

## X



# ARABIC POETRY AND THE ORAL-FORMULAIC THEORY

In the preceding chapters we have discussed the social function, performance contexts, and compositional techniques of Nabaṭi poetry. We have seen that, with respect to all these areas, Nabaṭi poetry is a continuation of the tradition of ancient Arabic poetry; and as such, it can provide a valuable model for the elucidation of questions concerning poetry. Chief among such questions is the problem of the supposed “oral-formulaic” nature of ancient Arabic poetry, which has in recent years aroused much discussion and controversy. In this chapter we will take up this topic in an effort to show that ancient Arabic poetry, like Nabaṭi poetry, cannot be considered “oral-formulaic” in the sense that some investigators have assumed, since both, although composed and delivered orally, rely heavily on the role of memory in both composition and transmission, and their use of formulas is a stylistic rather than a generative technique.

In my discussion I shall first examine some theories of oral poetry, in particular the well-known Parry-Lord theory and the controversy it has engendered; I shall then discuss some attempts to apply this theory to ancient Arabic poetry; and lastly I shall demonstrate, using Nabaṭi poetry as a model, that “orality” does not always, or necessarily, imply “oral-formulaic,” and that attempts to fit ancient Arabic poetry into this classification are in error.

### *What Is Oral Poetry?*

Ever since Albert B. Lord published *The Singer of Tales* (1960), a landmark in the study of oral literature, many scholars have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to apply his findings to a variety of oral traditions. The dogmatism of many partisans of this theory and the imprecision of its terminology—as well as the fact that Lord’s essentially descriptive remarks have been interpreted as prescriptive conditions for all oral poetry—have caused a great deal of confusion and, in many cases, have led to highly doubtful conclusions. Before dealing with specific

issues, it is pertinent to give a brief sketch of the main assumptions of the Parry-Lord theory, as it may be designated, as presented in *The Singer of Tales* by Lord, the student of the originator of the theory, Milman Parry.

Parry was initially interested in explaining the function of formulas in Homeric epics. But since no living representative of the ancient Greek epic tradition survived, he felt that a logical alternative was to turn to the still living tradition of Yugoslav epic poetry. Parry and Lord went into the field and found that textual fluidity and abundance of formulas were the most salient characteristics of this oral epic poetry. The formulas functioned to relieve the epic singer of the task of memorizing his epic songs, each of which might run into thousands of lines. Yugoslav epic singers did not memorize their repertoire; instead, a bard would compose extemporaneously as he sang at a rate of from ten to twenty ten-syllable lines a minute. To facilitate this feat, the bard used formulas which he manipulated to embellish his epic song and to lengthen or shorten it according to the response of his audience and the demands of the performance context. Such formulas could also serve to fill potential gaps in the recitation while the bard was working up the next segment in his head before producing it.

In other words, the epic singer as described by Lord does not recall a previously composed epic; rather, each separate performance entails a re-creation of the epic song. "For the oral poet the moment of composition is the performance. . . . An oral poem is not composed for but *in* performance" (Lord 1960:13). Among the implications of this statement is that questions of origin and attribution in oral epic traditions are irrelevant. The statement also reduces, if not eliminating altogether, the role of memory in the transmission and performance of oral epic poetry.

Despite some basic terminological inadequacies of the Parry-Lord oral-formulaic theory (which I shall touch upon shortly), it describes fairly accurately the situation observed by them in Yugoslavia. It is only when their methods are generalized and mechanically applied to other poetic traditions that the theory begins to lose its credibility. This is a problem that has been noted by many scholars; for example, regarding F. P. Magoun's application of the theory to Old English poetry, Larry D. Benson observes that "so useful has the theory proved and so widely has it been accepted that it is not surprising to find it already hardening into a doctrine that threatens to narrow rather than broaden our approach to Old English poetry" (1966:334). This opinion is echoed by Albert C. Baugh, who writes that "it is a familiar phenomenon in the scholarship on any subject that ideas which begin as opinions become petrified into dogma at the same time that assumptions have a way of taking on the status of fact. In secondary works they are generalized and disseminated"

(1967:1). Similar opinions have been expressed by Michael Curschmann (1967:36), Ruth Finnegan (1976:135), and H. L. Rogers (1966:102).

Proponents of the Parry-Lord theory hold that the presence of formulas in a poem is unequivocal evidence that it is both composed and transmitted orally.<sup>1</sup> "Oral poetry, it may be safely said, is composed entirely of formulas, large and small, while lettered poetry is never formulaic," F. P. Magoun states categorically (1953:447), and concludes on this basis that Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry was orally composed and transmitted. But his conclusion has been challenged by a number of scholars.<sup>2</sup> For example, in two thoroughly documented articles, Baugh (1959, 1967) has shown that the Middle English romance—despite an abundance of formulas and recurrent themes—was the work of literate authors who "wrote with oral presentation in mind" (1967:9). Benson states that "poems which we can be sure were not orally composed use formulas as frequently and sometimes more frequently than supposedly oral compositions such as *Beowulf* or the poems of Cynewulf" (1966:335); he goes on to say that "To prove that an Old English poem is formulaic is only to prove that it is an Old English poem, and to show that such a work has a high or low percentage of formulas reveals nothing about whether or not it is a literate composition, though it may tell us something about the skill with which a particular poet uses the tradition" (*ibid.*, 336). According to Benson, literate poets employ formulas "in the same way any writer observes a literary tradition" (*ibid.*, 337). In other words, a formula might be chosen "not because the demands of the meter or the pressure of oral composition prevent the poet from pausing to select some more suitable phrase but because this phrase *is* suitable, is part of a poetic diction that is clearly oral in origin but that is now just as clearly a literary convention" (*ibid.*, 339). J. J. Campbell concurs with Benson that conventions that are oral in origin—such as various formulas—"could be, and were carried over into written literature" (1960:88), and Michael Curschmann adds that stylistic techniques which are singled out by proponents of the oral-formulaic theory as characteristic of oral composition "may primarily be a more general reflection of popular taste" (1967:49) rather than sure signs of orality.

Such observations are borne out by the example of Nabaṭi poetry. As we noted in our description of this poetry, it does indeed contain many stock phrases and recurrent images; yet these are essentially stylistic conventions used for their appropriateness to the subject rather than to generate segments of a poem. Essentially, it is rarely possible to determine from textual evidence alone whether a Nabaṭi poem was composed by a literate or illiterate poet, as the same conventions will be used indiscriminately by both.

One of the basic problems of the Parry-Lord theory is the rigid distinction it attempts to establish between an "oral" and a "written" mode of composition. Usage of the terms *oral* and *written* literature by proponents of the theory is highly vague and ambiguous. Lord in particular asserts that oral and written techniques of composition are "contradictory and mutually exclusive" (1960:129), an assertion that would deny any essential relationship between poets composing orally and in a written form within the same tradition, or between the "oral" and "written" phases of a given tradition.

But we have already seen how, in Nabaṭi poetry, oral and written composition and transmission coexist and overlap. Among Nabaṭi poets, some are literate and others, the vast majority, are illiterate. A poem composed in written form by a literate poet may circulate by word of mouth, whereas a poem composed orally by an illiterate poet may find its way to the written page and become preserved in this fashion. It is not unusual for an illiterate Nabaṭi poet to seek the assistance of a scribe to write down his poem as he composes it or after it has been composed. Furthermore, an illiterate poet, just like a literate poet composing with pen in hand, will compose his poem slowly with a great deal of reflection and deliberation.

This interaction between "oral" and "written" modes of composition and transmission is not unique to Nabaṭi poetry. Finnegan (1974) discusses the question at length and gives ample references and examples from various traditions from Africa and Asia to show that it is not always possible to draw a clear distinction between "oral" and "written" literature. In another place, Finnegan concludes that "When one looks hard at the detailed circumstances and nature of literary phenomena in a wide comparative context, historically as well as geographically, the concept of 'oral literature' *does* cease to be a very clear one, because of the varying ways in which a literature piece can be oral (or written): 'orality' is a relative thing" (1976:141). Finnegan also writes that oral composition is "a useful term that roughly conveys a general emphasis on composition without reliance on writing, but cannot provide any absolute criterion for definitively differentiating oral poetry as a single category clearly separable from written poetry" (1977:19).

Not only is it difficult, therefore, to draw a clear-cut boundary between "oral" and "written" poetry in terms of form and content, but it is equally difficult to make a meaningful and true distinction between an "oral" and a "written" mode of composition. A Yugoslav *guslar* may compose during performance, but not all oral poets follow his example. In the case of Nabaṭi poetry, I have already explained in detail the effort a Nabaṭi poet goes through in order to compose a relatively short lyric. In fact, slow

and deliberate composition prior to delivery is characteristic of oral traditions of diverse cultures (Finnegan 1976:145–159, 1977:73–87). Space does not allow for consideration of all possible cases here, but two examples will suffice. B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis explain that Somali poets “spend many hours, sometimes even days, composing their work” (1964:45). J. W. Johnson also stresses that “Somali poets rarely perform their work until composition is completely finished in private” (quoted in Finnegan 1976:146 and 1977:74). Among the Eskimos, poetic composition is equally painstaking. In the words of K. Rasmussen, “a man who wants to compose a song may long walk to and fro in some solitary place, arranging his words while humming a melody which he has also made up himself” (1931:321). In the following lines an Eskimo poet draws a parallel between the labor of composition and that of fishing:

. . . Why, I wonder  
 My song-to-be that I wish to use  
 My song-to-be that I wish to put together  
 I wonder why it will not come to me?  
 At Sioraq it was, at a fishing hole in the ice,  
 A little trout I could feel on the line  
 And then it was gone,  
 I stood jigging,  
 But why is that so difficult, I wonder? . . . (Ibid., 517–518)

Once we accept the fact that in oral poetry composition can, and often does, precede performance, it becomes necessary to suppose that memorization plays an important role. John D. Smith has observed that even performers of oral epic in western India rely on memory to a very great extent (1977). Moreover, it is possible to assume that portions of epic poems of especial historical or genealogical significance—such as the catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*—were of necessity memorized and inserted at the proper point.

Furthermore, it frequently occurs that composer and performer are in fact two different individuals. This is certainly the case in Nabaṭi poetry, as was shown earlier. Baugh has convincingly argued that the Middle English romances were composed by learned authors to be memorized and performed publicly by minstrels (1967). He goes on to say:

It is not necessary to argue whether a jongleur or minstrel could have learned by heart a *chanson de geste* or a romance. It was his business to do so, just as it is the business of actors at the Old Vic to learn their parts in a variety of Shakespearean plays. As Tatlock

long ago remarked, "To recite from more or less perfect memory a poem of a thousand short couplets was no more a feat for a minstrel than for a modern actor." (Ibid., 28–29)

E. Knott and G. Murphy (1967:64) have shown that, in medieval Gaelic court poetry, poet and performer were usually separate individuals. The poet composed his poem slowly in a dark room; subsequently he taught it to a bard who memorized it in order to recite it or chant it in the court. Such minstrels or jongleurs were also responsible for transmitting poems over a wide geographical area, traveling from place to place and earning their livings in this manner.

Andrzejewski and Lewis emphasize the role of memory in the performance and transmission of Somali poetry and point out that the concept of a "correct" version is locally recognized. The compositions of each poet are preserved under his name, and a reciter will always inform his audience whether he is reciting his own or someone else's composition. Andrzejewski and Lewis speak of:

. . . [impressive] feats of memory on the part of the poetry reciters, some of whom are poets themselves. Unaided by writing they learn long poems by heart and some have repertoires which are too great to be exhausted even by several evenings of continuous recitation. Moreover, some of them are endowed with such powers of memory that they can learn a poem by heart after hearing it only once. . . . The reciters are not only capable of acquiring a wide repertoire but can store it in their memories for many years, sometimes for their lifetime. . . .

A poem passes from mouth to mouth. Between a young Somali who listens today to a poem composed fifty years ago, five hundred miles away, and its first audience there is a long chain of reciters who passed it one to another. It is only natural that in this process of transmission some distortion occurs, but comparison of different versions of the same poem usually shows a surprisingly high degree of fidelity to the original. This is due to a large extent to the formal rigidity of Somali poetry. . . .

Another factor also plays an important role: the audience who listen to the poem would soon detect any gross departure from the style of the particular poet; moreover among the audience there are often people who already know by heart the particular poem, having learnt it from another source. Heated disputes sometimes arise between a reciter and his audience concerning the purity of his version. It may even happen that the authorship of a poem is questioned by the audience, who carefully listen to the introductory

phrases in which the reciter gives the name of the poet, and, if he is dead, says a prayer formula for his soul. (1964:45–46)

As can be clearly seen, this situation virtually duplicates what we have already observed about Nabaṭi poetry.

In the case of the Yugoslav epics described by Parry and Lord, their extraordinary length makes memorization difficult, whereas laxity of meter and absence of rhyme facilitate improvisation. Short poems such as the ballad, however, are easily memorized (Friedman 1961). Moreover, the demanding formal and stylistic features of some poetic traditions, such as alliteration in Somali poetry and strict rhyme and meter in Nabaṭi poetry, inhibit improvisation and put a premium on prior composition and memorization.

In addition to form and content, the social function of poetry determines to a great extent whether it is memorized or improvised. "As a general rule it may be said that the more a tradition is associated with a vested interest, and the more this interest is a concern with the public as a whole and is functionally important, the more exacting will be the control over its recital, and the better the guarantee against distortion through failure of memory" (Vansina 1961:42). As indicated above, such a consideration could apply to specific segments of individual poems that were considered of special community importance; it applies even more specifically to traditions such as that of Nabaṭi poetry, where poetry has a highly significant social and political function.

After surveying a variety of oral poetic traditions, H. M. and N. K. Chadwick come to the conclusion that:

Both memorization and improvisation are employed in the preservation of oral literature. Sometimes the exact words of a poem may be remembered for hundreds of years, even when the language has become more or less obsolete and unintelligible. Sometimes only the barest outline of a theme or story may be preserved. All possible varieties between these two examples are found. (1940:III, 867)

The Chadwicks give examples of four types of poetry in which strict memorization is the rule. These are: (1) poetry intended for collective singing, (2) sacred poetry (e.g., *Rigveda*), (3) poems of carefully studied diction (e.g., *mele inoa* of Hawaii), and (4) poetry with complicated meters (e.g., Norse ["Scaldic"] poetry) (*ibid.*, 868).

The final point I wish to discuss in this section concerns the instability of the orally transmitted text. Lord has emphasized the fluidity of the epic song. Since in his view every performance of the epic song is a new creation of that song, it follows that "In oral tradition the idea of an

original is illogical” (1960:101). Lord goes on to stress that in oral tradition “we cannot correctly speak of a ‘variant,’ since there is no ‘original’ to be varied” (ibid.). Many advocates of the Parry-Lord theory have dogmatically adhered to this principle, assuming that *any* textual variation in *any* oral poetic tradition provides incontestable evidence that the poems constituting the tradition were composed, performed, and transmitted in substantially the same manner as the Yugoslav epics; I refer particularly to Zwettler’s application of the oral-formulaic theory to ancient Arabic poetry (1978:10–11, 189 ff.). The basic problem with this assumption is that it not only confuses composition *for* oral performance (a typical feature of Arabic poetry) with composition *during* performance (which is much more doubtful), but ignores the historical and technical problems that affected the *transmission* of pre-Islamic poetry during the first centuries of Islam.

Many of the general problems arising from oral transmission were treated in the earlier discussion of the transmission of Nabaṭī poetry. In this discussion we saw that each poem has an original version composed by a specific poet prior to delivery, and that each instance of performance or transmission is never a recomposition but rather a conscious attempt to reproduce the memorized original faithfully. It is obvious that any orally transmitted poem is bound to become subject to various changes which are due mainly to the failure of human memory and the vulnerability of this manner of transmission. Yet a qualified transmitter will retain one version of any given poem which is fixed and seldom changes. The stability of a Nabaṭī poem is influenced by various factors, including its length, beauty, subject matter, public interest, and remoteness in space and time; notwithstanding these factors, however, in the minds of poet, transmitter and audience there always remains the conception of an inviolable entity which is *the* poem.

### *Applications of the Parry-Lord Theory to Ancient Arabic Poetry*

D. S. Margoliouth (1925) and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1926) were the first to challenge the traditional views of the ancient Arab philologists regarding the authenticity of Jāhilī (pre-Islamic) Arabic poetry. Through independent efforts and for different but sometimes parallel reasons, Margoliouth and Ḥusayn concluded that the corpus of Jāhilī poetry, which the philologists claimed to have collected from transmitters who received it from past generations, was largely forged. The swift response to the arguments of Margoliouth and Ḥusayn by both Arab and European scholars was effective in laying them to rest.<sup>3</sup> The forgery hypothesis was



largely abandoned and the issue was resolved in favor of the genuineness of Jāhili poetry and the general reliability of the ancient Arab philologists.

More recently, James Monroe (1972) and Michael Zwettler (1976, 1978) have put forth their own assumptions concerning the nature of Jāhili poetry, which again raise the question of its "authenticity," although in a somewhat different sense. Prompted by the work of Parry and Lord, Monroe and Zwettler concluded, through statistical analysis of texts and the mechanical application of the Parry-Lord methodology, that Jāhili poetry is oral-formulaic in the same way that Yugoslav and Homeric epic poetry are. Monroe—who entitles his article "Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry: The Problem of Authenticity"—proposes that the whole controversy concerning the authenticity and forgery of Jāhili poetry becomes irrelevant once it is realized that this poetry is oral-formulaic. After presenting a statistical survey of formulas in the first ten lines of four Jāhili poems, he concludes: "It follows that pre-Islamic poets, who were oral-formulaic artists, composed during the course of improvisation rather than relying upon memory" (1972:37). This means that the poetic corpus collected by the early Arab philologists, though not necessarily forged, cannot be, as the philologists assumed, the genuine production of Jāhili poets. For, in Monroe's view, the oral-formulaic process of composition and transmission obliges us to reject the traditional views of the philologists, who assumed that every poem they collected had an original version by an original composer (*ibid.*, 41).

Zwettler, for his part, confidently claims that in Jāhili poetry "the dual poetic operation of oral composition and oral transmission is a single act of oral rendition" (1976:199).<sup>4</sup> Later he asserts that "many—perhaps most—poems acquired named composers only considerably later than the time of their presumed composition or actual recording" (*ibid.*, 204). Thus he implicitly denies the importance of deliberation prior to composition and subsequent delivery, and of memorization both in the transmission of poems and in their correct attribution—all aspects of the poetic process to which Arab poets and philologists alike accorded great significance.

The conclusions of both Monroe and Zwettler are based on the assumption that any poetry which is delivered and transmitted orally is necessarily composed orally as well, and is oral-formulaic in the same way as the Yugoslav tradition described by Parry and Lord; and that the mere presence of formulaic expression (or any sort of phrase or even word which is frequently repeated in similar contexts or positions) or any degree of textual variation automatically support this conclusion.

In my opinion, an important methodological shortcoming in the work of Monroe and Zwettler is their failure to consider Nabaṭi poetry and

its relevance to the understanding of ancient Arabic poetry. They have thus missed a crucial lesson of the work of Parry and Lord, which is to study the closest living representative of an extinct poetic tradition in order to understand that tradition better. Just as the Yugoslav epic tradition could shed light on some questions relating to Homeric poetry, so Nabaṭi poetry can illuminate many of the problems that have arisen in connection with pre-Islamic poetry, more particularly since it is the direct inheritor and continuator of that tradition. It is surprising, therefore, that scholars who have speculated on the authenticity of Jāhili poetry, as well as on the manner of its composition, performance, and transmission, have not examined the contemporary oral poetry of Arabia in order to shed some light on these problems, since the formal and thematic relationship of the two traditions, as has been established in the previous chapters of this study, is readily apparent. Nabaṭi poetry fulfills the same sociopolitical function as its ancient predecessor, and Nabaṭi poets occupy the same social position and exercise the same influence as did the ancient poets. It would seem obvious, therefore, that questions relating to the composition, performance, and transmission of pre-Islamic poetry could best be answered by reference to its living continuator, Nabaṭi poetry, rather than to an alien tradition such as Yugoslav or Greek poetry—not least because the Arabic tradition is *not* an epic, but a lyric, tradition, and thus both the cultural and literary contexts of Arabic and Yugoslav poetry are quite different. The close relationship between ancient Arabic poetry and Nabaṭi poetry would lead one to the conclusion that the ancient poets, like Nabaṭi poets, composed slowly prior to performance and relied to a very considerable degree on memory for the propagation and preservation of their poems.

Moreover, Monroe and Zwettler fail to note that the social and political role of poetry in ancient Arabia distinguishes it from epic traditions like that of Yugoslavia. As R. A. Nicholson puts it, "Poetry is at once the promulgation and record of the moral ideals of ancient Arabia" (1969: 82). A poet was considered a tribal asset, and his tribesmen regarded him as "their guide in peace and champion in war" (*ibid.*, 63). In ancient Arabia, there was no legal code or religious sanction to enforce law and order. Poetry was the most effective means of encouraging conformity to proper and accepted standards of social behavior. The poet was the spokesman of his group, the custodian of its honor, and the guardian of its most cherished traditions. He was honored and respected, and he exercised unrivaled influence in his community. It was his duty to praise the worthy and castigate the villain. "By the use of carefully selected epithets," Gibb observes, "he unfolds to his audience a series of idealized portraits of tribal life, a scene of revel, or a desert thunderstorm; he extols his own bravery or defiantly proclaims the glorious deeds of his tribe

and the disgrace of its rivals or enemies; he sings the praises of his patron and lauds his generosity; in exultant tones he describes a battle or a successful raid; or he sums up the ethics of the desert in a vein of didactic pessimism" (1963:17–18). Outstanding men were praised and their deeds immortalized as evidence of tribal nobility and as examples to be emulated by later generations. Misers, cowards, the fraudulent, the treacherous, all those who failed to live up to the desert ideals, were ridiculed and derided by the poets, who warned others against mixing their blood with that of such people in marriage.

The poet defended his tribe against antagonist poets and reviled its enemies. Poets of hostile tribes taunted each other in poetic exchanges of boasts and satire—exchanges that were not necessarily conducted face to face; poetic challenges and responses were memorized and transmitted by travelers and migrating tribes who passed them on to others they met until they finally reached the person or tribe to whom they were addressed. It is obvious that such poems must be passed on substantially unchanged, for to respond in kind to an antagonist a poet must know exactly what the other poet said. Moreover, the effect of such boastful, eulogistic, and satiric poems depended on their wide distribution and survival over the years as testimony for or against the individuals or tribes mentioned in them.

Gibb sums up the role and function of pre-Islamic poetry as follows:

Among the pre-Islamic Arabs, words in themselves seem to have retained something of their ancient mystical and magical power; the man who, by skillful ordering of vivid imagery in taut, rightly nuanced phrases, could play upon the emotions of his hearers, was not merely lauded as an artist but venerated as the protector and guarantor of the honour of the tribe and a potent weapon against its enemies. Tribal contests were fought out as much, or more, in the taunts of their respective poets as on the field of battle, and so deeply rooted was the custom that even Muḥammad, although in general hostile to the influence of the poets, himself conformed to it in his later years at Madina.

In view of such a universal veneration of the poetic art, it is not after all surprising that the productions of the great *qaṣīd*-poets were handed down from generation to generation. It was, again, not merely that they set the linguistic and aesthetic standards which were to dominate almost all Arabic poetry (and much of its prose as well) down to the modern age; but they fulfilled also another function, by no means less important. Poetry, said the later philologists, was 'the *dīwān* of the Arabs'; it preserved the collective memory of the past, and so gave an element of continuity and

meaning to the otherwise fleeting and insubstantial realities of the present. In the two major themes of eulogy and satire the poets pressed home the moral antitheses and sanctions by which this collective existence was regulated and sustained. With relatively few exceptions, the pre-Islamic poets express, and even prescribe, a high standard of tribal morality, and noticeably avoid any reference to the humbler and ruder features of bedouin life and its environment. (1963:29–30)

In most epic traditions, the singer draws his material mainly from mythical, legendary, and pseudohistorical sources. The epic poet, moreover, usually attempts to reconstruct the history of a nation, or at least a significant portion of that history, and thus unifies his varied materials to that end. Ancient Arabic poetry, by contrast, is in the main a record of local events, tribal feuds, and actual episodes; it is oriented toward the individual and the tribe rather than the nation, which had in any case no meaning in Arabia at that time. Ancient Arabic poetry was called *dīwān al-ʿArab*, “the register of the Arabs,” because it was a repository of genealogical and historical knowledge handed down from generation to generation: “It is this historical character, even more than its high poetic interest, which gives its unique value to that which has survived to us of the compositions of the ancient Arab poets” (Lyall 1885:xv).

Unlike epic singers, who constitute a professional class of entertainers, the poets of ancient Arabia included tribal chiefs and heroes whose pronouncements were treated with the utmost respect and gravity. These poets of high status employed their poetry to achieve social and political ends, and presented their verses as serious statements and carefully contemplated utterances. A tribal hero felt no embarrassment at celebrating his chivalry and noble birth in boastful verses; this was, in a sense, his most gratifying reward for endangering his life in defense of his tribe and for dispensing his wealth in hospitality for the hungry and the wayfarer. The reputation of a poet was measured by the felicity and fidelity of his words. A boasting poet must live up to his claims and match his words to his actions, or else lay himself open to satire. By the same token, a panegyrist or a satirist must measure his praise or blame to the real virtues or vices of the subject. Thus accurate transmission was essential to convey the message—whether boast, praise, or blame—exactly as stated, and any alteration of the original poem would be considered highly undesirable. In the Arabian desert, praise and blame were institutions of social and moral control that had to be employed scrupulously lest they lose their effect.

In ancient Arabia, poetry was an integral part, if not the most important part, of daily life. Anything that touched human existence provided a proper topic for poetic composition, and the recitation of poetry required no special setting or occasion. However, an aspiring poet anxious to make a name for himself would most likely seek a public occasion when multitudes of people came together to exhibit his poetic skill. The poets of ancient Arabia took their compositions to annual fairs, such as that of ʿUkāz, to recite them before a large audience which included seasoned master poets who judged the poetry (al-Iṣfahānī 1868:IV, 35; VIII, 79–80, 194–195; IX, 163, 182–183; XIV, 41–42; XIX, 73–78).

Great fairs were held, the most famous being that of ʿUkāz, which lasted for twenty days. These fairs were in some sort the centre of old Arabian social, political, and literary life. It was the only occasion on which free and fearless intercourse was possible between the members of different clans.

Plenty of excitement was provided by poetical and oratorical displays—not by athletic sports, as in ancient Greece and modern England. Here rival poets declaimed their verses and submitted them to the judgement of an acknowledged master. Nowhere else had rising talents such an opportunity of gaining wide reputation: what ʿUkāz said to-day all Arabia would repeat to-morrow. (Nicholson 1969:135)

The poets who attended ʿUkāz or any of the regularly held annual fairs did not improvise, but recited poems that had been prepared well in advance and composed with extreme care and deliberation in order to impress the judges and the audience.

By examining the historical and sociopolitical role of ancient Arabic poetry, we can see that it is a tradition associated with a vested public interest, of the same type that Vansina describes (1961:42; *vide supra*); control over the recital of such a tradition is very exacting, so as to guarantee against distortion caused by failure of memory. Furthermore, as the Chadwicks observe (1940:III, 868), in a poetic tradition with great formal complexity, such as that of ancient Arabic poetry, strict memorization is the rule. The demanding rules of rhyme and meter in Arabic poetry make spontaneous composition in performance a highly difficult task; on the other hand, this strict prosody and the relative brevity of the Arabic poem make it much more reasonable to assume that prior composition and memorization are the norms, as is the case in most nonepic traditions. It is of interest now to turn to evidence from the ancient tradition itself, which is supportive of this conclusion.

*The Views of Ancient Arab Poets and Writers  
on Composition and Transmission*

In the following pages I shall present evidence from two independent sources—first, direct reports and firsthand observations recorded in ancient Arabic sources and, second, references in the poetry itself—to show that in ancient Arabia the composition of poetry was a slow and deliberate process which took place prior to and separate from performance and transmission. These two sources of evidence corroborate each other and provide us with a vista from which we can gain a better view not only of the native scholarship but also of the native perceptions, conceptions, and intuitions concerning poetic creation. The ancient poets were in the best position to tell us, through their verses, how their poems were composed, performed, and transmitted. The ancient Arab philologists, of course, were not so very remote in space and time from the ancient poetic tradition as we are today. The earlier among them were not only perceptive critics but, in fact, part of the general audience who interacted with that poetry and observed its performance in its proper social setting.

Although no one has written on Arabic poetry more than Arab authors, ancient and modern, it is unfortunate that the references cited by Monroe and Zwettler—at least those which they treat seriously—are predominantly Western, and that they fail to take sufficient account of the views of ancient Arab poets and writers on composition and transmission. Of medieval Arab authorities on poetry Monroe writes: “The idea that the poets of pre-Islamic times were illiterate is not a new one. Medieval Arab critics relied on oral transmission by Bedouin informants in writing down and collecting their poems. But although the orality of the transmission they were recording was quite obvious to them, their literate habits of mind blinded them to the significance of this fact, nor were they aware of the techniques of oral composition” (1972:10). Later in the same article he states: “Given the overwhelming importance of the formulaic technique for the production of oral poetry in Arabic, it is curious to note that, as far as I know, medieval Arab critics were not aware of it. This must be attributed to their literate habits of mind, nor should they be blamed for something about which not even modern scholars have been aware” (*ibid.*, 31). Monroe’s assumptions are echoed by Zwettler, who writes: “We have good reason . . . to revise substantially our idea of the early *rāwī* and of the manner of composition and transmission of early Arabic poetry. We have too long allowed our judgement in these matters to be swayed by the unintentionally biased reports of medieval literary scholars steeped in a bookish tradition and by our own literarily grounded biases and expectations” (1978:88).

Quite apart from the fact that these assumptions concerning the “literate habits of mind” of medieval Arab scholars—who were living in a society where *oral* habits of transmission with respect not only to literary but to other sorts of texts still prevailed, and where one of the standards of literary excellence was the effect of the work in *oral* performance—seemed derived from more contemporary “literarily grounded biases and expectations,” it is, to say the least, ungenerous of Monroe and Zwettler to characterize in this way and call “bookish” those ancient philologists who endured the hardships of the desert in order to collect poetry from its most authentic source, the nomadic reciters. More bookish are Monroe and Zwettler themselves, whose work is based on an analysis of text which they themselves consider unreliable, and on theoretical speculation based on material from totally different traditions, rather than on work in the field. The works of the ancient philologists were the result of firsthand observation of the ancient Arabic poetic tradition and familiarity with its sociocultural setting. Some traveled to the desert to collect poetry from the nomadic inheritors of the Jāhili poetic tradition, while others drew on the nomads who came to the towns of Basrah and Kufah for barter and various other purposes (Dhayf n.d.:148–149, 160–161; al-Asad 1966:155, 193–194, 482). The early philologists were also contemporary with early Islamic poets who continued to compose in the same language and in the same fashion as their Jāhili predecessors; thus they were dealing with a living tradition, and were not attempting to fit it into any preconceived theoretical mold.

Although these philologists sought to determine the exact attribution and exact original version of every poem they collected, they were aware of the vagaries of oral transmission. Ancient collections of pre- and early Islamic poetry abound in references to variants in addition to the lexical, genealogical, historical, geographical, and other relevant notes accompanying the poems. Moreover, the basic linguistic conservatism characteristic of Arab poets and philologists alike, and their commitment to the preservation of the language—which holds a near-sacred position in their view—and its literary monuments in their original form, provided additional incentive to record poems just as they were heard from their informants. Given the problems of oral transmission, this may well have been a contributing factor in the appearance of variant versions of the same text, since each investigator would record from each informant precisely what he heard; however, these same philologists were in general quite concerned with questions of authenticity and correct attribution. The failure of Monroe and Zwettler to take seriously the views of ancient Arab writers and to examine more carefully the ancient poetry itself (in more than a merely statistical fashion) constitutes a serious methodological flaw in their work.

Anyone familiar with the history, nature, and function of ancient Arabic poetry is aware that the poets composed their poems slowly and carefully. The ancient poets of Arabia had no exact parallel to the English verb *to compose*; instead, they referred to this creative process with such terms as *naqqāḥa*, *thaqqāfa*, *ḥakkaka*, *naẓama*, *ḥāka*, *tanakhkhala*, all of which signify the careful selection of words and polishing of verses. The sobriquets of many ancient poets allude to their careful method of composition: al-Muhalhil, “he who refines his poetry”; al-Muraqqish, “he who adorns his poetry”; al-Muḥabbir, “he who embroiders his poetry”; al-Muthaqqib, “he who ornaments his poetry”; al-Mutanakhkhil, “he who sieves his poetry.” Some pre-Islamic poets like Zuhayr, al-Ḥuṭayʿah, and al-Nābighah were called *‘abīd al-shiʿr*, “the slaves of poetry,” because they spent much time and effort in polishing their poems (al-Jāḥiẓ 1968:II, 12; Ibn Qutaybah 1966:I, 78; Ibn Rashīq 1963:I, 133). The poems of Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā are called *al-ḥawlīyāt* (the annuals) because it would take him a whole year to compose one poem (al-Jāḥiẓ 1968:II, 12; Ibn Qutaybah 1966:I, 78; Ibn Jinnī 1952:I, 324; Ibn Rashīq 1963:I, 129). When al-Ḥuṭayʿah was asked to give his opinion of poetry, he said, “*khayr al-shiʿr al-ḥawlī al-munaqqah al-muḥakkak*,” “the best poetry is the polished and refined poetry which is composed over a long period of time” (Ibn Qutaybah 1966:I, 78; al-Jāḥiẓ 1968:I, 13). A lengthy anecdote about al-Ḥuṭayʿah, which is recorded in several ancient sources, closes with his describing to his audience his method of composition: “I lie on my back, put one leg over the other, and growl after rhymes like a thirsty young camel,” “*fa-ḥasbuka wa-llāhi bi ʿinda raghbatin aw raghbatin idha rafaʿtu ihdā rijlayya ʿalā al-ukhrā thumma ʿawaytu ʿuwāʿa al-faṣīl fī ithri al-qawāfiʿ*” (Ibn Qutaybah 1966:I, 144,326; al-Iṣfahānī 1868:II, 47). In *al-Aghānī*, we read that it took Labīd a whole night to compose a short poem, which he delivered the next morning at the court of al-Nuʿmān, the king of Hirah. Labīd stayed up all night riding a camel saddle, biting it and kicking it (al-Iṣfahānī 1868:XIV, 94–95).

Ancient Arabic sources on the lives and works of early Islamic poets, who continued the oral poetic tradition of their pre-Islamic predecessors, provide direct evidence that these poets approached poetic creation as a difficult and serious labor. The famous poet al-Farazdaq once said, “I am the most eminent poet of Tamīm [tribe]; yet there come times when I feel that the pulling of a tooth would be easier for me than composing just one verse” (Ibn Qutaybah 1966:I, 81; al-Iṣfahānī 1868:XIX, 36). When composition became difficult for him, al-Farazdaq would mount his camel and ride alone through the valleys and mountains (Ibn Rashīq 1963:I, 207). His contemporary, Kuthayyir, preferred to ride in green pastures and deserted encampments when composing (ibid., 206; Ibn



Qutaybah 1966:I, 79). Al-Aḥwaṣ, another early Islamic poet, would seek solitude on the ledge of a lofty escarpment (*ibid.*).

In his famous book *al-Aghānī*, an indispensable source for every student of classical Arabic poetry, Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, a literary historian who died in A.D. 967, discourses in detail on the lives and works of all prominent pre- and early Islamic poets and provides well-documented anecdotes which are highly relevant to the proper understanding of poetic composition in ancient Arabia. Combined with poetic testimonies, these anecdotes, more than tenuous formulas, give us solid evidence on how ancient poets went about composing. The following story concerning Jarīr is recorded by al-Iṣfahānī and translated by Nicholson.

There was a poet of repute, well known by the name of Rá'í ʿl-ibil (Camel-herd), who loudly published his opinion that Farazdaq was superior to Jarīr, although the latter had lauded his tribe, the Banú Numayr, whereas Farazdaq had made verses against them. One day Jarīr met him and expostulated with him but got no reply. Rá'í was riding a mule and was accompanied by his son, Jandal, who said to his father: "Why do you halt before this dog of the Banú Kulayb, as though you had anything to hope or fear from him?" At the same time he gave the mule a lash with his whip. The animal started violently and kicked Jarīr, who was standing by, so that his cap fell to the ground. Rá'í took no heed and went on his way. Jarīr picked up the cap, brushed it, and replaced it on his head. Then exclaimed in verse:—

*"O Jandal! what will say Numayr of you  
When my dishonouring shaft has pierced thy sire?"*

He returned home full of indignation, and after the evening prayer, having called for a jar of date-wine and a lamp, he set about his work. An old woman in the house heard him muttering, and mounted the stairs to see what ailed him. She found him crawling naked on his bed, by reason of that which was within him; so she ran down, crying "He is mad," and described what she had seen to the people of the house. "Get thee gone," they said, "we know what he is at." By daybreak Jarīr had composed a satire of eighty verses against the Banú Numayr. When he finished the poem, he shouted triumphantly, "*Allah Akbar!*" and rode away to the place where he expected to find Rá'í ʿl-ibil and Farazdaq and their friends. He did not salute Rá'í but immediately began to recite. While he was speaking Farazdaq and Rá'í bowed their heads, and the rest

of the company sat listening in silent mortification. When Jarír uttered the final words—

*“Cast down thine eyes for shame! for thou art of  
Numayr—no peer of Ka’b nor yet Kiláb”*—

Rá‘í rose and hastened to his lodging as fast as his mule could carry him. “Saddle! Saddle!” he cried to his comrades; “you cannot stay here longer, Jarír has disgraced you all.” They left Bašra without delay to rejoin their tribe, who bitterly reproached Rá‘í for the ignominy which he had brought upon Numayr; and hundreds of years afterwards his name was still a byword among his people. (Nicholson 1969:245–246)

Another anecdote concerning Jarír— who, along with his rivals al-Farazdaq and al-Akḥṭal, were the most eminent poets of their age—is related by ‘Ubayd Allāh, the *rāwī* (transmitter) of Jarír and al-Farazdaq.

One day al-Farazdaq summoned me and said to me, “I have composed a line of poetry, and [since I am convinced that it is matchless] I have vowed to divorce my wife, al-Nawwar, should Ibn al-Marāghah [i.e., Jarír]<sup>5</sup> come up with a retort to it.” I asked, “What did you say?” [He recited:] “I shall descend upon you [Jarír] and annihilate you like death, surely you cannot escape death.— Journey to him with this line!”

So I travelled to al-Yamāmah and found Jarír in his courtyard, playing in the sand. I told him: “al-Farazdaq has composed a line of poetry; and he has sworn on pain of divorcing al-Nawwar that you could not respond to it.” —“Surely his wife will be soon divorced! What is the line? Woe to thee!” After I recited the line to him, he started rolling in the dust and throwing it on his head and chest, till nearly sunset; then he said, “I am the father of Ḥarzah.<sup>6</sup> The wife of the rascal shall be divorced.” He came up with this line: “I am Time which nothing can destroy; Time defies death and endures forever.—Journey to the scoundrel [with this line]!”

I went to al-Farazdaq and recited the line to him, and told him all that Jarír had told me. He said to me, “I beg you to keep this incident secret” [thus conceding that he had lost but not wishing to divorce his wife]. (al-Iṣfahānī 1868:XIX, 32)

Another story concerning al-Farazdaq is related on the authority of a tribesman from Quraysh. Al-Farazdaq and the poet Kuthayyir were seated in the mosque at Medina when a strange youth entered and inquired

roughly which was al-Farazdaq. When asked to explain his rude behavior, he answered that he was from the tribe of Banū al-Anṣār and that he wished to challenge al-Farazdaq's claim to poetic eminence by reciting verses by the poet Ḥassān Ibn Thābit, and then allowing al-Farazdaq a year in which to match them. After he recited the poem and left, al-Farazdaq arose in confusion and left the group, which remained discussing the excellence of the poem. On the following day, they reassembled in the same place, and were wondering what had become of al-Farazdaq when he appeared and sat down in the same place.

He inquired, "What became of the Anṣārī lad?" We responded by railing at the lad and heaping curses upon him. Al-Farazdaq said, "May God's wrath descend upon him; not in my whole life have I been afflicted with the like of him, and I have never heard more beautiful verses than those he recited. When I left you yesterday, I went to my house and started going up and down in every path of poetry, but I could not say one verse; it was as if I had never composed poetry before. I stayed up all night in this state, until I heard the call for the dawn prayer; then I saddled my camel, grasped its halter, rode it to the valley of Dhubāb and cried as loudly as I could, 'Help your brother, O Abū Lubnā!'" Then my breast began to stir like a boiling cauldron. I tethered my camel, laid my head on my arm, and did not rise until I had composed a poem of one hundred and thirteen verses."

Just as he began to recite the poem, the Anṣārī youth appeared and came toward us. After saluting us he said [to al-Farazdaq], "I do not mean to rush you and I do not expect anything from you prior to the deadline I gave you; but whenever I see you I shall ask you what you have done." Al-Farazdaq replied, "Be seated," and recited [his poem] to him. When he finished, the Anṣārī lad rose and left downcast.

After the youth had gone, his father and several other tribesmen of al-Anṣār came and apologized for his audacious behavior and begged al-Farazdaq not to visit his satires upon their tribe, which he agreed not to do (al-*Iṣfahānī* 1868:VIII, 193–194; XIX, 38–39).

A final anecdote from *al-Aghānī* concerns al-Akhṭal when he was at the court of the early Umayyad caliph 'Abdalmalik Ibn Marwān.

Al-Akhṭal said to 'Abdalmalik, "O Commander of the Faithful, Ibn al-Marāghah [Jarīr] claims that he can finish composing a panegyric in your honor in three days; whereas it took me a whole year to finish [a certain] panegyric which I composed in your

honor . . . and I am still not satisfied with it.” ‘Abdalmalik said, “Let us hear it, Akhṭal.” Al-Akhṭal began to recite the poem, and ‘Abdalmalik began to swell with pride. At the end he said, “Bravo, Akhṭal; do you wish me to write to the corners of the earth saying that you are the most eminent poet of the Arabs?” “No,” said al-Akhṭal; “your word suffices me.” ‘Abdalmalik rewarded him with a bowl full of coins and robes of honor. A servant of ‘Abdalmalik took al-Akhṭal to a public place, crying: “Here is the poet of the Commander of the Faithful; here is the most eminent poet of the Arabs!” (al-Iṣfahānī 1868:VII, 172–173)

In addition to the complexity of rhyme and meter in Arabic poetry, which would make it impossible to compose a poem of moderate length on the spot, the poet, even before starting to compose, might need some time to collect relevant information to include in his poem, especially if it happened to be satirical or panegyric. Ḥassān Ibn Thābit, the poet of the prophet Muḥammad, who composed poems in defense of the prophet and satirized his enemies, the people of Mecca, gathered his genealogical information from Abū Bakr, who was considered an authority on such genealogies (al-Asad 1966:209). Jarīr and al-Farazdaq were famous for seeking out historical and genealogical facts to include in their poems (ibid., 227). It is related that, when ‘Umar ibn Laja’ al-Taymī arrived in Basra, al-Farazdaq and his *rāwī* (transmitter), Ibn Mattawayh, went to see him. Al-Farazdaq said to Ibn Laja’, “Oh Abū Hafṣ, my cousin Shabbah Ibn ‘Uqāl wrote to me that the poets of the Banū Ja’far tribe had defamed him in their poetry, and he could not answer them; he asked for my help; but I do not know how to disgrace them because I do not know their defects and blemishes.” ‘Umar replied, “I know a great deal about them. I have pitched my tent amongst their tents, I have accompanied them in their migrations, I have been with them at their summer camps and deep in the desert.” Al-Farazdaq called for someone to bring a piece of paper and caused the information to be written down for him, and used it in a subsequent poem (ibid., 228).

The anecdotes illustrating the seriousness with which the poets approached composition are supplemented by evidence from the poetry itself. Although the ancient poets were apparently not as preoccupied with the poetic process as are Nabaṭī poets, we sometimes come across lines describing the difficulty and slow pace of composition.<sup>8</sup> Ancient authors such as al-Jāḥiẓ (1968:II, 6–13), Ibn Qutaybah (1966:I, 78–81), and Ibn Jinnī (1952:I, 324) give detailed discussions of this matter, with ample illustrations.<sup>9</sup>

Transmission is another aspect of ancient Arabic poetry that distinguishes it from epic poetry. In Arabic poetry, composition and transmis-

sion are two distinct fields of specialization. In most cases, the compositions of a poet (*shā'ir*) were recited and spread not so much by the poet himself as by his transmitter (*rāwī*) (Nicholson 1969:131–134; Gibb 1968:19–21). In reality, transmission was a diffuse activity in that anyone might know a few poems or a few lines of poetry,<sup>10</sup> but some individuals who were endowed with prodigious memories and exceptional gifts of delivery made names for themselves as transmitters. Transmission and composition were not, however, mutually exclusive activities. A poet could very well be the transmitter of the work of an older poet, who was most likely his relative or kinsman.

In their application of the oral-formulaic theory to classical Arabic poetry, Monroe and Zwettler disagree as to the significance of the distinction between *shā'ir* and *rāwī*. Monroe concedes that “the tradition of the *rāwī* points in the direction of memorization” (1972:41); Zwettler, however, chooses to blur this distinction by thinking of the *rāwī* as primarily the apprentice of the *shā'ir*: “The similarity is self-evident between what we know about the activity of the early *rāwī*, his ‘apprenticeship’ to an older poet within the tribe, and his own emergence as an accomplished poet in his own right, and between Lord’s description of the training of an oral poet” (1978:87).

When we examine the etymology of the word *rāwī* we find nothing to suggest that the *rāwī* was the poet’s apprentice. In its original sense, the word *rāwī* with its various derivatives refers to the act of carrying water on a camel in large containers made of skin from the water source to the camp. Metaphorically its meaning was extended to signify one who carries in his memory poetry from the poet (the source) to the audience. It is true that many an ancient Arabian poet was also a transmitter; yet some outstanding transmitters were bad poets or could not compose at all. A good poet would, of course, know a great deal about poetry and poets in general, but he would always keep his own compositions separate from those of other poets which he had stored in his memory. Thus, the fact that the same person might be both a poet and a transmitter does not contradict the fact that in ancient Arabia composition and transmission were two independent activities, and that memorization played a crucial role in the latter.<sup>11</sup>

As a matter of fact, it was considered a mark of poetic genius to compose elegant and memorable verses to be memorized and spread by the transmitters. When al-Farazdaq was asked why he preferred to compose short poems, he answered, “Because I have found that they stick longer in the memories of men and spread wider in the assemblies,” “*li-annī ra'aytuhā fī 'ṣ-ṣudūri athbat wa-fī 'l-mahāḥḥīli ajwal*” (al-Iṣḥānī 1868:XIX, 33). To a similar question, al-Ḥuṭay'ah answered, “Because they are absorbed easier by the ears and they stick longer in the mouths

of transmitters,” *“li-annahā fī ’l-adhāni awlaj wa-fī afwāhi ’r-ruwāti a’laq”* (ibid.). It was al-Ḥuṭay’ah who coined the famous phrase, *“waylun li- sh-shi’ri min ruwāti ’s-sū”*, “Woe to poetry [which is spread] by bad transmitters,” which indicates that poets were quite annoyed by bad transmitters whose memories did not serve them well and who mangled verses and distorted poems.

As the following excerpts show (the first from a poem by al-Muzarrid and the second from one by al-Musayyab Ibn ‘Alas, both translated by Lyall), poets would boast that their verses would spread fast and wide through camps and watering places and would be sung by night travelers and caravans.

(58) I warrant to him with whom I contend that my words shall be so striking that the night-traveller shall sing them as he fares along, and the caravans be urged forward by them on their road;

(59) Well remembered are they, cast forth with multitudes to bear them about: their sound is gone forth in full sunshine into every land;

(60) They are repeated again and again, and only increase in brilliancy, when the diligent lips of men test my verse by repetition.

(61) And he whom I attack with a couplet, it sticks to him and is conspicuous like a mole on his face—and there is nothing that can wash out a mole!

(62) Thus is my requital for the gifts men bring; and if I speak, the sea is not exhausted, nor is my voice hoarse with too much use. (Lyall 1918:II, 61)

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(15) So shall I surely bring as an offering, on the wings of the winds, an ode of mine that shall pass into every land, until it reaches al-Qa’qā’;

(16) It shall come down to the watering-places, ever as something fresh and new, and it shall be quoted as a proverb among men, and sung by the singers. (Ibid., 31)

In the following lines, Ḥamīd Ibn Thawr pictures himself in a vast plain singing out his verses to multitudes of eager transmitters who relish them, and singers who sing over and over:

- 1 *la-a’tariḍan bi-’s-sabli thumma la-aḥḍuwan // qaṣā’ida fihā li’l-ma’ādhiri zājiru.*
- 2 *qaṣā’ida tastahli ’r-ruwātu nashīduhā // wa-yalhū bihā min lā’ibi ’l-ḥayyi sāmīru.*

Once a poet composed and publicized his poem and it was spread widely by transmitters, he no longer had control over its circulation, and could neither change any part of it nor deny its attribution to him. In the following lines, ʿAmīrah Ibn Juʿal expresses his regrets for having defamed his tribe in his poetry; but now it is too late to apologize, since his verses have already been imprinted on the lips of reciters: it is as impossible for him to take back his words as it is to put milk back into the udder.

- 1 *nadimtu ʿala shatmi ʿl-ʿashīrati baʿdamā // maḍat wa-ʿstatabbat li-ʿr-ruwāti madhāhibuh.*
- 2 *fa-aṣbaḥtu la astīʿu daʿan limā maḍā // kamā lā yaruddu ʿd-darra fī ʿd-ḍarʿi ḥālibuh.*

Jarīr describes how his verses travel swiftly on the lips of reciters to strike his poetic rivals and shed their blood like the sharp edge of a fine sword which quivers in the hand of an expert fighter:

- 1 *wa-ʿāwin ʿawā min ḡhayri shayʿin ramaytuhu // bi-qāfiyatīn an-fadhtuhā taḡṭuru ʿdi-damā.*
- 2 *kharūjin bi-afwāhi ʿr-ruwāti ka-annahā // qara hunduwānīyin idhā huzza ṣammama.*

In another excerpt, Jarīr is addressed by al-Farazdaq, who asks him, “How can you eradicate the satirical verses I have composed against you, which have been spread by reciters from Oman to Egypt?”

- 1 *taḡhannā yā jarīru li-ḡhayri shayʿin // wa-qad dhahaba ʿl-qaṣāʿidu li-ʿr-ruwāti.*
- 2 *fa-kayfa taruddu mā bi-ʿumāni minhā // wa-mā bi-jibali miṣra mushahharāti.*

Such verses clearly show that poets took pride in the fact that their verses were memorized, spread widely, and passed on from one generation to the next. Even after a poem became popular among reciters, it remained the property of its original composer, and it would be considered a theft if a reciter were to claim another poet’s work as his own. This provides further evidence that in ancient Arabia, composition and transmission were viewed as two separate and independent activities. An aspiring poet might begin his career as a *rāwī*, but once he acquired sufficient compositional skills he would compose his own poems bearing his own name. For example, al-Farazdaq was the transmitter of the poetry of

Imru' al-Qays, but he also made a name for himself as a great poet; al-Ḥuṭay'ah was the transmitter of Zuhayr, as well as being himself a poet of great repute.

Such evidence from ancient sources clearly shows that the poets of ancient Arabia approached the composition of poems seriously and deliberately, that they spent considerable time and effort revising and polishing their poems before considering them worthy of delivery, and that it was common practice for a poet to entrust his poems to a transmitter for memorization and publication. This refutes the view that composition and performance were the same event; although there are examples of spontaneously composed poems, these were generally quite brief, and more lengthy compositions were preceded by much thought and deliberation. Moreover, even spontaneously composed verses would subsequently be entrusted to transmitters who were responsible for both their correct attribution and transmission, which demonstrates that composition and transmission were separate activities and that the latter relied heavily on memory. All of this is paralleled by the Nabaṭi poetic tradition which we have already described at length; and investigation of this tradition would surely assist in clearing up some of the misconceptions that exist concerning the oral nature of Jāhilī poetry.

### *Conclusion*

To say that ancient Arabic poetry is not oral-formulaic according to the criteria of Parry and Lord as applied by Monroe and Zwettler is not to deny either its orality or its verbal and thematic conventionality. With regard to the latter, the statement made about Nabaṭi poetry in the introduction to chapter 2 is equally applicable to ancient Arabic poetry insofar as it too is a reflection of a conventional world view, an articulation of collective sentiments, a register of recurring events, and, in short, the product of a traditional society in which all art forms and cultural artifacts are highly conventionalized. As regards verbal formulas, they do indeed appear with high frequency in ancient Arabic—as in Nabaṭi—poetry; but they do not function in the same way as they do in Yugoslav epic poetry, nor are they as abundant. The two poetic traditions, as has been discussed above, are quite different in form, social function, performance context, and modes of composition and transmission.

There is no doubt that, in ancient Arabic poetry, formulas do, to a certain extent, serve a generative function in poetic production; but this function is not primarily to make possible spontaneous composition during performance. Sometimes formulas aid in speeding up composition if the poet has had very little time to prepare his poem before its delivery; and even when the occasion of delivery is not so pressing, an oral poet



who does not have recourse to writing down his verses as he composes them cannot allow a long time to elapse between the composition of individual verses lest he forget the opening of his poem before coming to its end. In such cases conventional formulaic language is used to speed up composition as well as to mark the different sections of the poem. Formulas also facilitate memorization, hence enhancing the transmission of the poem in an oral society, and they also serve to fill gaps created by occasional lapses of memory by reciters as the poem travels in time and space.

But the most important function of formulas is not generative but stylistic. As Monroe himself has observed (without fully analyzing the reasons for this), “the most common formulas appear in the earlier parts of the poem” (1972:26); they function to inform the audience—in a context of oral *delivery*—what to expect, what *kind* of poem they are going to hear, what the poetic context is, and obviate the necessity of establishing the latter in lengthy introductory verses. For example, a formula such as *li-man ṭalalun*, “whose are the traces?” (see *ibid.*, 1972:29) immediately alerts the audience to the fact that, in the imaginative context of the poem, the poet and his friends have halted in the course of a desert journey to contemplate the ruined encampment of the tribe of the poet’s beloved, and that he will continue by lamenting the pains of separation and perhaps recount episodes of love from the past. In other words, the formula provides important generic and thematic clues to the members of the audience, who, in the context of oral delivery, receive the poem in a strictly linear fashion, but are nevertheless enabled to anticipate what will follow. Such formulas were retained even when the poetry came to be written down more and more, first of all because delivery remained primarily oral even though transmission might be through writing, and second, because of the highly conventional character of Arabic poetry throughout its development. The occurrence of formulas thus reflects the traditional nature of ancient Arabic poetry, the orality of which continued to be a pronounced feature because poems continued to be read or recited aloud; silent reading—as was the case in Western literary traditions as well—was a habit acquired very late in the development of the tradition, and was never of great importance.

In short, although in ancient Arabic poetry formulas have a significant function in performance, this function is different from that of formulas in epic poetry. In the ancient Arabic tradition, a poem’s aesthetic quality was measured by its overall impact on a wide audience, its function as a record of, and model for, collective action and individual conduct, and its utility as a cognitive chart to organize the social and physical universe. Given these functions, striving for creativity and originality as they are understood in modern literary traditions has no meaning, and would

(even if considered possible or desirable) encumber the poetic message and comprise the role of the poet as a voice of public opinion. Each poet must, it is true, develop his own individual style; yet he must not depart too much from established conventions lest he alienate himself from his audience. Formulaic expressions are artistic conventions and stylistic devices that serve to alert the audience to the thematic movement of the poem and establish the necessary rapport and feeling of familiarity that attract the audience to the poem without jeopardizing its individual quality. It is therefore necessary to reevaluate such terms as *orality* and *formulaic* in order to understand their true importance and function in the Arabic poetic tradition as a whole; and the study of Nabaṭi poetry as the continuator of the classical tradition plays an important role in the achievement of this goal.