

STUDYING NABATI POETRY: TOOLS OF THE TRADE

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Tonight, I will beg your indulgence, for I am going to throw caution to the wind and speak up my mind and tell it like I think it is. I am going to start my presentation by drawing some comparisons between nabati poetry and Greek literature, as well as giving few examples from ancient Near Eastern cultures, and I am going to slightly tip the balance intentionally in favor of nabati poetry. I say intentionally because my purpose is to make certain claims with the greatest emphasis possible.

I am going to claim that if we were to compare nabati poetry and Greek literature, nabati poetry would not come out the worse off than Greek literature, if it were not for the sophisticated analytical tools which have been utilized throughout the ages to hammer out the best there is in Greek literature, and to add to it luster, brilliance and coherence that would be otherwise lacking. How much ink has been spelt by brilliant classicists and Renaissance scholars on studying Homeric epics, or Hesiod Theogony, or Pindar, or Sappho, the poetess of Lesbos! Since the renaissance this has been an ongoing scholarly undertaking that verges on indoctrination, not to say infatuation, undertaking no less emphatic, not to say fanatic, than bible Sunday lessons. It is this inherent bias in Western scholarship that makes of the Greek concept “moira” a concept loaded with profound philosophical significance, while the very exact Arab concept of “*qismah/nasieb*” is a mere indicative of fatalism. Greek culture was enthusiastically adopted by European elites as their cultural ancestor, in an attitude which reminds us somewhat of that adopted by Arab intellectuals towards the Jahiliyah era, both were pre-s, Greek was pre-Christian and Jahiliyah was pre-Islamic.

To clarify my intention, I can only give few simple examples, keeping in mind that I am talking here not so much about nabati verse or Greek verse. Rather, I am talking about the whole tradition, meaning the whole encompassing cultural milieu of each one of these poetic traditions, including myths and legends and, in the case of nabati poetry, the narratives *sawaalif* سواف (sing. *saalfah* سالفه) usually associated with the poems. It would be too tedious to compare nabati poetry and Greek poetry image for image, or topos for topos. There is hardly a heroic scene in the Iliad, for example, which has no parallel in the nabati tradition. Since each one of these two poetic traditions is a reflection of its general cultural ambiance and heroic ethics, It would be more enlightening and parsimonious to compare these cultural settings. I am calling for a shift in emphasis from the purely literary criticism to the more comprehensive cultural criticism. This would provide us with the leeway to bring in other adjacent and relevant traditions comprising the totality of the ancient civilizations of the Near East. We can widen the comparative scope to include Sumerian, Egyptian and Semetic cultures.

Let me start with the opening lines of a nabati poem. The nabati poet usually starts his verses by telling us that when he is overcome by the compositional mood, he enters into an altered state of mind, into a trance resembling the trance of the pythia, the prophetess of Apollo at Delphi when she delivers her prophetic oracles in inspired ravings. The Greek word for such a prophetess is *mantis*, a word related in etymology

to *mania* or madness. The nabati poet tells us liefrally that he goes mad. When he feels the urge to compose he seeks solitude away from the crowd, so people would not see him in such a disarrayed state and untidy appearance. He usually seeks the promintory of a high mountain. The image of scaling a mountain sumit collapses two ideas, the idea of the difficulty of compositional labor and the idea of a widening horizon that allows the poet to see from higher up further than ordinary mortals can see. What concerns us here is the fact that ancient Greeks and Semites always sought mountain tops to be closer to the Gods and to sources of inspiration. Babylonians whose country was flat built *ziggurats*, or what is conventionally dubbed the Tower of Babel. Here we should remember that Moses received the ten comandments on the top of mount Horeb.

Related to the theme of poetic composition is the description of the mental toil of the poet in his search for beautiful images and comparing it, on the one hand, to the mental anguish of the lover yearning for his lady or, on the other, to the arduous toil of the hunter after the quarry; sometimes running barefoot on rocks and thisels and sometimes crawling on his hands and knees. Actually, many poets are avid hunters like Sruor al-ATrash سرور الأطرش and Sacir al-Khmeshi ساكر الخمشي. In the opening lines of his poem, the poet-hunter would tell us that he was waiting in his hiding place for the game to pass by with gun loaded. But as he was aiming and ready to shoot the beautiful eyes and graceful neck of the gazelle reminded him of his amour, so he did not shoot. Here we find a reminiscence of legends related to the Greek Artemis (Diana of the Romans), the virgin goddess of the hunt. We may take the hunter's refrain from shooting his quarry as a propitiation for the goddess of the hunt and respect for her virginity, since both killing a game and violating chastity involves the shedding of blood. The legend says that the hunter Acteon glanced at Diana while she was dipping naked in the lake. As punishment, she transformed him into a gazelle and he was hunted down by his own hunting dogs which shredded him into pieces. Glancing at naked lasses in a pool is a favorite theme in Arabic poetry from the classical poet imru' al-Qays امرؤ القيس to the nabati poet Jabr ibn Sayyaar جبر بن سيار.

Some of you may remember the encounter of the Trojan chief Anchises with Aphrodite. The goddess Aphrodite was enamored with Anchises and she wanted him to sleep with her, a lucky man he was to be desired by the very goddess of sexual passion. Poor Anchises was stunned and overwhelmed by the glory of the diety and he beseached her to leave him be and not to molest him, promising her if she spared him he would offer a sacrifice for her every year and will build her a sanctuary on the top of the highest mountain which would be seen from afar in all directions. Since *al-jaahiliyah* الجاهلية till recent times bedouin used to raise a white flag and build a cairn of white boulders on a high mountain or high roads or near watering wells anouncing the favor done by someone to someone else. This is called *bayaadh* بياض, whitening. On the other hand, blackening *sawaad* سواد is done to blacken the name of a treacherous or a dishonest man. The camel brand of the intended man is scratched on the white or black cairn.

I am sure you all know Hermes, the Greek god, clever son of Zeus. On the very day he was born he stole the cattle of his brother Apollo. To deceive Apollo, Hermes wore his sandals backward, turned them around so when going it looks like he is coming.

This is the very trick resorted to, according to legend of course, by Ghaalib ibn HaTTaab *غالب بن حطاب*, the poet chief of al-Jowf الجوف district when he escaped from the prison of Ibn Rashied in Hayil.

In the narrative background to a poem by Sharief Barakaat, the story goes that his mother in law was infatuated by him but he rebuffed her advances. She skinned a desert rat *jerboa* *جربوع* and threw it in the *majls* مجلس of his father claiming that his son tried to sexually assault her and while defending her honor she dropped her fetus. His father chastised him and told him never to show his face in his *majlis*. The same thing happened with the Greek hero Hyppolytus. Hyppolytus was willing to kneel for the goddess Artemis but not to Aphrodite. Aphrodite was crossed with him and caused Phaedra, the wife of Hyppolytus's father Theseus, to have a crush on him. Hyppolytus suffered the same fate as Sharief Barakaat, or is it the other way around!

Another Greek legend says that Hecabe, the wife of Priam, king of Troy, while pregnant with her son Paris, dreamed that she was giving birth to a blaze of fire that burned every thing. Of course, we know that Paris caused the Trojan war when he kidnapped Helen, wife of Menelaus, king of Mycenea. The incident reappears with one chiefly lady from the tribe of al-'Ijman العجمان who is said to have dreamed the same dream and married Sultan ad-Dewiesh سلطان الدويش, the Mutair مطير chief whose incessant raids on al-Ijman cost them dearly.

The heroic values of nabati tradition coincide with those of Greek tradition. Both traditions assert that only heroes deserve fat meat and fair ladies and sitting on carpets and cushions and not on bare dusty earth. Both traditions have the same concept of honor, renown or glory, *kleos* in greek, a common theme in Homer's epics, especially in the episode of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. You achieve honor and glory by performing outstanding heroic feats that would cluster into a biographical narrative or *salfah* and poems that people will continue retelling long after you are dead, thus causing your name to be immortalized and your memory to be preserved many generations after you die. Such deeds would enhance the reputation and social status of your progeny and hold them responsible to preserve the honour you have bestowed on them and live up to it. This is the only immortality you can achieve in nabati and Greek traditions. There is no hereafter.

Let's now change direction and go from Greece to the Ancient Near East. We will start with the ancient Sumerians. They are called the black headed people *sudan ar-rus* *سودان الروس*. This is the very epithet designating the Shammar tribe. What makes this parallel significant is the very close relationship of Shammar to Mesopotamia and the continuous waves of migration since very ancient times from Northern Arabia to Mesopotamia.

Take another example. I remember as a young boy when farmers till the land for planting corn they used to sing: *ياولي السما تجعله عيثري* meaning "Lord of the sky, may you grant that our corn would grow luxurious". Is not *عيثري* derived from Ishtar or Ithtar, Goddess of fertility?! Also, is not "Lord of the sky" a befitting title for Zeus?! I also remember that the cornfields planted in the open desert to be irrigated by rain were called *ba'al* *بعل*. I do not need to remind you who Ba'al is.

There is no end to such cultural parallels between nabati tradition and ancient Semitic beliefs. Take tree worship, especially the palm tree. Before the Wahabee movement

in Najd, an unmarried woman used to circumambulate around a male palm tree while repeating: *ya faHl al-fuHuol 'uriedu ba'lan qabl al-Huol* // أريد بعلا قبل الحول // يافحل الفحول. Remnants of tree worship does not stop here. The Najdis used to put blades from the fronds of a palm tree on exposed food or milk believing that such a precautionary measure would protect the food from poisoning.

In the Najdi version of the Hilali epic the hero Abu Zeid was travelling with his nephew 'Aziez and 'Aziez died on the way back home. After burying him, Abu Zeid tethered his camel, left his ring, and cut his hair on his grave. Do not tell me that this is not a reverberation of grave offerings.

Should I remind you of *al-'Itfih*, also called *al-markab* المركب or *Dhillih* ظله. This is a gigantic, decorated riding gear like a *hodah* هودج with a young chiefly lady inside, nearly naked and ululating to encourage her tribal folks on the battlefield. Could *al-markab* be a remnant of the ancient Semitic tabernacle? and the ululating lady a remnant of Athena or Ishtar, both dieties of war and love, among their other duties of course.

Or take the nabati epithet *al-'adhara* العذارى, singular *'adhra* عذرا. This epithet does not mean virgin in nabati tradition; virgin is *bikir* بكر not *'adhra*. *'adhra* simply means fair young lady. I always wondered what light this could shed on the epithet *maryam al-'adhra* مريم العذراء which is translated as the virgin Mary!

Now I want to say few words about customary law. Let me first point out that each bedouin tribe usually set apart one of her branches to be a refuge for the accused and the transgressors till they get a fair trial. We find the same institution recorded in Chapter 20 of Joshua in Exodus. In customary law among the bedouin most procedures relating to confirmation of oaths have to do with sexual organs and fertility symbols, like the oath of *shamlah* شمله and the oath of *namlah* نمله. *shamlah* is a kind of "brassiere" put on the udders of a female camel in milk so her young does not suckle all her milk and some would be left for the family nourishment. *namlah* is the ant. Ants come out during harvest season. Connection with fertility in these two cases should be apparent. On the other hand, when someone is in distress and seek the help and protection of a stronger man, he holds the belt of this benefactor while seeking his help. I take the belt here as euphemism for the phallus, the instrument of fertility. This should remind you of the story of Abraham with his servant whom he entrusted to send to the land of Haran to ask for the hand of Rifqah, daughter of Beto'iel, for his son Isaac. Abraham asked the servant to put his hand on his, *i. e.* Abrahams' thigh and swear that he will seek a wife for Isaac from Haran and not from the Canaanites. Again, I take Abrahams' thigh as euphemism for his penis. When the servant arrived to the house of Laban son of Nahour, he refused to partake of the food they offered him till they hear him out first and grant him his request, *i. e.* the hand of Rifqah for Isaac. This is the bedouin's ritual of *mumaaHah* ممانحه. Among them, an emissary will not taste even water or coffee till his request is granted. This ritual is related to the bond of hospitality, or what the ancient Greeks call *xenia*, whereby a guest enters into a bond with his host and neither of them is supposed to molest or cause harm to the other. The institution of *xenia* is demonstrated by the incident of the encounter of the two homeric heros Glaucos and Diomedes on the battlefield of Troy. Although the two heros were fighting on opposite sides, when they met they refrained from

killing each other when they discovered that they were bound by the *xenia* bond, a bond they inherited from their ancestors. Violation of *xenia* is demonstrated by the unseemly conduct of the suiters who wanted to marry Penelope, the wife of Odysius, thinking that he would never return from Troy. Traces of this institution can be detected in the story of Lot as recorded in the nineteenth chapter of Genesis. Lot begged the people of Sodom not to molest the two angels because they were his guests under his roof.

We are all familiar with the expression "mother earth". The earth is pictured in ancient cultures as a goddess called Ga قاع by the Greeks. Nabati poets used two epithets to refer to the homeland. Al-'Ouni العوني in his poem *al-khaluuj* الخلوج called it "our mother, how sweet is her milk". Poets, who composed panegyrics praising the late king Abdulaziz and lauding his efforts to unify the kingdom called Najd a beautiful young bride whose dowry is gun powder and drawn swords. On the other hand, chiefs, kings and pharaohs in ancient societies are depicted in the image of a bull, the bull being a symbol of brute force and insatiable sexual verility, and hence fertility and prosperity. It is the responsibility of the king or pharaoh to fertilize the land and to defend it against enemy intruders. Let me dwell a bit on the image of the bull which goes as far back in history as the drawing on the palette of Narmer, the first Egyptian pharaoh, not to mention testimonies from Mesopotamian archaeology. In nabati poetry, the advancing brave warriors on the battlefield are compared to the charge of camel bulls in heat, for it is impossible to stand in the way of a rutting bull from his advance towards a female camel in heat. Keep in mind the bitter battles between male animals in the rutting season. Should a chief of a Najdi settlement be besieged by his enemies he feigns marriage and order his men to beat the drums in celebration of his wedding to show the enemy that his sexual appetite is at its peak and that the siege does not worry him in the least. There is a link between sexual virility and courage in war.

One of the most interesting examples illustrating this theme is a poem by the Shammari poet Khalaf abu Zwayid خلف أبو زويد praising SaTTaam ibn Sha'laan سطلام ابن شعلان, chief of the Rwalah Tribe. For reasons we do not need to go into, Khalaf abu Zwayid fell from grace at the court of Prince Muhammad ibn Rashied and sought refuge with SaTTaam ibn Sha'laan. Ibn Rashied was barren and had no children. Abu Zwayid insinuated at this in his poem while, at the same time, comparing ibn Sha'laan, the traditional enemy of ibn Rashied, to a stud horse. The court poets of ibn Rashied took this as a very grave offense and composed many poems defending the virility of their prince.

If in this talk I sound to you like I am rambling, it is because the points of contact between nabati tradition and the ancient traditions I mentioned are so vast, varied and variegated, it is hard to pin them down and get a good grip on them. There are many more examples to cite but it would take long winded explanations and detailed background information to point out the resemblance. My aim was only to give few samples in order to draw your attention to parallelisms between nabati

tradition and ancient Greek and ancient Near Eastern traditions, and then proceed from there to state that by carefully studying nabati poetry and comparing it with these ancient traditions, we can shed light on them just as much as we shed light on nabati poetry itself. Furthermore, such paralellisms, entitle us to benefit from the research tools which have been applied since the European Renaissance to analyze these ancient traditions and utilize them in our study of nabati poetry. We need all the sophisticated scientific tools applied to the study of the folklore, oral literature and oral history of all nations, especially those applied to the study of ancient Near Eastern, Egyptian, Semitic and Greek cultures and literatures. I wanted to show that this poetry is no less valuable and worthy of our attention than other traditions which are deemed important by specialists. It is time to start treating nabati poetry with the same scholarly seriousness in which we treat these ancient traditions. Studying nabati poetry within strictly local limits is not very eluminating. Such an approach undermines the real value of this poetry.

So far I have been dwelling on the comparative approach as one of the research tools we need to utilize in the study of nabati poetry. But we need all the scientific armaments we can muster and here I want to stress the importance of the wholistic approach which emphasizes the connectedness of literature to the rest of culture in oral societies. Oral literature is embedded and enmeshed with the rest of culture in traditional societies. Therefore, literary criticism and exegesis turn out to be not just philological and literary, but mainly ethnographic.

In studying the total cultural ambience of an oral literary text such as a nabati poem, we come to understand fully not only its content and meaning, but also its function, which is usually not strictly artistic and aesthetic, as is the case in the literary texts of script cultures. A poem composed by a Bedouin sheikh is not just a poem. It would be considered frivolous and unbecoming for a respectable sheikh to compose a poem just for its own sake, and sheikhs usually open their poems with such a disavowal. It has to have a dignified purpose and serious intent—to defend a cause, lay a claim, exhort to action, declare war, celebrate a victory, sue for peace, and so forth.

Let me sum up my position. Oral literature is, in a sense, like crude oil in that there are so many derivatives you can extract from it, but only if you have good refineries; in the present instance this means sound methodology and a sophisticated theoretical orientation. This way, if you do not enjoy oral tradition as art, you can utilize it, for example, as a historical document reflecting or refracting social facts.

If we agree that nabati poetry is a reflection of Arabian culture, then its interpretation becomes not merely a linguistic or literary undertaking. It becomes a comprehensive ethnographic project; for to deal with the themes, imageries and the whole content of nabati poetry is to deal with the cultural components of the Arabian culture in its totality. At this level of analysis, nabati poetry and classical Arabic poetry interlock

and interact to give us a comprehensive, continuous ethnographic portrayal of the Arabian culture from pre-Islamic era to pre-modern times. Just as nabati poetry is the natural continuation of Jahili poetry, so the premodern culture of Arabia is the continuation of its classical predecessor.

Therefore, as much as we call for the study of nabati poetry for a deeper understanding of pre-Islamic poetry, we also just as urgently call for the study of the culture of pre-modern Arabia to shed light on aspects of the pre-Islamic era which are still hidden from us. This way, we can fill the gaps in our knowledge of earlier times. Furthermore, we should remember that the Arabian Peninsula is the original home from which all Semitic races migrated since ancient times and that bedouin culture is the prototype of ancient Semitic culture. Therefore, bedouin ethnography holds the key to a deeper comprehension of pre-Islamic Arabia, as well as ancient Semitic society, religion and customs.

In this talk, my intent was to look at nabati poetry from a wider perspective and to treat it with the seriousness it deserves as a potent social, political, and ideological force in the traditional Arabian society. More specifically there must be a stop to studying nabati poetry by the wrong people for the wrong reasons using the wrong tools. We need to upgrade the study of this heritage from the anecdotal to the scholarly. We might as well emend the subtitle of this talk and change it from "Studying nabati poetry: Tools of the trade" to become "Studying nabati poetry: A Plea for Method"