FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY QAŠĪDAS

Thoughts on the Development of Classical Arabic Poetry

The difference between the formal ode (qašīda) and the occasional piece of poetry (qit‘a) seems to have been already fairly well established in Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Despite the complex nature of the problem created in the main by the orality of transmission, if not, in some cases, of composition, and despite the fact that in many instances we cannot be absolutely sure that what has come down to us as a qit‘a was not originally a part of a qašīda, it can be said, with all due caution of course, that stylistically there is a discernible difference between these two types of poetic composition. Apart from its obvious freedom from the relative external structural rigour of the qašīda, the occasional poem is generally marked by the simplicity of its language. Indeed there must be a necessary correlation between the formality and ritual-like quality of the qašīda and the pomp and grandeur of its language, the recondite and hieratic nature of its diction. Imru’ al-Qays’ elegies on his father or ancestors⁠¹ are composed in a language considerably simpler than that of his mu‘allaqa or his Umm Jundub qašīda.⁠² Likewise, the language of Labid’s elegies on his half brother Arbad⁠³ is much simpler than that of his mu‘allaqa.

This simplicity of language is not just a feature of elegies, although among the most striking instances of it are understandably elegies such as al-Muhalhil’s on his brother Kulayb or those of al-Khansâ’ on her brother Sakhr, since elegies tend to be closer to spontaneous and direct utterances of grief. The simplicity is to be found in other types of poetic expression, as in ‘Adiy b. Zayd’s plaintive verse which he composed in jail or Labid’s well known lines on his old age,⁴ or in the ‘religious’ pieces attributed to Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt. It is not that all qašīda poetry is free from direct expression rendered in simple language. Examples that come readily to mind are al-

A‘shā’s description of wine, even though it is embedded in a longer work of panegyric, or the much quoted poem by Yashkuriy al-Munakkal, or parts of ‘Amr b. Kulthūm’s mu‘allaqa, particularly the latter part dealing with the more urgent theme of his recent humiliation and vengeance in the court of ‘Amr b. Hind, in which characteristically the language becomes more spontaneous and direct with the result that this whole section sounds less stylized than the rest of the poem and comes closer to the nature of a qit‘a. (Is it mere coincidence that al-Tibrizī omits this whole section from his edition of the poem?) Nevertheless, I think that our generalization regarding the greater simplicity of the occasional piece remains valid.

Given this distinction between the qasīda and the occasional poem it is not surprising that the major developments in Arabic poetry during the Islamic period/periods should be more easily noticeable in the qit‘a than in the qasīda. Yet it would be wrong to assume that later attempts to produce qasīdas did not involve some changes in the nature and scope of the qasīda. The Pre-Islamic qasīda was a natural product of a heroic way of life, a tribal desert society with its own ethos and values. It was created to celebrate these values, and by its ritualistic function to enable the Arab of those far-off days to face issues of life and death in an environment that was usually harsh. As is well-known, the poet had an important social function to fulfil, namely to sing the praises of his tribe, defend its honour and attack its enemies. Few societies, in fact, accorded their poets the acclaim and respect which, according to tradition (which was admittedly of a later origin), were given to the Pre-Islamic Arab poet. One recent scholar gave his chapter on Pre-Islamic poetry the appropriate title ‘The Poet as Hero’. We may, therefore, usefully designate the Pre-Islamic qasīda as Primary Qasīda, to distinguish it from the type of qasīda composed in later Islamic times to which we can give the name Secondary Qasīda. The terms Primary and Secondary were once used by C.S. Lewis in his book A Preface to Paradise Lost, in connection with his study of the epic, the Primary Epic such as Homer’s and the Secondary Epic of poets like Milton.

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7 See Sharīb al-Qasī’d al-‘Ashr, al-Tibrizī (Cairo 1352 A.H.), p. 251, where the poem ends.