

The Search for Peace and East-West Reconciliation in Rihani's Prose Poetry

Ameen Rihani was a truly American author in that the influences on his work were wide-ranging and eclectic. This lack of systematization and artfulness, often a deliberately chosen stance, is without doubt one of the distinctive characteristics of American literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its power to shape "Americanness" was only broken by the rise of Anglo-American High Modernism in the wake of the first World War.

If the influences on Rihani came from many sources, none, however, is more profoundly interesting than his relationship with Walt Whitman. Beginning in the years immediately following the turn of the century, Rihani sought to "naturalize" the practice of free verse in Arabic, specifically citing Whitman as his inspiration. Thus in his introduction to his own volume of prose poems, Hutaf al-Awdiya, Rihani characterizes the kind of poetry he is seeking to create as follows:

Walt Whitman is the originator and leader in this kind [of poetry]. After his death, many contemporary American and European poets have gathered beneath his banner. In the United States today there are many "Whitmanesque" groups, among whose members can be found a faction of literary figures who have gone to an extreme limit in championing the beauties of his poetry, in adopting his democratic principles as their own, in advocating his American philosophy, since the merits of his poetry are not contained solely within its new, strange form but rather extend to its philosophy and imaginative power, which is even newer and less familiar.¹

This passage is notable not only in the way it directly identifies Rihani's practice with Whitman's, but also in the way it singles out content above form as central to Whitman's

¹ Ameen al-Rihani, Hutaf al-Awdiya, 16.

impact on the succeeding generation of his disciples. For Rihani at least, what is as central to Whitman's verse as his experimentation in sound and meter, is his political views--and especially his advocacy of democracy--and his possession of a philosophical viewpoint conditioned by his American experience.

It may even be the case that Rihani had in mind what is probably Whitman's most succinct formulation of these basic principles, as found in his statement in the preface to his collection "As a Strong Bird" (1872), where he concludes his characterization of the impulses which set in motion his program of poetic experimentation by setting forth an agenda of his hopes for the America of the future:

Not [for it] to become a conqueror Nation, or to achieve the glory of mere military, or diplomatic, or commercial superiority--but to become the grand Producing Land of nobler Men and Women--of copious races, cheerful, healthy, tolerant, free--To become the most friendly Nation, (the United States indeed,)--the modern composite Nation, formed from all, with room for all, welcoming all immigrants--accepting the work of our own interior development, as the work fitly filling ages and ages to come; the leading Nation of peace, but neither ignorant nor incapable of being the leading Nation of war;--not the Man's Nation only, but the Woman's Nation--a land of splendid mothers, daughters, sisters, wives.²

He hopes that it is this America his poetry will be able to contain and, to a certain degree, direct.

These observations, with their stress on inclusiveness, and on a dynamic concept of peace that involves the process of reconciliation not only of races, but of genders, could with equal likelihood have come from Rihani himself. In fact, one need only to turn to his well-known "Testament," composed a few years before his death in 1940, to find a similar set of principles articulated in Articles 9 and 10, where he asks his listeners to "oppose wars and criticize useless acts of courage and sacrifice for the sake of one's homeland," for "the true act of heroism in this day and in the future, will be to say 'I will

² Walt Whitman, "Preface to 'As a Strong Bird,'" Leaves of Grass: Authoritative Texts on His Art Criticism, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1973), 743.

not fight and I will not bear arms for war.” He then goes on, like Whitman, to turn specifically to include women as part of his audience, telling his listeners to say to their mothers, sisters and wives that there is “a new heroism, a heroism of the mind and the spirit, a literary heroism overflowing with love for humanity. So have them raise their sons and teach their brothers the principles of human brotherhood, to respect freedom of thought and emotion, and to reject the subjugation of their enemies, or to submit to their judgments. Then they will truly be heroes, in opposing wars and in the glorification and promotion of peace throughout the world.”³

These two passages--especially when juxtaposed--suggest that possibly the most important element in understanding the work of both poets as complementary, is to realize that for both, their poetry was molded by war, yet each was ultimately impelled to write as they did in order to accommodate a vision of reconciliation and peace. For Whitman, the war was the American Civil War, traditionally seen as a time of testing the basic ideals of American civil society and its allegiances to particular moral values. Most notably, Whitman had to find ways to speak both for America’s traditional commitment to freedom and self-determination (a concept that was to undergird the Southern call for “state’s rights”), and many Americans’ more recent, but no less powerful moral abhorrence of slavery.

For Rihani, the decisive war was World War I, both for what it revealed about the deep fissures in his adopted American society (as is admirably revealed in his recently published Letters to Uncle Sam) and how it would redraw the map of the Middle East and especially his beloved Lebanon, in ways whose impact is still being felt today.

Nevertheless, it is also important to realize that this commitment to peace, by both poets, is not to a static state of affairs--simply the absence of war--but to a dynamic process, one that may best be termed a process of “reconciliation.” For both, this

³ Amin al- Rihani, Al-Amal al-Arabiyyah al-Kamilah, Vol. 8, ed. Amin Albirt al-Rihani (Beirut: Al-Muassasah al-Arabiyyah li-al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1983), 502.

reconciliation involved an active commitment to forming an epistemological continuum between East and West that was the polar opposite of Orientalism (though one always had to guard against falling into Orientalist traps), to epistemology as a way of life, to learning about the “Other” in ways that also involved learning about oneself.

From the beginning of his poetic career, in his first major poem “Song of Myself” Whitman celebrated the virtues of experience--as opposed to book learning--as teacher (“You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,/You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,/You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.”).⁴ Here, as in so many of his early poems, Whitman’s focus is introspective, certainly on the construction of a “self,” and the process of learning about that self consumes him. Yet, as he quickly makes apparent to us this “self” is not univocal. It is made of many parts, some of which do not sit easily together and must be reconciled with painstaking care, or even allowed to fight and jostle with their voices, and compete with one another, for the greater good of the whole (“I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,/Regardless of others, ever regardful of others/Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man/Stuff’d with the stuff that is coarse and stuff’d with the stuff that is fine/One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same.”)⁵ This creative engagement of differing voices is brought probably to its highest pitch in Whitman’s late masterwork, “A Passage to India,” where his celebration of American (and Western) innovations in transportation and communication technology--the American railroads, the telegraph, the laying of the Atlantic cable, the opening of the Suez Canal--are declared to have value primarily because they will allow East and West to join their knowledges, facilitated by the mediating power of the poet who can recognize the value of differing truths:

⁴ “Song of Myself,” sect. 2.

⁵ “Song of Myself,” sect. 16.

Then not your deeds only, O voyagers, O scientists and inventors,
 shall be justified
 All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd,
 All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be told,
 All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and
 linked together,
 The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be
 completely justified,
 Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by
 the true son of God, the poet,
 (He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains
 He shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose,)
 Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,
 The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.

It is perhaps no surprise that when Rihani chose to translate one particular poem by Whitman into Arabic, he chose "To Him That Was Crucified," ("Ila al-Maslub")⁶ which expresses a similar exaltation of the poet as prophetic figure, and asserts the brotherhood of such "unacknowledged legislators of the world," no matter what their origin.

Why Rihani may have seen these kinds of pronouncements on Whitman's part as an inspiration for his own practices can be usefully brought out by contrasting them with the vastly dissimilar sentiments expressed on the subject of the Other, and his role in civilization, by the influential American intellectual Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was something of a mentor-figure (directly) to Whitman, and (indirectly) to Rihani himself. When Emerson was commissioned late in his career to write an essay on "Civilization" and its definition, he begins by drawing an exclusionary contrast between so-called civilized peoples and barbarians:

A nation that has no clothing, no iron, no alphabet, no marriage, no arts of peace, no abstract thought we call barbarous. And after many arts are invented or imported, as among the Turks and Moorish nations, it is often a little complaisant to call them civilized.⁷

⁶ Amin al-Rihani, *Al-Amal al-Arabiyah al-Kamilah*, vol. 9, 90.

⁷ Emerson, 23.

Here, Emerson follows a well-trodden path, first blazed by the Baron de Montesquieu in his discussion of Oriental despotism in his Esprit de Lois (a work fundamental to the theorization of the American practice of democracy in the 18th century), where the peoples of the Ottoman Empire (the Turks) and the peoples under French rule in North Africa (the Moors) are specifically excluded from the group called “civilized” even though they would by virtue of their achievements otherwise meet the criteria. Montesquieu does this in order to create an artificial political category known as despotism, under the rubric of which he wants to dissect the practice of his own sovereign, Louis XIV, and he transfers the description of the despot to the Turkish sultan in order to avoid political persecution. But this characterization of the peoples of the Ottoman Empire as incapable of incorporating self-rule in their political system takes on a life of its own as Montesquieu’s writings become widely disseminated and quickly becomes an article of faith among American students of the Frenchman. That Emerson should be numbered among those students can be seen by the fact that, elsewhere in this essay, he incorporates Montesquieu’s famous theory of “climes” and his characterization of so-called “uncivilized” people as ever and eternally the same.

Rihani may very well have been exposed to precisely this essay by Emerson, given his interest in the latter’s work, but it would have been very easy for him to come across many other examples of similar formulations, which can be found pervasively argued in many of the influential journals of the period, like the influential Atlantic Monthly, where some of Rihani’s own writings were published in 1910. At any rate, the contrast between Whitman’s openness to new ideas from unconventional sources, and Emerson’s closed universe, could not be more stark, and it is perhaps no surprise that a significant part of the subtext of Rihani’s own experiments in prose poetry seek to undermine the basis for the Emersonian worldview, at least in this regard.

Whitman had most often sought to find frameworks for his own representation of how the human mind can successfully achieve a sense of peace (the process of

reconciliation) either 1) in contemplation of the vast panorama of humanity's activities, or 2) in the contemplation of change and renewal in nature. It is not surprising, then, to find Rihani doing much the same thing in his early experiments with prose poetry.

The first of these experiments to be published, "Al-Hayah wa-al-Mawt Aw al-Kharif wa-Ghiyab al-Shams fi Lubnan" (Life and Death, Or Autumn and Sunset in Lebanon), appeared in October 1905 in the leading Egyptian periodical of the day, Al-Hilal. It would be extremely difficult now to reconstruct the impact this poem must have had on the audience of the day, for it was so unlike anything they had ever experienced before in the traditions of Arabic poetry. But, for that small coterie who was equipped to appreciate it, the high standards of craftsmanship it displayed would no doubt have been impressive. Rihani clearly took great care presenting telling details of description as he chronicled the speaker's reactions to the tableau he saw before him as he watched first an autumn storm and then the sun setting from a vantage point in the hills of Lebanon just below Mt. Sinnin. He also used repetition of lines referring to the image of a nightingale warbling in its cage as a leitmotif that neatly divides the poem into six unequal segments. The nightingale evokes the traditional equation of birds with the human soul, and provides the needed transition to a new level of consciousness at the end of the poem, where it flies free from its cage, thus symbolizing the human soul's triumph over the despair it feels at imminent death.

At the beginning of the poem, however, the nightingale seems to be content with the acceptance of the inevitability of change, decay and death:

Yes we are in autumn, you who rejoice in the spring of life,
 We are in the last phase of the year
 And what is the frightful wailing
 Which fills the mountains and the valleys and the seas,
 But the weeping of time
 Round the bed of his daughter hovering on the edge of death
 Despite the fact that the spirit of the Lord is
 Hurricanes
 Decline

All the pearls and coral in the depths of the sea,
 All this is dissolving now around the day dying on the breast of the
 sun
 To make his death more glorious.
 But is it because of death she [=the sun] has found all these colors?
 Is it because of death that she has found all this beauty?
 Is it because of death that the flowers scatter their aroma and scent
 upon the horizons?
 No. No! But listen:
 Indeed the nightingale glorifies God in his cage, saying hallelujah.

This power of the poet, to see beyond the immediacy of individual death to the eventual triumph of light and life in the renewal of nature and its constantly changing forms, is what allows the nightingale at the end to fly forth from its cage and experience that power at first-hand:

But alas now the brow of Mt. Sinnin is covered in gloom
 And the colors have begun to disappear bit by bit
 As though melting into the Mediterranean
 And the flowers perfumes scatter into space among the black
 clouds
 And the pearly cities have fallen
 Which the sun built upon the shores of golden seas
 And the silver islands have sunk into the depths of the sea
 And the ambergris lakes have been transformed into black ghosts.
 Yes--the day has been buried after having died intoxicated with
 love
 Buried in a tomb of water, wrapt in the shroud of night.
 Hurricanes and rain, love and beauty, sleep and darkness
 Is this life? Is this death?
 But look:
 Here you see the messengers of eternity shining forth in the sky
 Carrying their lamps to give light to the night of life
 And here the nightingale has come out from his cage
 And flown into space, warbling joyously.

This is the true peace, intimately associated (as it so often is in Rihani's poetry) with freedom and liberation, which is only arrived at after the poet--and nature--survive the threat of conflict and death. Certainly the setting and the bardic evocation of the poet's voice as a means to triumph over the finality of death and false peace evokes so many similar tableaux in Whitman's, especially the last section of his most famous poem,

“Song of Myself,” where he uses a similar sleight of hand to equate himself with a bird that represents the power of nature to renew itself:

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of
my gab and my loitering,

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. . . .

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles . . .

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

In his later poetry, Whitman more often combines this view of nature as the ground for the search for true peace with a vision of joining with all mankind (“I am large, I contain multitudes”) to achieve a similar effect. We find a similar development in Rihani’s prose poems, which perhaps culminates in the vision he creates for “Ana al-Sharq” (I Am the East). This poem, like his first, found similar wide dissemination among the public of the day, this time in the newspaper Al-Ahram (Cairo, February 15, 1922).

Here, the poet directly addresses a “young man of the West,” who becomes in the course of the poem an Other who must both educate the poet and be educated by him.

I am the East
I am a phantom, O intrepid young man of the West
A phantom in the procession of time
In the procession of mundane life
But [even] a phantom may have a voice, or rather many voices,
You will hear some of them today
And you will hear them for a long time tomorrow.
Voices that fight with each other, that clash, yet they [come]
From a single heart
They have an echo in all my temples
And they have an echo in the colleges of your land

A voice that cries out in solitary retreats and resounds in holy
 places
 And a voice that chants like a camel driver in the desert and fills
 the
 mountains of my devotion with a pleasant silence
 And a voice that whispers into the ear of your sickness a new
 desire
 Seeking to raise up its aspirations and sense of purpose
 A voice that sends waves of peace undulating over the surface of
 the
 water in the holy rivers
 And a voice that utters a cry of yearning in the shadow of the two
 holy places,
 Just as it swells and peals upon new platforms, the platforms of the
 homeland.
 A voice that hymns Nirvana to gods of gold
 And sings of Karma and Divine Predestination in the huts of the
 wretched and miserable,
 And a voice that exclaims approvingly in places of amusement in
 your country, O young man of the West,
 Just as it speaks, around the cups of wine,
 Of the most recent scientific opinion concerning magnetism
 And the most recent political opinion concerning the League of
 Nations.

Though here the speaker emphasizes the “ancient knowledge” that he is in a position to impart to the Westerner, in an effort restore the balance in the latter’s life that he has lost, elsewhere he acknowledges his own desire to learn from the West in order to change his circumstances, to banish from his own vision certain aspects of his experience which have created hardship and pain and describes himself as “loaded down with burdens.” But the most interesting aspect of this part of the poem, at least from the view point of its affinity to the work of Whitman and his school of American poetry, is Rihani’s strong emphasis on how the “East’s” voice is composed of many voices, at least one of which is a voice “that sends waves of peace undulating over the surface of the water in the holy rivers.” This powerfully evokes Whitman’s own catalogues of the many voices of American life and his strong identification with those who do not walk in the halls of power, and it is the weaving together of all their experiences which allows him to express, over and over again (but especially in “Song of Myself”), the transcendent

vision of hard-won harmony that “is not chaos or death--it is form, union, plan--it is eternal life--it is Happiness.”

Especially in “I Am the East,” Rihani offers to his Western companion a similar vision of unity in multiplicity where “all the colors melt and mix,/Undulating in waves of light beneath the quill of time.” But it is also worth noting that this poem, composed in 1922 when the disastrous effects of the British and French mandate system on Arab aspirations for freely chosen political institutions that would truly express their people’s will were becoming all too apparent, concludes with a plea for peace, for the cessation of violence and war fought out on largely on the ancient soil of the poet’s spiritual homeland:

I am the East--philosophies are mine, religions are mine,
And who would sell me planes in exchange for them?

It is unfortunate that this question still remains all too relevant today.