Mu'allqa of Tarafa

Michael Anthony Sells

Haverford College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.haverford.edu/religion_facpubs

Repository Citation

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Haverford Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Haverford Scholarship. For more information, please contact nmedeiro@haverford.edu.
THE MU'ALLAQā OF TARAFĀ

Introduction

Tarafā 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'allaqā, 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'allaqā of Tarafā 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 ḥalālā, the ruins of the beloved's campsite. The ruins 'appear' (lāhat) 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 ḥalālā and the command spoken out over the form of the camel, the poetic persona of Tarafā 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

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 *asamm*. 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 *summ*: 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 *aṭṭāl* which the poet interrogates about the beloved. In the *Mu‘allaqa* of ʿAntara, it is used in connection with the warrior’s spear. 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-reversable movement from the *aṭṭāl* to a final self-assertion, a movement that contains a continuous series of semantic “overflows.” In Ṭarafa’s brief and intense *nasib*, the poetic voice overflows the initial beloved-gazelle metaphor. The particular descriptive point is superceded 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 ʿAntara, and 10 of Labīd in Anbārī’s recension of the *Mu‘allaqāt*. 
Labīd’s *Muʿallaqa* 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 (Maʿbad 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 *Muʿallaqāt* 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”, Maʿbad, 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 Ṣuflūk 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 *Muʿallaqa* 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 *Muʿallaqa* to be an incomparable poetic work.4

---

The Nasīb

The ruins Khāwla left
on the mottled flatlands of Thāmhad
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 Mālikite
were a ship, free-floating,
in the wide wadi beds of Dādī,

The ship of an ‘Adawlīyyan
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 Bûrjad 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 Háwmal,
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 mange stricken camel
smeared with tar.

Yet I see the sons of dust
will not deny me,
not the tent people
under their widespread 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 Áʻbad
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 Máʻbad.

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 Dárghad mountain.
Had my lord wished
I'd have been a Qays bin Khálid.
Had my lord wished
I'd have been an 'Amr 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.

Haverford College  translated by Michael Sells