

ANCIENT ARABIC POETRY

The most illustrious tradition of romantic poetry on oriental subjects, from the *Westöstlicher Diwan* to Rückert, Platen, Hugo and Leconte de Lisle, was inspired essentially by Indian and Persian epic, lyric and gnomic poetry, referring only to a minor degree to the ancient poetry of the Arabs—although it is precisely Rückert to whom we are indebted for a version of the *Hamâsa*, a famous anthology of pagan Arabic poetry. Goethe approached this anthology through the versions of Jones, described it briefly in the “Notes and Commentary” to the *Diwan*, and among other sections retold one tale splendidly in verse: the “Song of Vengeance” of Taâbbata Sharran. Here the force of his genius lifted him well above the bristling Latin of Freytag, through whom he had come to know the song, and brought him very close in lyrical intuition to the original of this masterpiece of debated authenticity. But on the whole, the poetic heritage of the ancient Arabs was not adequately echoed in the literature of the romantic age. Rückert himself, inspired by pagan Arabic poetry, is read by few people today; and the poetry that was his model is studied rather by philologists, for

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its documentary value. Theodor Noeldeke, at the beginning of his classic study of the *Mu'allakat*, declared frankly: "It is questionable whether the aesthetic pleasure provided by the study of ancient Arabic poetry is worth the great pains required even to approach an understanding of the same." It is difficult to stand in opposition to the authority of the "old master" of German orientalists, who confessed that "the more he studied the Semites, the more he loved the Greeks." Even the most humble author of these lines dares to appropriate for himself the lines of Noeldeke; and yet, beyond every comparison, which cannot help resulting unfavorably for the ancient poets of the desert, he who knows how to love and seek out poetry will find in them authentic artistic values. Even the harsh pagan song can in certain passages interest us, fill us with enthusiasm, and move us.

Ancient Arabic poetry, which we wish to sketch rapidly in these pages together with a few examples, is the only expression that has come down to us of the reality and ideals of this people's life, before the word of Mohammed came to give it a unifying faith and a world mission. Without this poetry, we would have only a few dull dates in inscriptions about the preislamic Arabs, and the rare remarks of Syrian and Byzantine authors. Even the heritage of prose stories about the age of Giahiliyya, or paganism, which the Moslem authors of the first three centuries after the Hegira have transmitted to us, are founded in large part on the poetic heritage of this most ancient period, whose authenticity on the whole was never doubted by Moslem scholars. Doubts on this subject were expressed by western Arabists, and then also by a contemporary oriental scholar, Taha Husein, who thirty years ago wrote a book filled with radical scepticism as to pagan Arabic poetry. Perhaps today he himself, having arrived at a rather conservative position not only in literary matters, would not rewrite that book in the same way. In any case, many other students of the ancient Arabic world, including ourselves, consider this extreme position untenable; they consider ancient Arabic poetry to be an on the whole faithful echo of that period and that way of life, uncertainties and manipulations in its transmission notwithstanding. Even those who, without subscribing to radical scepticism, are strongly inclined to doubt

the validity of the patrimony transmitted to us in this way (we are thinking especially of the French Arabist R. Blachère), grant it at least the documentary value of recreating for us, on the whole, the material and spiritual climate of the Giahiliyya. Therefore we can approach the remains of this period, that have come down to us in various anthologies and *diwans* of single poets, collected in Islamic times, with a fair amount of faith.

It is most difficult, almost impossible, to find in all this material a gradual evolution of the language, style, and meter; these must have gone through a formative process that escapes us entirely. The efforts that have been made (for example, with the great ingenuity of von Grünebaum) to reconstruct a chronology of the most ancient Arabic poets from internal evidence, remain problematic. Pagan Arabic poetry appears to have been completely developed and formed in those documents which external tradition tells us are the most ancient, which are dated from the second half of the fifth century A. D.; almost all the other documents stem from the sixth century, with a few in the first decades of the seventh, up to the coming and triumph of Islam. A rigid stylization of language, style and theme already pervades all of them. The language is a literary *koiné*, which with firm and coherent unity raises its head above the various dialects spoken in the Arabic peninsula at that time (mirroring above all, according to some authorities, a group of central-oriental dialects of Nagd and Yamama), and constituting the model of that which will be the language of the Koran itself, and of the first centuries of Islam. The style is already clearly crystallized in fixed modulations common to all, which make it almost impossible to distinguish individual personalities or groups of schools by style. The themes are no less crystallized, including a basically limited range of subjects: nomad life, with its emotional bonds easily formed and dissolved (whose echo is found above all in the convention of the erotic prelude, or *nasib*), the contests between the tribes, deeds of warrior valor and of hospitality, long voyages through the desert, the hunt for wild animals, the joys of banqueting and drinking. The praise of Bedouin virtues, in the life and death of the hero (in the former case we have the poetry of praise, *madih*, and in the

second the elegy, *riḥḥa'*), is in contrast to the verse attacks, frequently bitter, vulgar and poisonous (*bigiā*); these two types represent the opposite poles of Bedouin social habits. And between the two poles of praise and vituperation of the poet's peers, we find the gnomic poetry, sometimes obvious and banal, but sometimes acute, pregnant and appropriate, which in its most felicitous forms is perhaps the aspect of Arabic poetry most likely to impress itself on our memory today, and to leave a lasting aesthetic impression of this ancient art. More, certainly, than the other types described, which are more famous among the Arabs, but less appreciable to us in their detail, in their sometimes prosaic and pedantic realism, and in their inexhaustible love of synonyms that is the delight of the philologists but the despair of even highly trained modern students.

The form in which all these various motifs are usually presented is that of the *kasīda*, with single rhymes, and verse whose meter varies according to the schemes of some half dozen Arabic systems, on whose formation there are both old and new theories. The *kasīda* has a typical structure (even if it is not always observed), opening with an amorous lament, with the contemplation of the traces of an abandoned camp from which the beloved woman has migrated with her whole tribe, thus offering the poet the opportunity to reminisce about his love and to describe the beauty of the woman. There follows a section dedicated to the description of the camel or steed on which the poet is crossing the desert, the beasts he hunts, the dangers and adventures he encounters. Finally, in the third and last section, he passes from these obligatory sections to the specific theme of the song: the praise of a potentate, boasting about his own tribe, polemics against enemies or rivals, or the solicitation of favor and gifts. Nothing further removed from convention occurs in this stylized art of the desert—no free flights of lyricism, of individual or original fantasy, of subjective confessions beyond the form described, which restricts our personal view of single poets to little indeed. And yet, despite all these limitations, single personalities do appear to us out of the most ancient pagan songs; native writings and literary criticism already demonstrated this, and now the direct study of the *diwans* from a modern point of view has sometimes confirmed, sometimes

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modified or deepened our understanding of these characteristics. In the pages that follow we shall present only a few of these figures, choosing from among the most distinct and meaningful individuals.

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A native canon of early times put a group of poets in the first place (or in "the first category," according to an expression of Arabic criticism, which has a passion for classifications); these were each the author of one of the seven *Mu'allakat*, seven *kasidas* or exemplary songs, which a rather ancient tradition has given to us as the crown of the most esteemed pagan art. At the head of this group, and also, we may say, of the ancient Arabic Parnassus, stands the poet king Amru'ul-Qais, a prince of the tribe of Kinda, who in the sixth century sought in vain to reobtain his lost paternal domain, turning even to Byzantium for help. His *Mu'allaka* is famous for the description of his steed, a classical piece of bravura which is so famous that we will not reproduce it here, presenting rather the superb description of a storm that closes the famous song:

You see, friend, a lamp down there that I show you shining, like lightning
between hands, in a dense round cloud?

Is it its gleam that makes the light, or rather the lamp of a hermit, pouring oil
over the wick?

I stood still with my companions to watch it, between Darig and Udhaib, faraway
object of observation.

While we watched, its downpour of water fell to the right on Mount Qatan,
to the left over the Sitàr and Yadhbul.

And it began to pour water on Kutaifa, beating prostrate the high trunks of
the trees.

Its squalls passed over Mount al-Qanàn, hurtling down the wild goats.

In Taimà it left no palm trunks standing, and no forts that were not anchored
in stone.

The mountain Thabir, between the downpour of its huge waters, seemed to be a
huge head, wrapped in a striped mantle.

The storm unloaded its load of water on Ghabit, like the Yemenite merchant
who lays down the loads of goods he has carried.

The little birds of the valleys seemed in the morning to be drunk with the juice of pure wine, infused with pepper.

And the drowned animals of the wild, in the far country of the flood, seemed in the evening to be tangles of wild roots.

Amru'ul-Qais sang also of love, a frank and shameless sensual love, free of all sentimentality; and he sang of the pleasures of wine and the hunt; but he sang also of the sadness of the human condition, dedicated to pain and death. Mohammed called him "the leader of poets on the road to hell," and for us, leaving unjudged his eschatological deserts, he is certainly the first and most passionate voice in the chorus of the Giahiliyya.

Other authors of *Mu'allakat* and other poetry, collected by ancient philologists in single *diwans*, are Tarafa, famous for the description of his camel and his melancholy and virile comments on the brevity of man's life; 'Antara, the Arabic Achilles, who sang of the joys of combat and of his love for the beautiful Abla, described perhaps a little less conventionally than was usual; Zuhair, who included in his praise of two generous tribal chieftains one of the most ancient gnomic syllogisms; Labid, who celebrated the hunt and described a wild bull shining white in the night during a rainfall; Amr ibn Kulthum, the eloquent apologist of the virtues of his tribe, the Taghlib; while his rival Harith celebrated his own Bakr, submitting his poetry to the Arab king of Hira, who decided in favor of the Bakr. But the group of *fubul* or stallions, the most prized poets of the pagan age, is by no means exhausted with the seven authors of the *Mu'allakat*; a great number of other illustrious names accompanies them, among whom we should name at least 'Abid ibn al-Abras, one of the most archaic and genuine figures among the pagan poets. From his *diwan* let us look at least at the verses describing with rare concentration and effective dynamics the flight of an eagle that falls on a fox in the desert:

... a predatory eagle, in whose nest the guts of her victims accumulate.

She spent the night tormented by hunger on a pile of rocks, like an old abandoned woman.

In the freezing morning the hoar-frost drops from her wings.

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From far she has sighted a fox, on the far side of a sterile plain.

She flaps her wings and shakes herself, ready to leap,

Then flies off full of desire toward the prey, and approaches it skimming.

The other one, crouches, hearing her approach, showing the white of its eyes as it looks upwards.

It raises its tail, dismayed at the rustle of the wings, with the air of one full of consternation.

The eagle reaches it and throws it to the earth, and the anguished prey is beneath her.

She prostrates it and beats it down, the stones wound its muzzle.

The fox shrieks with the claws of the eagle in its flank; a single blow of the inexorable beak opens its chest.

Another powerful individuality, which succeeded in expressing itself even through the literary conventions we have discussed, was Shanfara, the bandit-poet—a figure undoubtedly embroidered upon by legend, which makes it hard to discern the certainly authentic basis among all that a later tradition, or even forgery, has superimposed (and here, according to some, we must include even his most famous song, the splendid *Lamiyyat al-'Arab*). But almost certainly authentic, and pervaded by a very strong *ethos*, is the fragment conceded to him by all, the descriptive verses in which, from the vantage point of his adventurous life as an outcast from his tribe, imagines his own violent end:

Do not bury me! It is forbidden to bury me; but you, hyena, rejoice!

When they carry away my head, and in my head the major part of me, and there where the encounter took place the rest of my body lies abandoned.

I do not hope here for any life to please me, perpetual bandit for my sins.

In the case of Shanfara as in that of Taâbbata Sharran, the other brigand-poet, translated by Goethe, the voice of ancient Arabic paganism comes to us in accents strong and heroic beyond any convention.

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Islam destroyed this paganism, and with it to a large extent the

ideals, customs and way of life of the Giahiliyya; but it did not destroy, or even radically modify, that poetry which was its expression. Mohammed, personally not very gifted for or appreciative of poetry, was ill-disposed towards poets, partly because his own supernatural inspiration had been compared by his enemies to that of the poets, an obsession of spirits or of the "jinn." This hostility of the Prophet, in addition to the judgment of Amru'ul-Qais quoted above, is formulated in famous verses of the Koran (xxv, 224-28), where they brand the poets "who go wandering through every valley, saying that which they do not do." But the genius and love for flowing speech were too deeply rooted in the Arabic soul for the new faith to be able to extirpate them; and so poetry, which was an offensive weapon of the adversaries of Islam, was also a defensive weapon of the Prophet himself, who had his official cantors and apologists in verse (especially Hassan ibn Thabit of Medina) and was in contact with other famous poets of his time. The most famous echo of this meeting between the Prophet and poetry is the famous song that in form and spirit is completely similar to the pagan songs, but was accepted in Moslem tradition and piety because it was dedicated to Mohammed: the *Banat Su'ad*, or "Poem of the Cloak" (*Burda*), of Ka'b ibn Zuhair, with which this poet, who had offended the Prophet, ingratiated himself again, and was able to effect a reconciliation with the symbolic gift of his own cloak, thus acquiring the Prophet's good will and pardon. The *Banat Su'ad*, given religious qualities only by extrinsic circumstances, is in reality a typical pagan *kasida*. It opens with the classic amorous lament, or *nasib*:

Su'ad is gone, and my heart languishes today with love, enslaved by her, held
mercilessly enchained.

The morning that she left, Su'ad was like a gazelle bleating tenderly, with
splendid submissive eyes.

When she smiled she revealed teeth of dazzling brightness, in a mouth like a
spring of water filled with wine...

He goes on with a no less canonical description of his camel, and arrives at the essence of his poem with the propitiatory

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praise of the Prophet and his *émigré* Companions:

The Prophet is a light illuminating the path, a noble sword unsheathed, among the swords of God,

Surrounded by a company of Quraish, who were told when they embraced Islam, in the valley of Mecca: "Depart!"

They advance like splendid camels, protected by the sword-blows that they boldly apply, while the cowards retreat.

Exalted heroes, clothed for the battle in coats of mail forged by David himself.

And so preislamic poetry continued into the Islamic age substantially unchanged, losing only its rare references to idolatrous cults and superstitions, which the tradition itself undertook to eliminate. The epic of conquest, which led to the Arab dispersion throughout the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, was only weakly reflected in verse; rather than commenting on foreign wars, political poetry followed the internal crises of the Moslem community, the civil wars and the first religious dissidences. In particular, a new and austere poetry flourished among the sect of the Kharigita, the radical puritans of Islam, who filled the whole first century of the Hegira with their deeds. In their poetry of asceticism and battles the same *amor fati* is expressed that we found among the pagan warriors, with the hope of heavenly rewards:

I say to my soul that leaps bewildered before the heroes (so sings the Kharigita chieftain Qàtari ibn al-Fugiàa): o soul, do not be afraid.

If you asked to survive a single day beyond the appointed term, you would not be heard.

Courage, therefore, courage, on the field where death moves freely. One cannot obtain eternity.

The way of death is the end of every living being, and its call summons the people of the earth.

He who is not taken in the flower of his years arrives weary at old age, and fate assigns him his end...

Do you not see the inexorable onrush of death, the fatal resurrection of those who are in the tombs?

They shall rise again unshod and naked, while their Lord gives out the guerdon;
and some of them will have earned it, and some have lost it.

This is the true religious poetry of earliest Islam. Beyond this, there were still the old preislamic *kasidas*. They had become more and more mechanical, devoted to the praise of caliphs and other potentates, or also often describing the contests and tribal struggles that wore down Arab particularism even after the advent of Islam. The *diwans* of the three most famous poets of the first century, the Ommiads age—Akhtal, Jarir and Farazdaq—were encomiastic or satiric. The first was a Christian, of the Taghlib tribe, and most devoted to the caliphs of Damascus, whose most eloquent praiser was this man, not of the Faith. The other two were Moslems, now in favor, now out of favor with the caliphs for political reasons, and most of all involved in acrimonious and bitter rivalry with each other. The result of this are *kasidas* of reciprocal vituperation (*Naqā'id*) which, together with their commentaries, provide a mine of historical information, genealogies, prosopography and custom, but are poetically of very little interest to us. The true poetry of the Ommiad age, in addition to the religious verses of the Kharigita, is to be found in the work of the poets of love, and in the first poetry of wine, two themes which are at this time just beginning to free themselves from the artificial complex of the *kasida* and to live a life of their own.

The motive of love had been only a stylized convention in pagan poetry, because of its obligatory presence in the prelude to the *kasida*, the *nasib*.

Now, in the age of the Ommiads, it flourished and developed independently, both in Bedouin society and in the urban society of Hejaz. In the desert, it was cultivated most of all by the poets of Udhra (the "Asra" of Heine, "who die when they love"), whose most famous representative was Jamil. As treated by him and his comrades, who were more or less actual historical figures, the conventional sensual love of paganism was profoundly spiritualized. Jamil's *diwan*, lost in its original form but with individual pieces collected in

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modern times, contains some of the purest and most passionate expressions of Arab love:

Wind of the north, do you not see me raving to you about love, and visibly exhausted?

Give me a breath of the aura of Bathna [Bathna or Buthaina was the great love of this poet of Udhra], and be gracious enough to breathe over Jamil.

And say to her: "Little Bathna, my soul is satisfied with just a little of you, or with more than a little."

And in another poem:

My spirit was bound to hers before we were created, and after we were drops maturing into life, and in the cradle.

Our love grew as we grew, and grew strong, and when we die it will not break faith with the pact we have sworn,

But it will survive into every further state of ours, and will visit us in the shadow of the tomb and of the sepulcher.

And Mejnun (he who was "mad for love" of his Leila); Kuthayir, the friend and disciple of Jamil himself, Nusaib, the Negro poet; and still others all sang in the same vein. But beside these chaste poets of the desert there was the other current of city love poetry, less profoundly and sincerely spiritual (while far from being vulgar or obscene), but rather witty and gallant. Its leader was Omar ibn Abi Rabi'a, who spoke for golden youth in Mecca, who sang of the joys and torments of a passion not cosmic and tragic like that of Jamil, but amiably worldly and almost idyllic, in one of the most brilliant, witty and artistically pleasing *diwans* of all Arabic literature. Omar certainly did not love a single woman, not even as a literary fiction; the pages of his *diwan* swarm with varied female names and figures (who are, however, not individually differentiated) with whom the poet twined and loosed fleeting "bourgeois" idylls, against a background of the holy places of Mecca and Medina and the related pilgrimage. Here, for instance, are verses inspired by a meeting at Mina, where the beauty performed with the poet the apotropaic rite of throwing

pebbles, a left-over from ancient pagan customs conserved in Islam:

At the place where they throw pebbles in Mina, there appeared to me, worse luck, a sun, clothed in cloth of Yemen.

From it there peeped out a woman's fist, when she threw the little stones, and a little painted hand, decorated with pointed fingers.

When we met on the hill she greeted me, and my accursed mount pulled at the bridle...

And so, by Allah, I no longer know, as I try to account, whether I threw seven or eight little stones...

Omar ibn Abi Rabi'a, who proclaimed himself "the martyr of love," and who was accompanied by a swarm of other "martyrs" of this gallant holy war (al-Ahwas, the Ommiad prince al-Argi, the caliph himself Walid ibn Yazid), formed together with them the most brilliant constellation between the end of our seventh century and the first half of the eighth, with its centers at Hejaz and in the desert of Syria. Their poetry of refined elegance breathes the joy of living in a society still almost exclusively Arab, but already sweetened by a rich life of leisure and of blossoming culture, that is opening up to cosmopolitanism and to the new cultural experiences of the following age. If the Abbasid revolution, which overthrew the Ommiads in the middle of the eighth century, constituted a sharp break from the political past, the new culture which it inaugurated already found its precedents in the late Ommiad age, which has not yet been properly studied. Many novelties of the following age were present in seed in this age, including poetry.

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The seeds which we mentioned above reached full maturity in the first Abbasid age (second half of the eighth century and the first decades of the ninth), helped by the great broadening of the social and cultural horizon which the new dynasty and the new imperial center in Iraq brought with them. To limit ourselves to poetry, it seems to have reached a decisive turning point, becoming definitely citified, and abandoning, or rather

enriching, the ancient Bedouin themes with new and modern urban content. A new style, whose profile was barely visible in the Ommiad age, substituted free composition in fragments (*qita*) for the old *kasida*, devoted mainly to the celebration of love and wine, and to the Parnassian description of life at court. This is the poetry of the *Mubdathun*, or moderns, whose major representative was Abu Nuwas, and for a moment it seemed to rejuvenate the ancient tradition of the art of the desert. But we must point out that the latter was never totally abandoned or supplanted, and that the attempt of the Abbasid innovators (besides Abu Nuwas let us remember Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf, Bashshar ibn Burd, Muslim ibn al-Walid, and other provincial poets such as al-Wa'wa') to achieve a radical rebirth of themes and style succeeded only partly. It was finally frustrated by a resurgence of classicism, between the end of the ninth and the tenth centuries, embodied in the great name of al-Mutanabbi. With him, and with the other neo-classical poets of the Abbasid age (Abu Tammam, Buhturi, Abu Firas), Arabic poetry finally acquired that archaizing aspect in language and style that detaches it from life, and made it from then on a simple literary exercise, even to the present day. And even now, in that Arabic cultural renaissance that has accompanied the political one of this century, the strength of the poetic tradition crystallized in the Abbasid age has had a not-so-advantageous effect on the young poetry. It is enough to think that the most famous modern Arabic poet was an eloquent classicist and academician, the Egyptian Shawqi (1868-1932).

Thus ancient Arabic poetry, to which we dedicated the present extremely brief sketch, had its great age between the sixth and the ninth centuries of our era, between the harsh life of the Giahiliyya and the first two or three centuries of Islam. Its vital circle was already finished when the second Islamic literature appeared, the Persian literature that was to open new paths to poetry and give world literature a series of masterworks. It was this Persian literature that was the passion of the great preromantic and romantic spirits of the west, especially Goethe. The old art of the desert naturally remained in second place for them. Approaching it, we do not see exceptionally formed artistic personalities, such as Firdusi

or Khayyam, Rumi or Hafiz; we see rather a powerful tradition and artistic technique, formed under primitive living conditions, continuing among a profoundly changed faith and society, and becoming more and more conventional down to the present day. But even in this rigid tradition, there burns frequently the light of authentic poetry.