THE ABSTRACTED SELF IN ARABIC POETRY

'I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together'

John Lennon

Whatever must be accepted from new insights in the nature of collective and oral composition, and the concomitant shakiness of the status of 'the poet', there can be no doubt that the poet himself, or rather his 'lyrical I' is very much present in classical Arabic poems. In almost every poem, and certainly every nasib, the poet speaks himself, or about himself, or even to himself; although his persona usually speaks in a somewhat impersonal way.—I hasten to make the necessary distinction between, on the one hand, the personae in the poem (the Poet, the Beloved, the Companions, the Mamduh and others), and, on the other, the persons in the situational context of the poem (the poet, the beloved, the mamduh, or whoever).

Several scholars have studied this poetic voice and the way the poet sees himself in the world. I only mention Von Grunebaum's *Wirklichkeitsweite* of 1937, which contains a long chapter entitled 'Das Ich und seine menschliche Beziehungsfähigkeit',¹ and more recently Jaroslav Stetkevych’s ‘The Arabic Lyrical Phenomenon in Context’ of 1975.²

There is one small thing about the poet’s persona that has often been observed, to which I would like to draw attention once more: it is the fact that the poets very regularly and often confusingly do not only speak for themselves but to and about themselves as well. In itself, this is not typical of Arabic poetry; I suppose that poets have addressed themselves in any literature. For instance, in western literature we find, according to Curtius from late antiquity onwards, poets invoking themselves or their own souls instead of the Muses.³ Shakespeare addresses his 'Pour soul, the centre of my sinful earth'; Yeats wrote ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’. But early Arabic poetry is distinguished by the frequency of its occurrence as well as by the sudden shifts. A shift, for instance, from second to first person singular in consecutive lines is extremely common, and not rarely one poem contains an erratic sequence of several of these shifts. For example, Imra’ al-Qays's *mu‘allaqa* begins in the first person

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² JAL, 6 (1975) 57-77.
(wuqāfan bihā ṣaḥbī ʿalayya maṭīyyahum), turns to the second (ka-daʾbika min ʿummi ʾl-ḥuwayrīth), back to the first (fa-ṣādat dumūʿu ʾl-ʿaynī minnī), and the second (alā rubba yāwmin ṣāliḥīn laka) and finally settles for the first (from wa-yawma ʿaqartu il-ʿadhārā maṭīyyātī onwards).

At the outset, a word of warning against overrating the importance of this phenomenon may not be amiss. After all, it belongs to the surface of the literary work and does not necessarily and faithfully reflect distinctions on a deeper level, in perspective—that is, through whose eyes the world is represented—and in voice—that is, whose expressions are used and how reliable these are. But surfaces do count in literature. With this in mind I can think of several questions to ask: What is the origin of the phenomenon? What is its function or effect? In which contexts and in which periods does it mainly occur? and What has been said about it by ancient or modern critics?

To start with the last: I do not know of any extensive modern discussion of the subject, although it has often been mentioned in passing, as by Lyall, who remarks ‘in these amatory preludes the poet frequently speaks of himself in the third person ... and also addresses himself in the second person’.4 Reckendorf had something more to say, for apart from giving a number of examples he offered an interpretation by saying: ‘In Gedichten ist der scheinbare Personenwechsel oft bloss ein Dialog des Dichters mit seinen Freunden.... Auch reden die Freunde über den Dichter bald in der 2., bald in der 3. Person’.5 This view is adopted by Bloch, who suggests that its origin might be sought in the ancient antiphonic chant of the caravan, ‘alten Wechselgesängen der Karwanreiter’.6 I do not believe this to be correct; but of course one cannot leave the ‘companions’ out of the picture, especially since their origin is not wholly clear.7

The ancient Arabic critics dealt with the phenomenon, as far as I am aware, in three connections. First, it is mentioned (and hardly more than that) in chapters on ʿibtidāʾ, the beginning of poems. For it could be confusing, even embarrassing, if the addressee of a panegyric ode took the words of the poet to be addressed to him. A number of these unfortunate blunders became notorious, such as Dhuʾl-Rumma’s line ‘Why is it that your eye is always dripping with water, as if it were running from split