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Mu'allafa of Tarafa

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THE *MU'ALLAQA* OF ṬARAFĀ

Introduction

Ṭarafa occupies an honored place within the Arabic tradition. Jarīr placed him first among the early poets while Labīd and al-Akhtal put him second.¹ But his *Mu'allaqa*, especially prized by Arab poets and critics, has been less of a favorite in the West. Camel imagery dominates not only the famous *nāqa* scene but the rest of the ode as well, imagery that epitomizes the difficulty of translating bedouin culture into a modern language.

My goal is a translation that is natural, idiomatic, and poetic. Translation presupposes interpretation. It involves continual compensatory moves dependent upon interpretation. The translation that follows seeks to present a *Mu'allaqa* of Ṭarafa which, despite the cultural distance between its world and ours, is commensurate with our poetic concerns and poetic values.

The poem opens with the appearance of the *aḥlāl*, the ruins of the beloved's campsite. The ruins "appear" (*lāḥat*) in the sense of the word still retained in the nominal form "apparition." They flicker and fade, hovering between reality and illusion. The second verse pictures the hero beneath the riding camels. From the direction of their looming shapes comes the command of the poet's companions to be hard, to endure. The image and the command are interconnected. Endurance will be expressed and ramified throughout the poem in a complex camel symbolism. This ode might be called the camel ode *par excellence*. From the initial image in verse two through the great *nāqa* section, from the dispute over the lost pack camels to the final dispute over the slaughter of a *nāqa*, symbolic presentations of the camel are the vehicle through which the poetic voice achieves its power and edge. Between the apparition of the *aḥlāl* and the command spoken out over the form of the camel, the poetic persona of Ṭarafa is formed.

If the camel sections are thought of as primarily descriptive, the modern reader is justified in asking how commensurate an extended camel description, however rich, might be to our poetic idiom. I have attempted to "bring across" two elements that lie beneath the descriptive surface of the poem: symbolic resonance and semantic overflow.²

¹ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes* (London and New York, 1957), p. 74.

² I discuss these principles here only insofar as they guide the translation of this ode. A more complete exposition appears in a recently completed essay, "Symbolic Resonance and Semantic Overflow in the Early Qasida: Poetic Values and Poetic Claims," presented at the workshop on Middle Eastern Literature, University of Pennsylvania, March, 1985.

An example of resonance can be seen in the term *ašamm*. In his boast Ṭarafa responds to his critics with his celebrated song of the pre-Islamic ethos (But for three things...) in which he compares the grave of the miser to the grave of the spendthrift. Both graves are covered by stone slabs that are *šumm*: deaf, hard, silent. The same term is used in Imr'u al-Qays' *Mu'allaqa* in connection with the granite stones that the sleepless poet imagines anchor the stars, stopping their movement and the movement of time. In Labīd's *Mu'allaqa* the term is used in connection with the *aṭlāl* which the poet interrogates about the beloved. In the *Mu'allaqa* of 'Antara, it is used in connection with the warrior's spear.³ What these various contexts reveal is a common symbolic resonance: in each case the term refers beyond its immediate, descriptive context to the hard, deaf silence of fate. The genius of early Arabic poetry lies in the tension between the immediate descriptive function and the unlimited symbolic resonance that it generates.

Resonance occurs when an image taps into a network of symbolic associations. These associations are set off in each ode in a different manner through the non-reversible movement from the *aṭlāl* to a final self-assertion, a movement that contains a continuous series of semantic "overflows." In Ṭarafa's brief and intense *nasīb*, the poetic voice overflows the initial beloved-gazelle metaphor. The particular descriptive point is superseded by an extended, independent tableau including the gazelle, lush vegetation, jewel imagery, camomile, dew, and dune. The antecedent (are we talking about the beloved or the gazelle?) loses itself in the continual extension of the metaphor. The beloved-gazelle metaphor is transformed into the deeper, beloved-as-lost-garden archetype. In the extended metaphor or simile the poetic voice overruns the original descriptive logic to reveal the deeper symbol. In the tension between the imaging power of the initial metaphor or simile, and the resonance of archetypal associations underlying it, meaning overflows.

The *nāqa* section is composed of a dense series of similes or imagistic flashes that are never merely descriptive. The *nāqa*'s eyes, for example, are compared to the eyes of a "frightened doe oryx with fawn." As an inverse simile (like Homer's comparison of war clamor to falling snow) it is exquisite. The effect is due to the interrelation of its descriptive surface to the deeper symbolic polarity between the endurance and elemental immutability associated with the camel, and the grace and vulnerability associated with the oryx. In Ṭarafa's ode the first side of the polarity is developed through similes (to the bridge, anvil, fortress, rock), while the second side is alluded to through the symbolic resonance. By contrast,

³ Verses 48 of Imr'u al-Qays, 50 of 'Antara, and 10 of Labīd in Anbārī's recension of the *Mu'allaqāt*.

Labīd's *Mu^ʿallaqa* develops the oryx-vulnerability side in an extended tableau, bringing in the opposite side through allusion. The same symbolic correspondences underlie each ode, but the poetic voice can overflow into different channels.

The powerful symbolic resonance generated by the *nāqa* scene supplies a highly charged context to Ṭarafa's dispute with his brother and cousin (Ma^ʿbad and Mālik) over lost pack camels and the later dispute with an old man, perhaps his father, over the illicitly slaughtered *nāqa*. The later incident also draws on the *nāqa*'s symbolic association with the self of the poet-hero, an association reflected in the pre-Islamic custom of tying the *nāqa* to the grave of the dead hero. The energy this association adds to the ode can be seen by comparing the *nāqa*-slaughter scenes in the *Mu^ʿallaqāt* of Labīd and Ṭarafa. Labīd slaughters his own *nāqa* and distributes it to the clan and its dependents, a symbolic, never explicit, self-sacrifice. At this moment the hero's individual boast is subsumed into a collective, tribal boast. Ṭarafa sacrifices another's *nāqa*. This sacrifice-gone-wrong leads to the opposite result, the splitting of both psyche and community into mutually hostile voices, an enraged "old stick of a man" taking over the function of the previous blamers (the *ʿādhilāt* or "scolds", Ma^ʿbad, and Mālik), and a raging poet. In each case the slaughter of the *nāqa* brings the emotional and symbolic force of the ode to a crescendo. But that crescendo yields contrasting conclusions. Ṭarafa's ode ends not with the integration of the poet into the community, but with a vague, repeated threat, the poet just short of the irrevocable break with the tribe we find in the *Ṣu^ʿlūk* poetry of Shanfarā.

In the process of translating, in the weighing and shifting of compensations, I have focused upon preserving resonance and overflow, and their modulation through the rhythm and flow of the verse. A modern, natural English cannot duplicate the intricate meter and rhyme of the original. Through unrhymed quatrains and the play of syntactical cadence against the line breaks I attempt to recreate the original's inner rhythmic texture.

Early Arabic poetry, in particular the *Mu^ʿallaqa* of Ṭarafa, is distinctive in its time and place. That time and place may seem removed from modern life. Yet within or beneath the apparent descriptions is a symbolic world of concerns common to all poetry. From the perspective of that world, I find Ṭarafa's *Mu^ʿallaqa* to be an incomparable poetic work.⁴

⁴ The translation is based upon the texts in Max Seligsohn, *Diwān de Ṭarafa Ibn al-ʿAbd Al-Bakrī, accompagné du commentaire de Yousouf Al-Aʿlam de Santa-Maria* (Paris: Librairie Émile Bouillon, 1901); Al-Anbārī, *Sharḥ al-Qaṣāʾid al-Sabʿ al-Ṭiwāl al-Jāhiliyyāt*; Al-Tibrizī, *Sharḥ al-Qaṣāʾid al-ʿAshr*; and Al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-Mu^ʿallaqāt al-Sabʿ*. For a recent article with important implications for the reading of Tarafa's ode, see Jaroslav Stetkevych, "Name and Epithet: The Philology and Semiotics of Animal Nomenclature in Early Arabic Poetry", *JNES*, vol. 45, no. 2 (April, 1986), pp. 89-125.

The Nasīb

The ruins Kháwla left
 on the mottled flatlands of Thámhad
 appear and fade, like the trace of a tattoo
 on the back of a hand.

There my friends halted
 tall camels over me,
 saying: don't lose yourself
 in grief, man: endure!

As if, yesterday,
 the howdas of a Málíkite
 were a ship, free-floating,
 in the wide wadi beds of Dádi,

The ship of an 'Adawlíyyan
 or the Yemenite,
 the mate tacking at times
 then bringing her around,

She cleaves the rippled waves,
 bow breast submerged,
 like the hand of a child at play,
 scooping through the soft soil.

Among the tribe is a gazelle,
 a wine-dark yearling,
 shaking down the Árak berries and draped,
 string on string, with chrysolite and pearl.

She lags. From a dune thicket
 she watches the herd.
 She pulls at the Árak branches
 until they clothe her.

From a deep red mouth she smiles,
 a camomile blossom
 dew-moistened
 breaking through a crest of pure sand,

As if the sun had loosed
 its robe
 upon her face, glowing,
 washed in light, smooth.

The Nāqa

And I, I ride off care
 when it assails me,
 on a travel-honed mare,
 moving by evening, and by dawn,

Solid as a coffin's planks,
as I drive her on
down a track pared out
like the stripe on a Búrjad cloak.

She vies with thoroughbred camels,
fleet-footed,
thigh-to-thigh
down the beaten track.

On the twin heights she pastures
among the dry-of-udders,
grazing meadow hollows, lush
after a second rain.

She starts at the driver's cry,
warding off fears
of a muck-matted bay stallion
with her bristly tail,

As if it were barbed
with white falcon feathers
drilled into the tailbone
with an awl,

Lashing up at times
over the haunches, then down
upon a dried out udder
milkless as a withered waterbag,

With hard, meaty thighs,
like the double doors
of a towering fortress
with mortared walls,

Ribs like the casing
of a vault, upper spine
stuck with vertebrae
packed in on one another close,

As if her flanks were wrapped
in a Dála-shrub thicket,
and a curved bow underpinned
her solid, buttressed spine,

Forearms that at the elbow
twist out wide,
like those of a water carrier
lugging two full pails,

A build like a Byzantine's bridge—
its builder swore
to raise up brick and mortar sides
until intact—

With a red-bristled underchin,
 a back well strengthened,
 long stride,
 and lashing forearms

That splay out wide from the body,
 she leans to the side,
 forearms
 like wedged-in roof beams.

She barrels forth,
 veering, huge-headed,
 collarbones raised high
 on a towering frame,

The saddle strap marks
 along her rib cage
 like watercourses on the high roughland's
 smooth rock slabs,

Intersecting at times,
 then distinct,
 like the white inlay
 of a tattered shirt,

With a long neck and withers,
 when she lifts them,
 like a ship's bow
 rising out of the Tigris,

A skull like an anvil,
 two sides welded
 to a jutting point
 like the edge of a file,

A cheek like a Syrian's
 parchment, a lip
 like a Yemeni's
 untanned leather,

Eyes like two mirrors
 sheltered in the rock
 browbone's caves,
 two carved-out pools,

Eyes shielded from dust
 like the two dark ones
 of a frightened doe oryx
 with fawn,

Two keen ears that sense out
 sounds of the night-journey,
 soft, muffled, secret sounds,
 or piercing,

Sound-sharpened ears: you see in them
 good breeding,
 like those of a stray wild cow
 in Hāwmal,

A high-strung, pulsing heart,
 quickened, compact,
 like a stone hammer
 against a hardened slab,

A split upper lip, and a nose,
 pierced, smooth, well formed.
 When she sweeps it along the ground
 her pace quickens.

If you wish she paces.
 If you wish she slows,
 fearing the leather strap's
 twisting coil.

If you wish, her head rises
 beyond the saddle frame,
 and she swims with her forearms
 like a speeding ostrich.

Journey and Boast

On one like that I set out
 when a friend says:
 that you and I
 could be each other's ransom!

When a man's soul flies to his throat
 in fear, and he imagines
 impending ruin, though no one
 stalks his evening journey, waiting.

When the tribe seeks a young man
 that's fearless, I think it's me
 they mean. I don't hang back
 and I don't stand stupid, gaping.

When I snap the rough-fringed whip
 she bursts forward,
 vapours smoldering
 over the kindled rock terrain.

She struts in elegant ease
 like a slave-born courtesan
 before her lord, parading her white,
 single-spun, pleated train.

I don't skulk the high-backed
 wadi slopes
 in fear. When men ask for help
 I give it.

Seek me in the tribe's
 council ring, you'll find me.
 Track me among the vintner's shacks
 you'll find me there,

Where the faces of drinking fellows
 blaze like stars,
 and evening brings among us a singing girl
 in a bodice and saffron scented gown,

Her neckline
 opening wide, fine
 to the drinker's touch,
 her naked skin tender.

When we say let us hear a song
 she breaks into one at ease—
 with a delicate glance
 and without strain, playing.

When she sings
 I seem to hear
 the oryx doe's echoing refrain
 for a lost, spring-born stray.

So I go on drinking,
 chasing pleasure,
 selling off acquisitions,
 selling inheritance, squandering,

Until shunned by all my father's tribe
 and set apart
 like a mangle stricken camel
 smeared with tar.

Yet I see the sons of dust
 will not deny me,
 not the tent people
 under their widespreading flaps of hide.

Nay! You who blame me for joining
 the clamorous roar of battle,
 and attending pleasures,
 will you make me immortal?

If you can't ward off my fate
 then leave me
 run it down
 by spending all that I have.

But for three things in a bravo's life,
 by god! I would not care
 when I saw my death bed visitors
 rising to leave:

Beating the scolds
 to a drink of deep red wine
 that mixed with water
 bubbles over,

Wheeling about,
 when called by one in need,
 a horse like a water-bound tree wolf
 when startled,

And shortening a cloudy day,
 a cloudy day that gladdens,
 under the high-poled tent flaps
 with a paramour,

Her anklet rings and bracelets
 like blossom cascades
 strung over the red callotrope
 or an unbroken, soft-stemmed castor.

A generous man quenches his soul
 while he is still alive:
 You'll know when we are dead
 which of us still thirsts!

I see the tomb of the hoarder,
 the panter-for-his-wealth—
 like the tomb of the prodigal,
 profligate do-wrong: the same.

You see two heaps of earth
 with silent slabs
 of hard, deaf stone
 piled up upon them.

I see death choose
 the generous and the noble,
 while picking over the best part
 of the hardened miser's spoil.

I see life, a treasure,
 shrinking every night,
 shrunken by days and time,
 then gone.

By your life!
 Death does not miss the bravo,
 its slackened rope's around him,
 hand around the twisted coils.

Quarrel: Lost Pack Camels

What is wrong with me?
 I see myself.

I see my cousin Málík.
 I come near. He draws away,

Blaming me.

I don't know why.
As Qart bin Á‘bad
blamed me in the tribe.

Every good I asked for
he turned to disappointment,
as if we'd laid it in the niche
of a dug-out grave.

There was no wrong in what I said,
crying out a claim—
not letting it lie—
for the lost pack troop of Má‘bad.

I claim kinship,
and by your fortune!
at the last limits of endurance
I am a witness.

Called on in trouble,
I defend.
If enemies come straining against you
I strain back.

If they abuse your honor
I give them a draught
from death's pool.
I don't start off with threatening.

I brought on no misfortune,
as if I were the cause
of my being abused,
disparaged, put aside!

Were my lord another man
than the man he is
he would assuage my sorrow
or grant me a day's respite.

But my lord is a man
who strangles me
though I thank him, and beg him,
and pay his ransom.

The oppression of a kinsman
is more painful to a man
than the blow of a sharpened sword
of Indian iron.

Leave me and leave my doings be
You'll have my thanks!
though I am far away
pitching camp on Dárgħad mountain.

Had my lord wished
 I'd have been a Qays bin Khálid.
 Had my lord wished
 I'd have been an ʿAmr bin Márthad.

I'd have been a man
 of great, wide-grazing herds,
 paid visit by sons of nobles,
 lords, and by the sons of lords.

I am the thin one.
 You know him,
 quick as the head
 of a darting serpent.

I am the one who swore
 to make his thigh always
 the soft backing
 of a fine, double-edged Indian sword.

When I stand with it, avenging,
 it cuts.
 The first blow makes a second unneeded.
 No pruning axe,

Steady, not deflected
 from its target:
 When someone says "easy!"
 its wielder says "done."

When men of the tribe
 rush for weapons,
 you'll find me,
 hand around the hilt, unassailed.

Quarrel: The Slaughtered *Nāqa*

Many a troop of kneeling,
 sleeping camels ...
 I startled the leaders
 passing in front with a sharp, bare blade.

Before me meandered an old mare
 with thick-skinned udders,
 rugged, huge, the pride
 of a quarrelsome old stick of a man.

He said, and already
 the leg and shank had been slit,
 can't you see
 what calamity you've brought us!

No, by your life! he said,
 what do you make of this
 hardened drunkard
 heaping his wilful excesses upon us?

Let him go, they said,
 let him take what he's taken,
 but keep the kneeling troop away
 or he'll go on killing.

Serving maids roasted in embers
 the unborn calf,
 and carved choice cuts of hump,
 and rushed to set them before us.

O daughter of Má'bad!
 When I die, proclaim my death
 and tear your collar open,
 as I deserved.

Don't make me a man
 whose resolve wasn't my own,
 who could never replace me
 or cast my shadow,

Slow to the great deed,
 quick with foul palaver,
 docile before the fist,
 slapped away.

Were I unwanted, a hanger-on,
 the enmity of one of the crowd
 or some loner
 might hurt,

But bold and daring
 against them,
 true to my word, well-born,
 I drive men way.

By your life I swear it!
 My day is not murky
 or muddled,
 nor my night neverending.

How may a day
 have I steeled myself in battle,
 guarding gaps
 in the midst of threatening,

On a field where the bravo
 tastes fear of death:
 when horses' shoulder blades entangle,
 quivering.

How many a gambling arrow, yellow,
 fire-blackened—
 I listened to it crackling—
 have I trusted to the shuffler's hand.

There will come to you news
of one you didn't provide for,
for whom you never
fixed a date for meeting.

The days will reveal to you
what you didn't know before.
The one you refused provision
will bring you word.

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translated by MICHAEL SELLS