



COMPOSITION: THE POET'S VIEWPOINT

Nabaṭi poets delight in versifying their views and conceptions concerning the processes of composition and transmission. Indeed, it is an established tradition to comment, in the opening verses of a poem, on the arduous task of poetizing, and perhaps mention how the finished work is to be communicated to the audience. Occasionally these views are given direct expression, but in most instances they are obliquely stated in figurative language and encoded in stock motifs which are worked into the prelude of the poem.

The prelude forms an integral component of the poem's artistic identity and contributes to its compositional intricacy. Aside from its aesthetic function, however, the prelude can be analyzed as a metapoem—a poetic commentary upon poetizing (see Dundes 1966) which, upon close inspection, can provide us with a revealing inside view of the accepted methods and common practices of composition in Nabaṭi poetry—and, perhaps more importantly, tell us how poets themselves conceive of the poetic process. I shall examine in the following pages the poet's view of inspiration and composition as expressed in the prelude to the poem, supplementing my discussion with material from my field experience as well as that gleaned from various written sources.

The Nabaṭi poet considers his words as a mirror reflecting his private feelings and inner emotions, or what is variously called *sadd*, *ċinīn*, and *ʿazā*. In composing, the poet *ybayyih sadduh*, *ybayyih ċinīnuh*, *ybayyih ʿazāuh*, that is to say, he exposes himself to the public eye and divulges to all his innermost and most deeply guarded secrets. Despite his oft repeated vows to hold his tongue and remain silent, there are times when he is so overwhelmed by the poetic urge that he can no longer restrain himself, hard as he may try to resist the temptation.

Even in his old age, the poet finds it impossible to disregard the poetic call. This is because the poet is characteristically a compassionate person who is very sensitive to the pathos and the difficult conditions of human existence. His keen mind is constantly preoccupied (*mšaggā*, *mʿanna*) with the vicissitudes of life. The poet is also a man of passion (*rāʿī hawa*).

His impulsive heart (*galb al-xatā*) is easily enamored (*miḡram*, *mwallaʿ*) by scenes, actions, and qualities that strike his fancy and appeal to his imagination. He is readily moved by such sights and sounds as the deserted encampment, the departure of the tribes after summer camping, the procession of a migrating tribe, the rumbling of thunder, the flashing of lightning, the sad groaning of a mother camel over her lost calf, the cooing of a dove, the passing figure of a shapely woman, and so on. It is scenes like this that enflame the heart of the poet, stir (*yhayyiḏ*) his passions, and tear the scab off his emotional wounds (*ynaggiḏ jruhuh*).

This outlook is illustrated by the following popular anecdote concerning Baṣri al-Wḏēhi, a famous poet from the Shammar tribe (al-Thumayrī 1972:147–148; Ibn Khamīs 1978:152–154). In his old age, Baṣri vowed to dissociate himself from poetry and the pursuit of pleasure; he undertook to perform the religious duty of *ḥajj*, hoping to please God and ask for His forgiveness. While at Mecca performing the rites of *ḥajj*, Baṣri was approached by one of his friends who, to tease him and test his faith, said: “O Baṣri, there is a rare piece of *silʿih* (merchandise) exhibited in the marketplace; I would like to buy it, but I thought I should get your expert opinion first.” Baṣri took his friend’s words at face value and followed him into the marketplace, until the latter stopped at a crowded corner where a famous bedouin beauty was doing her shopping. She was the daughter of Šaʿāʿ Ibn Rbēʿān, one of the principal chiefs of the mighty ʿTēbah tribe. When his eyes caught sight of the bedouin princess wearing her colorful garments and riding in her decorated litter which was surrounded by onlookers, Baṣri realized what the words of his friend had really meant, but it was too late. He became transfixed and could not take his eyes off the princess. He gazed at her for a long time, and then gave a detailed description of her beauties in a poem, which later became very popular; the opening line of the poem is: “Confounded be the one who led me here and renewed my wounds; oh, pity me, I am a frail old man!”

The poetic genius of an outstanding poet is conceived of as always being near at hand, lying dormant like smoldering embers to be set ablaze at the moment of inspiration. When the poet is inspired (*mtahayyiḏ*), the door of his heart opens and it becomes possible for him to travel the difficult path of poetry. Some poets claim that at the moment of inspiration they become delirious, as if they were intoxicated. During this trancelike state, the heart of the poet begins to bubble (*yijjīṣ*) with emotions like a boiling cauldron (*mirjal*). Notions seeking articulation invade his mind like a swarm of locusts. His breast overflows (*yajhaš*, *yifīḏ*) with words pouring forth like a stream flowing from a spring (*ʿidd*). This poetic surge is compared to *darr* (abundant milk flowing from the udder) or *jamm* (abundant water collecting at the bottom of a deep well). A poet may

boast that his poetic *darr* would fill every vessel to the brim, or that his *jamm* is so abundant that waterwheels working day and night could not dry it up. Others may make more exaggerated claims and compare their poetic flow to an ocean that would drown everything, or to a torrent that would sweep away anything in its path. This wild poetic surge, however, must be controlled and turned into well-ordered verses. Order must be imposed on the formless poetic mass of vaguely connected words, images, and ideas that flood the poet's mind. Here are a few lines from the prelude of a poem by Mḥammad al-ʿAbdallah al-ʿŌnī which convey these ideas (Kamāl 1960–1971:V, 73–77).

- 1 [My verses are] gems and pearls reaped from an overflowing ocean of ideas,
- 2 Which I subdue and fetter lest it [the ocean] deluge the world in less time than it would take to swallow a sip of coffee.
- 3 When I am inundated with the surging ocean of reflection, and its foaming waves begin to press against my body, I confine it with heavy chains and a thousand locks.
- 4 Were it not for such constraints, my words would stream forth like tumultuous seas where giant ships voyage.
- 5 Turbulent passions stirring inside my breast have chased slumber away from my eyes, so that I remained sleepless all night.

Although poetry is inspired by passions, composition remains a deliberate and reflective process. The diction of the poem must be evocative and musical; therefore the words must be chosen with extreme care. Musil writes that the nomads “hold that the words used in a poem must be out of the ordinary, not those heard in common everyday life. The more unusual words the Bedouin can put into his composition, the better he thinks it. The poet therefore revises every verse most painstakingly, repeats it many times, substitutes some words for others, and asks the opinion of his friends before producing his poem” (1928:284). Of one particular poet, Musil observes: “When I found that he depicted me in his poem as sitting upon a *heḡîn* (mount camel) I demurred, saying that I rode a *delûl*, that the Rwala do not say *heḡîn*, but *delûl*. The poet acknowledged this, but said he could not employ such a common word as *delûl* in his poem, for in a poem one has to use the word that is more graceful even if less familiar” (1927:237).

The strict rules of rhyme and meter in Nabaṭi poetry make versification a slow and difficult process. A Nabaṭi poem ranges in length from a few to more than a hundred verses. But whether it is a short ditty or a long ode, all the verses of a poem must be of the same meter. They must have the same number of long and short syllables combined in exactly the

same order. The verse is divided into two hemistichs which are metrically identical, but each of which has a different rhyme. The first hemistichs of all verses must rhyme with each other, as must the second hemistichs, no matter how long the poem may be. Due to the importance of rhyming in Nabaṭi poetry, a poem is often called *gāf* or *gīfān* (rhymes). To make all the verses of a poem fit this grid of rhyme and meter, each verse must be carefully polished (*mḥakkak*). The labor involved in such a painstaking process is reflected in the various terms that poets use to refer to it, such as *ywallif* (to harmonise), *y^ʿaddil* (to straighten), *yāzin* (to measure), *yanḥat* (to sculpt), *yṣaxxir* (to hew), *y^ʿasif* (to tame, break).

There is a close link in the minds of Nabaṭi poets between poetry and love. Regardless of the principal subject of his composition, a poet is likely to pay tribute to a charming woman who is the source of his poetic inspiration. It is *ṭard al-hawā* (the passionate pursuit of exquisite beauty and amorous affairs) that impels poets to undergo the pains and agonies of composition. This search for ultimate beauty and ultimate joy inspires the poet to seek aesthetic perfection for his composition, regardless of the difficulties and hardships he brings upon himself in executing this demanding task. The poet may stay up all night carefully polishing his words and revising his verses, as expressed in these lines from the prelude of a poem by ʿAbdarriḥmān al-Brāhīm ar-Ribīʿī (Ibn Sayḥān 1965–1969:II, 198).

- 1 I was still awake when the Pleiades descended in the western horizon as if driven by my ever-watchful eyes; thoughts swarmed in my mind and I was unable to close my eyes.
- 2 The ship of my passions sailed in the deep ocean of reflection and plunged into a vast chasm whose bottom is frightful.
- 3 Its waves push against each other painfully inside my breast; I am burdened by the calamities of fate.
- 4 From this ocean of ideas I harvest what strikes my fancy, gems of verses which I string intricately.

Poetic inspiration is likened by poets to the blowing of the wind, but the difficult process of composition is likened to the laborious operation of winnowing (separating the grain from the chaff) or, more commonly, to sailing. Poetic reflection is viewed as a mental journey in a turbulent sea of passion (*baḥr al-hawā*, *baḥr al-ḡarām*) whose waves are frightful and whose depths are full of terror. The probing for words and images is like diving for pearls. Only bold and worthy men can dive deeply in the sea or delve deeply into poetic reflection. These ideas are expressed in the following verses from a long poem by Rāshid al-Khalāwī (Ibn Khamīs 1972:247).

- 1 My verses are precious pearls selected by my discerning mind; like pure gems they appeal to men of sound judgment.
- 2 I picked them from the abyss of a deep ocean; whoever dives in it other than me, [who am] experienced, will drown in its bottomless depths.
- 3 Others tried it before me, but they lost the shore; many a ship was overturned, its captain flung into the dark chasm,
- 4 Ocean depths which only Rāšid can sail and dive into without the help of ropes and haulers.
- 5 My tongue pulled them [the verses] from the bottom of my heart to fashion them into a splendid form.

Naturally, a Nabaṭi poem is more than a collection of verses that share the same rhyme and meter. The artistic unity of the poem is achieved by the skillful interweaving of its thematic components. The conventional themes, stock motifs, topics, and formulas of the Nabaṭi poetic tradition are compared by poets to flowers in a meadow, fruits in a garden, or gems and pearls. The poet picks those things he fancies (*yixtār*, *ytaṅgā*, *yajni*, *yagṭif*), sorts them out, and weaves them into an intricate and harmonious composition of his own.

In its thematic development, the Nabaṭi poet follows very closely the structural principles employed by the ancient Arab poets. A long poem usually consists of several themes strung together and studded throughout with similes and images, all of which are conventional, but each of which is given a slight semantic turn or a new artistic twist. The goal of the poet is to strike a balance between the familiar and the unique. In his composition, the poet does not touch upon all the themes at his disposal, nor does he necessarily arrange the themes he chooses in a set and rigid order. Themes in the same poem are not treated at the same length or according to a fixed proportion. The poet has a wide range of options with which to start his poem and develop it to a successful completion. He works within a modular structure in which themes are components that can be augmented, truncated, added, deleted, and shifted around for artistic effect. The poet tries as skillfully as possible to relate the thematic components of his poem to each other and coordinate them gracefully in one harmonious whole. This is achieved by the intricate interlacing of themes and by the smooth transition from one theme to the next so that all converge together to form a poem that is at once traditional and original.

Nabaṭi poets are well aware that the verses of a poem must exhibit an artistic unity—a structure—beyond that of rhyme and meter. They employ visual images to convey their conception of poetic order and they metaphorically represent the intellectual process of composition as a

visually intricate handicraft. The various compositional methods a poet may follow in developing his poem are compared to desert roads that crisscross each other, going up and down over soft sands and hard rocks. Only an expert poet can extricate himself and steer safely through this poetic maze. One poet, Zēd as-Salāmih al-Xwēr, boasts in the opening line of one of his poems that his verses are *riyām w-mawālīf*, that is to say, they follow each other closely and in perfect harmony like the file of mother camels followed closely by their suckling calves on their way back from pasture. The most common word used to refer to composition is *naḍm*, which also refers to the threading of beads. To praise the intricacy and beauty of his composition, a Nabaṭi poet would most likely appeal to the visual sense of his audience, and compare its verses to gems and pearls of variegated colors and sizes strung together into a resplendent necklace. Other words used in reference to composition are *yabni* (to build) and *yšayyid* (to construct). The word for verse is *bēt* (a house, a structure, an edifice), and the beginning of the poem is called *sās* (foundation).

Poetic cogitation is not only compared to manual labor (e.g., carving, hewing, building, weaving, threading,) but in some instances it is accompanied by physical activity such as the making of coffee. When the poet feels the spark of inspiration stirring inside him, he fixes himself a cup of coffee to clear his head and help him compose. Coffee making is as elaborate and absorbing a ritual as composition. The way a man makes his coffee is his *nūmās*, since it reflects his nimbleness, alertness, composure, tact, and taste. A man takes as much pride in his coffee making as he does in his poetic composition. Coffee making involves building the fire, washing the cups and pots, boiling the water, slowly roasting the coffee beans, pounding the roasted beans rhythmically in a brass mortar, throwing the ground coffee into the boiling pot, letting it boil for a few minutes, drawing it away from the fire and letting it settle, crushing the cardamom seeds, casting the right amount of crushed cardamom into a fresh pot, pouring the coffee that was left to settle into this fresh pot, letting it just come to a boil with the cardamom, withdrawing the pot from the embers, and leaving it for a while to settle and become clear. In other words, coffee making and composition are both patterned activities, except that one is manual whereas the other is purely mental. It is this resemblance in one way and difference in another that makes these two activities go together so nicely; each is in some way a mimesis of the other. While the poet makes his coffee he also makes his poem, deciding its rhyme, meter, and opening line, which is called *mišadd*, from the verb *šadd* (to saddle a camel mount), because the other verses of the poem ride upon the first line; that is, they depend on it, in rhyme and meter. By the time the coffee is ready, the poem is well on its way. As

he sips his coffee, the poet reviews his poem, revises its verses, and adds some finishing touches. Finally the poet, having finished his coffee, closes his poem with a line of prayer for peace upon the soul of the Prophet.

We see, then, that composition is generally viewed as a mimesis of physical activity and is in fact at times accompanied by such activity. It is of equal interest to note that the mental operation of poetic composition is for some poets associated with a vigorous and restless body motion. This physical motion is a visible sign that the poet is emotionally moved—that he is in a state of poetic labor. When the poet is inspired (*mtahayyid*), he feels agitated and burdened and he cannot rest until he unloads the heavy burden of passion (*ḥiml al-ḡayy*, *ḥiml al-hawā*, *ḥiml al-ḡarām*), that is, until he finishes his composition. The poet paces around (*yisū*), roams about (*yihjil*), and runs (*yihrif*), as the poets say, like a mad man, a wild beast, or a thirsty camel separated from the herd and lost in the empty desert wastes. Because the poet is always on the run, poetic composition is compared to hunting. Actually, many famous poets were also famous hunters—like Srūr al-Aṭraṣ, who composed while walking alone in the wilderness stalking wild game. Like hunting, poetic composition is an obsession (*wil'ih*) which is toilsome yet enjoyable. The hunters pursue *ṣēd* (wild game) such as *ḏbā*, *rīm*, and *ḡizlān* (all species of gazelle), while the poets woo beautiful virgins who are also called *ṣēd*, *ḏbā*, *rīm*, and *ḡizlān*. In pondering over his poem and in searching for the right words and images, the poet undergoes all sorts of hardships, just like a hunter in pursuit of the quarry. Some poets elaborate this metaphor by describing the sad lot of the hunter: his body is weary from ceaseless running, his skin is shriveled and darkened from overexposure to the burning sun, his back is aching from frequent stooping and stalking, and his bare feet are bleeding from stepping over thorny bushes and sharp rocks.

In addition to the visible sign of body motion, composition is also associated with emotional turbulence and excitement. The heart of the poet is set ablaze by passions burning inside him, and hot tears flow down his cheeks like the splashing of water buckets drawn from the bottom of the well by four strong, fast-moving camels. He sobs (*yta'abbar*), wails (*yimūḥ*), moans (*yagnib*) and howls (*ya'wī*) like a bereaved mother, a camel who has lost her calf, a man whose leg has been broken on the battlefield, or a hungry wolf. Many poets prefer to be alone while composing, because they do not want to be seen in such a distressed state. They seek solitude in the empty desert or on the forlorn summits of lofty cliffs away from people. The following four brief examples—by Riḏa ibn Ṭārif of Shammar, Srūr al-Aṭraṣ, Mḥammad Ibn Aḥmad as-Sdērī (Ibn Sayḥān 1965–1969:II, 137), and Zabn Ibn 'Mēr (ibid., 226), respectively—illustrate the poet's state while composing.

- 1 When passions fill my breast I say: bring forth my graceful mount,
put on her saddle and her trappings.
- 2 Put on her saddle and grant me leave [to go]; I must seek relief on
the desert roads.

* * *

- 1 I spent all day yesterday on the ledge of a lofty cliff; I did not come
down till darkness fell.
- 2 There, I was sobbing; my tears were streaming like the copious rain
of the clouds.
- 3 I was moved by the memory of my love; she is as beautiful as the
wild doe grazing peacefully with the flock.

* * *

- 1 These are the verses of the one who leaped over the forlorn summit
of a lofty escarpment which only eagles can reach,
- 2 A high heap of boulders which is difficult to climb but whose top
I seek when passions overrun my heart.
- 3 There, I sit alone and my mind sinks into the abyss of reflection.
- 4 There, I sit and muse, so puzzling is the change of times.

* * *

- 1 Leave me, leave me, dear friends, leave me. Leave me, do not
reproach me; I can no longer hold back my tears.
- 2 I wish to be left alone in the empty space to cry and relieve my
heart; I do not want others to hear me.

As these examples show, composition is accompanied by emotional outbursts and loud vocalization. Generally speaking, a Nabaṭī poet does not compose in silence. Rather, he sings out his verses (*yīṣibb aṣ-ṣōt*, *yazʿaj aṣ-ṣōt*). Even when there are people present, the poet cannot control himself, but keeps murmuring aloud his yet unfinished verses. Here are the opening lines of a poem sent by Tirkī Ibn ʿAbdallah ʿAl Saʿūd to his cousin Mishārī, then a prisoner in Egypt (al-Ḥātam 1968:II, 9).

- 1 I was alarmed by a serious matter that chased sweet slumber away
from my eyes.
- 2 Secrets that I have been striving to conceal are leaking out of my
breast; the people around me are startled by my loud mumbling.

- 3 My heart is inflamed by the sad news I received from a noble man [Mishārī] complaining of hardship and ill fortune.
- 4 Go on, pen! Write a most tender greeting to my cousin, Mishārī.
- 5 He gallantly walks the dangerous path of glory, the scion of valiant ancestors who in boldness are like hungry wolves.

That composition is accompanied by singing and loud vocalization is also attested to by this interesting observation recorded by Musil.

Our omnivorous poet Miz'el aḥu Za'êla was composing a poem in my honor. Since a roving versifier must earn his living by his art, he apparently thought I would pay him well for a poem I liked. It was interesting to watch his procedure. He would ponder for several minutes and then recite two verses twenty or thirty times, substituting for some of the expressions new and better ones—*azjan*, as he called them. Then he would bid Ṭâreš pay attention and remember these verses. After Ṭâreš had learned them, Miz'el would be absorbed and silent again, and after a while would sing the first two verses and add the third to them. Having sung them to Ṭâreš innumerable times in his shrill voice, he would ask me to write them down while he composed the rest. (1927:236–237)

Singing and loud vocalization are not only signs of an emotional outburst; they also help the poet to measure the rhythm of his verses. It has already been mentioned that the verses of a poem must all be identical in the number of their long and short syllables and in the manner in which these syllables are concatenated. Syllabic scansion, however, is a scholarly procedure with which Nabaṭi poets are not acquainted. For Nabaṭi poets, “meter” translates into “rhythm,” and “scansion” into “singing” or “chanting.” The word *meter* (*baḥr* in literary Arabic) is unknown to Nabaṭi poets, except perhaps for the few literate poets among them. Instead, they use the two words *ṭarg* and *šēlih*, both of which refer to the way a verse is sung or chanted. The word *ṭarg* is related to *ṭirīg* (a beaten track) and it means beat or rhythm. The word *šēlih* comes from the verb *šāl* (to raise one's voice in singing). As will be discussed in a later chapter, the Nabaṭi poet views his meters musically, and determines whether or not their scansion is correct by singing them. The relation of singing to composition is indicated by the expression *y'addil lḥūn*, which refers to the act of composition and which means “to harmonize some tunes” or “to straighten some rhythms.” A poet may call his composition *miḥkam al-fann*, meaning that its verses are of a perfectly measured rhythm. Sometimes the rhythm of the poem is guided by loud pounding

which beats rhythmically (*yidikk, yarjis*) against the poet's ribcage (*aḏ-ḏlū^c al-maḡālīg*).

In concluding this chapter, it is perhaps advisable to remind the reader that we cannot always impose a literal interpretation on everything the poets say about composition. The poet may very well mean it literally when he says that he stayed up all night composing his poem, or that he composed while running or climbing the ledge of a lofty cliff, or that he was inspired by a passing beauty—he may also simply be employing these stock motifs as part of the conventional prelude. Yet the evidence, internal as well as external, which we have examined in the preceding pages unequivocally demonstrates that in Nabaṭi poetry composition is a difficult labor and a slow process which is independent from, and prior to, transmission and performance.