FORMS OF SUFFERING IN MUSLIM PRISON POETRY

FLAGG MILLER

Poetry is born of suffering, as an old Arabic saying goes. Arabic poetry—or *shi`r*—is also held to be a vessel of insight and perception, one whose rhythms are attuned less to measured thoughts than to wellsprings of raw human feeling, *shu`uur*. In "Ode to the Sea," Ibrahim al Rubaish draws upon a traditional image of poetry as the sea itself to create verses that both provide relief and stir the depths of bitter despair: "Your stillness will kill the captain if it persists, / And the navigator will drown in your waves. // Gentle, deaf, mute, ignoring, angrily storming, / You carry graves." Poetry from Guantánamo Bay carries a message to humankind that is bittersweet at best. Complacency is not of poetic temperament.

From the earliest days of Islam's rise among world religions in the seventh century, poetry has provided a steady moral compass for Muslims. Its power to inspire believers as well as its controversial use for mischief were both appreciated by the prophet Muhammad. While warning listeners away from the tendency of poets to "aimlessly rove in every valley, preaching what they never practice" (Qur'an 26:225), the Prophet had the good judgment to enlist the support of some of the strongest poets in Arabia. In the centuries that followed, as Islam expanded among diverse communities that knew neither Arabic nor the customs of the Prophet's followers, poets continued to provide eloquent and easily memorized glosses on Islam's core messages. Whether composing in classical Arabic designed for the learned or in regional dialects designed to attract broader and often illiterate audiences, poets were important allies to political leaders.

Poets could also be formidable adversaries. As early Muslim states developed, so too did new means of incarceration,

along with the categories of criminal behavior used to justify imprisonment. In the provinces of Kufa, Damascus, Mosul, and coastal Yemen, ill-favored poets were among the first occupants of these early prisons. With emerging notions of civilizational order, responsibility, and social entitlement, however, the prison experience would speak to wider circles of versifiers, including those who, although not literally imprisoned, turned to certain types of verse in order to express the intensity of felt oppression. In genres called *habsiyya*, which emerged during periods of state centralization in Iran after the ninth century, as well as in Pakistan and India, for example, poets drew upon long-established traditions of Persian love poetry to reflect on their own sufferings, on the consolations of writing verse, and the possibilities of spiritual release. Such poetry continued to be refined in later centuries across South Asia and in the Middle East.

At another level, nationalist movements supplied new tools for discussing oppression and the rights of indigenous peoples. Poetry was instrumental, especially rhymed couplets composed in the tradition of Arabic *qasida* verse. Since the Prophet's day, the *qasida*'s formal meters, adjustable length (typically from twelve to eighty verses), and themes both spiritual and quotidian had helped popularize the genre among Muslim communities across Southeast Asia, India, Central Asia, the coasts of Africa, and Europe. *Habsiyya* poets were especially fond of the *qasida*'s structured conventions. As twentieth-century nationalists across the Arab world began enjoying the fruits of liberation struggles against Europe's colonial territories, *qasida* poetry was reworked to express a common cultural heritage. Neoclassical themes such as nostalgia for youthful lovers, descriptions of desert journeys, and praise for patrons found receptive audiences among socialist reformers partly because, although best expressed in Arabic, they also accommodated regional dialects and customs. Moreover, while expressive of

Islamic cultural ideals, they were not exclusively the heritage of Muslims. In diverse political contexts, poets addressed a variety of peoples, nations, and world revolutions.

The challenge for activists was, of course, to keep the *qasida* genre from being co-opted by entrenched national elites and to preserve its flexibility as a weapon for populist dissent. Marxists promoted the use of vernacular, rather than classical, Arabic in efforts to sever the *qasida*'s association with traditions of belles lettres. They also privileged shorter, easier compositions that could be sung as anthems and performed in mass gatherings to stirring musical accompaniment. Palestinians gained renown for their *qasida* anthems, many of which furthered the themes of an emerging prison literature that included short stories and novels by both men and women. With roughly thirty percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip having passed through Israeli prisons by the 1980s, images of the "cage," the "bird," and, later, the "hurled stone" grew especially popular throughout the Middle East. Socialists in Egypt, South Yemen, Libya, and Morocco, as well as secular Ba`thists in Syria and Iraq, found ample recourse to such images, while Islamists responded to the *qasida*'s potential elitism in multiple ways. Conservative reformers sometimes criticized the practice of poetry altogether, especially if sung or set to musical instrumentation, arguing that Muslims were better served by studying the Qur'an, memorizing transmitted accounts of the Prophet's words and deeds, and pursuing degrees in Islamic law—or *shari`a*—even from the confines of one's prison cell. Other Islamists appreciated the value of poetry in refining one's ethical and political sentiments. As noted by one of the Guantánamo poets, Abdulla Majid al Noaimi, "I set out to write, but I could not concentrate on the poem. I put poetry writing aside and turned to memorizing the Qur'an. But then I could not concentrate on the Qur'an, because my mind was occupied with the poem. With my mind divided, time began to pass. And then I was inspired."

Late twentieth- and twenty-first-century militants could find inspiration for composing poetry in the writings of Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb, considered by many to be the most influential modern theorist of global Islamic resurgence. During the 1950s and 1960s, Qutb was arrested and tortured in the jails of Gamal `Abd al-Nasser, the president of Egypt and champion of the Pan-Arab movement. Few institutions in the Arab world would prove as instrumental in turning moderate Islamist reformers, many of them members of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, into committed militants. From their ranks rose Anwar Sadat's assassins, whose designation of the Egyptian president as a tyrannical "pharaoh" with close links to the United States (and its White House, or "Palace") is echoed by one of the Guantánamo poets, Ustad Badruzzaman Badr. Many of al-Qa`ida's core leaders were Egyptians who had grown up in the shadow of Nasser's jails (including Ayman al Zawahiri, Abu Hafs, Sayf al `Adl, Nasser Fahmi, and others). These men understood well how torture could turn conservative moral reformers into radical militants, so they drew particular attention to ways in which abject humiliation drives victims of torture to seek revenge.[1] Before Qutb had developed his ideas about global *jihad* in the interests of "freedom from servitude," however, his earliest years were spent as a journalist, poet, and literary critic. The poet, Qutb wrote, is no mere philosopher, but is rather an activist who "plunges into life, sensing its sensations, conscious of its consciousness, interacting with it and then speaking about what he senses from it, or else about what life wants to say about itself!"[2] Contrary to the views of many Islamist intellectuals, Qutb held vernacular Arabic to be an especially apt medium for political expression. His interest in wresting poetry from the purview of classically trained aesthetes continues to reflect the orientation of many Islamist populists. Among contributors to this volume, Saudi-born poets (especially Mohammed

el Gharani and Abdulla Majid al Noaimi) demonstrate a special interest in the uses of vernacular Arabic for dissent.

Linking broader trends in Muslim prison poetry to the contributions in *Poems from Guantánamo* begs the question of the nature of the Guantánamo poets' dissent. Do the detainees call upon the vocabulary of radical Islamic militancy to defend themselves? Do they invoke other discussions of social justice? To what extent do their verses confirm their designations as global Islamic *jihadists* and "unlawful enemy combatants," as the U.S. administration and military tribunals have maintained?

Part of the challenge of answering such questions lies in the role of poetry as a figurative enterprise. If our aim is to study verbal artistry in a way that is maximally useful, we need to be prepared to consider answers not about the poets' intentions but about our own intentions as analysts responsible for distinguishing fact from fiction. We need to assess not only the detainees' own tendencies toward radicalism but also our own assumptions about detainees' identities, goals, and motivations.

To begin with the nature of poetic dissent in general, it is useful to draw a comparison between the detainees' verse and that of self-proclaimed militant *jihadists*. In this regard, the work of the Guantánamo poets is distinct for its relative absence of overt religious imagery. Militants such as Osama bin Laden himself, renowned among followers for his verse, tend to construct poems around well-rehearsed narratives of Islamic history, especially those focusing on the early armed struggles of Muhammad and his companions. In efforts to highlight their observance of Muslim doctrine, they employ classical Arabic inflected with archaic terms and pronunciations. Seeking a transnational Islamic audience, they avoid marked vernacular diction and themes that once appealed to the nationalist sentiments of Sayyid Qutb and his associates in the Muslim Brother-

hood. Poets among the Afghan Arabs are even known to favor compositions bereft of rhyme and meter, in their attempts to shed ties to the nationalist and literary heritage of *qasida* poetry. In such cases, overtly political Islamic symbols become the most important anchor for linking such verse to an envisioned Muslim community.

Barely half the Guantánamo poems in this collection, by contrast, invoke hallmark Islamic terms, such as "Allah," the "book of God," the "messenger," and "Islam." When they are used, moreover, such terms are usually employed in a mainstream manner, inserted into conventional supplications at the end of *qasidas*, rather than being used to develop themes of militancy. Certainly few of these poems open with pious supplications, in contrast to most religious poetry. At first stroke, the Guantánamo poets catch us off guard with a modernism that even rings secular at times. To be sure, studies of Islamic reform movements suggest that many global *jihadists* have a weak understanding of core Muslim beliefs and indeed have more affinity with Marxist revolutionaries than with religious devotees. Rarely do the *jihadists* themselves, however, invite such associations.

If any common theme unites the poems, it is a general concern with physical incarceration and oppression rather than with Islam. Descriptions of imprisonment (*habs*), cages, shackles, and tears provide a shared vocabulary, even as the poets' responses elicit a wide range of emotions. While at times courageous and defiant, the poets at other times express utter defeat, lamentation, and nostalgia, as well as a desire to give good advice. Perhaps most surprising of all, many of the poets share a deep strain of romantic longing. Whether lingering upon images of loved ones or on the flowery pastures of youth, Guantánamo poets have written modern Arabic love poetry. Especially salient are the *qasidas* by Saudi, Bahraini, and Yemeni poets, whose "yearning to meet the loved ones," "ten-

derest hearts," and gestures of the "kiss on his forehead" evoke trans-Islamic themes of *habsiyya* verse while also deferring to more proximate sentiments expressed in vernacular Arabic.

For those familiar with Arabic poetry, such verses bear an extraordinary resemblance to the florid writings of twentieth-century secular nationalists. Themes of nature's bounty, transcendence, and swimming "salmon" (certainly not found in Arab waters) evoke the work of early nationalist literati who came of age under European colonial rule and were inspired as much by poets like John Keats, William Wordsworth, or Stéphane Mallarmé as they were by neoclassical Arabic traditions. The Guantánamo poets appear to draw even more heavily from the socialist legacies of postcolonial firebrands across the Islamic world. Such influences are found in both themes of forced servitude and the struggle for justice and in the poetic conventions of political anthems such as repetitive anaphora ("We are heroes of the time. / We are the proud youth. / We are the hairy lions.") and open-vowel rhyme schemes that could be easily memorized and sung collectively. A common recourse to simple poetic meters underscores a special engagement with the kind of rural and tribal song traditions that could be picked up by broad audiences. Once again, even if adaptable to performance as Islamic anthems, an extremely popular genre among Muslim reformers worldwide, these poems typically defer overt association with Islamist iconography, as their authors strive to reach a more ecumenical audience.

In trying to come to terms with the oddly contemporary tenor of the poets' contributions, especially their national and socialist sensibilities, we have several possible explanations. From one perspective, we might conclude that the poems are evidence of the detainees' savvy public relations skills and so do not represent their true views as diehard *jihadists* or terrorists. From another, we might point out that the authors may be a self-selected group and that the true radicals are likely keeping

quiet. These suggestions, though, are problematic for at least two reasons. Through the ostensible logic of common sense, such positions replace empirical findings, however oblique or confusing, with a far more scripted set of debates about what Muslims or Islamists really want or believe. Rather than acknowledging human experience as complex and, indeed, historically conditioned, they invoke a set of Western stereotypes about the entrenched goals and identities of an "alien enemy." Such assertions are especially disturbing given that almost all the Guantánamo detainees have yet to see their day in court, with even their identities actively mediated by a U.S. administration that struggles to defend a mixed record in its War on Terror.[3]

These arguments also deny the Guantánamo poets' own testimonies of the censorship that hampers their ability to express their responses to the events within the camp. At times, the silence is imposed by prison authorities whose meticulous surveillance of all communications to or from inmates, including postcards from home, is described by one of the contributors in the margins of his poem. Having tried to deliver a photograph of himself to his family through an intermediary, the poet relates his sadness at being told, sometime later, that the intermediary had been forced to swallow the picture just before a complete body search was conducted. More frequently, the source of detainees' censorship is their own self-monitoring. Poetry itself is constraining, a theme that some of the poets explore as they confront the limits of structured verse in their attempts to describe the depths of their suffering. Al Rubaish compares poetry to the sea, whose "beaches are sadness, captivity, pain," and al Noaimi's self-reference as "the Captive of Dignity" expresses his own comparison of sadness to a captive and the embellishments of his dignified verse to the captor. Still, poetry can provide a welcome salve even when its formal

devices prove insufficient to express the reality of a tragic situation. In a 2005 study of human rights in Morocco, Susan Slyomovics reports how Moroccan victims of torture hold poetry to be a deeply valued medium because it can communicate that which is too humiliating to acknowledge publicly, especially to relatives at home.[4] Special note might be taken of the stark testimonial poem by Mohammed el Gharani, or the sulfurous verses of Shaikh Abdurraheem Muslim Dost, who writes that one "cannot help but be under the power of the traitors and the notorious. // Consider what might compel a man / to kill himself, or another." Far from being insincere, the Guantánamo poets admit that they have many concealed emotions.

Allowing for the complexity of the detainees' poems is an important first step in restoring a human dimension to grander official narratives about Guantánamo. Alert to the many investments at stake in representing and controlling their identities, the poets struggle intelligently, with what resources they have, to engage the sympathy and responses of the broadest possible audience. Pinioned impossibly in the context of a global war on terror, they seem to realize that a vocabulary of Islamic militancy is poor currency for such ends, even if it were available to given detainees. Instead, the poets strive for a language that is more likely to win advantage: the discourse of universal human rights. This is the claret most likely to linger in the chambers of the world's justice systems, especially those in Western countries. Indeed, as Slyomovics has argued, human rights discourses are entering the repertoires of a growing number of transnational Islamist organizations, especially when their members are incarcerated.[5] At Guantánamo, detainees are preparing their arguments not in sophisticated legal terminology, which most of them lack knowledge of, but rather in the familiar idioms and vocabulary of their youth. Whether describing scenes of nurturing parents or destitute children, of valiant sib-

lings bound by fate or worldwide victory for the oppressed, the idioms most apt for the detainees are those drawn from populist discourses of Arab national liberation.

If the poems surprise us by their return to a political vocabulary of the past, they also remind us of the enduring power in crosscultural responses to global inequality. The ultimate reception of the detainees' verse is likely to be as varied as the aims of the poets, rendered in as many strains as an anthem can have. However construed, the poets strike a deep chord with many audiences, reminding them of the stunted nature of justice at Guantánamo. At the very least, their verse has given voice to a new Muslim responsiveness to the United States' assertion of global legal sovereignty.

NOTES

1. Montasir al-Zayyat, *The Road to al-Qaeda: The Story of Bin Lāden's Right-Hand Man* (Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 31.

2. Sayyid Qutb, *Muhammat al-Sha`ir fi al-Hayah wa Shi`r al-Jil al-Hadir* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1933 [1974]), pp. 18–19.

3. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has stated that the Guantánamo detainees are "among the most dangerous, best-trained, vicious killers on the face of the earth." The validity of such a claim is questioned by the Pentagon's own personnel at the base, some of whom have estimated that, at best, only a few dozen of the five hundred detainees have any connection with terrorism (Joseph Margulies, *Guantánamo and the Abuse of Presidential Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 211.

4. Susan Slyomovics, *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), pp. 10–11.

5. Ibid., pp. 191–92.