

IX



NABAŦI POETRY AND THE CLASSICAL LITERARY TRADITION

In the previous chapter I examined the prosody of NabaŦi poetry and its relationship to classical prosody; I then traced the historical process that led eventually to the development of certain differences between the two prosodic systems. The prosodic relationship between NabaŦi and classical poetry is paralleled by a thematic relationship, already touched upon at the beginning of chapter 2 and implicit throughout this work. Aside from the fact that the two poetic traditions perform the same social functions and deal with the same general topics (e.g., boasting, panegyric, eulogy, satire, love poetry), they also employ many of the same compositional techniques and share many of the same stock themes, motifs, and images. In its thematic development, the NabaŦi poem follows closely the structural principles employed by the ancient poets. As in classical poetry, a long NabaŦi poem is usually divided into two principal parts, a prelude and the main topic. The journey (*rihlah*) remains a very significant component of the prelude in NabaŦi poetry. In this section, the poet pictures himself or his deputy as riding through the wilderness to deliver the poem. He describes in detail the desert roads and stations as well as the physical qualities of the camel mount. In addition to the journey and description of the camel mount, NabaŦi poets have preserved in their compositions the classical theme of the deserted encampment and the lamentation over the departed lady. Following the example of their ancient predecessors, many NabaŦi poets may begin or conclude their poems with a few lines expressing general principles or maxims of conduct.

As I have suggested in the previous chapter, the thematic continuity between ancient Arabic poetry and NabaŦi poetry is the result of their historical continuity; the two traditions are in fact the two ends of one continuous poetic tradition which extends over a long period and which reflects the same sociocultural realities. This historical continuity is, however, complemented by a more specific literary relationship, which is the subject of the present chapter—a relationship involving direct borrowings by NabaŦi poets of compositional and thematic elements characteristic

of, or originating in, the written literature of classical and postclassical Arabic.

Literacy and Compositional Techniques

The fact that Nabaŕi poetry is composed in the vernacular has led Ibn Khamīs (1958:152–174), Sh. al-Kamālī (1964:283–304), and others to assume that all Nabaŕi poets were illiterate. It is true that most of Nabaŕi poetry is the work of nomads and unlettered folk, but there were certainly, among the urban poets, some who knew how to read and write. It may seem surprising that a literate poet would compose in the vernacular instead of the more prestigious and respected literary language; in this connection, we should remember that the culture of premodern Arabia was predominantly an oral culture and that the poets addressed their compositions to a predominantly illiterate audience. A poet who wanted his verses to circulate among the illiterate masses would have to compose not in the literary but in the vernacular diction. The patrons of professional poets were mostly illiterate personages who wanted to be eulogized not in the literary but in the vernacular language. Moreover, literacy does not necessarily imply proficiency in using literary Arabic, for this is a scholarly and demanding skill which requires studious learning and diligent training. Nevertheless, there were a few literate Nabaŕi poets who clearly borrowed techniques and devices from written literature and employed them in their vernacular poetry.

Biographical evidence is perhaps the most unequivocal evidence of literacy. We possess very little biographical information about Nabaŕi poets, but the exiguous data we do have clearly state that a few of them not only knew how to read and write but were indeed learned men. Ibrāhīm al-J‘eŕīn (d. 1943) is said to have been well versed in Arabic literature (Kamāl 1960–1971:VIII, 5). Ḥamad Ibn Li‘būn wrote of his son, the famous Nabaŕi poet Mḥammad Ibn Li‘būn (1790–1831) that he “memorized the Qur’ān, learned how to read and write, and had beautiful handwriting. He panegyricized ‘Umar Ibn Sa‘ūd ibn ‘Abdal‘azīz in many poems. At the age of seventeen he migrated to az-Zubayr and he became a poetic genius” (quoted in al-Jāsir 1971:798). M. al-Qāḍi wrote that his grandfather, the famous Nabaŕi poet Mḥammad al-‘Abdallah al-Gāḍī (1809–1868), had memorized the Qur’ān by the time he was eight years old and had studied Islamic jurisprudence with one of the learned men in his home town, ‘Unaizah, but later became more inclined toward history and literature. He also had a most beautiful handwriting with which he copied *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. He was wealthy and famous for his liberal hospitality. When he composed his famous panegyric on ‘Unaizah and its citizens, the amir of the town asked him, “O Abu ‘Abdallah, how

can we reward you for this truly beautiful poem?” Al-Gāḍī answered, “Whenever guests come to town I would like always to be the next to have the honor of entertaining them, after you; this shall be my reward” (al-Qāḍī, in al-Faraj 1952:II, 10–11).

References to writing and to writing materials constitute a significant motif in the compositions of some Nabaṭi poets. This motif includes description of the ink, pen, and paper that are used in writing the poem. In the following examples (the first two by Silīm ibn ‘Abdalḥayy and the third by Miḥsin al-Hazzānī), it is clear that the poets describe themselves as composing with pen in hand.

- 1 Write! O pen held between the fingers of my hand; make straight lines of black ink on white paper.
- 2 I will write with you a beautiful poem, verses no one could afford were they to be sold for money.
- 3 I want to express my longing for a fair maiden with fluttering eyelashes and a long neck, a young lass who has plucked my heart into small pieces.

* * *

- 1 I constructed seemingly rhymes on a scroll of paper for the sake of a lady with many virtues.
- 2 Greetings to you, lady: as much as the thunder rumbles in the clouds; as much as the herbage sprouts and covers the sand dunes;
- 3 As much as travelers saddle their mounts; as much as black ink spells [words] on white paper—
- 4 From the tip of a reed pen in the hand of a poet constructing the foundation of his poem, composing beautiful verses with a clear head.

* * *

- 1 O riders, turn the necks of your mounts with the reins! Halt! Let me measure my rhymes.
- 2 Carry with you verses I have composed and strung on the surface of white paper, written with gallnuts and vitriol,
- 3 From *m ḥ s n* [Miḥsin]—verses recorded and embellished; they are the best—
- 4 To *m ḥ m d* [Mḥammad] whom I long to see, I send harmonious verses.

Note that in the last example the poet spells his first name in the third verse, and the first name of the friend to whom he is sending the poem in the fourth verse.

Further evidence of literacy which, like spelling, shows the composer's knowledge of the alphabet, is the poetic form called *al-muhmal*. The Arabic alphabet consists of twenty-eight letters, fifteen of which are dotted (*mu'jam*), and the rest without dots (*muhmal*). A *muhmal* poem is a poem all the verses of which are free of dotted letters; that is to say, the poet restricts himself to words that have no dotted letters (Ibn Khamīs 1958:366–368). I have a copy of a *muhmal* poem consisting of ten verses by Mḥammad al-ʿŌnī. Al-Gāḏī and Ibn Li'būn have also composed one *muhmal* poem each (Kamāl 1960–1971:VI, 52; X, 101).

Another poetic form that relates to the alphabet is *al-alfīyah*. This does not mean a poem of a thousand lines, as in some didactic poems composed in the Middle Ages, but an alphabetical poem. This is a compositional technique which was practiced by medieval poets (al-Rāfiʿī 1954:III, 36), but it is much more developed in Nabaṭi poetry. A poem of this sort generally consists of twenty-eight strophes arranged alphabetically according to their initial letters, each strophe being initiated with a different letter of the alphabet. It seems that this poetic form was borrowed from postclassical poetry and introduced into Nabaṭi poetry by al-Hazzānī, since the earliest Nabaṭi *alfīyah* was composed by him. Furthermore, al-Hazzānī composed his *alfīyah* (published in Kamāl 1960–1971:XIII, 8) after the postclassical model, that is, one verse for each letter of the alphabet. But while the *alfīyah* may have originated as a literary form at the hands of literate Nabaṭi poets, it later became popular among all poets, literate or illiterate. Later Nabaṭi poets developed this form in various ways and changed its rhyme scheme to strophic (see Ibn Khamīs 1958:351–354).

In addition to *al-muhmal* and *al-alfīyah*, literate Nabaṭi poets use other literary contrivances including *al-abjadī*, *ad-darsīʿī*, and *ar-rēḥānī*. The first of these refers to the alphabetical arrangement known as *abjad hawwaz*, in which each of the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet is assigned a fixed numerical value whereby letters can stand for numbers and vice versa. Accordingly, an event can be dated by words the numerical value of the letters of which, when they are added up, gives the year in which the event took place. This chronogrammatic dating is widely used by postclassical Arab poets, who called it *at-tāʾriḫ aš-šīʿrī* or *ḥisāb al-jumal* (or *jummal*) (al-Rāfiʿī 1954:III, 396–403; ʿĀnūtī 1970:64–66; Amīn 1972:171–179). Literate Nabaṭi poets have borrowed this device and used it not only to date specific events but for other purposes as well. For example, in the following verse, Rashīd al-Khalāwī advises his listener

to marry a lady whose age equals the numerical value of $w + y$ (i.e., $6 + 10 = 16$ years of age): *fiṭātin b-ḥarf al-wāw w-al-yā sinnahā // fa'in ḥāl ḥālin yitqin al-kāf ḥāsbah.*

Just as letters can stand for numbers, so numbers can stand for letters. Instead of spelling out the name of his lady, for example, a poet can give numbers which correspond in value to the letters that make up the name. This device is a means of concealment to which a poet can resort in case he does not wish to give outright the name of the lady with whom he is in love and about whom he is composing his poem.

Other methods of concealment include *ad-darsī* and *ar-rēḥānī* (ibid.). In *ad-darsī*, the letters of the alphabet are grouped into fourteen pairs: *dḡ, ṭj, nq, tḍ, šx, bz, s', dr, fy, lh, šḍ, ḥṭ, 'w, km.* To conceal the name of his lady, the poet replaces each of the letters of her name with the letter with which it is paired. For example, if the lady's real name is Hayā, the poet calls her Lafā.

In *ar-rēḥānī*, each letter of the alphabet is designated by a class of things, and the first radical of the word that denotes this class must be the same as the letter that the class designates: for example, $t = tamir$ (dates), $ḥ = ḥadīd$ (iron), $r = rēḥān$ (aromatics), $z = zujāj$ (glass), $s = simak$ (fish), $š = šīm$ (china), $f = fawākih$ (fruits), $n = nǰūm$ (stars), $w = wuḥūš$ (wild animals), $h = hawamm$ (dangerous beasts), $y = yāgūt$ (rubies), and so forth. Instead of spelling out the name of his lady, the poet who employs *ar-rēḥānī* will mention in his verses something about the objects that belong to the classes that designate the letters of her name.

Although they are composed in the vernacular, the verses of literate Nabaṭi poets are marked by syntactic and lexical borrowings from literary Arabic, and are full of Qur'anic allusions and references to religious and historical figures and other topics which point to the familiarity of their composers with written sources on religion, history, and literature. Literate Nabaṭi poets were also influenced by postclassical poets in their preoccupation with verbal brilliance and stylistic ornamentation. They strove to embellish their verses and adorn them with rhetorical figures and literary devices. Kh. al-Faraj, who was the first to compile an anthology of Nabaṭi poetry, wrote that al-Hazzānī, Ibn Li'būn, and 'Abdallah al-Faraj were well versed in, and influenced by, postclassical Arabic poetry, and that some of their compositions were characterized by contrived and excessive use of paronomasia, antithesis, double entendre, and other stylistic devices which were employed by medieval Arab poets (1952:7–9).

Among the literary features developed by postclassical poets and adopted by some literate Nabaṭi poets is that known as *al-laff w-an-našr al-murattab*. This consists of dividing the first hemistich of the verse into a series of nouns and the second hemistich into a series of attributes that

correspond in order and application to the preceding nouns, as in the following three verses by al-Hazzānī:

- 1 Tresses, bosoms, and ankles are flowing, erect, and firm.
- 2 Buttocks, waists, and bellies are plump, slender, and shapely.
- 3 With promises, trysts, and lies, they are false, deceptive, and generous.

Another postclassical device introduced by literate composers into Nabaṭi poetry is *at-tašrīʿ*. Instead of dividing the verse into two hemistichs as usual, in *at-tašrīʿ* the poet divides every verse in the poem into four parts; each part must rhyme with the corresponding parts in the other verses. Furthermore, the second and fourth parts of every verse can be taken out and there will still remain a meaningful verse. Here is an example from a long poem by Ibn Liʿbūn:

- 1 *yā-galb lō habb al-hawā (lik w-nāḥī) // bālik tijībīh y-al-ḡawī (wēn mā rāḥ).*
- 2 *kibb as-sifāh w-mā ḥawā (min mzāḥī) // ḍāmī ḍʿūnih tirtiwī (damʿ saffāḥ).*

Some literate Nabaṭi poets may try to emulate even more demanding literary techniques such as that known as *al-insijām al-lafḍī*, which was invented by Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī in their *Maqāmāt*. With this technique, the poet chooses the words for his verses so that the words in each verse will share at least one sound in common, in an attempt to create a certain acoustic harmony, as in the following two lines from a poem by al-Gāḍī where we observe that the sound *j* is spread throughout the first verse and the sound *s* is spread throughout the second verse.

- 1 *fiḡā mā lijā bī dāḡ fi lāj mihjīṭī // rijētīh rijā rajwā rijā rāj ṭāyir.*
- 2 *salāmin tisalsal min salāyil misāyil // b-al-irsāl sāl b-sirr al-asrār sāḥir.*

On one hand, Ibn Khamīs (1958:212–232, 350–370) gives a detailed discussion and copious examples of such stylistic devices, yet fails to recognize them as clear signs of literacy. For Ibn Khamīs, these techniques are signs of “luxury and frivolity” (*taraf*) but not of literacy. On the other hand, Sh. al-Kamālī entitles his book on Nabaṭi poetry *al-Shīʿr ʿinda al-Badw, Poetry Among the Nomads* (1964), implying that this poetry is composed only by illiterate bedouins. As a matter of fact, al-Kamālī asserts that Nabaṭi poetry is exclusively nomadic. It may have

escaped his attention that most of the Nabaṭi poets he discusses in his book, such as al-Hazzānī, Ibn Li‘būn, and Ibn ‘Arfaǰ, are urbane inhabitants of such large towns as az-Zubair, Buraidah, and ‘Unaizah. It is true that the great majority of Nabaṭi poets are illiterate and that the nomadic outlook pervades the Nabaṭi poetic tradition, but Nabaṭi poetry is composed by both illiterate and literate poets and by nomads as well as settlers. Moreover, the specific devices we are discussing here are not typical of the bulk of Nabaṭi poetry—especially that composed by nomadic poets—but are found only in limited examples and primarily in the works of poets whom other evidence shows to have been literate.

These literate Nabaṭi poets played a significant role in establishing direct links between Nabaṭi poetry and the mainstream of Arabic literature. They were intermediaries who were continually attempting to incorporate into their vernacular compositions formal patterns and thematic features drawn from classical and postclassical poetry. Some of their attempts were so successful and so well received by the general public that they were imitated by illiterate poets and eventually became thoroughly assimilated into the Nabaṭi poetic tradition.

Among the postclassical formal patterns adopted by literate Nabaṭi poets which have been used widely by their illiterate colleagues are the strophic rhyme and the *ramal* meter. In the strophic rhyming scheme, the first three lines of every strophe have their own independent rhyme, while the fourth line of every strophe has the same rhyme, binding all the strophes into one poem. It seems that al-Hazzānī was the first literate Nabaṭi poet to borrow this rhyming scheme from postclassical poetry. It has been pointed out above that al-Hazzānī did not employ the strophic pattern in his *alfīyah*. Nevertheless, he did employ it enthusiastically in many of his other compositions. Ibn Li‘būn, who came after al-Hazzānī, also composed strophic poems, but he added the further constraint that the rhyming words in the first three lines of every strophe should not only rhyme with each other but should also be homonyms. In this respect, Ibn Li‘būn might have been influenced by the device called *jinās al-qawāfi* (homonymous rhymes) of postclassical Arabic poetry and by the popular Iraqi poetic form *az-zhērī* (as a young man, Ibn Li‘būn migrated from Ḥarmih, his home town in Najd, to az-Zubair in southern Iraq). Ibn Ribī‘ih, Ibn ‘Arfaǰ, and al-Gāḍī composed strophic poems after the pattern set by Ibn Li‘būn.

The poetry of al-Hazzānī bears a conspicuous resemblance to the poetry of the celebrated Omayyad poet ‘Umar Ibn Abī Rabī‘ah. They both dealt explicitly with matters of love, and their compositions included dialogues and flirtations with fair chaste maidens. Also, al-Hazzānī composed in *ramal*, a favorite meter of Ibn Abī Rabī‘ah, and a meter much favored for love lyrics intended for public singing, as in the postclassical poetic

genre *al-muwaššah*, the invention of which is closely associated with singing. It is interesting to note, therefore, that after al-Hazzāni introduced the *ramal* meter into Nabaŕi poetry Ibn Li‘būn used it in love lyrics which he intoned for singing, thus making it one of the most popular meters in Nabaŕi poetry. The tunes invented by Ibn Li‘būn still survive today; they are called *al-alhān al-li‘būniyyah* or, more commonly, *as-sāmri*. In Kuwait, Bahrain, and the rest of the Gulf area they are sung to the accompaniment of the oud, while in Najd they are sung to the accompaniment of drums.

Just as literate Nabaŕi poets had firsthand knowledge of postclassical Arabic poetry, they were also intimately familiar with classical tradition. In their compositions they allude to ancient poets; moreover, the wording and content of some of their verses clearly indicate that they are direct borrowings from classical Arabic poetry, as is seen in the following three examples by Ibn Li‘būn. The first contains a hemistich quoted verbatim from the pre-Islamic poet Zuhayr, and the second and third incorporate hemistichs from the *Mu‘allaqah* of the pre-Islamic poet Imru‘ al-Qays (the relevant hemistichs are underlined).

- (1) *tibaššar xalilī hal tarā min ḏa‘āyin // tigāzan bihum fōg aš-šifā min ḥzūmahā.*
- (2) *yanšidnini yōm intawā al-kill bi-rḥīl // hal ‘ind rasmin dārsin min m‘awwal.*
- (3) *agfā mširrin ċinn jākāt šālih // jilmūd šaxrin ḥaṭṭih as-sēl min ‘āl.*

Although the pronunciation of these verses must be changed to comply with Nabaŕi scansion, they are of course completely recognizable; they also point to the adoption in Nabaŕi poetry of the rhetorical device *taḏmin*, a device characteristic of poetry composed by literate poets.

Literacy and Thematic Borrowing: The Mu‘allaqah of Imru‘ al-Qays

Space does not allow for a full treatment of the role played by literacy in establishing direct links between Nabaŕi and classical Arabic poetry. Suffice it here to mention a few examples illustrating the influence of one particular ancient poem, the *Mu‘allaqah* of Imru‘ al-Qays,¹ on the compositions of some Nabaŕi poets. The influence of Imru‘ al-Qays is perhaps nowhere more noticeable than in the compositions of ‘Abdal‘aziz al-Mḥammad al-Gāḏī, who in several of his poems borrows from the themes and images of Imru‘ al-Qays. This is shown in the following lines from one poem in which he emulates the famous *Mu‘allaqah* (the lines are

numbered according to their sequence in the full text, which is published in Kamāl 1960–1971:VII, 35–37).

- 1 The loose locks of midnight profusely hang over its ample tail like a surging wave flowing over another surging wave.
- 2 In the folds of darkness, stars flicker like the distant torches of monks who are expecting visitors.
- 3 The Pleiades are like the guides of a riding party who turned back to look for some lost riders.
- 4 To the east of them appears Orion; its belt resembles a glittering girdle adorned with pure pearls.

* * *

- 6 When will the morning illuminate the darkness of the night, though morning is no more cheerful and will not abate my anguish?

* * *

- 17 Before you [my beloved] I had enjoyed the company of many a virgin, many a middle-aged woman, barren wench, and pregnant woman whom passion drove to my embrace.
- 18 And many a nursing mother has slept with me; when her child cries, she gives him her back [and does not turn her face from me] out of respect for me.²

Another Nabaṭī poet clearly influenced by Imruʿ al-Qays is al-Hazzānī, as the following two examples will illustrate. In the first, al-Hazzānī describes the effects of rain and compares the drowned gazelles as they float on the water to the plucked *ʿanṣal* plant—using exactly the same words and image as does Imruʿ al-Qays in the last line of his *Muʿallaqah*: “The wild beasts at evening drowned in the furthest reaches of the wide watercourse lay like drawn bulbs of wild onion” (Arberry 1957:66). Al-Hazzānī’s version is:

- 1 The dust of the parched earth was raised by the first gush of rain, and the gazelles were drowned and carried away by the torrent,
- 2 Floating on the current like *ʿanṣal* plants; and low hillocks were covered by rainwater.

In the second example, al-Hazzānī describes how long the night can be for one who is sleepless by saying that the stars seem to be tied to the ground by strong ropes (i.e., they do not move westward), in imitation

of Imru' al-Qays's words: "Oh, what a night of a night you are! It's as though the stars were tied to the mount of Yadhbul with infinite hempen ropes; as though the Pleiades in their stable were firmly hung by stout flax cables to craggy slabs of granite" (Arberry 1957:64).

Al-Hazzānī writes:

- 1 On many a night whose terrors turn the hair gray and the stars seemed as if tied to the ground with iron chains
- 2 I crossed desert wastes with a shining sword of Indian make hanging at my side.

The image of the stars tied with ropes so that they cannot move became a popular one in Nabaṭi poetry.

In the second line of the example quoted above, al-Hazzānī refers to the fact that he has crossed the desert, sword in hand. This is an allusion to an episode in the *Mu'allaqah* of Imru' al-Qays in which the poet depicts himself as walking by night defiantly past the guards and relatives of his sweetheart, entering her tent at the time of her taking off her garments in readiness to go to bed, enjoying her company in a leisurely and unhurried manner, fearless of her kinsmen, who would surely slay him there and then did they know of his presence.

Many's the fair veiled lady, whose tent few would think of seeking,
I've enjoyed sporting with, and not in a hurry either,
slipping past packs of watchmen to reach her, with a whole tribe
hankering after my blood, eager every man-jack to slay me,
what time the Pleiades showed themselves broadly in heaven
glittering like the folds of a woman's bejewelled scarf.
(Arberry 1957:63)

Literate Nabaṭi poets have turned this episode into a favorite theme. The poet's sweetheart and the night spent with her are often described in much sensuous detail; but this is only a poetic background, so to speak, on which are projected the daring, resolution, and other manly qualities which enable the poet to attain his ambitious goals. The unapproachable beautiful maiden symbolizes the aspirations of the poet, and the guardsmen represent the antagonists and obstacles which continually try to frustrate the poet's efforts to achieve his aspirations. With sword in hand, the poet walks on the brink and wrestles with danger in order to reach his lady and enjoy her company.

The following three examples, dealing with the specific theme of the night visit and its implication of the poet's bravery and manliness, illus-

trate both the attachment of Nabaṭi poets to this theme and the extensive influence of Imru' al-Qays upon their treatment of it. The first in particular, by 'Abdal'azīz al-Mḥammad al-Gāḍī, employs many images drawn from the *Mu'allaqah*: it emphasizes the poet's courage in seeking out his beloved over all obstacles. (It is worth noting that the beloved here is not a desert maiden but an urban lady protected not only by her kinsmen, but by fortifications as well—a modification of the theme which reflects the poet's own environment.)

- 1 And how many a night I have stayed awake, passions burning my heart and reflection taking my mind in every direction.
- 2 The stars seemed as if fixed in place and tied to big boulders with tightly twisted ropes.
- 3 The dark night had covered the horizons with its black cloak, its darkness resembling the surging waves of the sea, terror upon terror.
- 4 I have sprung up with a resolute and ambitious spirit which dissipates wealth [to attain its ambitions] and draws a sharp sword upon the guardsmen.
- 5 To reach the lady with the rosy cheeks, I have trampled over many gallant men, carrying with me a sharp sword of Indian make.
- 6 She was well guarded in a fortified and lofty palace which was difficult to reach; but for me, nothing is difficult.
- 7 The ropes of my passion have pulled me up to her, and I have overcome all obstacles; may Allah never put love in the heart of a weakling.

The second example, by Rmēzān Ibn Ġaššām, speaks of the hazards of the desert beasts, and dwells more on the love idyll itself.

- 1 I slipped away to see her one hour after darkness fell; in my hand I was carrying a sharp sword of Indian make
- 2 To protect myself against nocturnal beasts that might attack me and try to make me give up my pursuit.
- 3 My sword was my only true friend—it makes a chuckling sound when it severs the enemy's limb from the rest of his body.
- 4 After the envious had gone to sleep, the slanderer gone to bed, and lovers closed their eyes,
- 5 I took my sword and went up to my lady in her bedchamber, and found her lying almost naked but for her nightgown.
- 6 With the tip of my finger I pinched her on the hip and whispered my name so as not to startle her.
- 7 I said to her, "Greetings," and she answered, "A thousand welcomes, my beloved."

- 8 She rested her head on my arm and I rested mine on hers until all the stars descended beyond the western skies.

The third example, by Abū Ḥamzih al-ʿĀmrī, again emphasizes the poet's valor in battle as well as in love.

- 1 I slipped away to see her at night before the dew fell from the stars, my only companions the carnivorous beasts that followed me, wishing to devour me.
- 2 Hanging by my side was a sharp, well-made sword; its broad blade glittered in my right hand.
- 3 My fearless heart routs the enemy with it; it is my best companion on a dark night.
- 4 I also carry tucked in my belt a crooked dagger that resembles a poisonous snake [for my enemies] or a draught of cool fresh water [for my friends].
- 5 I am Abū Ḥamzih from the lineage of ʿĀmir; I am the famous knight who is well known on the battlefield.

All of these examples illustrate the borrowing and modification by literate Nabaṭi poets of a specific theme drawn from classical Arabic poetry, and the use of images and motifs strongly influenced by this poetry.

Two Novel Poetic Genres

In addition to imitating stylistic features and compositional forms which were developed by classical and postclassical Arab poets, literate Nabaṭi poets made some novel contributions to the Nabaṭi poetic tradition. The most original of these contributions are the two poetic forms *al-ʿarūs* and *al-murāsālāt aš-šīʿriyyah*.

Al-ʿarūs literally means "the bride." A postclassical or neoclassical poet may metaphorically refer to his poem as *ʿarūs aš-šīʿr* "the bride of poetry," implying that it is a beautiful poem. But in Nabaṭi poetry, *al-ʿarūs* is a panegyric poem addressed to a friend or patron. In this type of poem, the poet chances to meet a beautiful and noble maiden who asks him to find her a worthy husband. The poet first asks her to marry him. This is an important step in the compositional development of the poem. If the poet does not ask the bride to marry him, the audience may conclude that he did not want her because of some fault in her looks or character which he knows about but is concealing. The bride refuses to marry him because he is poor, or because poets are fickle, or some similar excuse. The poet then parades before her, so to speak, several friends or prominent figures one by one, pointing out the merits of each. But the bride refuses each one as he is presented, pointing out that he is not suitable for her

because of some fault or shortcoming which she spells out. Every now and then the poet admonishes the bride for being so unreasonable and for causing him such mental anguish. Finally, the name of the man in whose honor the poem is composed comes up, and the poet expatiates upon his bravery, liberal hospitality, and uprightness. The bride picks him as her husband, ending the poem.

This poetic genre is not merely panegyric but also a fascinating social criticism done in a clever way. The poet manages to criticize friends and prominent people without incurring their anger because, after all, it is the bride who points out the shortcomings of these people in her dialogue with the poet, while he mentions only their positive qualities.

Al-Murāsālāt aš-šī'riyyah refers to a very widespread and interesting poetic genre, that of friendly poetic exchanges between dignitaries and outstanding literary personalities of the various towns and settlements of Arabia. These exchanges should not be confused with poems that are exchanged between town amirs and tribal chiefs for the purpose of delivering threats, declaring war, or suing for peace; nor should they be confused with poems sent by a father to his absent son or by someone seeking assistance from a relative, a friend, or a patron—such poems are composed with a specific and immediate practical end in mind. The poems we are discussing now seem to have no apparent motive aside from the literary exercise and aesthetic pleasure derived from composing and reading them.

This type of poetic correspondence is usually initiated when one poet, upon hearing of the high social standing and good breeding of another who lives in a distant territory, composes a poem which he addresses and sends to that poet, who in turn answers with a *mgādāt* (response poem) of the same rhyme and meter. A close inspection of these poetic exchanges can tell us a great deal about the various connections and mutual influences that bound literate Nabaṭi poets together across time and space. We know, for example, that al-Gāḍī of ʿUnaizah (1809–1868) was the correspondent of Mḥammad al-ʿAlī al-ʿArfaj (d. 1842), the poet-prince of Buraidah, and of Aḥmad Ibn Mḥammad as-Sdērī (d. 1860) who in the course of his long life held various prominent positions in the early Saudi regime. We know, too, that al-ʿArfaj also corresponded with ʿAbdallah Ibn Ribīʿih (d. 1856), just as as-Sdērī corresponded with Ibn Liʿbūn (1790–1831). Ibn Liʿbūn and Ibn Ribīʿih were the rival poets of az-Zubair in southern Iraq. It is no wonder, therefore, that the compositions of these five poets—Ibn Liʿbūn, Ibn Ribīʿih, al-ʿArfaj, al-Gāḍī, and as-Sdērī—exhibit some similarities in style and share many motifs and formulas.

A close reading of these exchanges soon reveals that their composers were men of culture and high social standing who not only knew how

to read and write but were learned men in direct contact with the mainstream of Arabic literature. The content of their compositions exhibits evidence both of wide cultural experience and acquaintance with classical learning. It is not unlikely that some of them read medieval treatises on Arabic poetics and stylistics. They engaged in poetic composition as a literary activity and approached poetry from the point of view of *adab* (belles-lettres). Their compositions are characteristically elaborate in form and show both a cultivated elegance and deliberate literary craftsmanship. Due to their literary nature and the similarity of their thematic content, *al-murāsālāt aš-šī'riyyah* constitute a special genre in Nabaṭi poetry.

The writing and delivery of these poems has been worked out into a conventional prelude consisting of an elaborate description of the ink, pen, and paper, as well as of the folding and kissing of the paper on which the poem was written and the placing of this paper on the head before handing it to the emissary. The boldness of the emissary, the strength and beauty of his camel mount, the perilous journey, and the desolate wastes he must traverse are also parts of this conventional prelude. Sometimes, instead of sending an emissary, the poet meets a riding party that is heading for the place he wishes his poetic message to be delivered, whereupon he implores them to stop at his abode for a smoke, a cup of coffee, or some other refreshment, and wait for him to write or bring an already written poetic message to take with them to the gallant, open-handed, and most learned intended recipient. After the prelude, or somewhere in the middle of it, the poet sends his greetings to the person to whom he is sending the poem. By employing the additive style, this greeting can be extended over several lines. The poem may contain a few lines of boasting, and it will certainly include verses praising the person to whom it is addressed. The poet also expresses his friendship and longing for that person in the warmest and most uninhibited terms.

In addition to the conventional prelude, *al-murāsālāt aš-šī'riyyah* share the same principal topic, which is grief over a past love and complaint about the pains of separation. The poet initiating the correspondence first describes in minute detail the physical beauty of his lady and the joys they once shared together. He then says that, for some reason, they are now separated and he no longer can see her. The poet addressed responds by consoling the grieving poet, counseling him on love, and promising to give whatever assistance is needed to rejoin the grieving poet with his lady. For example, in his response (*mgādāt*) he proclaims his readiness to send riders in all directions to look for the lady, or to offer all his wealth and influence to induce the lady's kinsmen to give her to the poet; or, if necessary, to rise up in arms with all his kinsmen to take the lady by force.

These poetic exchanges are essentially a means of forging friendships and alliances between the corresponding poets. The love story in these compositions is merely a convention, the underlying motive of which is the eliciting of support and sympathy from the person to whom the poem is addressed. When the responding poet offers the grieving poet his unconditional and unlimited assistance and promises to reunite him with his lady at any cost, he is actually making a commitment to stand by his side in any adventure or undertaking, whatever the cost to himself.

The genre of poetic correspondence is well known in Arabic literature; in fact, the first to introduce it into Nabaṭi poetry were literate poets such as al-Hazzānī, Ibn Li'būn, al-Gāḍī, and the other poets mentioned above. But once the genre was introduced, it was accepted by literate and illiterate poets alike, and was developed to a brilliance and complexity unparalleled in Arabic literature (see, for examples, the poems sent by Ibn Sbayyil to Feḥān Ibn Zirībān, in al-Faraj 1952:169–211).

The material dealt with in this chapter shows that the historical relationship between Nabaṭi poetry and classical Arabic poetry is complemented by a more specific literary relationship. Literate Nabaṭi poets drew consciously and deliberately from the classical tradition in order to enrich their own vernacular tradition; they also invented new genres which reflect the conditions of their environment. By this constant interplay between the literary and vernacular traditions, Nabaṭi poetry was further expanded and developed.