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PROLOGUE

FIVE ASSUMPTIONS

Any work which sets out to treat of pre- and early Islamic poetry enters into a polemic which has become well established within scholarly circles in the twentieth century. Within the domain of Classical Arabic literature, only the Qur'ān has generated so much controversy and disagreement. The present work is focused on what I have found to be problematical in our understanding of the poems. There are five assumptions underlying this work, which will be stated in the Prologue.¹

To achieve this I have taken as my starting-point some of the notions commonly expressed with regard to the poetry. I have largely, though not exclusively, based this Prologue on a close reading of H.A.R. Gibb's second, revised, edition of his *Arabic Literature*. This is, to be sure, somewhat unfair to Gibb, whose work is a sensitive summary of the state of knowledge current when first he wrote the book in 1926 and revised it in 1963, before the study of Classical Arabic poetry had received the degree of exposure it now enjoys. I have attempted to isolate those issues which have not, in my opinion, been properly addressed by subsequent scholarship.

It will be noted that the question of authenticity does not figure as a subject for one of the following notices. In the terms in which it has previously been (improperly) articulated, the question of authenticity is marginal to the study of pre- and early Islamic poetry.² Chapter One is, among other things, an attempt to state at least part of the question.

1. The Gestation Period.

"At one moment Arabia seems, in a literary sense, empty and dumb except for some votive or businesslike inscriptions in a variety of dialects. At the next, companies of poets spring up all over northern Arabia, reciting complex odes, *qaṣīdas*, in which a

¹ This is not intended as an exhaustive discussion of current research on the subject. It is a statement of what I consider the main themes of my work. Some have been discussed in great detail and with scholarly aplomb by other researchers. Two excellent overviews of ancient Arabic poetry are Wagner 1987 and Jacobi 1987, while Bauer 1992 is persuasive. There are several exceptions to this: Wagner 1987: 12-29; Bauer 1992: Jones 1992: 17-21 (despite his introduction of a related but no less controversial issue, that of oral transmission, which I believe also to have been improperly articulated with regard to pre- and early Islamic poetry).

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series of themes are elaborated with our juxtaposed our, vividness of imagination, and precision of imagery, in an infinitely rich and highly articulated language, showing little or no traces of dialect, and cast into complex and flexible metrical schemes that rhyme throughout the poem" (Gibb 1963: 13).

Gibb quotes Ibn Sallām (d. c. 231/845-6)'s *Ṭabaqāt al-Shu'arā'* (The Echelons of the Poets): "The early Arabs ... had no poetry other than verses spoken by some person or other on certain occasions. *Qasīdas* and long poems were first recited in the time of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib',³ Muḥammad's grandfather. Gibb senses an air of newness and excitement in the poetry of the period: "It is the expression of a new sense of power in poetical composition, of delight and exultation in the new ranges of aesthetic sensibility that were opened up by this discovery" (14).

These features highlighted by Gibb suggest that what we are witnessing is the flourishing of an ancient tradition still in the process of artistic development. In other words, that what we have is the tip of the iceberg, albeit an iceberg which is continually changing its shape. For Jones (1992: 5), "the only conclusion that one can draw from this is that the conventions of poetry, at both a general and a fairly specific level, had become widely established well before the composition of the earliest surviving poems".

The "new sense of power in poetical composition" is not new in the sense of unprecedented, but surely arose through the appreciation of poetry as art. Bauer 1992a has established beyond doubt the artistic nature of this poetry. It is unlikely that this so-called "astonishing outburst of poetic talent" spread "within a period of a few years or decades among all the tribes of Arabic speech". We must presuppose the existence not only of a language capable of accommodating such an outburst and of developing along with it, but also a shared poetic tradition of sufficient antiquity to support this interest: "It is evident that certain patterns were favoured by poets all over the Arabian peninsula, which indicates a convention about to be formed, or, as I should prefer to say, the emergence of a genre" (Jacobi 1996: 21).⁴

3 For an informed discussion of the implications of this passage and others, see Gamal 1993: 41-4.

4 Thus the description that we sometimes find of Arabic poetry emerging 'with Homeric suddenness' is true only in the sense that as in the case of the Iliad and the Odyssey a point is reached when not all compositions are lost" (Jones 1992: 6). Where I differ from Jones is in his underestimation of the possibility that the poems may contain antique elements taken over from an earlier stage of the tradition: "Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī and Muḥammad al-ʿAḍī appear to have lived in the first half of the sixth century, and their work, by raising traditional composition to new levels of excellence, seems to have played the same part in displacing earlier material that the muwashshahāt of 'Uḥayyā b. al-Samʿān, a good though by no means outstanding poet, played in Spain" (1992: 5-6). Jones does not, of course, mean that these poets composed from a vacuum but that their poetic

The same misconception obtains with regard to the history of the pre-Islamic era and "the emergence of the Muslim Arabs" (Reisö 1993: 31-32): the picture of the wandering bedouin, searching for centuries for pasture and booty, and then suddenly being struck by religious frenzy, inspired by an obscure prophet, and these events resulting in the conquest of most of the 'civilised' world in a very short time, is indeed fascinating but, at the same time, unsatisfying ... a military conquest of this scale and with such a lasting effect, creating a new world culture that still exists 1400 years later, must have had deep underlying causes and a long prehistory.

As with poetry, so too with history:

the classic Islamic historians of the Middle Ages knew of a history that stretched approximately one century before the appearance of the Prophet (Reisö 1993: 32);

the traditional view of the Arab conquest as the work of undisciplined bedouins who undertook a gigantic razzia is, in my opinion, completely erroneous. This is also true of the idea that this process was part of the perpetual waves of immigration of Semites from a presupposed home in Arabia. Instead, the conquest bears all signs of being the result of rational political considerations and — at least in the beginning — of being a well planned venture (Reisö 1993: 41).

This long gestation period is probable. On the other hand, we should ponder the fact that the poetic remains date from the sixth century, and the question to be posed should not be "Why do the earliest remains of pre-Islamic poetry stem largely from the sixth century?", but rather "What made the sixth century so unique that the earliest remains of pre-Islamic poetry stem from it?" In other words, what happened in the Arabian peninsula in the

forms displaced earlier ones as poetically valid. I should argue that at all times in the pre- and early Islamic periods, one can discern items of disparate chronological provenance, even though these often are a matter for conjecture. Relevant are the arguments of Gamal (1993), who claims that "what has been said about the literary output of the sixth century could be argued then for that of the fifth. That is to say, that the sophisticated form of the *qasīdah* as represented in the poetry of Zuhayr b. Janāb points to a well-established tradition in, and cultivation of, the art of Arabic poetry. It follows from this, of course, that the beginnings of this tradition antedate the poetic compositions of the fifth century" (1993: 58). Gamal's is a laudable attempt to make sense of the material, although at times he is not sufficiently exacting in his acceptance of this material. The factor of a gestation period had been made by Bräunlich (1937: 210-11), who supposes a long development before the first strings of poetry: "der Ursprung der Poesie ist vorislamisch; über den genaueren Zeitpunkt des Beginnes läßt sich nichts aussagen, doch setzt der komplizierter Zustand der uns erhaltenen Gedichte eine längere Entwicklung der Kunst voraus".

sixth century to actuate this apparent poetic explosion and to render it favourable to the revelation of the Qur'an?

2. The Belief in "an Ideal *Qasīda* Forever Lost" (Jacobi 1996: 23).

2.1 The *Nasīb*: a clear distinction should be made between *dhikr al-ajlāl* and *nasīb*.⁵ The former is "the mention of the deserted encampments", the latter the nostalgic reminiscence of former happiness. The former, as in the poetry of 'Abīd b. al-ʿAbās, need have no connection with any lost love. An obvious, logical development was to identify the encampment (*ajlāl*) with the beloved (in the *nasīb*) by specifying that these were her former dwelling places, upon which the poet had chanced in the course of a desert journey. Chapter Three suggests that the pre- and early Islamic *nasīb* could function as a proper vehicle for introspection and for the expression of complex emotional states.

2.2 The *Rahīl* (the Journey) and *Wasf al-Nāqah* (the Description of the She-camel). The connection between the two movements (*nasīb* and *rahīl*) is, however enunciated, not arbitrary: the poet turns from the unattainable to continue on his journey, plunging into waterless expanses of desert. It is the test of his manhood in the harshest of environments. The horse is not, usually, mentioned in this context:⁶ it belongs to a different poetical context, the Aristocratic Hunt, whereas the camel is the emblem of bedouinness. It is idealised, being, in all respects, perfect. Into this description, 'extended similes' are often introduced featuring the fauna of the desert. These similes serve to throw into relief the idealised portrait of the camel and probably originated as nomadic hunting songs. Attestation of the antiquity of the oryx episode is the narrative development which it demonstrates, a development which is standard without becoming stereotypical or monotonous. This does not, of course, account for the role within the poem and the poetry which this and similar tableaux fulfil. Chapter Four is an attempt further to explore this question: see Bauer 1992a: 262-73 for a preliminary discussion. Bauer stresses that the artistic worth and aesthetic reception of any given *qasīdah* was often determined by these sections.

⁵ The medieval critics do not make this distinction consistently. It is clear from the poetry, however, that such a distinction is needed. A glaring modern example of this distinction not being made is J. Stetkevych 1994: 58-129.

⁶ See Montgomery 1997 for a discussion of two famous (early) poems in which horses are described and Montgomery 1995 for an explanation of the disappearance of the horse as an integral part of the *wasf* section.

2.3 The *Gharad* (the Aim). Given that there are extant monothematic poems which correspond to the last part of the *qasīdah*, and that such *qīfahs*, 'morsels' or 'pieces', "often consist of threatening messages directed against an enemy, or of panegyrics addressed to a patron" (Jacobi 1996: 24), why should the poet have subjected himself to the so-called constraints of *nasīb* and *takhlūs* if they were deemed mere impediments to the delivery of his message, the conclusion of his poem? The *qasīdah* had no "subject proper" in such a narrow sense.

Any standardization of *qasīdah* structure which may have occurred should be accounted for in terms of the target audience and the emergence of the panegyric and not in terms of the inexorable grip of an ossifying conventionality or of the cathartic activity of the poet as ritualist. Chapter Five takes as its point of departure the rôle of the *gharad* in a poem by Bishr b. Abī Khāzīm al-ʿAsadī in which he describes a voyage made by sea.

3. "Standardizing the Structure of the *Qasīda*" (Gibb 1963: 19).

3.1 The supposed development from primitive incantation to poetic utterance, from the poet as *shāʿir*, "kenner", as wielder of "rhythmic words which exerted magical powers" to the poet as professional: "a profession requires a clientèle, and the clientèle signifies its approval ... by tangible recompense of herds and other possessions" (Gibb 1963: 18-19).

There are traditions concerning the demonic inspiration of the poets by supernatural creatures such as the *jinn* and the *shayāḥīn*. That these apply also to poets from the end of the *Jāhīlī* tradition suggests that the "incantatory" nature of verse was never fully obliterated: it is prominent in the accusations levelled at Muḥammad for being a poet.

The nature of the pre-Islamic tradition is such that the presence of many levels of development can be discerned: a number of levels, if not all, may simultaneously be present in the tradition; some tribes and areas may, poetically and artistically, have been more sophisticated than others. It is true that the panegyric was instrumental in providing the impetus for much of the poetical experimentation of the sixth century. There did, however, continue to exist other types of poetry, and there existed various types of panegyric. The process is never complete: the *qasīdah* is constantly subjected to experiment. That the poets evolved one brand of panegyric ode which was especially lucrative does not mean that this is representative either of other genres or the whole tradition.

3.2 The limitations of the audience: the poet "was obliged ... to keep within the range of themes which his audience understood ... He could not, even had he wished, strike out on fresh paths and introduce a new or wider

range of ideas; had he done so, he would have outstripped their comprehension and lost contact with them" (Gibb 1963: 19). This misconception is connected with the notion of the poet as tribal spokesman, and has been transmuted by modern scholarship into the theory of poetry as ritual, both narrowly and expansively defined.

In many cases, we do not know what sort of audience a poem was designed for. There are poems which may have been designed to appeal to a wider audience, and they may be more conservative and traditional in their approach. There are poems which may have been designed for an audience consisting of other poets and they may be bolder or more adventurous. There are poems which may have been composed purely for the poet's own personal sake: i.e. they are expressions of his own concerns. It is wrong to posit a purely or exclusively tribal context for the whole corpus of pre-Islamic verse: there simply is not enough evidence to admit of such a sweeping statement. To be sure, the poet was, in many, though not all, cases the tribal spokesman, but he was much more besides. Furthermore, in view of the fact that the ode reveals such a varied concatenation of themes throughout the sixth century, ⁷ we must be cautious not to underestimate the aesthetic awareness of a pre-Islamic audience. As Gibb himself says (1963: 29): "the audiences too were gifted with peculiar aesthetic sensibilities".

3.3 The *rāwī* (the Thirst-quencher, or Rope-twister) must have contributed to the transmission of the verse of the period. ⁸ It is far from clear how or even whether he contributed to its stereotyping. The assumption is that in the process of memorization much became standardised that was previously diverse. It is equally plausible, within this frame of reference, that the 'stereotypicality' of pre-Islamic verse is a result of the inadequacies of the writing system used to record it, in other words that the texts of the poems are a simplified transcript of a more complex performance. It may be that the tradition is in itself selective: that only the best, viz. those conforming to that pattern generally accepted as artistic, were thought worthy of preservation. Bauer 1992, however, has given a convincing account of the onager description by taking that part of the *gasidah* tradition at its face value. Chapter One offers a further possibility for consideration, viz. the editorial activities of the 'Abbasid scholars. ⁹

⁷ "It appears that in the earliest period we are able to study, about the beginning of the sixth century AD, there were no strict rules poets had to follow with regard to the thematic sequence of their odes, for there is a considerable number of patterns, some of them unique" (Jacobi 1996: 21).

⁸ For a concise survey, see Jones 1992: 21-3.

⁹ To an extent, this investigation is indebted to the concerns voiced by Blachère (1952-66), although I have shifted the focus from transmission to editing. I consider the 'Abbasid scholars to have worked conscientiously and sympathetically with material which they, by

4. "The thing said varies so little and the whole art lies in the untranslatable manner of saying it" (Gibb 1963: 22).

This is the logical outcome of the preceding, viz. the postulated conventionalised structure: if the content is ossified, the (linguistic) form must be its artistic *raison d'être*. It is somewhat contradicted by Gibb's remarks on pp.26-7: "In that heightening of the reality, that idealising of the common incidents and aspirations of life, that challenge by image and allusion to the understanding and intelligence of the hearer, lie the elements that transform the poet's words from the stuff of prose to the stuff of poetry ... only after this do the adornments of language come in to add their effect".

5. The Poet as Nomad.

The birthplace of Arabic poetry was the sandy plain, partly steppeland, partly desert, of central and north-eastern Arabia. Except in the rare oases the land, bare, monotonous, subject to violent alternations of heat and cold, drought and flood, was, and is, unable to support settled communities. Its inhabitants are of necessity nomadic, subsisting chiefly on the produce of their camels and sheep, and compelled to move unendingly from place to place in search of fresh pasturage. The monotony of their life is broken only by the fierce pleasures of years of plenty and the biting misery of years of famine, and by the success or failure in their raids on one another or on the settled communities on their fringes. Their secular, physical environment has moulded their habits, thought, and speech ... The circle of ideas bounding the horizon of such nomads is necessarily narrow (Gibb 1963: 3). ¹⁰

and large, deemed authentic. I do not consider them to have been wholesale forgers. The root of the problem is that, despite being in possession of the remarks recorded by Ibn Qutaybah [de Goeje] 1904: 14) and those of al-'Askari (see pp. 36-7 below), we are not in a position to recognise or document the models used by the 'Abbasid editors for this purpose.

¹⁰ It is worth comparing Finnegan's remarks on Eskimo poetry: "The Eskimos have to survive in an environment which, one would have thought, is hostile in the extreme to human life ... The temperature is often below freezing, the winter days provide at best only a few hours of daylight in which to seek food, and there are no trees to provide shelter or fuel — or indeed wood for making implements. Yet the Eskimos have somehow developed a way of life that enables them to cope with their environment and to create a culture which is more than a mere battle for physical survival. They imbue their experiences and even their

It has been and is universally held by scholars both Oriental and Occidental that pre-Islamic poetry is the poetry of such nomads. Gibb, however, comes closer to the 'truth' when he says that the poetry presented an image larger than life. The passions and emotions and portrayals were idealised in content and expression – in content because it presented the Arabs to themselves as they would have liked to be, immeasurably bold and gallant and openhanded, and in expression because these ideal images were clothed in rich, sonorous, and evocative language, and given emotional intensity by the beating rhythms and ever-recurring rhyme (1963: 25).

I should maintain that a portion of pre-Islamic poetry is nomadic: a significant portion is 'bedouinising', descended from the desert but belonging to the sedentary milieu, the great courts of Northern Arabia, extolling the (desert) 'Arab heritage, for political, historical, ideological, emotional and artistic reasons.¹¹

Scholarship has almost without exception accepted the conception of this poetry expressed in what is essentially a romanticised, 'Abbasid vision of

perception of themselves and of nature around them with poetic comment and reflection. Their struggles with their harsh environment seem to provide an opportunity, rather than an obstacle, for the development of poetry of a strikingly personal and meditative nature" (1978: 224).

11 Hereafter I shall designate this bedouinising poetry as Bedouin poetry. See also the comments of Bauer 1992a: 215 and especially 255. The relevance of the themes of the onager or ox, episode, for example, to the poet's Bedouin audience were idealised representations of conceptual domains in keeping with the aspirations of the aristocratic audience for whom 'Bedouinness' had become a political and symbolical standard.

a past vital to its (Islamic) self-definition.¹² This manifestly needs urgent revision.

12 S. Stetkevych has attempted something analogous for the 'Abbasid literary collections of pre-Islamic material, both poetry and *akhbār*: see 1991: 257-81 and 1993: 119-57. I do not, however, always agree with either her premises or her conclusions. Jones 1996b: 58 is stimulating: "the received text of the Qur'ān does not take us directly back to the time of Muḥammad (and one should not forget that there is a similar problem with pre-Islamic poetry: it exists only in an 'Abbasid guise)". See also al-Asad 1969 and Sezgin 1975: 14-33.