

# GIRL - BUTTERFLY - GIRL

## Translations have their own melody

### (Comments of the translator from the Arabic)

The translation of poetry is a creative activity and not merely a technical transference of “meaning” from one language to another. Not only must a translator tackle problems of rhyme and metre, tone-colour and rhythm, but he or she must ensure that the elements which went into the formation of the textual continuum in the original poem are not allowed to slip through the fingers during the course of the translation. Last but not least: the translator must employ a variety of methods by which to overcome linguistic “voids” such as cultural and historical connotations existing in the original language but missing in the language into which the poem is being transferred. This holds true for every translation but where poetry is concerned, the situation is far more difficult and complex.

Contemporary Arabic poetry to this day embraces elements and norms which came to it from the early poetical heritage, starting with the pre-Islamic period and continuing for approximately 1500 years; from here sprang the splendid, linguistically pure *Qasīdas*. The Hebrew poets of Moslem Spain, in the magnificent Hebrew poetry of the Golden Age, succeeded in building a cultural and linguistic bridge between biblical writings and the Arabic language, and at times also translated early Arabic poetry into Hebrew, leaving almost nothing to be desired. However, a present-day Israeli translator of Arabic poetry throughout the ages would find it difficult to approach the linguistic depths and artifice of Yehudah Halevy and Ibn-Gabirol. A new “melody” would have to be found so that our contemporary language could reflect the early texts; unfortunately, we have not as yet been blessed with a creative translator of this calibre. Thus there are good Hebrew translations of the poetry of many different nations, but good translations of Arabic poetry are **extremely** rare. And just as it is no easy matter to translate pre-Islamic Imru Al-Qays and 10th century Al-Mutanabbi, in the same way the texts of 20th century Ahmad Shawqi and Al-Jawāhiri who wrote in the neo-classical manner, present problems.

Modern and modernistic Arabic poetry, and particularly that of the last 20 years, is a different matter. Poets such as Unsi Al-Hajj, Shawqi Abi-Shaqra, Muhammad Al-Maghut and Fu'ad Rifqa have succeeded, almost overnight, in freeing themselves from the classical Arabic formula and have adopted forms very similar to those of contemporary European and American poetry. From this point of view the translator of their poetry has a far easier task and this is perhaps why I chose to translate these poets' works in particular for my collection *Nehar Parpar* which appeared in 1973.

However, whereas these poems make few demands on the translator, the reader — unversed in the life-style and cultural norms of the Arab Orient (in this case Lebanon and Syria) — may find great difficulty in their comprehension. The juxtaposition of village scenes, everyday life and ancient local symbols within the poetic-surrealistic or imagistic texture, imposes a heavy interpretive load on the reader. I believe, however, that it is well worth making the effort.