



Reconfiguring Tradition in Arabic Poetry: Ethics, Memory, and the Poetics of Continuity

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Abstract

This study investigates the literary tradition of Arabic poetry through a critical engagement with T.S. Eliot's essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Eliot's perspective remains foundational to understanding tradition as a dynamic relationship between the past and the present. Yet, it is also rooted in a Western literary canon and largely centred on aesthetic order, formal continuity, and canonical reconfiguration. This study, therefore, treats Eliot not as a universal model to be applied unchanged to Arabic poetry, but as a theoretical interlocutor whose limits become visible when placed in dialogue with a different poetic tradition. It argues that Arabic poetry not only confirms but also goes beyond Eliot's model, revealing tradition as an ethically charged and culturally remembered continuum. Drawing on ethical criticism and cultural memory theory, this study examines selected Arabic poets across classical, revivalist, and modernist periods: al-Mutanabbi, Abū Nuwās, Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī, Aḥmad Shawqī, Badr Shakir al-Sayyāb, Adonis, 'Abd Allāh al-Baradūnī, and Maḥmūd Darwish. It applies a comparative reading to trace how the Arabic poetic tradition has been consolidated, disrupted, revived, transformed, reconstructed, and rearticulated. The study concludes that the Arabic poetic tradition is neither a stable archive nor a sequence of inherited forms. Rather, it is an ethically oriented and culturally remembered continuum through which aesthetic continuity, moral value, historical consciousness, collective memory, and cultural identity intersect under changing historical and existential conditions.

Keywords: Arabic poetry, Tradition, T. S. Eliot, Cultural memory, Ethical criticism, Poetic continuity.

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إعادة تشكيل التراث الشعري العربي: البعد الأخلاقي، والذاكرة، وشعرية الاستمرارية

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ملخص:

تتناول الدراسة التراث الشعري العربي من خلال قراءة نقدية لمقالة ت. س. إليوت الشهيرة "التقليد والموهبة الفردية". فعلى الرغم من أن تصور إليوت ما يزال أساسياً في فهم العلاقة الحية بين الماضي والحاضر، فإن هذا التصور يظل متصلاً بسياقه الغربي، ومشدوداً في جانب كبير منه إلى النظام الجمالي، واستمرار الأشكال، وإعادة ترتيب العلاقة بين النصوص داخل المتن الأدبي. ومن ثم، لا تتعامل هذه الدراسة مع تصور إليوت بوصفه أنموذجاً كلياً يمكن نقله إلى الشعر العربي وتطبيقه عليه كما هو، بل تتخذه مدخلاً نظرياً للحوار والمساءلة. فمن خلال قراءة الشعر العربي في ضوء هذا التصور، تكشف الدراسة حدود رؤية إليوت حين تواجه تجربة شعرية مغايرة، تتداخل فيها الاستمرارية الجمالية مع الذاكرة الثقافية، والقيمة الأخلاقية، والوعي التاريخي. وتستند الدراسة في مقاربتها إلى النقد الأخلاقي ونظرية الذاكرة الثقافية، متخذةً من نماذج مختارة لشعراء عرب ينتمون إلى مراحل كلاسيكية وإحيائية وحداثية مادةً للتحليل، وهم: المتنبي، وأبو نواس، ومحمود سامي البارودي، وأحمد شوقي، وبدر شاكر السياب، وأدونيس، وعبد الله البردوني، ومحمود درويش. وتعتمد الدراسة، في ذلك، مقارنةً مقارنة تتبّع مسارات تشكّل التراث الشعري العربي وتحولاته، من ترسيخ السلطة الشعرية، إلى خلخلة القيم الموروثة، ثم إحياء الماضي، وتحويل رموزه، وإعادة بنائه وصوغه من جديد. وتبين الدراسة أن التراث ليس أرشيفاً ساكناً، ولا سلسلة جامدة من الأشكال المتوارثة، بل هو مجال حي للحوار والمساءلة وإعادة التأويل، تتقاطع فيه الاستمرارية الجمالية مع القيمة الأخلاقية، والوعي التاريخي، والذاكرة الجمعية، والهوية الثقافية. وبذلك تبلور الدراسة فهماً للتراث بوصفه عملية متجددة تمكن اللغة الشعرية من حفظ الماضي، ومساءلته، واستدعاء صوته من جديد في ظل شروط تاريخية ووجودية متغيرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر العربي، التراث الشعري، ت. س. إليوت، الذاكرة الثقافية، النقد الأخلاقي.

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1. Introduction

The concept of tradition holds a decisive place in modern literary criticism because it names the difficult relation between inheritance and renewal. Few modern statements of this relation have been as influential as Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1975). According to Eliot, tradition is not a passive inheritance but an acquired historical sense. It is a discipline through which the poet perceives both the pastness of earlier works and their continued presence in the present Eliot's (1975). Eliot's perspective is powerful because it rejects the romantic myth of isolated originality. So-called "new" poems, he argues, do not arise from private self-expression alone; they take shape within an already established literary order and, once written, subtly alter that order. Tradition is therefore not a museum of static forms but a structure of relations in which past and present continually revise one another.

The strength of Eliot's model is also its limit. His theory explains formal relation, canonical pressure, and the aesthetic ordering and reordering of literary history, but it does not fully explain how tradition operates as ethical memory, cultural inheritance, historical burden, or collective self-understanding. An inherited poem is never merely a predecessor; it may also be a moral witness, a symbolic archive, a language of belonging, or a site of dispute. This is especially true in Arabic poetry, where the past often enters the present through more than an echo. It enters through images of authority, desert, ruin, love, loss, homeland, exile, prophecy, revolt, and remembrance. The Arabic poetic tradition is thus not merely repeated or rejected; it is alive, argued with, judged, revived, displaced, and reclaimed.

The present study, therefore, begins with Eliot but does not stop there. It treats his essay as a foundational point of departure and then extends the discussion through ethical criticism and cultural memory theory. Ethical criticism provides a way to understand literature as a field of value, judgment, human significance, and moral perception (Booth, 1988; Nussbaum, 1990). Cultural memory theory explains how texts preserve and reorganise collective meanings across time (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). In this study, tradition is not defined narrowly as aesthetic continuity, although it remains one important dimension. Rather, tradition is understood as a historically transmitted and continually reactivated field of poetic forms, symbolic resources, ethical values, cultural memories, and interpretive practices. When these two perspectives are brought into conversation with Eliot, tradition becomes not merely a relation between inherited forms, but a dynamic continuum in which form, value, memory, and historical consciousness meet.

This study argues that Arabic poetry confirms Eliot's core insight that the past and present reshape one another. It also presses this insight further. Through a selection of Arab poets extending from al-Mutanabbī and Abū Nuwās to al-Bārūdī, Shawqī, al-Sayyāb, Adonis, al-Baradūnī, and Darwīsh, this study shows that tradition operates in many ways: consolidation, internal rupture, revival, public rearticulation, symbolic

transformation, critical reconstruction, historical conscience, and lived identity. These modes of tradition do not appear in a linear evolution. Rather, they reveal the plurality of ways in which Arabic poetry has made the past speak again under altered cultural, political, and existential conditions.

This study is guided by three related questions. First, how does Eliot's concept of tradition help illuminate the relation between past and present in Arabic poetry? Second, in what respect does his model become insufficient for understanding Arabic poetic nuance? Third, how can ethical criticism and cultural memory theory help specify how value, memory, identity, and historical responsibility operate within Arabic poetic tradition, especially in ways that Eliot's primarily aesthetic model does not fully account for? The main contribution of this study is not to claim that these dimensions are absent from all definitions of tradition, but to develop an integrated theoretical model for reading their specific interaction in Arabic poetry. Arabic poetry is not used here simply to apply Eliot's perspective; it is used to test the limits of his theory and to develop a broader model of tradition attentive to form, value, memory, identity, and historical responsibility.

2. Literature Review: Tradition, Poetic Continuity, and Cultural Reconfiguration

The study of literary tradition has increasingly moved away from treating the past as a fixed archive and toward understanding tradition as a dynamic field of selection, reactivation, and transformation. In contemporary literary criticism, this shift has been especially visible in discussions of literary inheritance, canon formation, intertextual relations, and the historical dynamics that shape the value of poetry. Studies on Eliot's idea of tradition have shown that his ideas remain relevant not because they celebrate continuity, but because his perspective reimagines literary originality as a relation between individual works and an inherited order of meaning (Morgenstern, 2007). However, later comparative approaches have complicated this view by showing that literary traditions do not exist in a vacuum. They are shaped by language hegemony, translation, institutional recognition, canon formation, and unequal cultural power (Almond, 2017; Kim, 2018; Wager, 2017). Recent work on Arabic and Persian modernism enhances this argument by showing that modern poetic innovation in these languages emerged not only through encounters with Europe, but also through Arabic-Persian literary exchange and prosodic experimentation. It also developed through transregional networks of poetic influence, translation, publication, and intellectual debate (Thompson, 2022). These studies are valuable for the present one because they allow tradition to be read not as a static literary phenomenon, but as a contested structure through which cultures remember, authorise, and revise themselves. Classical Arabic poetry provides an important foundation for this discussion because the tradition developed a sophisticated understanding of poetic excellence long before modern theories of intertextuality and literary tradition. Arabic literary criticism did not reduce poetry to mere ornamentation or emotion. Rather, it examined the relations among wording, arrangement, rhetorical force, semantic precision,



imagination, and inherited forms of eloquence. Al-Jurjani's (2004) theory of *nazm* remains central to classical Arabic literary criticism because it locates meaning in the organic relation between syntax, semantic structure, and rhetorical arrangement, rather than in isolated words or decorative figures.

Al-Qayrawani's (1982) perspective on poetic authorship similarly shows that Arabic poetry has long been understood through a complex interaction of talent, convention, form, memory, and judgment. Al-Qartajanni (1966) continues this tradition by linking poetic composition to imagination, persuasion, affect, and the purposeful construction of meaning. Recent studies have returned to al-Qartajanni's ideas, particularly his theory of imagery and his engagement with Greek and Islamic traditions of poetic thought (Al-Osaily et al., 2024). These Arabic sources are important because they show that the concept of tradition was never merely for preservation in Arabic linguistic culture; it was long concerned with arrangement, transformation, rhetorical effect, and the renewal of inherited expressive forms.

Modern scholarship on classical Arabic poetry supports the preceding argument that Arabic poetic tradition was never merely preservative, but was shaped by complex structures of form, symbol, memory, and rhetorical effect. Studies of the classical *qasidah* genre have shown that premodern Arabic poetry was constructed using highly organised patterns of address, memory, journey, praise, loss, and symbolic return (Sells, 1989; Stetkevych, 1991). Meisami's (2003) comparative work on medieval Arabic and Persian lyric poetry similarly demonstrates that continuity in Islamic literary traditions was not mere mechanical repetition but a nuanced use of compositional strategies, rhetorical sequencing, and inherited poetic formulas. Abdul-Raof's (2006) study of Arabic rhetoric contends that Arabic literary expression depends on pragmatic and stylistic relations among form, intention, audience, and effect. Moreover, these studies provide a relevant basis for reading Arabic poetic tradition as structured and semantically charged.

Several studies of modern Arabic literature have challenged the common assumption that modernity requires a clean rupture from tradition. For instance, Allen's (2000) survey of Arabic literary history presents modern Arabic literature as part of a long continuum of development, linguistic negotiation, and cultural adaptation. Lyons's (1977) account of modern Arabic poetry similarly demonstrates that twentieth-century poetic innovation emerged through engaging with inherited diction, metre, imagery, and public relevance rather than through an abandonment of the past. Jayyusi's (1977) study of modern Arabic poetic movements similarly shows that modernist experimentation developed through tension between continuity and rebellion, especially in relation to metre, myth, symbol, and national consciousness. Al-Musawi's (2006) work likewise examines how modern Arabic poetry negotiates with tradition even when it appears to challenge inherited forms, because the modern poem often depends on inherited cultural memory in order to produce critique, renewal, or rupture. More recent scholarship on Arabic-Persian modernist poetry strengthens Musawi's

perspective by showing that modernist poetic forms in Arabic should move away from Western-centric critiques, towards wider transregional literary exchanges and debates about form, commitment, and innovation (Thompson, 2022). These studies support the central aim of this study: to demonstrate that modern Arabic poetic forms do not negate tradition but instead rely on it as an intense mode of reconfiguration.

The relation between tradition and modernity in Arabic literature has been examined through broader comparative and historical frameworks. Boullata & DeYoung's (1997) edited volume on tradition and modernity in Arabic literature shows that modern Arabic writing emerged through selective adaptation, recovery, transformation, and dialogue with both indigenous and foreign forms. Athamneh's (2017) study of modern Arabic poetry after the 1950s adds a political dimension to this discussion by showing how revolution, conflict, and public crisis shaped the symbolic and ethical functions of poetic language. Adonis's (1974) critical work *al-Thabit wa-al-Mutahawwil* is also significant because it theorises Arabic literary history by exploring the tension between permanence and transformation, obedience and creativity, and inherited authority and radical renewal. More recently, Al-Musawi's (2026) study of poetic desire, literary borrowing, and accusations of outright "theft" likewise demonstrates that Arabic literary production has long involved a culture of reuse, transformation, rivalry, and creative appropriation. These studies support the present study's aim to read poets such as al-Sayyāb, Adonis, al-Baradūnī, and Darwīsh not as writers outside of tradition, but as poets who force tradition to undergo crisis, reconstruction, and revision.

Ethical approaches to literature have shown that literary form is inseparable from questions of responsibility, judgment, response, and value. Miller's (1987) account of ethical reading argues that interpretation is never merely technical because reading places the critic in a position of responsibility to language and otherness. Newton's (1995) work on narrative ethics similarly defines literature through its reciprocal claims that bind the author and their audience.

Attridge's (2004) account of literary singularity adds that the ethical force of literature is not only in its explicit moral content but also in its role regarding alterity, invention, and critical reading. Phelan's (2007) rhetorical theory of narrative judgment further strengthens this point by showing that literary interpretation involves layered acts of reader evaluation and response. Although these studies are not limited to poetry, they are useful for this study because they support reading the Arabic poetic tradition as a domain of value rather than merely as a literary form.

Studies on cultural memory add another dimension to the discussion. The representation of memory has been theorised as a process through which literary texts preserve, reshape, and contest collective meanings across time (Neumann, 2008). Rigney's (2012) work on the so-called afterlife of literature shows



that texts continue to act historically after their first moment of production because they are continuously reactivated by later audiences, institutions, and cultural crises. Huyssen's (2003) account of modern memory culture further demonstrates that the present often turns to the past not for passive preservation, but because cultural memory becomes more relevant during periods of rupture, displacement, and historical anxiety. Rothberg's (2009) concept of multidirectional memory is also useful because it rejects the idea of memory as a sealed or exclusive archive and instead treats it as dialogic, relational, and open to new historical configurations. These perspectives help explain why Arabic poetic tradition often includes themes and images such as ruin, homeland, prophetic echo, martyrdom, exile, teacher, desert, rain, and voice: such images are not merely decorative motifs but methods of cultural remembrance.

Recent research on Darwish illustrates the importance of reading Arabic poetry as a site of collective memory, justice, and reclamation. Alhirthani's (2024) study of Darwish's "Identity Card" and "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" argues that these poems are not only literary texts but also function as politically charged sources of translation, circulation, reception, and counter-narration. This is relevant to the present study's main argument because Darwish's poetry does not merely inherit tradition; it transforms poetic language into a tool of historical presence, collective identity, and ethical witness. In this sense, recent scholarship on Darwish's work supports this study's broader claim that Arabic poetic tradition cannot be reduced to a standard or static canon. It must be read as a living structure of memory, justice, and communal self-understanding.

Existing scholarship on Arabic poetry therefore provides three main foundations for the present study. First, studies of literary tradition and world literature generally show that tradition is relational, historically mediated, and shaped by cultural outlook. Second, studies of the Arabic poetic tradition and modern Arabic poetry show that Arabic literary history has developed through ongoing negotiated continuity rather than sudden rupture. Third, ethical criticism and cultural memory theory show that poetic inheritance carries value, responsibility, and collective memory. However, one area that requires further work is the development of an integrated model that brings these three strands together in the reading of Arabic poetry. This study fills this gap by arguing that Arabic poetic tradition should be understood as an ethically charged and culturally remembered continuum: a living order that survives because it can be renewed, challenged, reconstructed, and reinhabited under changing historical conditions.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study combines three interdependent theoretical perspectives: Eliot's theory of tradition, ethical criticism, and cultural memory theory. The first perspective clarifies a logic of continuity. Eliot's (1975) "historical sense" requires the poet to perceive the past not as dead chronology but

as a simultaneous order that continues to shape the present. This idea is important because it allows tradition to be read dynamically. A poem does not simply follow earlier poems; it enters a field already populated by prior meanings and modifies that field by its added presence.

The second perspective is ethical criticism, represented here through Booth's (1988) account of the ethical force of literary encounter and Nussbaum's (1990) account of literature's relation to moral perception, judgment, and ethical understanding. While Eliot's model explains how a poem belongs to a literary order, ethical criticism asks what kinds of value, judgment, and human significance are implied by that belonging. The ethical dimension is important to this study because Arabic poetry often lends itself to public judgment, social critique, existential affirmation, and cultural obligation. A classical motif may carry cultural authority, whereas a revivalist form may express nationalist pedagogy. In particular, a modern poetic form might carry the scars of exile or a historical rupture. Ethical criticism thus ensures that tradition is not merely seen as the repetition of technique. It reveals how form becomes charged with responsibility.

The third perspective focuses on cultural memory. Tradition endures not only because texts survive materially, but because communities continue to recognise, reinterpret, and mobilise them. Cultural memory theory helps clarify how a poem can function as a memory-object: not simply a preserved artefact, but a symbolic structure through which collective identity is narrated and contested (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). In this sense, tradition is a field of remembrance. It is carried in poetry by quotations, allusions, rhythms, images, public recitations, educational institutions, national narratives, and intergenerational reading practices.

This study's theoretical framework can therefore be summarised as follows: Eliot supplies the aesthetic principle of relation; ethical criticism supplies the principle of value; and cultural memory theory supplies the principle of collective remembrance. These theories produce a concept of tradition as an ethically charged, culturally remembered continuum. This conceptual synthesis is illustrated in Figure 1, which presents the relationship among Eliot's theory of tradition, ethical criticism, and cultural memory theory, and shows how they guide the analysis of Arabic poetry.

Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Model of Literary Tradition

ELIOT'S THEORY OF TRADITION		
Historical Sense: Pastness and Presence		
Simultaneous Literary Order: Relation between Past and New Works		
Three Interrelated Analytical Dimensions		
Aesthetic Continuity	Ethical Orientation	Cultural Memory
Application to Arabic Poetry: Authority; Rupture; Revival; Public Rearticulation; Symbolic Transformation; Critical Reconstruction; Historical Conscience; Lived Identity		



4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven methodology grounded in comparative literary analysis. This approach aligns with comparative literary methodology, where texts are read relationally across traditions, historical moments, and theoretical frameworks rather than as isolated literary objects (Zepetnek, 1998). It does not aim to offer a comprehensive survey of Arabic poetry or to provide statistical data. Instead, it is meant to be purposive and interpretive: the poets selected were chosen because each exemplifies a unique way in which Arabic poetry engages with tradition. The corpus, therefore, functions as a theoretical case study rather than a detailed archive. It moves from classical authority and internal disruption to revival, modern transformation, radical reconstruction, critical memory, and existential continuity.

Thus, the decision to include the eight poets mentioned is methodological rather than illustrative. Using a smaller corpus of two or three poets could enable more detailed analysis of each case, but it would also diminish this study's main argument that tradition functions as a spectrum of historically evolving modes. Al-Mutanabbī and Abū Nuwās establish two possibilities within the classical canon: consolidation and disruption. Al-Bārūdī and Shawqī show how the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century revival did not simply repeat the past but redirected it toward recovery, pedagogy, and public value. Al-Sayyāb and Adonis demonstrate that modernity does not abolish tradition; it transforms, fractures, and reconstructs it. Finally, al-Baradūnī and Darwīsh show that tradition may become historical conscience and lived identity. The value of the corpus lies in this varied architecture.

The poets are not treated as equivalent historical units or as representatives of entire periods. Rather, each functions as a critical node in this study's argument. This approach is appropriate for a theoretical study because, as noted, the aim is not to write a literary history of Arabic poetry, but to build a conceptual model from a selection of examples. These examples serve as characteristic examples of how wider poetic orientations become visible. This use of selected examples is appropriate for qualitative textual analysis, which examines how texts organise meaning within specific cultural and interpretive contexts (McKee, 2003). This method also avoids the problem of treating tradition as an abstract concept detached from textual practice. Every theoretical claim is therefore supported by a specific example drawn from individual poems, even when the discussion moves toward broader conceptual synthesis.

The selection of eight poets necessarily limits the depth of individual close readings. The study also acknowledges the absence of women poets, particularly Nāzīk al-Malā'ika, whose prosodic innovations and modernist interventions warrant dedicated future investigation. The order in which the analysis takes place is deliberate. It begins with authority because the canon must first be established before it can be disrupted, revived, or transformed. It then moves through rupture and revival to show that continuity and critique are

both integral to the tradition. The sections on modernism do not present modernity as liberation from the past, but as an intensified struggle with inherited symbolic material. The final sections on al-Baradūnī and Darwish then shift the emphasis from formal and symbolic reconstruction to memory, historical judgment, and existential belonging. The structure of this study, therefore, reflects its central argument: tradition is not one thing, but a sequence of reconfigurations.

The analysis proceeds with close reading supported by comparative conceptual mapping. Each selected example is read in relation to three questions. First, what kind of aesthetic relation does the poem have with inherited poetic forms, images, or rhetorical structures? Second, what ethical orientation does the poem generate through its treatment of authority, value, blame, knowledge, homeland, hunger, identity, or historical accountability? Third, how does the poem activate cultural memory through its use of inherited symbols, collective references, or recognisable poetic techniques or forms? These questions are applied flexibly, because the three dimensions often overlap within a single line or image of poetry.

The analytical approach in this study is therefore layered. The first layer identifies form and symbolism, through exploring elements such as metre, diction, trope, image, genre memory, and allusive structure. This layered attention to form is also supported by recent formalist approaches to literary form that identify connections among aesthetic pattern, social meaning, and historical interpretation (Levine, 2015). The second layer examines how inherited poetic forms, symbols, and meanings are transformed through inversion, displacement, re-accentuation, fragmentation, and re-semanticisation. Finally, the third layer interprets the ethical and mnemonic significance of these textual transformations. This layered approach allows the discussion to avoid two common pitfalls: treating tradition as mere formal inheritance and treating modern innovation as a simple rupture. This study instead views tradition as a field of contested continuity.

Because this study engages Arabic poetry through analysis in English, transliteration and translation are used for clarity. The translations are functional rather than formally poetic. The purpose of this method of translation is to support this study's central argument rather than to replace the Arabic text. Thus, the interpretive claims offered here remain grounded in the Arabic wording and in the theoretical framework rather than in the English renderings alone.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis is organised to answer the study's three research questions through a sequence of selected poetic examples. First, it shows how Eliot's concept of tradition illuminates the relation between past and present in Arabic poetry by tracing how each poet enters into dialogue with inherited forms, images, and symbolic structures. Second, it identifies the limits of Eliot's primarily aesthetic model by showing that the Arabic poetic tradition cannot be explained through formal continuity alone. Third, it demonstrates how

ethical criticism and cultural memory theory help account for the values, memories, identities, and historical responsibilities that are carried by the Arabic poetic inheritance. The eight poets are therefore not treated as a chronological survey, but as analytical examples through which the study's integrated model is tested and developed.

Figure 2. Developmental Trajectory of Arabic Poetic Tradition

al-Mutanabbī - Authority (Consolidation of Tradition)
Abū Nuwās - Rupture (Internal Disruption)
al-Bārūdī - Revival (Conscious Re-appropriation)
Aḥmad Shawqī - Cultural Re-articulation
al-Sayyāb - Transformation (Symbolic Re-inscription)
Adonis - Reconstruction (Epistemic Disruption)
al-Baradūnī - Critical Memory (Historical Conscience)
Darwīsh - Lived Identity (Existential Continuity)

5.1 al-Mutanabbī: Tradition as Authority and Cultural Permanence

Table 1. Selected poetic lines from al-Mutanabbī

Arabic	Transliteration	English Literal Translation
وما الدهر إلا من رواة قصائدي	<i>wa mā al-dahru illā min ruwāti qaṣā'idī</i>	Time itself is but a narrator of my poems,
إذا قلت شعراً أصبح الدهر منشداً	<i>idhā qultu shi'ran aṣḥaba al-dahru munshidā</i>	and whenever I compose a verse, time becomes its reciter.
أنا ترب الندى ورب القوافي	<i>anā turbu al-nadā wa rabbu al-qawāfi</i>	I am the companion of generosity and the lord of rhyme,
وسمام العدا وغيظ الحسود	<i>wa sumāmu al-'adā wa ghayzu al-ḥasūd</i>	the poison of enemies and the rage of the envious.

Al-Mutanabbī represents tradition as a means of cultural consolidation. His poetic voice does not merely participate in an inherited order; it seeks to dominate the very terms by which that order is remembered. His famous assertion that time becomes a narrator of his poems transforms his poetry from an artistic act into a force of cultural permanence. This line is not modestly conscious of tradition. Rather, it is commanding in its claim that poetic utterances can compel time itself to become a transmitter of fame. In Eliot's view, the poet joins tradition, but al-Mutanabbī radicalises this entrance by imagining tradition as answerable to his own voice. This interpretation is reinforced by Larkin's (2008) account of al-Mutanabbī as a

poet whose career and style are inseparable from Abbasid ideals of authority, ambition, poetic prestige, and public image.

The aesthetic dimension is evident in the rhetorical grandeur of this claim. The line in Table 1 depends on several factors, including classical balance, amplification, and personification. *Al-dahr*, which means time or fate, is converted into a reciter. The force of the verse, however, is not confined to its poetic structure and rhetorical devices. The poem ethically constructs a self whose authority derives from attributes such as eloquence, courage, and the power to impose meaning. This is a daring and historically revealing ethical posture: poetic greatness, in this context, becomes a form of sovereignty. Regarding cultural memory, the line demonstrates its own survival. It imagines poetry itself as the medium through which the poet defeats disappearance and enters collective remembrance. Tradition here is not a neutral archive; it is an arena in which the poet's voice struggles for permanence.

Al-Mutanabbī therefore indicates both the usefulness and the insufficiency of Eliot's view. Nevertheless, he confirms Eliot's claim that tradition is an order of relation, but he also reveals that this order is saturated with power, prestige, and cultural value. In other words, tradition is not simply adjusted by a new work; it is seized, personalised, and used to exert authority.

5.2 Abū Nuwās: Internal Rupture and the Reversal of Inherited Codes

Table 2. Selected poetic lines from Abū Nuwās

Arabic	Transliteration	English Translation
دع عنك لومي فإن اللوم إغراء	<i>da' anka lawmī fa-inna al-lawma ighrā'u</i>	Leave off your blame, for blame itself is temptation,
وداوني بالتي كانت هي الداء	<i>wa dāwinī bi-allatī kānat hiya al-dā'u</i>	and cure me with that which was itself the disease.
ألا فاسقني خمرًا وقل لي هي الخمر	<i>alā fasqinī khamran wa qul lī hiya al-khamru</i>	Come, pour me wine and tell me plainly: it is wine,
ولا تسقني سرًا إذا أمكن الجهر	<i>wa lā tasqinī sirran idhā amkana al-jahru</i>	and do not serve it to me in secret when openness is possible.

Abū Nuwās occupies a different position in the continuum of tradition. He does not reject the inherited order from the outside. Instead, he disrupts it from within. On the surface, the formal structure of his poetry remains recognisably classical, but the ethical vocabulary of inherited ideas is inverted. Blame, which is supposed to discipline one's desire, becomes the very force that intensifies it. Disease, which should be avoided, becomes a cure. The line in Table 2 is not a break from tradition but a subtle form of internal sabotage, turning tradition against its own moral standards. Kennedy's (1997) study of Abū Nuwās and the

classical Arabic wine-poem tradition is useful here because it shows how Abū Nuwās's *khamriyyāt* (literally, "wine poems") transform inherited poetic codes while still remaining deeply embedded in the Arabic literary tradition.

From Eliot's perspective, Abū Nuwās enters the existing traditional order and alters it, but this alteration occurs through inversion rather than reverent continuity. The inherited language remains noticeable, which is precisely why the equally noticeable rupture has force. If Abū Nuwās had abandoned the tradition entirely, this contradiction would lose its sharpness. Instead, he retains the old rhetorical instruments, bending them towards contrary meaning. In ethical terms, the line destabilises fixed categories of blame, desire, remedy, and transgression. It does not simply celebrate indulgence; it exposes the instability of moral language when it confronts vices like appetite, pleasure, and social hypocrisy.

At the level of cultural memory, Abū Nuwās reminds us that tradition is never internally uniform. The canon preserves not only authority and decorum but also more subversive elements such as irony, scandal, and resistance. This complicates any account of the Arabic literary tradition as merely conservative or continuous. Abū Nuwās also shows that renewal may arise from contradiction, and that a tradition capable of remembering him is already one capable of remembering its own tensions.

5.3 Al-Bārūdī: Revival as Conscious Re-appropriation

Table 3. Selected poetic lines from Al-Bārūdī

Arabic	Transliteration	English Translation
أَقِيلِي اللّوْمَ عَاذَلْ وَالْعَتَابَا	<i>aqillī al-lawma 'ādhlā wa-l-ʿitābā</i>	Reduce your blame, reproach, and rebuke,
وَقُولِي إِنْ أَصَبْتُ لَقَدْ أَصَابَا	<i>wa qūlī in aṣabtu laqad aṣābā</i>	and say, if I have judged rightly, that I was indeed right.
وَكَمْ قَائِلٍ قَدْ قَالَ فِينَا فَلَمْ نَجِدْ	<i>wa kam qā'ilin qad qāla fīnā fa-lam najid</i>	How many a speaker has spoken of us, yet we found
لِمَقَالَتِهِ وَقَعًا وَلَا كَانَ مَصْدَرًا	<i>li-maqālatihī waq'an wa-lā kāna maṣḍarā</i>	no force in his speech, nor any lasting source of meaning.

For Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī, tradition becomes an act of conscious return. His poetry captures a revivalist moment in which classical form is not passively inherited but deliberately repossessed. This distinction matters because revival is often mistaken for imitation. In al-Bārūdī's case, the return to older structures of Arabic poetry arises from a historical context marked by political displacement, cultural decline, colonial pressure, and the need to restore dignity to poetic speech. The old form returns not because the present is devoid of innovation, but because the present has become unstable and requires a language of authority, balance, and recovery.



The first line in Table 3, "Reduce your blame, reproach, and rebuke," preserves the rhythm, rhetorical tone, and rhythmic flow typical of classical Arabic poetry. Yet the line is not merely ornamental or imitative. The address to the reproaching figure recalls an inherited convention, but al-Bārūdī reworks it as a gesture of self-examination and moral positioning. The second line, "and say, if I have judged rightly, that I was indeed right," deepens this movement from complaint to judgment. The speaker does not simply reject reproach; he asks that his position be measured against truth. This turns the conventional address into a demand for fairness and restores a standard by which speech and judgment can be evaluated.

The following lines strengthen this concern with the value of speech: "How many a speaker has spoken about us, yet we found / no force in his speech, nor any lasting source of meaning." Here al-Bārūdī contrasts mere utterance with effective poetic speech. The terms "force" and "source of meaning" suggest that language must possess weight, origin, and consequence. Speech is judged not by its occurrence alone, but by its capacity to leave an effect and carry authority. In this sense, the poem becomes a reflection on poetic authority itself: empty speech disappears, while speech marked by judgment and dignity becomes capable of entering cultural memory.

In Eliot's terms, al-Bārūdī re-enters the existing literary order, but the act of re-entry is historically charged. The inherited form is not treated as a neutral aesthetic structure; it carries the memory of a stronger poetic past and becomes a means of responding to a wounded present. Ethically, al-Bārūdī's revivalism is a search for measure: balance, eloquence, honour, judgment, and self-command. In terms of cultural memory, his poetry turns the classical past into a resource for renewal. Tradition survives because it can be reactivated under pressure. Instead of becoming a relic of lost greatness, inherited form becomes a living source of language through which a later age attempts to regain its voice.

5.4 Aḥmad Shawqī: Public Rearticulation and Ethical Pedagogy

Table 4. Selected poetic lines from Aḥmad Shawqī

Arabic	Transliteration	English Translation
قم للمعلم وفّه التبجيلا	<i>qum lil-mu'allimi waffihi al-tabjilā</i>	Rise for the teacher and accord him due reverence,
كاد المعلم أن يكون رسولا	<i>kāda al-mu'allimu an yakūna rasūlā</i>	for the teacher almost becomes a messenger.
وطني لو شُغِلْتُ بالخلد عنه	<i>waṭanī law shugiltu bi-l-khuldi 'anhu</i>	My homeland-if I were distracted from it by eternity,
نازعتني إليه في الخلد نفسي	<i>nāza'atnī ilayhi fī al-khuldi nafsī</i>	my soul would still yearn for it even in paradise.

Aḥmad Shawqī takes revival further, turning aesthetic restoration into public rearticulation. Like al-Bārūdī, he preserves the formal dignity of classical Arabic poetry, but Shawqī redirects it toward education, nation, public virtue, and collective formation. This is one of the clearest areas where Eliot's model requires expansion. Shawqī's poem not only modifies the literary order; it also addresses the social body. Thus, his poetic form becomes pedagogical, not in a narrow didactic sense, but in the deeper cultural sense of shaping public value.

Table 4 highlights the elevation of the teacher to near-prophetic status, which clearly alludes to Islamic and Arabic cultural memory. The teacher is not merely a professional figure. Teachers in this cultural context are widely associated with transmission, guidance, ethical cultivation, and communal continuity. The poem maintains aesthetic continuity through its metre, diction, and rhetorical style. However, its deeper impact resides in its ethical hierarchy, where knowledge is depicted as sacred work and education serves as the link between inherited civilisation and future progress.

Shawqī's example demonstrates that tradition can become a tool for civic engagement that extends far beyond the confines of the literary canon. Instead, poetry as civic engagement enters schools, national celebrations, public recitations, and collective memory. The poet therefore rearticulates tradition in a manner that Eliot's aesthetic order alone cannot explain. For Shawqī, tradition is not only the relation between old and new poems. It is the relation between poetic inheritance and the moral education of a community.

5.5 Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb: Symbolic Transformation under Modern Crisis

Table 5. Selected poetic lines from Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb

Arabic	Transliteration	English Translation
عيناكِ غابتا نخيل ساعة السحر	<i>'aynāki ghābatā nakhilīn sā'ata al-saḥar</i>	Your eyes are two palm groves at the hour of dawn,
أو شرفتان راح بنأى عنهما القمر	<i>aw shurfatān rāḥa yan'ā 'anhumā al-qamar</i>	or two balconies from which the moon slowly withdraws.
مطر... مطر... مطر...	<i>maṭar... maṭar... maṭar...</i>	Rain... rain... rain...
وفي العراق جوع	<i>wa fī al-'irāqi jū'</i>	and in Iraq there is hunger.

Al-Sayyāb's work marks one of the most decisive transformations in modern Arabic poetry. His innovation lies in the re-semanticisation of inherited symbols under modern historical pressures, without abandoning classical form. Rain is an ancient and common symbol of fertility, renewal, mercy, and life. However, in "Rain Song," the repeated cry for rain is set against hunger. The aim is not a symbolic celebration, but a deliberate contradiction, in which rain, the sign of abundance, appears in a world structured by deprivation or hunger.



This is where Eliot's relational model remains useful. Al-Sayyāb's modernism does not erase the past. DeYoung's (1998) study of al-Sayyāb and postcolonial Iraq locates the latter's poetic innovation within Iraqi history, including postcolonial experiences and the modern Arabic literary transformation. Al-Sayyāb's innovation relies on inherited symbolic memory to expose the fracture of the present. The inclusion of palm groves, dawn, moonlight, rain, land, and Iraq in the poem is not mere decorative imagery. These are symbols of cultural memory. However, their symbolism becomes destabilised when they are placed under the pressure of colonial history, political anxiety, social hunger, and broken national promises.

The poem turns lyrical beauty into an ethical accusation. The repeated use of "rain" in Table 5 both creates a musical effect and functions as a wounded call. This symbol prompts the question of why such a fertile land remains a land of hunger. In cultural-memory terms, rain retains its inherited associations with fertility, renewal, mercy, and life, but al-Sayyāb does not preserve these meanings unchanged. By juxtaposing rain with hunger in Iraq, he transforms the inherited rain image into a symbol of frustrated renewal and unfulfilled abundance. Hunger refers both to material deprivation and to the wider social and political crisis embodied in poverty, disillusionment, and broken national promises. Tradition therefore survives here through re-semanticisation rather than simple preservation: the rain image remains recognisable, but its meaning is reshaped by the pressures of modern Iraqi history.

5.6 Adonis: Critical Reconstruction and Epistemic Disruption

Table 6. Selected poetic lines from Adonis

Arabic	Transliteration	English Translation
هذا هو اسمي	<i>hādhā huwa ismī</i>	This is my name-
ليس لي اسمٌ غير هذا التحول	<i>laysa li ismun ghayru hādhā al-taḥawwul</i>	I have no name other than this transformation.
أنا مفردٌ بصيغة الجمع	<i>anā mufradun bi-ṣiḡhat al-jam'</i>	I am singular in the form of the plural.

Adonis represents perhaps the most radical engagement with tradition in this study. Unlike the other poets mentioned, he does not merely revive, invert, or symbolically transform the past; he subjects it to epistemic disruption. For Adonis, tradition becomes a problem of knowledge, identity, and authority. The line in Table 6, "I have no name other than this transformation", has no fixed cultural inheritance and turns change itself into identity. The self in this poem is no longer secured by things like genealogy, canon, or stable cultural naming. It exists as movement.

Returning once more to Eliot, Adonis pushes the concept of tradition to its limits. Eliot imagines the literary order as modified by new works, yet still recognisable as order. Adonis, by contrast, treats order itself

as something that must be dismantled, questioned, and reconstructed if it is to remain alive. His poetics do not stand outside Arabic tradition. Indeed, much of the force of his poetry comes from its intense dialogue with tradition. However, the dialogue in Adonis's work is adversarial, archaeological, and insurgent, implying that the past is not a sanctuary. Rather, it is a field of buried energies and exhausted authorities. Creswell's (2019) study of poetic modernism helps situate Adonis within the radical modernist debates that reshaped Arabic poetic form, authority, and intellectual freedom in the twentieth century.

Creswell's (2019) situates Adonis within the Beirut-based modernist debates associated with the journal *Shi'r*, where poets questioned conventional metre, inherited literary authority, ideological commitment, and the boundaries of Arabic poetic expression. According to Creswell, Adonis occupies a complex position within these debates. Although he challenges inherited authority and established poetic conventions, he continues to draw on classical Arabic and Qur'anic materials, reworking them as resources for modernist experimentation. Adonis's modernism therefore does not merely reject tradition; it reconstructs it by subjecting inherited forms and meanings to critical scrutiny.

The ethical dimension of Adonis's poetry is apparent in its demand for what Said (1983) describes as "critical consciousness": an awareness of how inherited cultural narratives and structures of authority acquire legitimacy and become resistant to questioning. From this perspective, Adonis's poetry unsettles inherited certainties not for novelty alone, but because unexamined tradition can harden into restrictive intellectual authority. Cultural memory in his work is not reverent recall but transformative excavation. He asks which inherited assumptions, forms, and structures of authority must be challenged, reinterpreted, or displaced so that inheritance can remain productive rather than stagnate or become confined. For Adonis, tradition is therefore not abandoned. Instead, it is forced to undergo the ordeal of transformation.

5.7 Al-Baradūnī: Critical Memory and Historical Conscience

Table 7. Selected poetic lines from Al-Baradūnī

Arabic	Transliteration	English Translation
ما أصدق السيفَ إن لم ينضه الكذبُ	<i>mā aṣḍaqa al-sayfa in lam yaṇḍuhū al-kadhibu</i>	How truthful the sword is, if no lie unsheathes it,
وأكذب السيفَ إن لم يصدق الغضبُ	<i>wa akdhabu al-sayfa in lam yaṣḍuqi al-ghaḍabu</i>	and how false the sword is, if anger itself is not sincere.
يا أبا تمام هل تُبصر ما صنعوا؟	<i>yā Abā Tammām hal tubṣiru mā ṣana'ū?</i>	O Abū Tammām, can you see what they have done?

'Abd Allāh al-Baradūnī transforms tradition into historical conscience. By addressing Abū Tammām, al-Baradūnī does not merely allude to a classical poet. Instead, he summons the past as a witness to the present.

This mode of tradition is neither revivalist nor purely modernist. It is accusatory. Abū Tammām, who died in the ninth century, is called into the present so that the present may be judged by the memory of what has been inherited and betrayed.

The intertextual gesture towards Abū Tammām establishes continuity through address, quotation, and tonal recollection, but its purpose is not homage alone. In Table 7, the question “Can you see what they have done?” turns tradition into a tribunal. In Eliot’s terms, al-Baradūnī’s new poem enters the existing order by forcing the past to look back on the present. The movement is deliberately reversed: not only does the present read the past; the past is imagined as reading, witnessing, and indicting the present.

Al-Baradūnī’s poetry turns memory into a form of ethical accountability. His clear allusion to tradition affirms cultural pride while exposing historical failure, which in turn renders cultural memory uncomfortable, even painful. In this context, memories do not console the reader; they interrogate. This is one of the strongest ways in which Arabic poetry exceeds Eliot’s formal model: tradition is not only an archive of aesthetic relations but also a moral device through which the present is measured and found wanting.

5.8 Maḥmūd Darwīsh: Lived Identity and Existential Continuity

Table 8. Selected poetic lines from Maḥmūd Darwīsh

Arabic	Transliteration	English Translation
على هذه الأرض ما يستحق الحياة	<i>‘alā hādhihi al-arḍ mā yastaḥiq al-ḥayāh</i>	On this earth there is what deserves life.
ونحن نحب الحياة إذا ما استطعنا إليها سبيلا	<i>wa-naḥnu nuḥibbu al-ḥayāh idhā mā istaṭa‘nā ilayhā sabīlā</i>	And we love life whenever we can find a way to it.

Darwish’s poetry is the most existentially significant to this study’s main argument. In his poetry, tradition is no longer primarily a matter of formal inheritance, symbolic transformation, or critical reconstruction. It becomes lived identity. In Table 8, Darwish’s earth serves as a poetic symbol of homeland, memory, body, loss, persistence, and the future, all at once. The line “On this earth there is what deserves life” appears at first glance to be a simple declaration, yet its simplicity is the result of profound historical compression. A whole collective struggle for presence is condensed into a sentence of luminous affirmation.

Darwish’s relation to tradition is subtle because it does not always announce itself through overt classical imitation. The relational continuity of his work lies in the elevation of poetic speech into communal memory, the transformation of land into ethical value, and the use of the lyric voice as a collective witness. Mattawa’s (2014) study of Darwish supports this interpretation by showing how Darwish’s poetry has become inseparable from Palestinian national memory, identity, exile, and cultural survival. Turning back to Eliot, his model helps explain how a poem can enter and reshape an inherited order. However, Darwish shows

that this order is not only literary. It is also the order of things like dispossession, remembrance, belonging, and survival.

The line "We love life whenever we can find a way to it" ethically rejects despair while avoiding the sentimentalisation of suffering. It does not depict abstract optimism. Instead, hope appears conditional, wounded, and historically aware. The phrase "whenever we can" acknowledges obstruction and vulnerability. The poem makes memory tolerable, and tradition allows the self and community to carry on. Darwish, therefore, offers the fullest instance of tradition as lived continuity, depicting it as a structure of meaning carried by those who must remember to remain.

When read together, the eight poets in this study portray tradition as a spectrum rather than a single relation to the past. Al-Mutanabbi consolidates poetic authority and turns time itself into a witness to his utterances. Abū Nuwās unsettles inherited moral codes from within their own language. Al-Bārūdī returns to classical form as an act of historical recovery. Shawqī turns revival into public pedagogy. Al-Sayyāb breaks formal continuity but preserves symbolic memory under the pressure of modern crisis. Adonis reconstructs tradition through epistemic disruption. Finally, Al-Baradūnī summons the classical past as a historical conscience, and Darwish transforms memory into lived identity.

This trajectory confirms that the Arabic poetic tradition cannot be reduced to either continuity or rupture. It is continuity under stress, rupture within recognition, revival without innocence, transformation without amnesia, critique without abandonment, and memory without stillness. Eliot's theory ultimately remains valuable for providing a language of relation, but Arabic poetry still requires a broader definition of relation. The relation between old and new is not only formal; it is ethical, political, mnemonic, and existential.

In light of this, it is worth emphasising that tradition survives not because it remains unchanged, but because it remains open to revaluation. A tradition that cannot be questioned becomes an antiquarian residue; it becomes a cultural loss and even intellectual stagnation. Fortunately, Arabic poetry offers a vital alternative: the past continues to matter because it can be revoiced under new historical pressures. It is precisely this capacity for revoicing that makes tradition a living structure rather than a dead inheritance.

6. Implications for Comparative Literary Studies and Future Research

This study demonstrates that Eliot's concept of tradition remains valuable but is not entirely adequate for Arabic poetry. While Eliot discusses the connection between past and present, Arabic poetry highlights additional aspects such as ethical duty, cultural memory, societal responsibility, and historical identity. The poets analysed here not only exemplify Eliot's idea but also push its boundaries and enrich it.

The study proposes that comparative criticism should go beyond merely contrasting influence and difference. The focus is not on whether Arabic poetry resembles or diverges from Eliot, but on how Eliot's

model is transformed when set against a poetic tradition influenced by aesthetic, ethical, religious, political, and historical factors. In this context, Arabic poetry functions as a theoretical interlocutor rather than just an additional example.

In world-literature studies, the article shows that tradition cannot be reduced to circulation, translation, or global prestige. A line by al-Mutanabbī, an address to Abū Tammām, al-Sayyāb's rain, or Darwish's earth carries dense cultural meanings that demand close reading and historical sensitivity. The study emphasises the importance of integrating theoretical reasoning with detailed textual analysis.

Future research could extend this model by examining women poets, comparing Arabic poetry with Persian, Turkish, African, or South Asian Islamic literary traditions, or using corpus-assisted methods to trace recurring memory symbols such as earth, rain, ruins, homeland, exile, night, and voice.

The study remains limited by its selective corpus and compressed historical scope. Its aim is not to offer a complete taxonomy of the Arabic poetic tradition, but to show that such a tradition requires a broad model capable of integrating form, value, memory, critique, and lived historical experience.

7. Conclusion

This study has argued that the literary tradition in Arabic poetry should be understood as an ethically oriented and culturally remembered continuum. Building on Eliot's theory of tradition, this study demonstrated the value of his central insight that the poet does not create in isolation. New poems enter into relation with a prior order. The examples examined here show that this relation cannot be confined to aesthetic reordering alone. Tradition also carries moral value, public memory, historical pressure, and existential belonging.

The movement from al-Mutanabbī to Darwish reveals that tradition assumes many forms. It may appear as authority, contradiction, revival, pedagogy, symbolic crisis, reconstruction, historical judgment, or lived identity, among other things. These forms are not mutually exclusive, but constitute the profound plurality through which Arabic poetry has negotiated its inheritance. In every case, the past is neither simply preserved nor simply overcome. It is made to speak again, whether proudly, ironically, painfully, or with the fragile dignity of survival.

The broader implication of this study is that comparative literary criticism must treat tradition as more than a formal or static canon. In this way, Eliot remains indispensable, but he must be read against and beyond himself. Arabic poetry extends his model by showing that the "historical sense" is also ethical consciousness and cultural memory. The past is not only a literary order behind the poem; it is a burden, a resource, a witness, and a language through which communities continue to understand themselves. Tradition, then, is not what remains unchanged. It is what continues to matter because it can still be contested, reconceived, and relived.



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