

A Transnational Approach to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī’s ‘Umar Khayyām Levi Thompson, University of Colorado Boulder

Abstract

Transnational analysis has become an essential part of approaches to modernist literature in the academy, but scholars of Arabic literature have yet to embrace its possibilities. This article presents the benefits transnational literary inquiry holds for analysing Arabic literature as a significant instance of postcolonial literature, taking as a case study the Iraqi poet ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī’s references to the Persian ‘Umar Khayyām. Through my consideration of contemporary readings of Khayyām from Iran, I re-orient Arabist understandings of this poet’s function in Bayātī’s work. Moving beyond arguments centred within a nationalist paradigm of understanding, I employ a transnational mode of analysis to provide an alternative reading of Khayyām’s presence in Bayātī’s poetry and the dramatic work *A Trial in Nishapur*. The article seriously considers the modern Iranian reception of Khayyām, which presents him as a rationalist and skeptic rather than a Sufi mystic. I therefore offer a new way of understanding Bayātī’s use of Khayyām as a poetic mask that attends to Bayātī’s significant engagements with Iranian culture and Persian literature. Finally, I draw on this case study to argue that we must begin accounting for the transnational connections that have defined modern Near Eastern literatures like Arabic and Persian.

Modern Arabic literature is by its very nature transnational. Colonial and postcolonial national projects have made transnational movements of forms and themes from one inevitably yet necessarily imagined community¹ to another essential to the development of Arabic poetry and prose. Even in the nationally-specific context of Palestinian resistance literature, we find Maḥmūd Darwīsh (d. 2008) ruminating on the loss of far-flung – geographically and historically – al-Andalus as he considers his own nostalgia for the Palestine of his childhood during his years of exile. Still, the transnational approach has yet to find many practitioners in the field of modern Arabic literature.² In the hopes of provoking future study within the field, in this article I explain how a transnational approach is not only enlightening but also indispensable to our appreciation of Iraqi poet ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī’s (d. 1999) work by focusing on the transnational

¹ The phrase ‘imagined community’ here refers to Benedict Anderson’s pioneering work *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006 [1983]), in which he investigates how the idea of the nation develops out of shared social imaginaries. By saying ‘inevitably yet necessarily imagined community’, I mean to acknowledge the fiction of the nation-state and highlight its necessity within the decolonial and postcolonial struggles of colonised peoples. In these contexts, the nation-state is a necessary fiction.

² A stand-out study is Kamran Rastegar’s *Literary Modernity between the Middle East and Europe: Textual transactions in nineteenth-century Arabic, English, and Persian literatures*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures, ed. James E. Montgomery et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007).

movements that shape his poetry. Using a limited case that crosses both national and linguistic borders (Iraq to Iran; Arabic to Persian), I contend that we must begin accounting for not just the broadly shared cultural and religious influences that have shaped Near Eastern literature but more importantly for the transnational interconnections that continue to mould Arabic literature during the age of the nation-state. We must start paying attention to them if we are to understand where modern Arabic literature has come from and where it will go.

The Transnational Approach and Modernist Poetry in Iraq

The transnational approach to literary criticism began in the 1990s and became part of the scholarly conversation about world literature in the 2000s. A landmark text in transnational literary studies for those of us studying what are commonly referred to as ‘minor’ literatures, such as Arabic, is 2005’s *Minor Transnationalism*. In it, editors Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih make an important distinction between ‘transnationalism-from-above’ and ‘transnationalism-from-below’ that guides my analysis. The first category results from the globalisation of capital; it is homogenising, totalising, and determined by the market. Contrarily, “transnationalism-from-below” as Sarah J. Mahler calls it, is ‘the sum of the counterhegemonic operations of the nonelite who refuse assimilation to one given nation-state’.³ By looking to the transnational movement of people (for example, the profound effect Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb’s [d. 1964] sojourns in Iran with the Iranian Communists had on his political and poetic development) as well as poetic forms and themes, we can better comprehend literary modernism in the Near East⁴ as a shared project of resistance to Western colonialism and neocolonialism. We must also, however, account for the indelible mark of Western colonialism on the transnational movements of modernism.

Iraqi modernist poetry offers a prominent example of the role transnational exchange plays because of its geographical proximity to Iran and the Persian modernist movement, with which it shares particular formal and thematic features laying beyond the reaches of Western poetic influence. These include but are not limited to: making the poetic foot (*tafīlah* in Arabic; *rukṅ* in Persian) the formal base of the poetic line (*bayt*); doing away with the monorhyme standard of the premodern *qaṣīdah* (ode); and returning to the Near Eastern mythic tradition (both Islamic and pre-Islamic) for thematic material – a technique they share with Western modernists. In what follows, I examine ‘Umar Khayyām’s presence in Bayātī’s poetic project to provide an example of how the transnational incorporation of figures from premodern Near Eastern culture was a defining part of Arabic modernism during the 1960s. In my rereading of Bayātī’s Khayyām in light of the movement of the latter’s myth from the Persian tradition to the West and back to the East, I show that we can come to a fuller understanding of Khayyām’s presence in Bayātī’s work by thinking transnationally, from both above and below.

Of the modern Iraqi poets, Bayātī is the most obvious candidate for this type of transnational study. After the publication of his breakthrough collection *Abārīq muhashshamah* (*Broken Pitchers*) in 1954, he was forced to leave Iraq in 1955 because of his involvement with the Iraqi Communist Party.⁵ For much of his life after that, he travelled and lived abroad,

³ Sarah J. Mahler qtd. in Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. Eds., ‘Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,’ *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005) 6.

⁴ For my purposes here, I will be referring to the geographical area including Iraq and Iran as the Near East.

⁵ For instance, he was editor of the popular Iraqi leftist cultural journal *Al-Thaqāfah al-jadīdah* (*The New Culture*).

moving among the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe and taking up residence in Cairo, Moscow, and Madrid. His itinerant life has prompted a flurry of academic interest in his work, including a special issue of the *Journal of Arabic Literature* edited by Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych entitled *Perhaps a Poet is Born, or Dies*.⁶ In the Arab world, Bayātī counted among his friends and acquaintances writers and poets such as Sayyāb (who became a decidedly vicious enemy of his later on), Luwīs ‘Awaḍ (d. 1990), Ṣāliḥ Jawdat (d. 1976), Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (d. 1987), Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī (d. 1992), Khalīl Ḥāwī (d. 1982), and even Najīb Maḥfūz (d. 2006). He also befriended writers from outside the Arab world like Rafael Alberti (d. 1999), Robert Lowell (d. 1977), Gabriel García Márquez (d. 2014), and Nāzım Hikmet (d. 1963), whose funeral he attended as a pallbearer.⁷ After the end of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958, he was appointed as a cultural attaché and spent much of his time in Moscow from 1959-64 before moving to Cairo, where he lived from 1964-71. Years later, he would move to Madrid, which was his base from 1979-89. In the last year of his life, he finally visited the country whose culture had so inspired his poetry throughout his career, travelling to Iran only a few months before his 1999 death in Damascus, Syria.⁸

He may have become enthralled with Iranian culture and literature through his early readings of Arabic translations of Khayyām (d. 1131), Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492), Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273), and Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1221), as he relates in his autobiography.⁹ Or perhaps it was a youthful infatuation with one of his classmates (the daughter of the Iranian cultural attaché in Baghdad)¹⁰ at the Baghdad Teachers College that led him to engage, for the entire length of his poetic career, with Iran in his poetry. Readers flipping through his *dīwān* (collected poems) will sense a distinct Persian presence both in the masks the poet puts on and the cities in which he sets many of his poems. Khayyām first appears as a character in 1957’s *Ash ‘ār fī al-manfā* (*Poems in Exile*) in the poem ‘*al-Rajul alladhī kāna yughannī*’ (‘The Man Who Was Singing’). Later poems with Persian-influenced themes or persons include ‘*al-Majūsī*’ (‘The Magus’)¹¹ and ‘*Hakādhā qāla Zarādusht*’ (‘Thus Spake Zarathustra’)¹² from *al-Kitābah ‘alā al-ṭīn* (*Writing on Clay*, 1970); the collection titled *Qamar Shīrāz* (*Shiraz’s Moon*, 1975), which includes a poem by the same name;¹³ ‘*Maqāṭī ‘min*

⁶ *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 32.2 (2001).

⁷ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī, *Yanābī ‘al-shams: al-sīrah al-shi ‘riyyah*, 1st ed (Dimashq: Dār al-Farqad li-l-Ṭabā‘ah wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 1999) 97.

⁸ Nāṣir Muḥsinīniyā and Sīpīdah Akhavān Māsūlah, ‘*Bāztāb-i farhang va adab-i Īrān dar shi ‘r-i ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī*,’ *Kāvishnāmah-i adabiyyāt-i taṭbīqī (muṭāla ‘āt-i taṭbīqī-i ‘arabī – fārsī)*, Dānishkadah-i Adabiyyāt va ‘Ulūm-i Insānī, Dānishgāh-i Rāzī Kirmānshāh, 3.12 (1392; 2014) 97.

⁹ Bayātī, *Yanābī ‘al-shams*, 27.

¹⁰ ‘A secret Bayātī kept for over fifty years, Furūzandah: the spark of lost love,’ Qāsim al-Buraysīm wrote in the pages of *Al-Ra ‘ī*. Quoted in ‘Abd al-Riḍā ‘Alī, *Alladhī akalat al-qawāfī lisānahu wa-ākharūn: shakhṣiyyāt wa-mawāqif fī al-shi ‘r wa-l-naqd wa-l-kitābah* (Bayrūt: al-Mu‘assasah al-‘Arabiyyah li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2009) 58. Bayātī dedicated his final poem, *Bukā ‘iyyah ilā Ḥāfīz al-Shīrāzī* (1st ed. [Bayrūt: Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabiyyah, 1999]) to Furūzandah, finally exposing his secret. See also Muḥsinīniyā and Māsūlah, ‘*Bāztāb*’ 101-102.

¹¹ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī, *al-A ‘māl al-shi ‘riyyah*, Vol. 2 (Bayrūt: al-Mu‘assasah al-‘Arabiyyah li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1995) 203-204. See Bassam K. Frangieh’s translation, Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati, *Love, Death and Exile: Poems Translated from the Arabic* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 1990) 35-37.

¹² Bayātī, *al-A ‘māl al-shi ‘riyyah*, Vol. 2 205-206. The reference to Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900) is also noteworthy.

¹³ *Qamar Shīrāz*, Bayātī, *al-A ‘māl al-shi ‘riyyah*, Vol. 2 359-392; Frangieh’s translation is *Love, Death and Exile* 209-217. I give city names in their usual English spellings except in citations of works originally in Arabic or Persian.

'*adhābāt Farīd al-Dīn al-‘Aṭṭār*' ('Selections from the Passions of Farīd al-Dīn al-‘Aṭṭār') in *Mamlakat al-sunbulah (Kingdom of Grain, 1979)*;¹⁴ and one of his final poems, '*Bukā'īyyah ilā Ḥāfīz al-Shīrāzī*' ('A Lament for Ḥāfīz al-Shīrāzī,' 1998). Persian cities other than Shiraz also appear in his poetry: Isfahan, Nishapur and Tehran.¹⁵ He drew much poetic inspiration from the Persian tradition, though his journeys did not physically take him to Iran until the very end of his life. But many years before then he travelled to Iran with his long study of Persian culture through books, particularly Persian philosophy and poetry that had been translated into Arabic.

I consider Bayātī's work the product of transnationalism rather than internationalism because we can directly connect it to his continual affiliation with movements that developed not out of the international community of nations that took shape during the mid-twentieth century but instead along with unofficial, transnational trends: existentialism, Sufism, poetic modernism, and (in Bayātī's case, unorthodox) Marxism.¹⁶ All of these were mediated by his readings of Arab and Persian cultural heritage (*al-turāth* in the Arabic tradition). While his exile may have been the result of changing internal and external politics in Iraq, the poetry he produced within it was transnational in its negotiations of places, times and philosophies. It reached beyond the bounds of the Iraqi national context despite his sometime involvement in the Iraqi government's cultural program (for example, during his time as cultural attaché and professor in Moscow).¹⁷ His own presentations of his literary horizons were wide-ranging, and we might take as an example the epigraphs at the beginning of his 1968 autobiography, which includes quotes from the Persian mystic and philosopher al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), Boris Pasternak (d. 1960), Anton Chekhov (d. 1904) and Rūmī. Elsewhere in the book, he quotes from the Chilean painter Roberto Matta (d. 2002), Fidel Castro (d. 2016), Alfred de Musset (d. 1857), Marcelle Auclair (d. 1983), Bertolt Brecht (d. 1956), Molière (d. 1673), Rabindranath Tagore (d. 1941), Rainer Maria Rilke (d. 1926) and Constantine Cavafy (d. 1933) – and that is only if we limit ourselves to chapter epigraphs.¹⁸ Particularly prominent within his reserve of cultural inspirations is the tradition of Persian philosophy and mysticism. He combined this tradition with his understanding of European existentialism, thus bringing together Western influences (transnationalism-from-above) with specifically Eastern cultural and intellectual traditions (transnationalism-from-below). Herein lies the core of Bayātī's transnational poetics.

Whence Bayātī's 'Umar Khayyām?

Of the many instances of transnationalism in Bayātī's life and poetry, his use of Persian rationalist and skeptic 'Umar Khayyām as a poetic mask offers the clearest example of how a

¹⁴ Bayātī, *al-A'māl al-shi'riyyah*, Vol. 2 405-408; Frangieh's translation is *Love, Death and Exile* 249-255.

¹⁵ 'Your eyes are Isfahan (*'aynāk Isfahān*)' Bayātī writes in 'To Hind,' a poem to his wife. Bayātī, *al-A'māl al-shi'riyyah*, Vol. 2 55-56. Nishapur figures prominently in Bayātī's work, most obviously in his 1962 play *Muḥākamah fī Nīsābūr* (Tūnis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyyah li-l-Nashr, 1973). 'At the gates of Tehran, we saw him ...' is the opening line to '*al-Rajul alladhī kāna yughannī*,' *al-A'māl al-shi'riyyah*, Vol. 1 280.

¹⁶ Bayātī explains his ideology as follows: 'From the ideological side, I am a progressive (*taqaddumī*) – without being a Marxist – and a Muslim Arab. Ideology does not impose its own terms.' *Yanābī' al-shams* 11. Still, critics have long noted that 'Al-Bayātī is regarded as the foremost representative of the socialist realist school in modern Arabic poetry.' *Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry*, ed. and trans. Mounah A. Khouri and Hamid Algar (Berkeley: U of California P, 1974) 241.

¹⁷ For a career timeline in Bayātī's own hand, see the letter appended to Khalil Shukrallah Rizk's 'The Poetry of 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati: Thematic and Stylistic Study,' diss. (Indiana University, 1981) 292-98.

¹⁸ Bayātī, *Tajribatī al-shi'riyyah* 7, 11, 29, 49, 67, 85, 87, 103, and 105.

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transnational approach is not just useful but necessary for our understanding of literary modernism in Arabic. Before beginning my analysis of Khayyām's place in Bayātī's *oeuvre*, a few introductory comments are in order. First of all, despite his popularity in both the West and the East and the numerous studies devoted to his life and work, Khayyām, the author of the famous *Rubā' iyyāt* (quatrains usually rhyming AABA), has long had a mythical status, and the poems ascribed to him are likely an amalgamation of the works of numerous authors.¹⁹ Khayyām's popularity skyrocketed in Europe after Edward FitzGerald's (d. 1883) translations of his quatrains, which appeared over the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century. The fame of these translations and subsequent ones in many languages other than English eventually renewed (created from scratch?) memories of the poet in Iran, as de Blois notes:

“Khayyām” exerted a tremendous influence on such major figures of 20th-century Persian literature as Ṣādiq Hidāyat (d. 1951) and his name continues to be invoked with passion in the ideological debates that have so shaken the country in the last hundred years.²⁰

To put aside the question of Khayyām's existence, it is clear from both FitzGerald's and the later Iranian critics' understandings of the poet that he was more a skeptic than he was a Sufi. Khayyām's skepticism about religion made his *rubā' īs* especially attractive to Hidāyat. He explains that Khayyām's French translator J.B. Nicolas (d. 1875) initially put forward the idea that Khayyām was a Sufi poet.²¹ In contrast to this interpretation, Hidāyat paints a portrait of Khayyām as a materialist philosopher (*'yak faylasūf-i māddī'*) who was ‘from the days of his youth until the moment of material death a pessimist and a skeptic (or at least appeared to be so in his *Rubā' iyyāt*).’²² Nevertheless, some of Hidāyat's ideas about Khayyām may also have been the result of over-interpreting or emphasising certain elements of the *Rubā' iyyāt* that were in line with his own prejudices and beliefs; Hidāyat was famously intolerant of Islam and a Persian chauvinist, and an irreligious, rationalistic Khayyām fit his model for the ideal modern Iranian intellectual.²³ Bayātī's understanding of Khayyām grew out of a transnational movement of interest in the poet throughout both the East and the West during the first half of the twentieth

¹⁹ It is beyond the scope of this article to thoroughly discuss the long history of scholarship on Khayyām. This observation is based on François de Blois, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey, Volume V: Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period*, 2nd ed. (London: RoutledgeCurzon in association with The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2004) 299-318; see especially pages 304-305.

²⁰ de Blois, 306. Ṣādiq Hidāyat's sustained fascination with Khayyām's *Rubā' iyyāt* was spurred on by European interest in the poet and has played a central part in how Khayyām is understood in Iran today. Afshin Molavi, *The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Struggle for Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002) 111.

²¹ Ṣādiq Hidāyat, *Tarānah-hā-yi Khayyām: bā shish majlis-i taṣvīr az Darvīsh Naqqāsh* ([Tīhrān?]: Intishārāt-i Māh, [1982?; originally published in 1934]) 11.

²² Hidāyat, *Tarānah-hā-yi Khayyām* 18-19.

²³ Lloyd Ridgeon, *Sufi Castigator: Ahmad Kasravi and the Iranian mystical tradition*, Routledge Sufi Series, ed. Ian Richard Netton (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006) 25-26. For more on Hidāyat's hostility to Islam and the Arabs, see Iraj Parsinejad, *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran 1866-1951: Literary Criticism in the Works of Enlightened Thinkers of Iran – Akhundzadeh, Kermani, Malkom, Talebof, Maraghe'i, Kasravi, and Hedayat* (Bethesda, MD: Ibex Publishers, 2002) 201-210. Hidāyat published his first collection of Khayyām's poems in 1923, which has been reprinted more recently. See Ṣādiq Hidāyat, *Rubā' iyyāt-i Ḥakīm 'Umar Khayyām* (Uppsala: Intishārāt-i Afṣānah, 1376 [1997]).

century. Bayātī's readings of Khayyām show that he was deeply familiar with Khayyām's reception in the West and how well-regarded his quatrains were in Europe and the United States. However, we must also consider the possibility that he knew about Khayyām the skeptic and incorporated elements of this Persian-inspired Khayyām into his poetry, thus reappropriating him from the context of his Western reception and resituating him in the East – a move we can productively understand as an instance of positive globalisation emerging from an East-East exchange occurring under the rubric of transnationalism-from-below.

Reading Khayyām Transnationally

This brings us to a fundamental misunderstanding among Arabist critics about Bayātī's invocation of Khayyām – a misreading we can correct by working transnationally. For example, in Aida Azouqa's analysis of the title poem of 1966's *Alladhī ya 'tī wa-lā ya 'tī* (*He Who Comes and Does Not Come*), she presents Khayyām as a Sufī mystic. Her interpretation draws on 'Azīz al-Sayyid Jāsim's *Al-Iltizām wa-l-taṣawwuf fi shi'r 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī* (*Commitment and Sufism in the Poetry of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī*) when she claims, '[T]he pursuit of al-Bayātī's [sic] masks of a female figure, the way Omar Khayyam, for example, pursues Aisha in *Al-Ladhī Ya 'tī*, stands for the Sufī transmutation of earthly love into the love of the Divine.'²⁴ Azouqa presents Bayātī's Khayyām as a mystic searching for union with the Divine and uninterested in the *dunyā* (the base and lowly world we live in). Overall, she argues that the Khayyām mask helps Bayātī expose the *dunyā*'s illusoriness and imagine the ultimate victory of justice over oppression.²⁵

But Khayyām was not a Sufī, at least not in the modern Iranian interpretations of the poet that we find mirrored in Bayātī's reception of his work. The *rubā 'iyyāt* attributed to Khayyām present instead the views of a skeptic and a man of science. Consider, for instance, one of his most famous quatrains:

Alas! The book of youth has come to a close,
Life's fresh spring has turned into December snows.
That bird of joy whose name was youth
Alas! I do not know whence it came or goes.²⁶

²⁴ Aida Azouqa, 'Al-Bayyātī and W.B. Yeats as Mythmakers: A Comparative Study,' *Journal of Arabic Literature* 30.3 (1999) 260. She cites *al-Iltizām wa-l-taṣawwuf* (Baghdād: Dār al-Shu'ūn al-Thaqāfiyyah al-'Āmmah, 1990) 200-201.

²⁵ In addition to 'Al-Bayyātī and W.B. Yeats as Mythmakers,' this reading is found in Aida Azouqa, 'Defamiliarization in the Poetry of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī and T.S. Eliot: A Comparative Study,' *Journal of Arabic Literature* 32.2 (2001) 167-211, and Saadi A. Simawe similarly considers Khayyām to be a Sufī in 'The Lives of the Sufī Masters in 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī's Poetry,' *Journal of Arabic Literature* 32.2 (2001) 119-141.

²⁶ This is traditionally referred to as *Rubā 'ī 63*. For the Persian text on which I have depended and another translation, see *The Rubā 'iyyāt of 'Umar Khayyām*, with an introduction by trans. Parichehr Kasra, UNESCO Collection of Representative Works Persian Series, no. 21, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater (Delmar, NY: Scholar's Facsimiles & Reprints, Inc., 1975) 63. Exemplifying the unstable redactions of Khayyām's *rubā 'iyyāt*, Hidāyat's version of this poem has a different third line that does not mention the bird of youth. *Tarānah-hā*, 79. I have consulted the translations included in *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam: English, French, German, Italian, and Danish Translations Comparatively Arranged in Accordance with the Text of Edward FitzGerald's Version with Further Selections, Notes, Biographies, Bibliographies, and Other Material*, ed. Nathan Haskell Dole, Vol. I (Boston: L. C. Page and Company, 1898) 186. The poem is also available online at Ganjoor: <http://ganjoor.net/khayyam/robaee/sh63/>.

The speaker's reflection on the fleeting nature of a lifetime and the mournful tone ('Alas!') show us a poet focused on the possibilities that lie within the world of the *dunyā*, not the everlasting afterlife that awaits the Sufi: eternal unity with the Divine. A Sufi would not mourn the passing of youth, but a rationalist philosopher who questions the mere existence of the hereafter would. This rationalist Khayyām provided Bayātī a secular figure with which he could explore the existential dilemmas facing the transnationally-focused Iraqi intellectual (at least in terms of Communist affinities) as an exclusionary vision of Iraqi citizenship was emerging with the gradual consolidation of the Iraqi nation-state under the Baath.

We can thus work transnationally to better understand Bayātī's invocations of the Persian poet. By bringing the modern Iranian conception of Khayyām into our considerations, we can make a stronger case for Bayātī's engagements with the poet as a materialist philosopher – as Hidāyat and the Iranian critics who came after him believed Khayyām to be – than as a Sufi. We might even begin with the poem I cited above, which Bayātī alludes to at the end of *He Who Comes and Does Not Come*. Other than the play *A Trial in Nishapur* – treated at more length below – this collection includes Bayātī's most sustained reflections on Khayyām. As we come to the end of Khayyām's story in *He Who Comes*, we find these lines,

I called out for you, O Lord, from the bottom of the ladder
My skin flaking off in the dark,
my hair went gray, the bird of youth
slipping into the fog.²⁷

Bayātī here adopts an uncommon turn of phrase from Khayyām's poetry, 'the bird of youth'. The allusion to Khayyām's *rubā'ī* is of prime importance because it indicates that Bayātī was aware of Khayyām's reception as a skeptic and atheist in the wider Near East at the time. For Bayātī, as we find with Hidāyat in the Iranian case, Khayyām's association with mystical Islam did not allow for a full investigation of his worldly philosophy. We might even read Bayātī and Hidāyat's interpretation of Khayyām as a key link between modernist poetry and secularism in the transnational network of literary exchange that was operating in the Near East at the time.

This materialist reading fits Bayātī's Marxist leanings and accounts for contemporary understandings of Khayyām's character in Iran. We likewise find at the end of the collection nine new *rubā'īs* Bayātī writes in the rationalist Khayyām's voice. The poems oscillate between hope for the future (summed up in the coming of a saviour) and continued pessimism about the possibility for change. For example, the first goes,

The Messiah sold his blood to the Donkey King,
the revolutionaries were defeated,
the world was drowned in the mire,
and the clown masks fell into muds of shame.²⁸

²⁷ Bayātī, *al-A'māl al-shi'riyyah*, Vol. 2 81.

²⁸ Bayātī, *al-A'māl al-shi'riyyah*, Vol. 2 95.

Bayātī puts on the skeptical Khayyām mask once again in these lines not to make appeals to the Divine but instead to reflect on the absurdity of struggling against reality, thus continuing the ambivalence that permeates *He Who Comes and Does Not Come*. In the sixth *rubāʿī*, the speaker's existential angst bursts out in a complaint:

We must choose
to grab the wind and pass over the voids,
to find the meaning behind the absurdity of life,
for life in this closed cycle is suicide.²⁹

The eighth and ninth continue to play on the overall ambivalence of the collection. The eighth asks,

We return, or we don't – who knows?
to our mother the earth, who carries an embryo of the hope [we] seek inside her
This sadness goes deeper, and the promises,
The moth of existence hovers around our fire.³⁰

After a cavalier dismissal of the idea of rebirth, this *rubāʿī* ends with the popular Sufi image of the moth and the flame. However, the moth here does not become one with the flame but 'hovers' around it, thus suspending the traditional final immolation and mystical annihilation in the Divine.³¹ The eighth *rubāʿī* is ambivalent about possible union with the Divine, and the ninth (and final) *rubāʿī* continues in the same manner, questioning a potential path to a better future by mentioning it only after the word *laʿalla* (perhaps; maybe).

The dead-alive, with nothing to live on or place to go
blows into the ashes
Perhaps (*laʿalla*) Nishapur
will, like a snake, shed the robe of her sadness and break the chains.³²

²⁹ Bayātī, *al-Aʿmāl al-shiʿriyyah*, Vol. 2 96.

³⁰ Bayātī, *al-Aʿmāl al-shiʿriyyah*, Vol. 2 96-97.

³¹ Annemarie Schimmel explains the origin of the motif when she discusses the Sufi mystic al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Hallāj (d. 922):

Hallāj describes the fate of the moth that approaches the flame and eventually gets burned in it, thus realizing the Reality of Realities. He does not want the light or the heat but casts himself into the flame, never to return and never to give any information about the Reality, for he has reached perfection. Whoever has read Persian poetry knows that the poets choose this story of the moth and the candle as one of their favorite allegories to express the fate of the true lover.

Mystical Dimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1978) 70. See also Mahmoud Omidshalar and J. T. P. de Bruijn, 'Candle,' *Encyclopædia Iranica*, IV/7, 748-751; <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/candle-pers>: '[W]hen the candle represents the beloved, then the lover is the moth (*parvāna*), which cannot resist the light and is drawn into the flame and consumed.'

³² Bayātī, *al-Aʿmāl al-shiʿriyyah*, Vol. 2 97.

The Iranian city of Nishapur, Khayyām's supposed hometown,³³ also provides the setting for Bayātī's 1962 play, *A Trial in Nishapur*.³⁴ This play offers yet another instance in which Bayātī plays on Khayyām's mythical status to offer a critique of political authority, tradition, and ungenerous readers of literature. Again, Bayātī incorporates a *rubā'ī* to make his point.

The play centres on Khayyām's experience at court, where the ruling class of Nishapur is considering whether or not the poet is guilty of committing *kufṛ*, that is, of blaspheming God. During the trial, we learn that it is the University Professor (*ustādh jāmi'ah*) who has brought the *kufṛ* claim against him. The Professor cites a *rubā'ī* as evidence of Khayyām's crime:

O You for whom we call out
we seek pardon
Tell me, where can You find pardon?³⁵

The Professor prefaces his quotation of the poem by telling the court,

Khayyām has, every now and then, written *rubā'īyyāt* collected in no single book but recited everywhere. The Sufis, in particular, know them and sinners repeat them, challenging the Qur'ān and the teachings of Islam. In my position as a humble servant of knowledge, I have collected many of these *rubā'īyyāt*, written in different scripts across Persia but all composed by Khayyām.³⁶

The Professor's testimony brings up a number of questions about the provenance of the *rubā'īyyāt*, for they appear to already be a part of popular culture in the fictional world of the play. The Professor, not Khayyām, claims that the poet is involved with the Sufis. (Elsewhere, the play describes him as a man of science but not as a Sufi.) The Professor's admission that the verses he has collected are 'written in different scripts' across the entire Persian-speaking land does less to support his claim that they are 'all composed by Khayyām' than it does to refute it.³⁷ That is, the Professor has confused cultural reception and recension of the quatrains with whatever philosophical positions Khayyām may actually have had. In the end, once his accuser recites the lines, Khayyām 'looks at the University Professor in astonishment and opens his mouth for the first time: "I didn't write this *rubā'īyyah*."³⁸ Bayātī thus plays on Khayyām's mythical status throughout the play as he does in the collection *He Who Comes and Does Not*

³³ de Blois 299-300.

³⁴ Without moving beyond the title, we are already reminded of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925; originally written 1914-1915), an early example of existentialist fiction that heralded the later work of Jean-Paul Sartre (d. 1980) and Albert Camus (d. 1960).

³⁵ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 41. It is worth nothing that the line breaks only result in three lines rather than the usual four and there does not seem to be any regular meter, which we would normally expect to find. This should not be surprising, as the Professor may have made up the verse himself in order to ascribe it to Khayyām and accuse him of *kufṛ*, thereby betraying his lack of literary critical ability and ignorance of even basic poetic standards.

³⁶ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 40-41.

³⁷ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 41. The Khayyām in Bayātī's play here reminds us of the Khayyām mythos found in Persian literary history, as de Blois observes: 'It is clear that by the 15th century at the latest the name of the famous philosopher and scientist had become a collective pseudonym for authors of *rubā'īyyāt*, especially those of hedonistic, fatalistic and more or less overtly anti-Islamic content' de Blois 305.

³⁸ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 41-42.

Come, using a mythos that formed over time in Iran, was ‘discovered’ again in Europe, and made its way back to the Near East following FitzGerald’s translations. Indeed, Bayātī also draws heavily on the American Harold Lamb’s narration of Khayyām’s story in *Omar Khayyam: A Life*.³⁹ Thus, Bayātī’s Khayyām is not only the product of Bayātī’s readings of Persian literature, but also a result of his engagement with Western recensions of Khayyām – a fundamentally transnational figure in any case.

The above scene at court portrays Khayyām as an outsider, a nonelite forced into conflict with a state-sponsored view of Islam enforced by the local leaders of Nishapur. Beyond the University Professor, these also include the Chief Judge (*kabīr al-quḍāh*), the Head of the Religious Community (*raḡul al-millah*), and even the theologian Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who admonishes Khayyām: ‘I have heard how you have gone outside the teachings of Nizām al-Mulk – may God rest his soul – and how you practiced magic in Isfahan the way unbelievers do.’⁴⁰

Forced out of Nishapur by political and religious hardliners in the play, Khayyām joins a caravan heading for Aleppo in the employ of a merchant. Along the way, the spirit of the founder of the Assassins (*al-Ḥashshāshīn*) – a group of Ismā‘īlī rebels who opposed the Sunni Saljuqs⁴¹ – al-Ḥasan al-Ṣabbāḥ (d. 1124), appears to Khayyām and asks him to join him in his sectarian rebellion. Ṣabbāḥ declares, ‘I have granted you the opportunity to be born again and here you are refusing it!’⁴²

Khayyām declines to join the Assassins, despite their rebellion against the Sunni elites who forced Khayyām into exile from Nishapur, because his conception of revolution is total, unrelated to sectarian division and, more importantly, founded in the refusal of violence. He compares Ṣabbāḥ’s feeding hashish to his men to steal them for their assassination missions to the Chief Judge’s use of something yet more dangerous: endless talk of Paradise and Hell to pacify the people of Nishapur.⁴³

Khayyām then explains his own stance on revolution:

We must wait. The revolutionary doesn’t risk his own head or others’ for nothing. Revolution requires preparation, mobilisation, and biding one’s time, waiting for the critical moment to strike. If I were to be born again, I would give myself over to it.⁴⁴

³⁹ Harold Lamb, *Omar Khayyam: A Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1934). See Issa J. Boullata, ‘The Masks of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī,’ *Journal of Arabic Literature* 32.2 (2001) 107.

⁴⁰ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 42. Ghazālī is well-known for his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in which he argues against the influence of Farābī’s and also Ibn Sīnā’s thought in Islamic philosophy. He studied and taught in the newly-instituted *madrasahs* (schools) founded by the Saljuq grand-vizier Nizām al-Mulk (d. 1092). For more on him, see Frank Griffel, ‘Al-Ghazali,’ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/al-ghazali/>.

⁴¹ For a detailed study of the group, see Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizārī Ismā‘īlīs Against the Islamic World* (Philadelphia: The U of Pennsylvania P, 2005). For a brief discussion of the political, religious, and historical context in Iran at the time, see *The Rubā‘īyāt of ‘Umar Khayyām* (1975) xi-xxxvii.

⁴² Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 75.

⁴³ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 78.

⁴⁴ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 79.

Şabbāḥ protests that if the circumstances are not right for revolt, one ought to draw first blood to spur on change, to which Khayyām replies,

The starlight of true revolution shines behind a thousand doors of long anticipation, but it will one day appear. People will mention how Khayyām died a soldier in a losing battle during the first fights for freedom [and] for the sake of humanity's victory in its final campaign.⁴⁵

Immediately after saying this, Khayyām collapses from exhaustion, dead. His companions mention how he had been delusional, speaking to himself, before the merchant proclaims to them all, 'God forgive us our sins! I didn't pay him his due. When I reach Aleppo, I'll give what he was owed to the poor.'⁴⁶

At the end of the play, we find a clear example of the existentialist as well as Marxist ideas behind the philosophical framework for Bayātī's use of the Khayyām persona. Although he dies poor and broken, 'a soldier in a losing battle', Khayyām gives in neither to the prescribed orthodoxy of the elite class in Nishapur nor to the anarchic bloodshed Şabbāḥ invites him to join in. Instead, he keeps faith in his vision of a coming revolution, notwithstanding the fact that he knows he will not participate in it himself. On the road to Aleppo, he is like Sisyphus pushing his stone, and it is up to the audience to imagine him happy⁴⁷ in the knowledge that he never compromised on his beliefs as he dies in the dirt.

Bayātī's conception of the poet in his later poetry thus reflects the existential dilemmas he introduced in his early work. He uses the Khayyām mask to explore the existential anxieties his speaker faces while attempting to come to terms with modernity. He deals not only with the changes to premodern poetry that came in the wake of the modernist movement but also with the conflicting projects of Iraqi nationalism on the cusp of its total transformation into Baathism (in 1968) and Communism, which he found himself struggling to negotiate after his multiple exiles from Iraq and sometime residency in Moscow. It is thus my assertion here that his poetry is best served by a reading that goes beyond the bounds of the national and into the transnational movements of ideas and political affiliations that he participated in.

Conclusion

After the early 1960s, Bayātī's poetic influences became increasingly transnational as his poetic vistas widened to include not only figures from the Arab past but also the gods of ancient Mesopotamia, Western writers, and Persian poets and philosophers. Of all of these, his sustained interest in the Persian literary tradition stands out because of the overall number of poems and entire collections he devoted to the thought and works of Persians such as Khayyām, al-Ḥallāj, al-Suhrawardī, Rūmī and 'Aṭṭār. His last collection, *Nuṣūṣ sharqīyyah (Eastern Texts)*, published the year he died, offers a final example of transnationalism and the poetic inspiration he drew from the Persian tradition. Among other poems dedicated to the blind Arab poet Abū al-'Alā' al-

⁴⁵ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 80.

⁴⁶ Bayātī, *Muḥākamah* 79-81.

⁴⁷ In his famous rejection of nihilism, Camus wrote, '*La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.*' Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe: Essai sur l'absurde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) 166.

Ma‘arrī (d. 1057), Damascus, and Baghdad, this last collection includes the long poem ‘A Lament to Ḥāfīz al-Shīrāzī’ as well as the title poem, ‘Eastern Texts’. In it, the old poet’s memories of the past bubble up in fifty short vignettes he completed at the end of November, 1998. Among these, he remembers witnessing the 1953 coup in Iran and its aftermath while living in Egypt. He recalls,

The day the mob killed Fāṭimī in Tehran⁴⁸
I was playing chess with Sayyid Makkāwī.⁴⁹

Elsewhere he remembers,

The Shah,
following the coup against Mosaddegh,
returned to Tehran with an Iraqi air escort
and the agents of imperialism.
As for me,
I went home
after giving
the barman my last dime.⁵⁰

He intersperses imagined scenes among these seemingly genuine memories to create a map of his poetic development and inspiration, which transcended his own tradition and depended on his interaction with Persian cultural heritage and history in particular as well as the well-attested influence of European modernism on his work. In the case of the coup treated in the above lines, Bayātī admits to the poet’s inability to influence society and his concomitant complicity in the role the Iraqi monarchy had in bringing the Shah back to power against the will of the Iranian people.

There remains much transnational work to be done in the study of modern Arabic literature, both on its interactions with local literary traditions (Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, Urdu, Hebrew) and others beyond the region. Here, I present Bayātī’s incorporation of ‘Umar Khayyām into his poetry as an exemplary instance of the transnational movement of mythic poetic themes in Arabic and Persian modernism. Behind the Khayyām mask, the speaker of *He Who Comes and Does Not Come* becomes an existential hero ruminating on the myths of death and rebirth that lie at the heart of Arabic modernist poetry. By reading this Khayyām as a rationalist and skeptic – which Bayātī’s engagement of the modern Iranian critical tradition requires of us – we can consider Bayātī’s work in terms of transnational modernist exchanges and move beyond interpretations restricted by national paradigms. As the nation-state continues to wither away under the pressures of globalisation and international trade, seeking out these transnational links in our readings of Arabic modernism will offer effective modes of

⁴⁸ Ḥusayn Fāṭimī, Mohammad Mosaddegh’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, was executed by firing squad on 10 November 1954.

⁴⁹ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī, *Nuṣūṣ sharqīyyah* (Dimashq: al-Madā, 1999) 63. Makkāwī (d. 1997) was a famous Egyptian radio personality, composer and singer.

⁵⁰ Bayātī, *Nuṣūṣ sharqīyyah* 64.

transnational, transcultural resistance to Western cultural hegemony and other unwelcome intrusions of capital.

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