thinking it an undoubtable eternal truth. Would he have trusted it otherwise and held rituals in its reverence had he known it was only the ornament of a drifting imaginary or inspiration drawn from reckless illusions?

The third point is that the imagination can be categorized under two kinds: man uses one kind to understand universal phenomena and expressions of life and the other to manifest that which lies within and cannot be expressed in common speech. This second kind begets another form that civilization cultivated in the human spirit, raising man from who he once was. This form is the rhetorical imagination, which serves to beautify and stylize expression. The first kind, in my view, is the initial of the two to originate in the spirit. When man took to studying his surroundings, his heart swelled with meaning and he began to express it with words and constructions. And when he had practiced much of life's discourses, uncovered several corners of time, and possessed enough speechmaking to express what he wanted, he was driven toward eloquence and compelling style. This bore a new kind of imagination, the kind man deliberately chose, be it allegory, metaphor, simile, or other devices in the art of discourse and speechmaking.

To elucidate further, I will add: man is a poet by nature. Poetry resides in his constitution, and eloquence finds its melody within his soul. For what person is not excited by a captivating view and a magnificent sight? or is not set alight by beauty in any of its forms?

However, people vary in the degree to which they perceive and feel beauty depending on the potency or weakness of their perceptive instinct. For some, it is so weak that it nears death, because their spirit has been overtaken by a different instinct that fills every crevice. For others, this instinct is so powerful that it rebels and conquers all other competing ones. The human spirit is a vast space of clamoring impulses, conflicting proclivities, and desires. Sensations and feelings vary by the instinct's potency or feebleness, which is why timeless poetry might burst forth from some hearts and minds, while others discharge nothing but pus. Some spirits reveal a powerful, tempestuous genius, while others breed only a submissive, lethargic foolishness.

Potency or feebleness is often born from conditions and events: tears of despair might awaken one thousand dormant emotions; a wistful smile might stir the stillness of existence; a magnificent view might give life to a lasting genius; or a single thought might break the constitution of the most resolute hearts. Man fell to earth instilled with such poetic instinct. It constitutes both a beautiful hope that might illuminate his way and guide his path in life and a dark disappointment that might plunge him into the depths of despair and torture him in burning pain.

Man fell to earth with nothing but his senses, spirit, heart, and emotions. His mind still slumbered in life's cradle. He had only the mysterious enigmas and occluded meanings of nature and the universe, wrapped in a cloak of hazy memories and flung far into the heart's corners. If he tried to grasp them, they would vanish like ghosts in the night while he drifted among them like a dazed sleeper in

a nocturnal dream, his visions cheering and saddening him, frightening and haunting him. He would have not a strong, powerful mind that drinks from life's gushing river to quicken his resolve but instead a weak, feeble, and decrepit mind, neither wise nor educated in the art of discourse.

Man was never so tame and fainthearted as to regard his surroundings with indifference and acquiesce to mute ignorance and miserable silence. Instead, he was emotionally potent and imaginatively stimulated. He went about analyzing phenomena within the universe in whatever manner poetry would allow. With his joyful imagination and vibrant emotion, he took to interpreting the expressions of nature without getting lost in illusions or uncertainty. He was confident, rather, that he had indeed arrived at the heart of truth. From this, the seeds of early religious myth sprouted within the human spirit and the heart's depths created pagan beliefs, like a fetus growing in the womb. Such were the origins of imagination in ancient thought before it was cultivated by civilization.

At times, words would fail man when expressing the thoughts and nascent emotions that swelled within him. He would make the imagination a vehicle for his purposes, a vessel for his meanings, without realizing that he used this phrase or that word in a context different from what had been intended—as the scholars of eloquence say. If I wished to list the discourse that has fallen under this effect, time would run out before my talk could end. I shall, however, make do with a few phrases, which I produce as evidence for my claim: "night has come," "the air has died down," and "the mountain's daughter." The last is used among the Arabs to mean "echo," but I believe this expression existed in Arabic before "echo," because imaginary meanings are closer to the early human mind than literal ones. I also believe that the originator of this phrase thought the echoed voice belonged to a female mountain jinn and named it thus. This was known among the ancient Arabs who lived thousands of centuries ago, and we have already proven that this imagination was regarded as truth, not illusion, in its early emergence. Even today, I know of people living in the desert who, when asked about the echo, would answer in earnest that it is a demon who mocks and ridicules the sons of Adam. And I know those living in the south who call the echo by the word *ḥudaīdān*, and, should you ask them about it, they would tell you that it is a demon who haunts the mountains and valleys.

The same is true for the word *al-rīḥ* ["wind"]. I have no doubt its origin was *al-rūḥ* ["soul"] and that its originator thought the wind was an arrogant, hidden soul. Then, subject to distortion over time, it became *al-rīḥ*, which also suggests they pluralized *arwāḥ* ["souls"] from *al-rūḥ*. This feminized its meaning as it feminized the soul and all the words related to wind. Do you not see the great resemblance between the synonyms of wind and soul? Just as they say *al-nasma* ["breeze"] and *al-nasīm* ["gentle wind"], they also say *al-nafas* ["breath"] and *al-nafs* ["spirit"].[c] This is familiar in ancient thought: in Norse mythology, the tempest is a powerful god they call "Ægir" who, Thomas Carlyle said, sailors in the south of England still heed. If they feel a storm stirring, they say: "Beware! Ægir is coming."

People are compelled toward the imagination by nature and instinctively need it. From it stems the nourishment of soul, heart, tongue, and mind. In the past, this necessity made it real, not illusory. People began to distinguish the imagination from truth only after their views towards life evolved. They came to realize that night and day, storms and seas, are neither spirits nor gods but manifestations of a divine order that governs everything. And yet, despite this, the imagination is still necessary. Even if man now resorts to his mind, the seat of logic, and can express his sentiments, he nonetheless appeals to emotion and always will, for emotion is the spirit's primary element. Resorting to emotion inevitably motivates him to call on the imagination because emotion, gentlemen, is a beautiful river that has been flowing through humanity's heart since ancient times, singing to its joys and sorrows, extolling its appetites and desires, and brimming with thoughts and affections, chaos and stillness. And from this beautiful river are born nymphs and pearls of thought, just as Venus was born of the sea's brilliant waves. On its banks, they sing to

humans the songs of life, muse upon its existence, ponder what life and death may bring, and contemplate the meaning of mortality and eternity.

Indeed! Despite everything, people still need the imagination, for no matter how powerful and lively language is, it does not, and will not, lift its heavy burden without the imagination. This burden holds the thoughts and affections of people's souls, the dreams and pains of their hearts, and all of the impressions, affections, and emotions of life. Language cannot undertake this heavy task unless the imagination lends it power that it would not have found otherwise.

How can we expect this stagnant language, originating from a cold, lifeless material, to carry between its folds the sacred flame that burns in all its light, radiance, and splendor from the furthest reaches of the immortal spirit?

Who among you wishes to hear angels' songs from a mute rock? Would you not prefer to play celestial melodies with a reed pipe?

No matter how sophisticated and progressive it might be, language is small and helpless in the face of this heavenly charge, for it is limited and finite, whereas the spirit is vast, endless, and everlasting. Language will always need the imagination because it is an eternal treasure that lends language life, vigor, and youth. But no matter what language receives from the imagination, it will remain incapable of satisfying the spirit's depth, breadth, and light. I have already stated that, in my view, the imagination can be categorized under two kinds, the first of which man adopted not for style and ornament but to understand the spirit's secrets and mysteries of existence. This is the kind of imagination from which previews of philosophy emerged. In its wake we hear the rumblings of a much larger life, exploding with full force and violence: the branch of art in which philosophy and poetry merge, in which thought and imagination intertwine. Man initially adopted the second kind of imagination to express himself when he could not do so with the naked truth. This kind has evolved over time to become the one we now know, about which books on eloquence have been written. I want to now call the first kind *aesthetic imagination* because man channels his aesthetic views through it onto the larger world. I also call it *poetic imagination* because it extends its roots into the furthest depths of emotion. As for the second kind, I shall name it *structural imagination* because it was cast from rhetorical structures. I also call it *allegorical imagination* because it is allegorical in both the contemporary sense and the ancient one.

After saying this, how shall I approach imagination among the Arabs? Shall I probe the aesthetic imagination or the structural one? Shall I approach it from a purely structural standpoint, which deals with allegory, metaphor, simile, and the extent of Arab skills in such discourse? Or shall I analyze allegory, metaphor, and simile from another perspective, namely their development over the ages, tracing the course of their emergence and the gradual evolution of their beauty and accuracy? or how the influence of poets and writers refined imagery and how this was colored by the changing shades of time?

I do not wish to consider the structural imagination from either perspective because such discourse has its own aficionados, and I am not one of them. Thank God; each of its aspects is stagnant and dry, in my opinion, and possesses neither wealth nor beauty. I take no comfort in and do not relish these kinds of brittle discussions. Furthermore, we cannot locate the nation's sentiments or its people's emotions within such discourse. Nor can we feel its pulse beating to the rhythm of man's spirit. Nor can we detect the extent to which it senses life's currents as a dynamic being. What use could there be for such an unstimulating discussion?

Instead, I wish to explore the imagination from a perspective that reveals the beautiful river that is humanity, which begins at the mortal limit, the soul, and ends at the limit of life, God. I wish to explore the imagination among the Arabs from the point where the waves of time flow with force and resolve. A point where the howling winds of existence are rattling and untamed. A point where the light and darkness of the universe, the dawns and dusks of life, flow in succession. That form of imagination that inspires, lives, feels, makes do, and thinks. In short, I wish to explore what I have

called the poetic or aesthetic imagination among the Arabs.

Imagination in this sense and in this shade is the one I wish to touch on today with respect to Arab intellectual life. I wish to begin with the grand spiritual heritage and powerful literary fortune our forefathers have left behind, so that we may appreciate its potency and production. For this reason, I will not limit my exploration to what poetry and prose the Arabs have left behind. Instead, I shall surpass these to include another form that, like poetry, is one of the imagination's tempting images among the many vibrant shades of human thought. It might not be an under- or overstatement to say this form of imagination is even more suggestive than poetry. This is myth. It carries more connotations than poetry, for myth was the first word in life man feared and from it tried to extract life's contradictory meanings. Myth constituted the first voice that chimed in among the sounds of thought and emotion. Or, in words that appeal to the mind, myth is poetry in its infancy, just as man is when he is a child. Its source is innocent youth, for it is closer to nature and says more about the spirit than anything else. It is free of all pomp and artifice, far from ornamentation and disguise.

By this light, I hope to illuminate the path of righteousness and destroy the depths of doubt. We shall attempt to walk this winding and uneven road, such that we might triumph, with the brilliant sun of truth and the coveted dawn of hope, over the gathering darkness and fog. We do not know if we shall hear the humming of a poetic imagination across the Arab desert and glimpse its lovely phantasm frolicking in that distant peninsula, or if we shall see nothing but its shadow, lost underneath the sun's glaring rays, and find nothing but its traces in the sand. Who can say? In any case, let us bring patience and hope on this uncertain journey and begin our procession in the name of God.

Note

1. "First man," where it is used, denotes a man who is governed by primitive, natural instincts, whether he is now lost in time or still draws breath.

Translator's Notes

a. According to the date mentioned in the prefatory author's note, this lecture was delivered in February 1928. In Arabic, *khayāl* designates a host of interrelated meanings that include "ghost," "specter," "phantasm," "trace," and "imagination" ("Khayāl" 309–10). The root, *khāla*, is "to imagine" or "make believe."

b. I have chosen to translate al-Shābbī's *al-insān* as "man" because it resonates with the European humanist sense that influenced him.

c. Written identically, the two words share the same triliteral root *n.f.s.* in Arabic and share interconnected theological and biological meanings, but they are vowelized differently. According to the *Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic*, the earliest recorded usage of *al-nafs* (150 BH / 476 CE) predates that of *al-nafas* (50 BH / 573 CE) ("Nafs"; "Nafas").

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