An anthology such as this is a miscellany of personal choice of Arabic verse and prose, ancient and modern, encountered across some sixty years of reading in Arabic literature. It is a type of work once called a *florilegium*, a bouquet of choice literary extracts, and this anthology, like similar bouquets, makes no claim to typicality or wide coverage but is simply, to quote Borges, ‘a library of preferences’. It came about when certain passages produced in me what T. S. Eliot called the ‘shudder’, a sense of shock and surprise. Only the original language can of course engender this shudder but a translation that manages to convey something of the shock of the original is fortunate indeed. My hope is that my readers will from time to time share that experience.

Although the principal aim of this anthology is entertainment, and assumes no prior knowledge of Arabic literature on the reader’s part, something ought yet to be said about the language itself and its extensive cultural horizons. For about a millennium, Arabic was the lingua franca of a world civilisation stretching from Spain to the frontiers of China, and acted much like the Latin of medieval Europe. Though modern westerners associate it with Islam and Muslims, Arabic was the primary language of scholarship used also by Jews and Christians, together with the many ethnic groups who lived within the confines of that global civilisation. One distinguishing mark of Islamic cities was their cosmopolitan character, a fact often commented upon by European travellers to the east, both medieval and modern. It was largely in these globalised cities where literature flourished. Arabic literature in the pre-modern period therefore speaks a universal language because it echoes the many diverse cultures embraced by that civilisation.

Today, the Arab world is in the main a source of dramatic news and graphic images for the international media, but Arabic literature is far less familiar to western audiences. Admittedly, today’s reader is better served than ever before where translations from Arabic literature, both pre-modern and modern, are concerned. There now exist several translation series producing scores of reputable translations each year and even a few magazines devoted to Arabic literature in translation. Many Arabic novels appear in translation each year, though not much poetry. The internet is also a major source of translations, mostly from religious texts, but these are not consistently trustworthy or elegant. There is thus, I believe, space for an anthology which, in a relatively short span, attempts to reflect the great diversity of Arabic literature across time, theme and genre, without burdening the reader with extensive notes and commentaries, an anthology that brings the
Anglophone reader face to face with that literature with minimum interference from its collector.

Most of the texts in this anthology have not previously been translated into English. This is because the anthology seeks to reflect, in its pre-modern section, not just the literary ‘canon’, a lot of which already exists in translation, but also the byways of that literature, most of which remain untranslated. By its byways I mean such topics as the occult, poetic fragments, heresy, psychological reflections, literary theory, sexual etiquette, humanity and nature, geographical observations and reflections on world history. In its modern section, the anthology highlights such themes as travel writing, feminism, political dissent, newspaper editorials, personal memoirs and so forth.

The anthology as a literary genre has had a long and distinguished history in Arabic literature. It acted in the beginning as the most typical illustration of the theory of adab, whose basic principle was the broad education of a gentleman. The adib, or possessor of adab, was a person who was familiar with all the religious and 'secular' sciences of his day and combined this broadly based knowledge with the moral character necessary to communicate that knowledge, that is the humility, generosity of spirit and integrity of a true scholar. Adab was also an avenue to advancement, not just in the scholarly sphere but in government chancelleries as well, and often in both. The anthology was accordingly regarded as an accessible way in which one could acquire that wide curriculum of knowledge and the moral character that goes with it. Almost all anthologies carried wonderfully flowery titles evoking such images as gardens, necklaces or pearls. In more modern times, though anthologies remain very popular, the word adab itself has lost its earlier meaning of a broadly based education, and has come to mean literature in the strict sense, though it still preserves the sense of refinement and good manners.

The pre-modern anthologies – those composed between, say, the ninth and sixteenth centuries AD – were multi-volume works, and always divided under general themes. The earliest anthologies had a few wide-ranging themes such as ‘Government’, ‘War’, ‘Leadership’, ‘Moral and Immoral Characteristics’, ‘Knowledge and Eloquence’, ‘The Ascetic Life’, ‘Companionship’, ‘Fulfilment of Desires’, ‘Food’, and ‘Women’. Later anthologies tended to have a more detailed table of contents, perhaps to expedite the search for particular items. But all pre-modern anthologies were heavily interspersed with poetry as if to bestow its aesthetic and authenticating coverage upon prose (poetry in many pre-modern cultures was thought to be more ‘reliable’ and ‘trustworthy’ than prose because it was less amenable to tampering), the verses being typically a few lines in length. The anthologies were somewhat rambling and did not adhere strictly to the general theme as the anthologist tied his extracts together and occasionally wandered away from the main subject. Finally, they included short rather than long extracts, whether these were sayings, entertaining anecdotes, moral disquisitions or grammatical and lexical annotations. It is rare to find in pre-modern anthologies an extract, in verse or prose, that extends more than a few lines in length. Modern Arabic anthologies on the other hand are, like many anthologies of our modern world, built on discrete pieces of prose and/or verse of considerable length. They lack the guidance of the pre-modern anthologist who would intervene in order weave his extracts together.

The present anthology is nearer in form and spirit to the pre-modern than to the modern anthology. Thus the extracts here are in their great majority short, and the reason for this is the same as the one given by those ancient anthologists: to avoid boring the reader. The principle that ‘less is more’, that is to say pithiness and concision, remained throughout
the pre-modern period a common feature of Arabic literary theory. Furthermore, and also like ancient anthologies, this one is not arranged in strict chronological succession of the chosen texts since its aim is not to demonstrate evolution but to allow the reader to pick it up at any point and read it, hopefully with pleasure. Then again, my definition of literature adheres more closely to classical adab than to literature in the strict sense. This means that the anthology includes, in addition to literary texts properly so called, extracts from philosophers, theologians and scientists since even the most difficult among them never aspired to anything less than a good style. Any adib worth his salt would be expected to have some acquaintance with the rational sciences, while the philosophers, theologians and scientists would strive to express themselves as elegantly as they could, occasionally peppering their texts with verse or proverbial wisdom in order to reach a wide audience. But one major difference with ancient anthologies is that I have not attempted to intervene or to tie together these extracts, preferring them to speak for themselves with minimum annotation from the anthologist.

The beginnings of modern Arabic literature can conveniently be dated to the nineteenth century. In the course of that century, deep structural changes came over Arab societies which might best be summarised as follows. The traditional scholars of the pre-modern period, for reasons that need not occupy us here, were giving way steadily to a new class of scholars less attached to the earlier religious curriculum and more attuned to western literary fashions and genres. The conventional ‘idama’, or religious scholars, were being edged out of the republic of letters by the new professionals: the journalists, doctors, lawyers, academics, civil servants, novelists and essayists of that age. Furthermore, and in that century, Arabic lost much of its earlier universality when separate Muslim nations discovered or rediscovered their literary traditions and breathed new life into their old languages. A canon for modern Arabic literature is still in the process of formation but there can be little doubt that the carriers of that literature are a palpably new breed of scholar, the product of modern societies. In this anthology, I wanted the extracts from modern Arabic literature to reflect, again without pretence to typicality, some of the new genres that have emerged in the last century and a half, such as the short story, the political editorial and the songs and poetry of political dissent.

One last thought. For a century or more, western Arabists have produced anthologies of Arabic literature in English translation that have contributed in no small measure to popularising that literature to a general western readership. So far as I know, they have not been thoroughly studied as a literary genre; a study of them, of their strategies of selection and translation, would be an interesting contribution to scholarship. As I gathered and translated my extracts, two recent anthologies in particular loomed above the rest: Robert Irwin’s Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature (2006) and Geert Jan van Gelder’s Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology (2013). Both have valuable introductions more thoroughgoing than mine. Yet if I want this work to stand alongside these two, I should try to say something about them and how my anthology differs from theirs. Both these anthologies have a more limited coverage than mine, confining themselves to the pre-modern period. Both weave their extracts together with learned commentaries which have great value to specialists and advanced students but might in some cases be off-putting to the proverbial ‘general reader’. Both include extracts far longer than mine, which may, again, be a little challenging to that reader. Irwin’s anthology is made up of extracts already translated by several hands and is thus uneven in style and diction. Van Gelder’s anthology consists of his own translations, formidably scholarly and extensively annotated and glossed, though one
might raise some objections to the poetic quality of some of his renderings – as indeed one might also to my own. Having said this, however, these two volumes will remain useful and eminently worthy of consultation for many years to come and may be warmly recommended to readers of this anthology.

As regards my own translations, poetry of course poses the greatest challenge. In translating Arabic poetry I did all I could to preserve the idioms, metaphors and other figures of speech in their original literal form, wishing to emphasise their distinctness, indeed their alienness. And yet, how near some of it is in spirit to other world literatures must be left to the judgement of its readers.

Ohe iam satis est, ohe libelle.

Tarif Khalidi
American University of Beirut
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PART I

Pre-Modern Texts
Mock-Heroic

The mock-heroic was a fairly common genre, probably a reaction to the epic genre of earlier times.

1. The poet and the wolf

Al-Buhturi (d. 897) was a celebrated court poet of the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258), admired for his simple diction and poetic inventiveness.

What a night!
Dawn at its tail-end
Like an inch of gleaming steel,
When a sword is drawn from its sheath.

I wrapped myself in its gloom,
While wolves were still in slumber,
My eyes like a night thief's, a stranger to sleep,
Stirring up the grouse where they squatted,
The fox and the viper my only companions.

Suddenly, a grey wolf!
Eye-catching, forepart and ribs upturned,
Limbs at his sides lanky, spindly,
Dragging behind him a rope-like tail,
His spine crooked, bent like a bow.

Creased by hunger, his resolve had hardened:
Nothing but bones, spirit and hide.
He crunched his fangs, in whose rows lurked death,
Like the crunching of one shivering from the cold,
Teeth chattering.
He rose to view.
As famished was I as he,
In a wilderness that never knew a life of ease.
There, both of us were wolves,
Each scheming against his mate:
My luck against his.

He growled then sat on his haunches;
My war chant enraged him;
He charged, like lightning followed by thunder.
I let fly an arrow that missed its mark,
Its feathers, you would imagine, like the tail of a shooting star,
In a night of blackest darkness.

But he merely grew in daring and resolution,
And I knew for sure he was in earnest.

So I followed with another, burying the arrowhead
Where heart, terror and malice are lodged.

He collapsed, for I had led him to the fountain of death,
Thirsty still. If only that fountain had been sweet!

I rose, gathered some pebbles and roasted him thereat,
The fire beneath him of glowing embers.
Mean was the meal I made of him,
And I left him, covered in dust, forlorn.

2. A love and wine song
Tamim ibn al-Muʿizz al-Fatimi (d. 984) was a royal prince of the Fatimid dynasty (969–1171) of Egypt and Syria, often tormented by the contrast between his family’s religious status and his own pleasure-loving lifestyle. An attempt is made here to preserve the original rhyme scheme.

Relish the pleasures of life, relish your youth!
Spring has come forth from its booth.
Your love, your very age,
Is youth upon youth upon youth.

Bring forth the wine in the palm of a server,
Who passes the wine, pure and chill.
He passes the wine, with wet lips or hand:
Swill upon swill upon swill.

As if his hands mirror his cheeks,
With a fire, a warming glare.
His hands, his cheeks, my heart:
Flare upon flare upon flare.

When scolders rebuke him,
And heap on me their words of shame,
Their censure and their blame:
Inane, inane, inane.

I swear: the world is a bride,
Whose veil was lifted by dew.
Its violet, narcissus and rose:
Hue upon hue upon hue.

From blood of pitcher let us shed the wine,
Such rain must not move out.
My pitcher, my glass, and morning mists:
Cloud upon cloud upon cloud.

Drink to the full! Sober means serious,
And the New Year deserves your toast and brew.
Your way, your drinking and singing girls:
So true, so true, so true.

3. Elegy for a drinking companion

ʿAbdullah ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 908) was an Abbasid royal poet and literary critic, and leader of the ‘modernist’ school of poets who insisted, against the backward-looking critics, that good poetry could be found in any age. The elegy here is a singular mix of sorrow and sarcasm, increasing its pathos, and displays the poet’s much-admired figural style. The dead companion, Abuʾl Tayyib, was a Shiʿite and so inimical to the Abbasids.

O Abuʾl Tayyib, who will grace our gatherings now? Who will quaff the wine?
A cup in the evening, another at dawn!
Who will drink from wineskins whose upturned spouts
Are like black men fallen in battle, their loin-cloths stripped away?
Who will frequent the wine keeper’s tavern, to be given cups to drink,
Upon which you’d fall prostrate, hands and neck fluttering?
And how many a dawn you ushered in, muezzin-like, with a snort,
Sending sleep flying from every terrified neighbour!
And how many a handclap for a song you heard,
Like a bird flapping its wings when driven from its longed-for nest!
And how many a morning, when prayer time came,
You pretended to ignore, reeling in drunken stupor!
How many a slave girl you went to sleep atop of,
Swimming over her as if riding the sea’s high waves!
How many a comely cup bearer, unwilling, you nailed down
To insert the L of your crotch in the O of his back!
And how many a counsellor would say to you ‘Repent!’
But you disobeyed him, turning upon him with curses and rebukes.
Although you kept silent while others disputed,
Yet your looks said it all: A curse upon the mother of Abu Bakr!¹
Remember how you swindled money from the Rawafid,² claiming
You were the Bab,³ plenipotentiary?
And how, if they held back payment in some year of hardship,
You would forsake your friends, making false excuses and staying away?
The cup bearer would then become idle,
His vessels dry of wine.
But if later the Rawafid paid up in full
You looked more pleased with yourself than flies upon dung.
You would mount an ill-bred horse, upright,
Like a monkey on a runaway sheep!
You would allude to some arcane knowledge, concealed in your heart,
To be kept hidden from commoners, in secret or in open.
But were someone to claim he was a scholar,
In some field of history, grammar or poetry, you would mock him
Laughing and marvelling,
As if you did not know that you do not know!
And if the cup bearer errs, pouring you three goblets at once,
What a rebuke he will hear!
But were a bat to fly past, you would become interested,
And lecture us on what fate holds in store.

Lord of Forgiveness, forgive him!
He stands before You, laden heavy with sins.
Illness and travel had drawn us apart: he is now dead.
And we are even further apart,
Until the Day of Final Gathering.

¹ Abu Bakr (d. 634): first successor of Muhammad and first caliph of Islam, considered illegitimate by some Shiʿites.
² Rawafid: A derogatory term for the Shiʿites. ³ Bab: an early Shiʿite religious official.
BEDOUIN CHIVALRY

4. A Bedouin and his guest

Al-Hutay’ah (d. circa 661) was a pre- and early Islamic poet and a wanderer, much feared for his malice. Only nominally a Muslim, the poet here evokes the chivalry and generosity of pre-Islamic nomadism.

Furrowed by a three-day hunger,
With a strap tied to his belly,
A skeleton he was,
In a wilderness where no dweller had ever left a trace.

Harsh was he in character,
Averse to human warmth;
So harsh that his wretchedness, to him, was a blessing.

He had withdrawn to a gorge, with an old wife,
And three ghostly children:
Dumb beasts you’d imagine them,
Barefoot they were, and naked.
Never had they fed on baked bread,
Never, since their birth, had they tasted wheat.

In the darkness he glimpsed a shadow, and was afraid.
But when a guest was revealed, he grew anxious and distressed.
When his son saw his confusion, ‘Father,’ he said,
‘Here, take and sacrifice me that you may feed him.

Do not plead hardship, for this passer-by might think us rich,
And heap abuse upon us.’

He pondered a while and turned away,
Though he did not slay his son, he almost did.

As the two of them conversed,
A herd of onagers appeared from afar,
Strung in a line behind their buck.

Thirsty was the herd, as it made for water.
He slunk towards them:
More thirsty was he for their blood.

He stayed his hand until they’d quenched their thirst,
Then from his quiver let fly an arrow into their midst.
A female, plump, young, its foal beside her,
Collapsed. Full fleshed was she and fattened.

Imagine his joy as he dragged her to his family!
Imagine their joy when they saw her bleeding wound!
They retired, their dignity reclaimed,
For they had done well by their guest;
No loss of face and a trophy won.
So cheerful was the father that he seemed
Like a father to their guest;
So friendly was the mother that she seemed
Like a mother to him.
FRIVOLOUS LOVE

5. A girl called Hind

‘Umar ibn Abi Rabī‘a (d. 711) was a Meccan aristocrat. Best known for his frivolous love poetry, he often stalked female pilgrims to Mecca.

If only Hind would keep her promise to me!
If only she’d cure my heartache!
Would that she’d act like a despot, just once,
For only the impotent are undespotic.
They say she asked her girlfriends, one day,
Having shed her clothes, seeking coolness:
‘Am I truly as he describes me – swear to me by God!
Or does he not do me justice?’
They burst out laughing;
‘Beauty’, they said, ‘is in the eye of the admirer.’
It was envy of her they harboured,
And envy has ever plagued mankind.
A maiden with soft and dewy mouth which, when open,
Reveals teeth like tiny white flowers, or else hailstones.
Her eyes are round, intensely white, intensely black,
Her neck supple and smooth.
Soft is her skin and cool in midsummer,
When the heat is blazing,
But warm in winter, a blanket to her young lover,
Beneath the night sky, when cold overspreads.

And I remember when once I said to her,
As tears streamed down my cheeks,
I said: ‘Who are you?’
She said: ‘I am one wasted by love, ravaged by sorrow.
We are the people of Khayf, from the region of Mina.
If we kill someone, none dares take revenge.’
‘Aha!’ I cried. ‘You are just what I want! And your name?’
‘I am Hind,’ she said.
My heart was dazed, smitten by her lance-like figure,
Decked in finest silk, all of a piece.
‘Yes, indeed,’ I muttered, ‘your clan is our neighbour. They and we are one.’

They tell me she put a spell on me – how lovely that spell!
Every time I ask her: ‘When do we meet?’
Hind laughs and says: ‘Day after tomorrow.’

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1 Khayf and 2 Mina: localities near Mecca.
MELANCHOLY

6. A rain cloud

Abu al-ʿAlaʾ al-Maʿarri (d. 1057) was a reclusive, blind Syrian poet and man of letters, whose enigmatic, melancholic and religiously sceptical verse has led some to call him a ‘freethinker’ and ensured him a controversial though central status in Arabic literature.

A rain cloud:
The sea had given its caravans to drink.
Once quenched, it took wing to high ground, jubilant.
But the king of the winds rose up to it with his troops,
And scattered it, unwilling, unfulfilled.

I wept for that cloud, having missed its quest,
Though neither its longing nor its passion was mine.

So too the nights:
They’re never generous when a creature pleads,
Never faithful to their promise.

HERETICAL VERSE

7. Faith and unbelief

Abu al-ʿAlaʾ al-Maʿarri. Here his religious scepticism is explicit.

Faith and unbelief, stories narrated,
Qurʾan recited, Torah and Evangel.
In every generation there are legends that people believe in;
Was there ever a generation known solely for right guidance?