Because beginnings are difficult, once the right one is found; it becomes a mark, a sign, a contract, a convention. Not just an action, a beginning is more than anything a consciousness.¹ The beginning of a poem is particularly daunting. It is the transition from silence to poetry, from the search to the journey. For it is the finding of direction² and a trust in what will ensue. This is a trust both on the part of the speaker/writer and the listener/reader—a signaling and an understanding. This connection that is initiated with language, with the absent other, with the self, and with the world, is the beginning. Poets in all traditions have sought out, chased after, waited for, and celebrated the beginnings of writing. Pablo Neruda’s famous poem “Poetry” describes the arrival of the poetic voice, the mysterious summoning that is the beginning of poetry:

Something knocked in my soul,  
fever or forgotten wings,  
and I made my own way,  
deciphering  
that fire,  
and I wrote the first, faint line,  
faint, without substance, pure nonsense,  
pure wisdom  
of someone who knows nothing;  
and suddenly I saw  
the heavens  
unfastened  
and open,  
planets,  
palpitating plantations,  
the darkness perforated,

² Ibid., 48.
riddled
with arrows, fire, and flowers,
The overpowering night, the universe …³

Walt Whitman in “Beginning of My Studies” rejoices in the beginning so much that he hesitates to move away from it:

… The first step, I say, aw’d me and pleas’d me so much,
I have never gone, and never wish’d to go, any farther,
But stop and loiter all my life, to sing it in extatic songs.⁴

The opening of the monumental Arabic qaṣīdah (the nasīb, the elegiac prelude) is such a powerful beginning that it has imposed itself on almost all Arabic poetic utterances from pre-Islamic times until today. The persistence of the conventional opening of the qaṣīdah is as haunting as the presence of the qaṣīdah itself in the Arabic poetic landscape. Poems were still beginning with a nasīb even at the turn of the twentieth century. We still see many traces of it in modern Arabic poetry. Co-opted, varied, or transformed, the nasīb, the flirtation with memory and loss, has become the mark of poetry in Arabic.

The qaṣīdah is a monumental⁵ structure, an outstanding identification or mark of what it is to be Arab. It presents to us the original landscape, geographical, psychological, linguistic, and emotional among other things. It has served as the primary field of reference for all Arabic poetry. It is the enduring edifice with which Arab poets even today have to negotiate a relationship or a truce before they move forward. However, it is intriguing that this monumental structure is always erected upon ruins. This journey through the Arabic linguistic and symbolic landscape is always launched from the site of abandonment and desolation. The classical Arabic qaṣīdah always begins with the

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “monument” as a structure, edifice, or site of historical interest or importance. It is an enduring, memorable, outstanding, or imposing example of some quality or attribute. A monument can also be an important or classic work of literature, especially an outstanding survival of an early literature (like the Arabic qaṣīdah). The word also has two obsolete meanings: a piece of information given in writing or a written document or record (of law). A monument, the OED entry continues, is a thing that serves as a mark or identification. See “monument,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press.