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Mahmud al-Braikan

**Selected Poems
1954-1993**

Bilingual Edition

**The translation of these selected poems
has been authorized by the poet himself.**



1

**Selected poems
1954-1993**

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**To
Dr. Muhammad Jawad al-Mussawi
The 'unextinguished hearth'
of inspiration and encouragement.**

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Mahmud al-Braikan and the Question of Publication

*“A poet dies twice, once when he publishes, and once when a statue is erected to him.”**

Two questions cannot be ignored when talking about Mahmud al-Braikan: His position on publishing and his vision of the world. There might be some sort of correlation between these two questions; they might even be looked at as two sides of one coin, but until this correlation is proved, and for practical purpose, we have no other choice than to treat them independently as two distinct characteristics that stand out to outline al-Braikan’s poetic world. This introduction is dedicated for the first question.

Al-Braikan remained for decades the leader of a one-man *strike* against publishing. His silence was interrupted now and then by publishing a

few poems in al-Muthaqaf al-Arabi (Arabic Intellectual,) and al-Kalima (word,) a fact to which he seemed to be alluding later on as *violation*. Based on this notice, pointed out in a margin added by al-Braikan to a group of his poems, published in al-Aqlam in the 1990's under the collective title *Intermingled Worlds*, we have reason to believe that at least some of, if not all, the poems that have appeared in al-Muthaqaf al-Arabi, or al-Kalima, or both, have been published without his permission. Their publication, therefore, should not mislead us into the belief that al-Braikan was fluctuating in his position on publishing.

Looked at from the outside, this refusal to publish might admit an interpretation in which al-Braikan is pictured as an austere or ascetic person marked by self-denial and abstinence. Even though this might be true, we have no right to assume the capability of penetrating the private world of the poet or to speak on his behalf.

This interpretation, however, is somewhat alluring, especially when we quote al-Braikan himself in his poem "On Historical Winds," dated at 1962:

"When the dead bodies disappeared

**And the scene cleared up,
The vastness of the tragedy
Took shape into our dark heritage**

**Our ominous heritage, the cemeteries' hunger,
Our victims' shame,
Our heritage, the punishment of all times,
For all that passed**

**Before hyenas and monsters,
I have given up my arrow
Glory has no glory
Let oblivion take my truth and name.”**

This quote clearly declares a resignation in the wake of a *tragedy*. The mouthpiece of the poet announces his pulling back from what seemed to be a scene of battle abounding with “dead bodies” and “victims.” We do not know for certain to what event the poem alludes; but, as a whole, it reads as a declaration of withdrawal, which might be hinting at the prolonged silence that will follow.

It all depends on whether the poem marked the beginning of the break with publication that the poet led for decades. If that was the case, then the refusal to publish could be explained as a political protest, or, more accurately, political despair.

It might be helpful to include here my personal testimony of the way al-Braikan has answered the question about the reasons for which he refused to publish his works. It was in 1990, in a teashop, in al-Ashar, in downtown Basrah. There were other friends with us who may confirm, disagree with or add to this statement. Needless to say that I here completely depend on my memory and it is almost impossible to reproduce the conversation that took place between us word for word. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that there was no way to determine to what point al-Braikan was open in answering the question. In short, al-Braikan did not give a clear-cut answer; he alleged that the reasons were so clear one needed not go anywhere to look for them.

I told him I knew he must have heard the same question for so many times from so many people, and he must have answered it for so many times, but if he did not mind answering it one more time.

He said something like, “Really? Don’t you see what’s going on? Why don’t *you* publish then?” I attempted to remind him that he was a distinguished, well-known poet, from an earlier

generation and when he did not publish he would be missed, etc., but he interrupted, “I know, but you have been writing for, say, twenty years or so—why don’t you publish?” I told him that I might have my own reasons but I was interested in his.

He spoke about the widely spread imitation, with which the new poetic experience was copied and recopied until lost its freshness and was killed. That was the direction, as far as I can remember, toward which al-Braikan led the subject. Nevertheless, I would like here to affirm my impression that he was avoiding the most sensitive and painful points in the subject, perhaps out of cautiousness. The reasons for his voluntary solitude and for his reticence were, at the time of our conversation, still at work. We kept talking about various subjects, music, for instance, and then went back to publishing.

I told him that publishing was the rule and not the exception, and that I had the conviction that if I were hundred percent, not ninety-nine point nine, but hundred percent, that what I was going to write would never, ever, be read by anybody I would never write it. He did not dispute that. Then, by the time we were saying ‘good bye’ to each other, we were discussing the

order in which his poems should appear, in case he was to publish them: Should he publish the old poems first, or should he publish a selection that includes samples of various periods of his life? And so on.

As a real poet, al-Braikan knows well that freedom is the oxygen of poetry, or more accurately, the oxygen of every highly creative process, as is the case in all fine arts. Thus he has gone so far as to value his freedom that he ended up by alienating himself in a totally dictatorial environment.

This is quite clear in his poem “Of Freedom,” included in a collection of short poems entitled “Abstract Poems,” published in al-Muthaqaf al-Arabi.

**“You have offered me a house
decorated and comfortable
in exchange for a song
sticking to the conditions
I would rather stay
on my horse’s back
and roam from one wind-course
to another”**

The relationship between poets and publishers, of which al-Braikan's case was only an example and only one personal solution among others, will have to come to light at last, and be treated in detail, and with honesty and courage, a project that goes way beyond the scope of this introduction.

The revelation of the peculiarities that have so far dominated the process of publication in our country, and surely in some other countries, with which we share a common historical background, this revelation will touch a painful nerve in the nervous system of our literary heritage. Such a project may include, but not be limited to, a treatment of the proposed role of poets in our history, the concept of poetry, that is, the way poetry was defined, the criteria according to which it was evaluated, and subsequently, the criteria according to which the sample-poems of literary text-books were chosen, and so on, and so forth. What we need is an extensive study that attempts to explain, in a simple, down-to-earth, gibberish-free language, such issues as why the poets of other provinces and cities of Iraq kept travelling to Baghdad in order to publish their products, in magazines, quarterlies and journals that were supposed to

receive those items by mail; how far the published copies of their works differed from the original ones; how much freedom the editor allowed himself in dropping, adding, adjusting, and in one word, butchering the texts under the name of *correcting* them, forgetting or ignoring the fact that editors were rarely, if ever, chosen for their merits; and the prolonged and deliberate silence about the most sensitive questions, on one hand, and the fake uproar about minor, trivial and non-existent problems, on the other, all combined to work as thick layers of dust hiding the actual literary scene from the public.

At the military level, a dictator jumps from nowhere to seize control of the ministry of defense and the broadcast-building, and then, all of a sudden, becomes field-martial and commander-in-chief, without having to pass through the ranks of sergeant, corporal or even private soldier.

His slogan is, "Might makes right." From his new position, he then lectures on the benefits of democracy and the principles of justice, and may congratulate his people for having him as the head of the state—him, who has put an end to tyranny, etc., etc., etc., and at the intellectual level, the shadows of the

dictator, the opportunists and self-seekers, aim at the ministry of culture, regardless of the degree of their kinship to culture, and, once they secure a foothold in it, they become authorities themselves, and they can shape the whole cultural environment the way they want. In the midst of such a chaos, of such a huge circus, what do we expect from a true poet to do—a poet to whom poetry stands for “the salt of the earth,” the salt without which the earth will rot?

Al-Braikan offers us a clue that he would have published his works, had he been his own publisher.

That was, at least, what he has done in both of the two issues he released of his literary review, *The Living Thoughts*. But the abandonment of this review, after circulating two issues, raises, still, other questions: How far one can go on in isolating oneself? To what extent can an individual be free in a non-free society? And, with respect to poetry, how much right do we have in considering ourselves free at the time we write our poems? The answer may be found in the first movement of Beethoven’s symphony number five, which may serve as a finale for the death of the poet.

**Someone is knocking at the door, knocking,
knocking, knocking at the door, persistently
knocking at the door. Should one open the
door, or should one let the door be broken?**

**“And my sword wasn’t at hand,
when they broke the gates
into my last fortress.”**

Haider al-Kabi

09/17/2005

*** Al-Braikan. (From a speech in memory of Badr
Shaker As-Sayyab.)**

احتفاء بالأشياء الزائلة

أربع أيدي
تمتد إلى دفع النار معاً
و عيون أربع
تتأمل طفلاً في مهده
مائدة
من زاد الفقراء
و حديث هادئ
الليل، و فيلم السهرة
انسام الفجر ترف رفيف جناح فراشة
العشب اللين بعد الغيث
يبدو منتعشاً و نظيفاً

HOMAGE TO THE EPHEMERAL THINGS

Four hands

Stretch out together to the warmth of fire,

And four eyes

Pore over a child in his cradle.

A meal

From the poor's provisions,

And a quiet talk,

The night, and the late night film;

The dawn's breezes flutter

A flutter of a moth's wing.

The soft grass after the rain

Seems fresh and clean.

الموسيقى تتموج في الغرفة
عنوان كتاب ممتع
كأس الماء لضمآن
نعاس المتعب
لعب الأطفال و ضجتهم
الذكرى تمرق في لحظة
خطة يوم قادم
نور الشمس
مجرد نور الشمس
اجمل ما في العالم
مشهده العابر
و مباهجه ال بهغرى.

**The music undulates in the room,
A title of an interesting book,
A glass of water to a thirsty man,
The drowsiness of the tired,
The kids' toys and their noise,
The remembrance flashes in a moment,
An agenda of a coming day,
The light of the sun,
Just the light of the sun.
The most beautiful thing in the world
Is its fleeting scene, and its little joys.**

طوبى لك
أن كنت بسيط القلب
فستفهم مجد الأرض
سحر الأشياء المألوفة
إيقاع الدأب الیومی
و جمال أواصر لا تبقى

آذار 1993

**Blessed art thou;
If thou art simple at heart,
You'll understand the glory of the Earth,
The enchantments of familiar things,
The rhythm of daily persistence,
And the beauty of bonds having no subsistence,**

March 1993

شبح لشبح

أنت تعرفني؟

لا أرى في المرايا سوى

شبحي المتغير

لا أستطيع التقاط ملامحه

تسقط اللحظات عليه إضاءاتها

فيموج...

أنت تعرفني جيداً؟؟

أتوزع بين الثواني التي لا يقاوم تيارها

ارتمي في فضاء التوقع

لا أستطيع اللحاق بظلي

أغادر هذا البصيص الذي هو روعي

GHOST TO GHOST

**You know me. Don't you?
Nothing do I see in the mirrors but
My changeable ghost.
Never can I pick up its features;
The moments project on it
 their sheens;
Therefore it wavers.**

**You know me well, don't you?
I'm torn apart among the seconds
 Whose torrent can't be resisted.
I toss myself into the space of expectation;
I can't catch up with my shadow;
I leave this flicker that is my soul**

ولا أتمنى زوال اضطرابي
أرى جسدي يضمحل
و كفي تشير
و اسمع صوتي البعيد
فمن يتغلغل في الذاكرة؟
و من يتراءى هناك؟
و من هو هذا المراقب؟
أعرفه انت؟

آب 1993

**And I don't wish an end to my confusion
I see my body thin away
And my hand signals,
And I hear my far-away
 voice,
Who is to steal into memory?
And who is to be sighted there?
And who is this observer?
Do you know him?**

1993

الصوت

صوت لا يشبهه صوت
يأتي من أقصى البرية
صوت كنداء اله هالك
يطلق لعنته
كتحشرج وحش مقتول
كتناوح ريح
ليست من هذا العالم.
صوت يطعن قلب الليل.
في البدء
ما كان أحد
يسمعه.
ثم اعتادوا

THE VOICE

**A voice that no voice resembles
Comes from the deep end of the wilderness;
Like a perishing god
That hurls its curse;
Like a rattle of a beast killed,
Like a swirl of a wind
That is not of this world.
A voice that stabs the heart of night.
In the beginning
Nobody used to hear it.
Then they were accustomed**

أن يمرق في أفق مدينتهم
لا يلتفت إليه أحد
لا يتساءل عنه أحد
فلماذا وحدك
يا هذا الشاعر
تسهر ليلاً
تنتظر الصوت الغامض؟
ولماذا
لا يمكن دفع الفكرة
إن هناك شذائد قادمة
و كوارث ستقع؟

شباط 1993

**To see it darting in the horizon of their city.
No body heeds it, no body asks about it.
O poet
Why do you alone stay awake every night
In a wait for the mysterious voice?
And why
Isn't it possible to drive away the thought
That there are hardships to come
And catastrophes to happen.**

Feb. 1993

