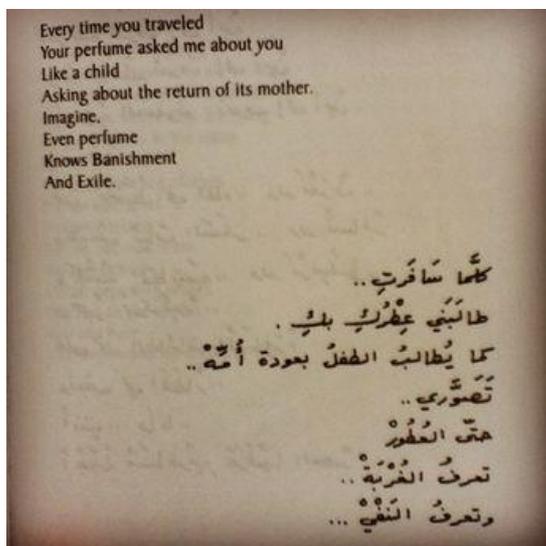


*With a view to increasing cross-cultural interaction and introducing readers to contemporary poetry from different parts of the world, Transnational Literature includes a small guest editor slot in its poetry section, curated by – and partly featuring the work of – an established poet from a country other than Australia. In this issue we're honoured to have a selection of Syrian poetry curated by renowned Palestinian poet, Ghayath Almadhoun, who has been living in exile in Sweden since 2008. Ghayath's vital, no-holds-barred poetry has many important things to say to the Western world. We're grateful for the opportunity to listen.*

## Syrian Poetry: An Introduction by Ghayath Almadhoun



*Text from a poem by Nizar Qabbani*

Modern Syrian poetry begins only in the 1930s. Prior to that, countries in the Middle East, including Syria, did not have the same political borders as today. The existing boundaries are the result of the Sykes-Picot agreement between the French and the English who occupied the Arab provinces at the beginning of the last century. Before that, poetry from the region of Syria was known as part of Arabic poetry, by virtue of language and history.

Damascus was the capital of the Arab-Islamic empire that extended from Spain to the borders of China for almost a hundred years. Syrian poetry is therefore an important part of the vast Arab poetic heritage that covers without interruption the period from the sixth century until today. There are twenty-two countries and more than four hundred million people whose mother tongue is Arabic. The main thing that distinguishes the Arab countries is that, although their mother tongue is common, they have very different cultures.

It is an unrivalled pleasure to be an Arabic poet because poetry is still the Arab's master art, old, important and with a great heritage. No one is denying the effect of prose writing – there are many recent changes in favour of the novel – but poetry is

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

still dominant. The novel is ultimately a Western art; it's new in our culture and only appeared in the Arabic world a hundred years ago.

As an Arabic poet, your poetry reaches many different people from different cultural backgrounds and there are a great number of Arab book fairs, which go in a systematic way. When you finish signing your book at the book fair in Beirut, you can travel to the book fair in Casablanca, from there to Tunisia, Cairo and so on throughout the year. The most beautiful thing Arab culture offers us as poets is the great diversity in the reception of our books in the Arab countries: they love you in Iraq, they hate you in Libya, you become a star in Palestine, someone writes good words about you in Kuwait, you get negative criticism in Algeria, and so on.

Syrian poets have participated in Syrian political and social life since the beginning of the last century. The country's top intellectuals were poets, politicians and diplomats. Poets like Nizar Qabbani have played an important role in changing attitudes towards women since the 1940s. Qabbani addressed sensitive topics about love, women and the status of women in the Arab world, subjects that became taboo after the collapse of the Arab Empire, where a harsh censorship and self-censorship occurred in the whole society and worsened during four hundred years of Ottoman occupation.

The poetry in Syria before the Syrian Revolution in 2011 was mainly influenced by Riyadh Al-Saleh Al-Hussein, who died young in 1982 at the age of twenty-eight, and Mohammed Almagout 1934-2006. They were the poets – not Adunis – who influenced the Syrian taste for prose-poetry on the ground, among poets and readers. Adunis's influence on Arab poetry only exists among Western academic literature researchers, not in reality.

After the Syrian revolution, the Syrian poets find themselves in the diaspora: new life, new fact. Now we see the beginning of what we can call 'exile literature'. It's still early to figure what the full result of this dramatic change in Syrian literature will be but we will be able to judge it in the coming years. We do know that the Syrian revolution has created a rift between young poets and metaphor. No more hiding behind the symbols to stay safe under the dictatorship. There is no room for metaphors when death is so clear. Syrian poetry has also become more narrative, searching for an internal music in the text itself. Poets found that the prose-poetry form was able to say what the media could not. Poetry has in fact played a big part in the Syrian revolution because the poets themselves participated in it.