Sunset in the Gardens of al-Andalus.

By M. Ikraam Abdu-Noor

The era of Muslim rule in Spain (early 8th century to 1492), the historical moment known in Arabic as al-Andalus, was an age of great poets and great patrons, when princes in cities like Seville and Cordova and Granada competed to attract the best writers of the day. The result was an era when poetry in Arabic was liberated from many of the constraints it had previously known, producing a timeless poetic legacy. Alongside the qaṣida, the classical Arabic ode written in a single meter and a single rhyme, new genres of stanzaic poetry having multiple rhymes and complex meters appeared in the late 10th century: the muwashshah in formal Arabic and the zajal in colloquial Arabic. Scholars are divided on the origin of these poetic forms. Some have argued that they developed from earlier Arabic stanzaic forms known in the Middle East, while others maintain that these forms were unique to al-Andalus and probably evolved from contact with non-Arabic forms native to the Iberian peninsula. Whichever view one takes on their origin, there can be no doubt that these new styles of poetry allowed the poet to experiment with rhyme and meter in unprecedented ways, to write in non-formal Arabic, and even to include non-Arabic phrases in their poems.

The expansion in the range of poetic forms in al-Andalus was accompanied by an extension of their themes, as well. Many of the ancient motifs and imagery found in the qaṣida — praise (rithā‘), wine drinking (khamriyya), love (ghazal) — persisted in the new poems, but

* Some of these translations have appeared in the magazine Palimpsest 2 (2005); used by permission.


were used in fresh ways. In one area, at least, the Andalusian poets outdid their forebears: one of the most widely used themes in the new poetry was description of nature. Certainly natural scenes may be found in older Arabic poetry, but rarely executed with the vividness and enthusiasm we find in many muwashshah and zajal poems. Perhaps it was due to the richness of the natural environment in Spain, perhaps simply to an animated love of versifying, fueled by the passions of wealthy patrons and princes. In any case, we find among the stanzas of al-Andalus passages of sublime feeling recalling natural scenes of striking beauty. The muwashshah and zajal reached the pinnacle of their glory in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries with poets like Ibn Baqi (d. 1150), Ibn Quzmän (d. 1160), Ibn Sahl (d. 1251) and al-Shushtari (d. 1269).

We cannot be certain about it today, but these new forms of poetry probably were born to be sung. Ibn Sanâ’ al-Mulk (d. 1211), observing the poems of al-Andalus from his vantage point in Egypt, attempted to create a way of analyzing their structure. He found, however, that he could not derive a single set of rules that governed the meters of all these poems. Indeed, he noted that many of these poems apparently “have no prosody but the melody, no meter but that of the beat....”

In any case, we know that eventually many of these poems did find their way into songs, and this literary-musical tradition echoes today across North Africa in musical genres collectively known as Andalusian music.

The translations presented here are drawn from the Moroccan version of this musical heritage, from two songbooks: At-turâth al-‘arabî al-maghribî fî al-mûsîqi (Idriss Benjallun, 1979) and Min wahy ar-rabâb (‘Abd al-Karîm ar-Râyis, 1982). The Moroccan Andalusian music is divided into eleven large suites, each suite (or nûba) being centered upon one primary musical mode. The modes, in turn, are associated with cosmological phenomena such as the rising of the full moon or the time just before sunrise. The poems here are drawn from the nûba called al-Mâya, which is associated with the time of sunset. We see here the setting sun used to

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3 Dâr at-Tirâz (1949 edition, Jawdat ar-Rikâbi, ed. Damascus: Dâr al-Fikr) p. 47. To be sure, not all scholars agree on the the musical origins of these poetic forms. James T. Monroe (e.g. “Poetic Quotation in the Muwaššaha and Its Implications: Andalusian Strophic Poetry as Sông” in La Corónica 14.2, 1986 pp. 230-250) and others argue that they were indeed meant to be sung, while Alan Jones (Romance kharjas in Andalusian Arabic Muwashshah Poetry. London: Ithaca Press, 1988) and others claim that the weight of the evidence does not support this conclusion.
describe lost love, moments of reverie and even the thanatopsis theme. In some cases we know the name of the poet, in most we do not. But we do know that in spirit and form these songs recall the glory that was al-Andalus.
A *muwashshah* stanza in the meter *ar-rajaz* [al-Räyis, p. 83]

The evening sun slowly shrouds  
  the horsemen gathering and the plains
On the tree branches she* shines  
  and the leaves are adorned by her rays
And thus she announces the arrival of night ...
    Ah, my heart’s wound is grave!
She decorates herself in pale yellow  
  when she is hidden from my eye
You whom the desert gazelle enchants  
  grieve, friend, for she is not nigh

* In Arabic, the sun is grammatically feminine.
A *zajal* stanza in the meter *manhûk ar-ramal* [al-Raïs, p. 84]

O evening, you recall to me my longing and hours of withering torpor

The sun’s glory becomes, at the horizon, a slope toward dark languor

O wine-pourer, pour lavishly for us, and drink in spite of anyone’s anger

See the sun, how it begins to yellow leaning toward night

A pomegranate blossom has enveloped in amber a temptation for the mind

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Abdu-Noor: *Sunset in the Gardens of al-Andalus.*
A zajal stanza in the meter makhla’ al-basit [Benjallun, pp. 84-85]

Stop, and snatch the violet’s audacious pride
how wondrous is the beauty of the garden-bed

Over a courtyard, in the little pool of water
the sun declines toward darkening sunset

The sun declines toward the yellow twilight
and gilds the leaves of climbing vines with gold

Branches appear in unexpected forms
and dress up the happiness of souls

While the garden spreads forth its verdure
in raiment which rivals a bride’s clothes

A bird, ensconced in the branches,
he is like a Friday preacher on his pulpit

Over a courtyard, in the little pool of water
the sun declines toward darkening sunset
A stanza in the meter *manhūk as-sarī* [ar-Rāyis, p. 93]

شمس العشيا بالله
والليل في غمضي
قد غاب عن نظمي
يا حسرتي يا أوahi
قد حلت الشرقا
ومن هوتي قال لي
قد بلغت الرقفا
واشتدت العشقا

The evening sun, by Allāh
irresistibly bending down
The bright of the day clothing it
but the night, darkening down
What a shame! O alas!
from my sight it has withdrawn
One who loves said to me,
“The separation has us unbound.”
Tears poured from my wide-open eye
and love became grief without bounds
Six lines in the meter *al-kāmil* by Ibn Maraj al-Kahl al-Andalusi [ar-Rāyis p. 97]

Many an evening have I remained, watching closely the moment

The days grant them generously after much difficulty

In a garden, we obtain from them every desire

when you breathe it, it gives the scent of ambergris

The birds sing, and the lawn-seats are folded up

while the sun dances on in a yellow chemise

The gardens float between adornment in silver and gold

and the flowers, becoming dirhams and dinars

The face of the sun yellows as it westers

only because it departs from the beauty of that scene
A stanza in the meter *majzūʿ ar-ramal* by the poet Muhammad b. Ali al-Awsi, better known as al-ʿAqrab (“The Scorpion”) [Benjallun pp. 83-84]

قُمْ نَرَى شمس العشيّة
وكُلّت جُلْةَ يَهِيّة
ووشحت كُلّ البساتين

يا مدیر كاس الحمیاّة
فَم اغتنم هذه المحاسن
زاهر ذو نفحات

وأمان ينو عجیب
والزمان اقیل متاتي
والحبیب مع حبیبه

Wait a moment, you will see the evening sun
like gold above the foliage fragrant
Adorning the whole garden
and dressing it in splendid raiment
O master of the wine-glass
stop and seize these charming moments
This day of ours is a wonderful time
a shining time, full of fragrance
And the lover is with his beloved
as the time draws closer to my end
A zajal stanza [Benjallun, p. 100]

The evening sun wears wasting 
before it sets
it announces glad forgetfulness

The moment rules over it,
and now it says
“All the sadness has fled.”

Beautiful people carry on
stealing my sense
like gazelles of the desert

We find in parties elegant
genial friends
sitting by the River Fez

There is no discord among them
except abstinence:
the pleasure of song and goblet

Abdu-Noor: Sunset in the Gardens of al-Andalus.
A *muwashshah* stanza [Benjallun p. 101]

The evening sun has gone to the west
and tears my eyes shed
from our separating
They trace lines, out of fear;
when she is made to disappear
the lover still longs in waiting
Until the birds have chittered,
chirped and twittered
among the leaves, lamenting
I replied to her, all openly:
Stop! I warn plainly —
go slow, by Allâh’s will!
Said the little ornament, the beauty:
This view you now enjoy,
pour the wine and have your fill!