Clive Holes & Said Salman Abu Athera

The Nabaṭī Poetry of the United Arab Emirates

Selected poems annotated and translated into English

Accompanied by a CD containing recordings of twenty-two of the poems in the original Arabic

نفحات نبطية من الإمارات العربية

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THE ARABIC TEXTS OF THE POEMS

Acknowledgements

Without the co-operation of the twenty-five poets and their heirs who gave us access to their work and permission to translate and publish it, this book would not exist. So it is to the *nabaṭī* poets of the UAE that we owe our greatest debt of gratitude. In the UK, we would like to express our appreciation to Deidre Holes and Annie Hudson for their tireless support. They were always ready with encouragement, critical comments and wise observations on the project as it unfolded, and happy to help in the thankless task of correcting the proofs. Last but not least, we would like to thank H.E. ʿAlī Sālim al-Kaʿbī, whose generosity financed this project. His Excellency is himself a well-known *nabaṭī* poet of the UAE, and we would like here to dedicate to him an English translation of one of his poems. The poem is in the genre of 'advice and guidance' (see section 9 of this book), in which the poet emphasises to those 'who sign things off' – that is, responsible officials in ministries and the like – that their position depends on relationships of trust, and they should, in all their professional dealings, do nothing that might compromise it:

'To you who sign things off'

All you who stamp and sign "approved"
Beware sly tricks and words removed!
God's Law is 'trust' for all officials,
Which He enacts through their initials.
So if that law you think to break,
Who'll trust him who your place will take?
Don't say that someone said bad words,
Which from his lips you never heard;
Some wrong deeds can't be corrected
Except by kindness well directed
So shaming scandals don't leak out;
Bad men we know – be in no doubt!

The Lord's commands, we ne'er refuse them;
And decent men, we don't abuse them.
When troubles mount, we battle through:
Our leader's trust is deep and true.
Beware, all you by plans beguiled,
Of angering men whose temper's mild.
In projects, cherish trust and show it;
Each person's measure, you should know it;
"Approval" stamps guard with your life,
And watchmen armed with gun and knife!
For work is like fresh water springs:
You'll drink from them, whate'er that brings.
Let these be warnings to the wise,
So they'll beware of stealth and lies!

We hope that we have fully justified the trust which H.E. ʿAlī Sālim al-Kaʿbī placed in us in asking us to write this book, and that it is a worthy introduction – the first in English – to the vibrant poetic tradition of the UAE, which is virtually unknown to the anglophone world.

Clive Holes
Said Salman Abu Athera

Introduction

Nabaṭī poetry – the colloquial poetry of the United Arab Emirates

What is *nabaṭī* poetry?

The poetry which is the subject of this book belongs to a popular, not an elite, nor even an educated tradition. Bedouin in origin, it is composed in a register of Arabic close to that of the spoken Gulf dialects rather than in Classical Arabic (CLA), the modern written variety of which is usually termed Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). But the language of spoken poetry is not the same as speech, and Bedouin poetry has historically employed a vocabulary and phraseology more 'elevated' in style, though what counts as 'elevated' has evolved over time. Bedouin poetry at what might be called the traditional end of the spectrum, still being composed until forty or fifty years ago, and often by poets unable to read or write, was already archaic in several ways: its world and vocabulary were those of seasonal migrations, desert encampments, droughts and dramatic storms, raising livestock, oryx hunting, and, (going back even further, but no more than a century), raiding and tribal battles. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, this world might as well be ancient history for all the connection it has with modern Arabia, and has been consigned to the burgeoning industry of Gulf culture and heritage, with its museums, sound archives, waxwork simulacra and television recreations. Intriguingly, however, the poetic tradition that was a product of this way of life has not died out, but shown a protean power to reinvent itself. It has moved on in subject matter, but still contains many traditional elements of sentiment, structure, and language.

The diction, themes and 'world view' of this poetry, with local variations, are shared by people of Bedouin origin from wherever they come, in a vast area that knows no national boundaries. Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Jordan, Iraq and Sinai all boast prominent Bedouin poets, and a network of tribal connections, reinforced these days by new electronic media, ensures that they keep in touch and are well aware of each others' work. Whilst doing fieldwork in central Jordan in 2005 for a previous book, we were having a late-night dinner with a local Bedouin poet, and were

interrupted by a call to him on his mobile phone, out of the blue, from a Saudi radio station. The call was from the host of a phone-in programme devoted to Bedouin poetry, and our host's name had cropped up in the discussion. The phone-call was live on air, and our poet was asked to recite a certain poem of his there and then, which he unhesitatingly did. Having done so, he put down his phone, and we resumed our dinner. There was nothing at all out of the ordinary about what had just occurred.

Although it is a 'popular' tradition, poetry of this type is composed by people of all social ranks. The late Shaykh Zāyid, the first President of the UAE, was a noted Bedouin poet, as was the founder and first ruler of the State of Qatar, Jāsim bin Muḥammad Āl Thānī (1821–1913), who was the first poet in the modern era to publish his *dīwān* (collected poems), in India in 1910, frequently reprinted since. Khamīs[1] gives early examples of poetry composed by leading members of the ruling houses and other senior tribal elders of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. One of the most well known living exponents is Shaykh Muḥammed bin Rāshid Āl Maktūm, Ruler of Dubai and Vice-President of the UAE, who has published several collections of his own poetry, and examples, both in Arabic and English translation, can be found on his personal website.

This common cultural patrimony is known throughout the region by the term *shiʿr nabaṭī*, which literally means 'Nabatean poetry', though it almost certainly never had anything to do with the Nabateans (Ar. *nabīṭ* or *anbāṭ*) of ancient history, a sedentary, Aramaic-speaking people who lived on the northern fringes of Arabia during the time of Roman control. It seems that after the Arab conquest and Arabization of the area from the 7th century on, the Arabic adjective originally associated with this lost people, *nabaṭī*, came to be used to describe the imperfect, 'broken' Arabic they are supposed to have spoken, and it is this transferred sense of the word that seems, much later, to have been applied to tribal poetry not composed in Classical Arabic but in the dialects of the nomadic Arabian Bedouin, which, by the grammatical standards of the Classical written language, were incorrect. According to the Saudi anthropologist and *nabaṭī* poetry expert Saad Sowayan, the first attested use of the word to describe non-Classical Bedouin poetry occurs at the end of the 13th century CE.[2]

Other studies of *nabaṭī* poetry in European languages

Studies of *nabaṭī* poetry in Arabic are many, and range from the countless collections of individual poets' works, published locally in cheap editions

and short print-runs, to more substantial general surveys. The most comprehensive of those that treat the UAE tradition is the two-volume work of the Jordanian scholar and poetry expert Ghassān Ḥasan Aḥmad al-Ḥasan.[3] In English there is little available. The most accessible work for the non-specialist is Saad Sowayan's *Nabati Poetry*,[4] which provides a short but excellent general introduction to all aspects of the subject, as exemplified by the Saudi tradition. It requires no knowledge of Arabic. The five-volume treatment by P. Marcel Kurpershoek,[5] running to almost two thousand pages, and again dealing with Saudi Arabia, is aimed at the specialist reader. It is based on oral materials the author collected in the course of many years' field-work in the Wādi Dawāsir, south-western Najd, and is a modern landmark in scholarship on the subject. Kurpershoek's work is basically a large collection of *nabaṭī* poems presented in transliterated Arabic with facing English translations of a fairly literal kind. Each volume is prefaced by a lengthy essay on the particular poets dealt with in it, and a detailed literary, sociological and anthropological commentary on the practice of Bedouin poetry, completed by a language glossary and various indexes. Clinton Bailey has published a study of the *nabaṭī* tradition as practiced by the older generation of poets from the Negev and Sinai,[6] and Bruce Ingham's book on the traditions of the al-Dhafīr of north-eastern Arabia[7] also contains much *nabaṭī* poetry in transliteration and translation. The authors of the present volume have recently published a study of *nabaṭī* poetry from Jordan and Sinai dealing with social and political topics, and covering the period from the Suez Crisis of 1956 to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath. Forty-one poems by five poets are presented in Arabic (both Arabic-script and transliterated versions), together with liberal English translations in verse.[8] Steve Caton's book on the north Yemeni tribal tradition[9] treats related but somewhat different types of poetry, none of which is termed *nabaṭī*. Other than these works, there is a scattering of academic articles in English and other European languages, and a few older specialist studies which are now very difficult to find.[10]

Nabaṭī poetry: its roles and functions in society

It may seem odd to the western reader to talk of the social 'roles' and 'functions' of an art like poetry. For very many centuries in the West, both the practice and reception of poetry have been largely solitary activities: the artistic response of an individual to the world around him crafted in (usually) written words, which are then printed, published and read (rather

than listened to) by other individuals whom the poet does not know, living in places where he has never been and to which he will probably never go. If there is any shared sense of community to which the modern poet and his audience belong, beyond that of being speakers of the same language, it is an imagined and an imaginary one. The 'orate' age when poets addressed members of their own immediate community with compositions on a limited set of themes, to serve a shared set of purposes, and in a formalized 'poetic' language, is long gone – in Britain, probably with the passing of the Anglo-Saxon world of oral epics like Beowulf. Yet the age when, *mutatis mutandis*, the preceding sentence could have passed for a description of Bedouin poetic practice came to an end only much more recently. The description of pre-Islamic poetry[11] below could just as well be one of the *nabaṭī* tradition of a century ago, probably less:[12]

> 'The poet knew that if he wanted to be heard and not to risk disappearance into obscurity, he was obliged to construct his discourse on the basis of an auditory aesthetic. This demanded *the exclusion from his discourse of distant allusions* and of hermetic or ambiguous statements; otherwise he was in danger of breaking *the continuity of the contact which linked him to the public*. Thus, in the pre-Islamic period, poetry declared *that which the audience already knew*, and poetic individualism consisted *not in what was said but in the manner of its saying*. Oral recitation was to leave on Arabic poetry a mark that would last for centuries; it would be, in Bencheikh's words, an *art of expression and not of creation*. The recitation of pre-Islamic poetry was strangely reminiscent of a ritual; the officiating poet, who *did not create poetry for himself, but for others*, encouraged *active participation on the part of his public* as a means of appealing to the hearts of his hearers. Poetic engagement derived in this case from the limpidity of the verse and *the familiarity of experienced listeners with the wording and the thematic sequence* of the *qaṣīda* [ode]' (author's italics).

The italicised phrases highlight elements of the ancient Arabian tradition which, as late as the turn of the 20th century, had hardly changed: pre-Islamic poetry, just like the *nabaṭī* descendant which had come to replace it, involved the communal rehearsal of shared knowledge and values, with the poet acting *on behalf of society* rather than as an individual voice, and the exercise of his artistic gifts being confined within a strictly observed set of aesthetic parameters and metrical rules. In essence, the poet was a spokesperson for his fellow tribesmen, no different from them, but able to reinforce through his art an outlook on life and a historical landscape

known to and shared by all, and do this in accordance with unchanging compositional traditions and structural rules passed down the generations.

The functions of poetry in this pre-literate Bedouin world, whether we are talking about the pre-Islamic period or that of traditional *nabaṭī* poetry, were many. Prime among them was as a repository of tribal history. The famous dictum about the role of old Arabic poetry in this regard, الشعر ديوان العرب ('Poetry is the (historical) record of the Arabs') applies equally well to the *nabaṭī* tradition. Accounts of inter-tribal battles, acts of treachery, the settlement of feuds, and descriptions of the characters and actions of tribal leaders are chronicled in it, constantly repeated and discussed around the camp-fire or in the tribal *majlis*. Such apparently factual accounts are, of course, partisan: every tribe has its poets and its point of view, and accounts of the 'same' battle, incident, act of perfidy, etc differ widely as a consequence – what one anthropologist of contemporary Jordan has aptly termed 'contentious multivocality',[13] a condition which is endemic in pre-literate societies organized on tribal lines. A further problem is that the distinction between the facts as observed by eye-witnesses and the later accretions of hearsay, mishearings or misconstruals, and even deliberate falsification, becomes ever fuzzier as spoken accounts of the event, poetic or otherwise,[14] are passed from one generation to the next. Consequently, what *nabaṭī* poetry and oral narrative says about tribal history (and these are among the few sources we have for what was happening inside Arabia before the 20th century) must be treated with caution as *political history*, even if it provides a rich source of ethnographic information on tribal lore and life.

With political independence has come a need to pull together rival, sometimes warring, tribal elements and mould them into nation states – a project with which the *nabaṭī* tradition and its tribal focus sits ill. The partisan *nabaṭī* ode, which has its roots in what the modernisers see as an anarchic, lawless past, is often at odds with those aspects of nation building which seek to create a new sense of identity and purpose, and kill off potential internal challenges to the new authority. In Saudi Arabia, the epicentre of the *nabaṭī* tradition, this dilemma has been acute. Although, from a cultural perspective, there is pride in Bedouin traditions, the perceived unruliness of the sentiments in some of the poetry has led to the bowdlerisation, sometimes to the mangling beyond recognition, of written versions of older *nabaṭī* poems published in officially sanctioned outlets if these poems offend against the new orthodoxies, political or religious.[15] Nowadays, however, tribal partisanship in poetry is to all intents and purposes a thing of the past. The new field of contention tends to be the rather less sensitive one of international politics.[16]

Other themes (*aġrāḍ*) in the *nabaṭī* poetic tradition apart from tribal history continue those of the pre-Islamic one: love (*ġazal*), boasting (*fakhr*), encomium (*madḥ*), gnomic wisdom and advice (*ḥikam wa naṣāyiḥ*), descriptions of nature (*waṣf*), hunting (*ganaṣ* or *miġnāṣ*), and elegy (*rithā*). All of these genres are represented in the present collection of poems, though with appropriate adjustments and some novel developments: 'boasting' poems are no longer about tribes but about nation states and their achievements; 'praise' poems are often dedicated to those who rule these states; and there is a modern vogue for 'social poems' (*ijtimāʿiyyāt*) which comment on recent social developments, often in an ironic or disapproving way. Examples from the current collection deal with the effects of education on girls (poem 36), the unwelcome effects of the influx of foreigners to the Emirates (35, 45, 46), the mistake of taking a foreign wife (39) and government corruption (42). Rather like the Letters to the Editor column in a Western newspaper, popular poetry provides a forum for topical comment – and for rejoinders. There are even lengthy poetic 'conversations' between poets, as we shall see below.

It is worth noting, in passing, that *nabaṭī* poetry, as a species of *colloquial* versifying, is subject to the same cultural prejudice as all other kinds of Arabic colloquial verse. In the view of many Arabs, particularly that of the cultural elite, only verse composed in the modern form of the Classical language, Modern Standard Arabic, is worthy of the name 'poetry'. Colloquial verse in their eyes is too banal in its subject matter, and too local in its frames of reference and language to be so dignified. Needless to say, this is not the stance adopted by the authors of this book, and it has been the object of a sustained critical assault[17] by the Saudi expert Saad Sowayan, who describes it, among other things, as 'ahistorical, unscientific, politically motivated and elitist'. But this attitude is ingrained nonetheless. On the back cover of a collection of colloquial poetry by the famous Bahraini poet 'Abdurraḥmān Rafīʿ (b. 1936),[18] who writes both colloquial and classical verse, one reads (our translation and italics) 'He has not limited himself to composing colloquial poetry, but *has transcended it to compose poetry in Classical Arabic*'. It is clear which of the two types of poetry carries the most prestige with the writer of this blurb, even though Rafīʿ is mainly known (and not just in Bahrain, but throughout the Gulf) for the brilliance and wit of his colloquial poetry, which provided a running commentary on the seismic social changes that the Gulf passed through during the 1960s and 70s.

Categories of the *nabaṭī* poem

All *nabaṭī* poems, like pre-Islamic poetry, must scan and rhyme.[19] The commonest type is the ode (called *gaṣīda*, though this term can be loosely applied to any type of poem), with an average length of between twenty and thirty verses (*bēt* pl. *abyāt*), each verse being divided into two equal hemistichs (*šaṭr*). Some odes are mono-rhymed (e.g. in this collection poem 4), while others follow the antique traditional pattern of double mono-rhyme (the majority in this collection, e.g. poem 1), with the first hemistich (*ṣadr*) in one rhyme (called the *nāʿiša*) and the second (*ʿajz*) in another (*qāriʿa*). The poem is usually on one theme (*ġaraḍ* pl. *aġrāḍ*), but in the work of the older generation of present-day poets, and older poems in general, longer poems may be polythematic, as was the case in the ancient Arabian poetry: a case in point in this collection is poem 48, in which the poet combines a description of the seasons, as the nomadic Bedouin perceived them, with several pieces of home-spun wisdom on the most important things in life. There are a large number of metrical patterns[20] (*wazn* pl. *awzān*, though local terms are also often used, e.g. *ṭarg* 'beat'), each of which consists of a regular pattern of quantitative feet, and whichever is chosen must be maintained throughout the poem. Some metres are strongly associated with particular themes.

Apart from the ode on a given theme, there are a number of other common poem types. The *gaṣīda alfiyya*, lit. 'A (B, C...) poem', is one based on the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, one verse allocated to each letter in alphabetical order. There are many variations on this theme, e.g. each letter is assigned a quatrain (four hemistichs), which begins with this letter, and has an xxxy rhyme scheme in which 'x' is the same as the letter of the alphabet assigned to it. A similar idea, except this time based on numerical order, the days of the week, or the twenty-eight days of each month of the Islamic lunar calendar, gives us the *gaṣīda mabniyya* lit. 'constructed ode'. One of the most famous of these in Emirati poetry is poem 10 of the present collection.

Poems in the form of dialogues or debates are popular. A common type (called *murāsala* 'correspondence') is when a poet sends a poem on a particular subject to another poet; the recipient must reply in the same metre, with the same rhyme-scheme, and the reply must be at least as long as the original. An example in this collection is the pair of poems 18 and 19, in which the first poet makes a 'complaint' (*mušākā*) to the second about a love gone wrong; the recipient was turned to, or so the sender says, because of his greater experience in matters of the heart. But at the end of the reply, which, in accordance with poetic custom, contains fulsome praise for the

sender of the original poem and several other traditional compositional elements which we will come back to shortly, it turns out that the recipient is in an even worse state of amorous despair than the sender! All either can do, he advises, is turn to God for help. It is obvious that poetic dialogues of this kind are really exercises for poets to show off their technical virtuosity: the second poet is effectively being set a challenge by the first to 'top' his poem. And if he does, the first poet may send back a rejoinder which will also need to be 'topped'. A lengthy exchange of this type, between the Emirati poet 'Abdullah bin 'Alī al-Shībānī and no less a person than the late Ruler of the UAE, Shaykh Zāyid bin Sulṭān Āl Nahayān, himself a noted *nabaṭī* poet, is described by Al-Ḥasan.[21]

A subgenre of dialogue poetry, known throughout the Gulf, is called *mrādd* ('answering back') or *galṭih*[22] ('entering, stepping forward'). This is not 'correspondence' but 'performance poetry', in effect a poetic duel, in which the first poet issues a challenge in two verses, and an opponent 'steps forward', as it were into the ring, and must reply relevantly, without preparation, and in the same metre and rhyme – an extremely difficult skill requiring ingenuity and great presence of mind, especially since the verses to which he has to reply are often cryptically phrased. Each poet has a 'team' of supporters who clap rhythmically and repeat their poet's verses as the other poet thinks up his reply (for which he has a few minutes). After seven or eight turns, given the constraints of metre and rhyme and the requirement never to repeat a rhyme word and always to say something new, one of the poets will be unable to reply, and the other can claim victory (the supporters of his opponent shout *'ilēt* 'you have been topped'). Poets capable of doing battle like this are few, and those prepared to risk their reputation doing it in public even fewer. No examples were offered in the field-work for this project.

A different kind of dialogue poetry is found in poem 17, which is in the form of an argument between a British crane driver and an Indian longshoreman, on some unspecified UAE quayside. The title of the Arabic original of this translation (*ḥarraj al-hindi*) is literally 'he annoyed the Indian', and is apparently based on a real incident. It tells in comical fashion of an argument between an English crane operator, whom we have named 'Bob', and an Indian longshoreman, whom we have named 'Ranjit'. A dockside accident that injures Ranjit, and for which each blames the other, leads to an exchange of colourful insults and ends up in court. After a farcical interlude in which an investigating policeman sent by the court is involved in a drunken car crash, Bob is convicted of causing injury to the Indian and

sentenced. But he refuses to accept the court's verdict and calls in the poet to arbitrate. The poet does so, and resolves their differences, encouraging the two to live and let live, a piece of advice that the two happily accept. Like many debate poems, this one is based on observable social reality – in this case the Emirate's multinational work force and the possibilities that arise of inter-ethnic friction and misunderstanding. There is a long-standing tradition of such poetry in the Gulf. A Bahraini example of the 1930s, *the Debate of Pearl-diving and Oil-Wells*, in which these two (and at that time competing) modes of earning one's living are anthropomorphised, depicts the detail of an economic and social transition in the making, and the disruptions that it caused.[23] Another 1930s debate, *the Debate of Tea and Coffee*, is a thinly veiled rehearsal of the differences between two co-existing ways of life well represented in the Bahrain of that time: the Persian ('Tea') and the Bedouin Arab ('Coffee').[24] As in *Bob and Ranjit*, the poet, after claim and counter-claim, finally brings the argument and vituperation to a close by reconciling the antagonists and making them see merit in each other. There is thus usually an underlying point being made about the social benefits of resolving conflict, whether economic, ethnic or religious. The debate genre in this manifestation is an ancient element in the poetic practice of the region, and the prototype of the form arguably goes back to the languages and cultures of pre-Arab Mesopotamia. Strictly speaking, such debates were not part of the Bedouin *nabaṭī* tradition, and are more typical of the sedentary culture of the coastal towns of eastern Arabia.

These are the main traditional varieties of poem included in this collection, but there are several others of which we collected no examples, e.g. the *mawwāl* (pl *mawāwīl*) – in the Gulf, this is a seven-line poem with an aaabbba rhyme-scheme, in which the thrice-repeated rhyme words are homonyms with different meanings which the listener has to divine; the *taġrūda* – a short poem, usually no longer than ten lines, in the *rajaz* metre, with each line the length of one hemistich in a normal ode, which was originally sung on camel-back to boost Bedouin fighting spirit when on raids, though now is used for other themes;[25] the *luġz* – a riddle in the form of a poem.

Structural elements in the traditional *nabaṭī* ode

Like its pre-Islamic forebear, the *nabaṭī* ode has a highly formalised structure, particularly in the work of its older exponents. Though none is compulsory, there are a number of common structural elements which occur with great frequency, and often several of them occur in a single poem.

Openings

Invocation of God

Many odes start with an invocation of God (*ðikr allāh*), praising and thanking Him for His bounties, or asking for His help, sometimes with allusions to Qur'ānic verses. There are many examples of this in the present collection, e.g. poems 8 and 18. Invoking the divine is not just a routine expression of piety but is often integrated into the theme of the poem. So, for example, the attributes of God selected by the poet are appropriate to his situation or subject: provider of rain in a poem about nature, the knower of all secrets in a poem of advice and guidance as to good behaviour. Here, in poem 16, God is appealed to as the 'douser' of emotional flames and the 'shield' against a multitude of woes:

O douser of the licking flames that set my heart alight!
O shield against all woes who puts the fates malign to flight!
Relieve this soul, I beg of You; it feels as if on fire
With mem'ries of a parting, and an unfulfilled desire.

Pride in the poet's ability as a poet

An expression of the poet's pride in his own virtuosity (*al-iftikhār bi l-maqdira l-šiʿriyya*) is also a common way of opening a poem on any subject. This was also a feature (though a less common one) of pre-Islamic poetry. The 18th/19th century 'father' of Emirati *nabaṭī* poetry, al-Mājdī bin Dhāhir, of whose work fourteen odes survive, starts no less than ten of them in this fashion.[26] One of several examples in the present collection can be found in poem 48:

I lament and I brood, and I feel sick inside,
But the verses I fashion, how strongly they stride!
It's as though o'er my heart a great sea cascades down,
Or the Nile, or a spring with a force that could drown.
There's nothing can stop it, so I let it flow free,
But channel its words to please no one but me.

Female poets also muse on the practice of poetry, though in a different way: rather than comparing poetic inspiration to a force of nature like a river

in spate or a waterfall as in poem 48 (another example is found in poem 10, where verses are 'like sea-springs'), they liken the results of their careful crafting of lines to precious jewels or perfumes.[27] An example in this collection is poem 28, which opens:

She who's wearing new apparel
Picks out diamonds, pearls and jade;
Weighs and sifts until at last they're
On blank sheets with care inlaid.
Not tossed before a crowd of devils,
But men of taste who'll pass them on;
Discerning folk are soon transported;
Dullards, though, feel sleep come on.
Confused, I start to count and measure,
And fighting back the tears, compose:

The practice of poetry, and pronouncements on what is good and bad in poetry, can also be poetic themes in themselves (see some of the poems in Section 4 of this collection).

The poet's troubled breast

In the pre-Islamic tradition, this way of opening an ode, known as the *nasīb* ('(amorous) prelude') conventionally took the form of depressed musings on the remains of an abandoned desert encampment and the memory of a lost love, long departed from it, whom the poet had desired from afar; an alternative was for the poet to climb to the top of a lonely hill-top to commune with his tortured soul. In the *nabaṭī* tradition, both these tropes survive, though they are not now necessarily connected to a lost love; the cause of the poet's woes (*humūm*) can be almost anything. In this collection, a prelude similar to those of the pre-Islamic tradition opens poem 16, in which the love-sick poet muses near the cave where it seems he once observed the object of his affections; and another, in poem 18, has the poet 'climbing nimbly to a mountain peak'. But in poem 16 the novelty is that the cave engages the poet in conversation about where the longed-for love has gone to, and the poem becomes one of the dialogue genre (*muḥāwara*). The opening lines of poem 14, which is not about love, but about hunting

with falcons, provide another example: the poet cannot sleep with all the surging emotions inside him, until news comes of the fair weather and good hunting to be had in Dhafra. Poem 31 is a collection of memories about the old life of seasonal migrations, camp-life and hunting, and here the prelude echoes the language of the *nasīb* of the pre-Islamic tradition, complete with 'traces erased by the winds as they wail' as the poet addresses, again as in pre-Islamic poetry, a (probably imaginary) friend, Fāris, before seamlessly embarking on a description of an oryx-hunt:

Times past… they have gone and will never return;
No need then, good Fāris, my hurt to retail;
Just remember those days, and their memory don't spurn;
Camp traces erased by the winds as they wail.
While everyone sleeps, I'm alone with my thoughts,
My eyes fill with tears, and they roll down my cheek;
Many a time, fleeing oryx I've caught;
Crept up with a rifle brand-new, not antique…

The messenger

The pre-Islamic polythematic ode often contained a section known as the 'journey' (*raḥīl*), usually on camel-back. In the *nabaṭī* tradition, there is an echo of this in the journey section (*riḥla*), in which the messenger (*mandūb* or *nadīb*) is instructed at the beginning of the poem to deliver the poet's message (i.e. the poem) to a distant named recipient. The rider (*rākib*) and his camel-mount are described in vivid and fulsome terms and are even instructed on the route they should follow.[28] Once upon a time this would have been a literal description of how poems were to be delivered; nowadays it has become a trope, often used in poetic 'conversations' between poets. It has also been updated: instead of a description of the messenger's nervous, thoroughbred she-camel with its shining coat and lush tail-hair, there is often one of a powerful 4WD with its leather seats and smooth gear change, careering across the desert at 120 kph. A typical example, by a female poet, can be found in poem 28 of this collection:

O messenger, go to him quickly,
Like a Mirage jet on wheels;
Mercedes-like, outstrip the north wind,

Please God who cares, protects, and heals!
Take this letter with its message:
Care and sorrow, aching grief;
My hair's gone grey, I'm love-afflicted,
Robbed of sleep, and love's the thief.

In poem 18, there is the novelty of a *double* 'journey section', in which the same messenger is apparently instructed to travel by both car and camel (!):

O rider of a four-wheel drive, jump in, and off you go!
God keep you and your company from accidents and woe!
But if at his encampment you intend to stop, well then,
Kindly wait ten minutes while I go and find my pen.
My letters please deliver, give my greetings at the rate
Of pilgrims at the Kaʿba when they circumambulate.
O you who makes the journey to good Ṣāliḥ's camp today,
Upon a swift-legged camel that all others will outstay,
Ṣāliḥ there will meet you, you'll be welcomed on the spot;
That long has been his custom and he never once forgot.

Closings

The traditional *nabaṭī* ode almost always ends with a coda stating that the poem is complete, and includes an invocation of God or the Prophet, asking for His blessings, or seeking the Prophet's intercession on Judgement Day. Sometimes this is accompanied by a plea from the poet for the audience's indulgence (poem 10):

Now his poem's complete, it's right and it's meet,
Bin ʿAdil should ask your indulgence;
May the Lord's prayers descend, like rhymed verse without end
On His Prophet, the Day of our Judgment.

or forgiveness for any faults in the poetry (poem 44):

So I hope you'll excuse any faults of the muse,
For I'm one of the many beginners;
As oft to Him pray as the bards verses say,
For the days force us all to be sinners.

In poem 38, having criticized the uncouth behaviour at modern Emiratis at weddings, the poet concludes with an apology for any offence his harsh words may have caused:

My poem's done, I won't say more:
It's what Bū Khālid asked me for;
Beg pardon if what I've just said
Makes any pretty face go red!

A common trope in such codas is the 'simile of abundance' (*takāṯhur*), whereby God is asked to bestow His bounties or blessings in quantities – 'as many as the...' –, and a stock of elements naturally abundant in the Bedouin environment is deployed to fill the slot: the grains of sand in the desert, the winds that blow, the raindrops that fall, etc. Typical examples occur in poem 14:

My poem's done; God's prayers be on the One who mankind guided,
As many as the leaves and stones and sand-grains God provided;
Muḥammad who was sent by God, and, at the Day of Reckoning,
Will save and intercede for us when Hellfire's jaws are beckoning.

and poem 16:

As many as the fowl that fly, be prayers upon the Lord;
As many as the creatures that stand still or walk abroad;
As many as the drops of rain that fall from rain-clouds driech;
As many as the riding men that errant camels seek.

and poem 8, here based on writing:[29]

I've said what I know, what I feel deep inside;
The Lord will sustain and protect and provide.

Divine grace I seek – as I started, I'll end –
As oft as the alphabet's typed, printed, penned.

In modern poems, there is sometimes a whimsical, or tongue-in-cheek feel to how this element is deployed. For example, poem 25, in which the poet imagines he and his sweetheart taking a space-ship ride to the moon to get away from all those who find fault with them, ends as follows:

My poem's done; now on him prayers
As much as our two space trip fares.

At the less traditional end of spectrum, and well represented in this collection, are poems which may contain none of these structural features, even if the basic requirements – that *nabaṭī* poems rhyme and scan – are still strictly adhered to. In general, the modern poem is less predictable in its structure and diction, more experimental in its treatment of topic, and more reflective of the poet's personal viewpoint and feelings than is the case with the older poets, where often one sometimes feels that form dominates content. This is no doubt a consequence of the wider cultural horizons that have opened up to the younger generations with the massive social change brought about by the economic boom of the last three or four decades.

Stock figures

The *nabaṭī* poetic landscape is peopled by a range of stock characters which are more or less identical throughout the Bedouin world. They are especially thick on the ground in love poetry. The role of most of these shadowy stereotypes is to thwart the course of true love, or otherwise provide a source of bad vibrations. There is the so-called *ḥajjār* pl. *ḥajājīr*, literally the 'denier(s) of access'. This word was used in traditional Bedouin society to refer to a woman's male cousins on the father's side of her family, who had 'first refusal' of her hand in marriage. If none wished to marry her, all had the right of *ḥajr*, whereby any one of them could exercise a veto (*manʿ*) on marriage to a particular suitor from outside her family. Sometimes these cousins would vie among themselves for precedence in granting or denying this permission, so that the suitor did not know to which of them he should turn. An example of this word occurs in poem 16 (where *ḥajājīr* is translated as 'jealous men'):