THE METAPHYSICAL 'UMAR?*

There is a received view of 'Umar b. Abī Rabī'ah as a poet that may be conveniently represented in the words of von Grunebaum:

He completely dropped the conventional melancholy attitude and exchanged the impersonal pattern of the nasīb for small and characteristic pictures of his own experiences. These he presented with extraordinary grace and in charming and comparatively simple language, frequently inserting vivid dialogues.¹

A certain amount of his poetry does indeed conform with this view, and, as might be expected, this is the poetry that is best known. It is instantly attractive and it is to a high degree innovative; it presents relatively few linguistic problems, although it is not always easy to decide on the precise significance of a given line or to determine the register of a passage of direct speech. It is also noticeable that there are distinct roughnesses in his technique. He disregards gender and number to a degree not obvious in Jāhili poetry; his syntax is often distorted by metrical exigencies. Sometimes we find the most blatant padding and sometimes a succinctness that borders on obscurity.

One aspect of this received view, namely that his poetry is essentially autobiographical, and that the anecdotes attached to the poems reflect reality rather than a fictional context designed to account for their composition, appears to be tentatively questioned by Salma Jayyusi:

He had modelled himself on the womanizing Imru’ al-Qays, but transcended him by an absolute concentration on his role and by a more light-hearted attitude.²

‘Umar is certainly, to some extent at least, playing a ‘role’. He is most conscious of Imru’ al-Qays. Not only does he assume many of the traits

of the poetic persona projected by the latter, but he also imitates and
develops the conversational parts of his poems, as well as borrowing,
alluding to and playing with—perhaps parodying—much else from him.\textsuperscript{3}

It is this persona in ʿUmar that gives rise to the idea that he is basically
light-hearted. However, it is not the only persona adopted by him. Con-
trary to popular belief, he sometimes displays an apparent melancholy
that would not be out of place in ʿUdhri poetry; in fact, there are many
poems attributed to him that are not readily distinguishable in mood
from those of, for instance, Jamīl Buthaynah.

It is noteworthy that many of the shorter poems in ʿUmar’s diwān are
rather trite, light-weight, conventional pieces, of no great merit. It might
almost be said that it is difficult to account for their having been com-
posed; certainly, one can hardly think of them as attributable to any par-
ticular occasion. The simplest solution, it seems to us, is to regard them
as songs.\textsuperscript{4}

One type of poem, of which two examples are found among the poetry
attributed to ʿUmar, is unprecedented, to our knowledge, in this period.
These two poems prefigure certain characteristics of Abbasid poetry.
They display a self-consciously ‘literary’ mannerism, distinct, on the one
hand, from the ‘literariness’ of reworking or parodying Jāhili conven-
tions, and, on the other, from the kind of sophistication evident in the
dialogue poetry. They are short poems, in the form of epistles, with the
first line constituting the address. This is a conceit deriving from the fre-
cquent references to the risālah and rasūl that play such an important part
in the poet’s amorous commerce.

I. [Schwarz, no. 428, Cairo, no. 428, Beirut, p. 389]

1. \texttt{min ʿašiqīn ʿabbīn yusirru l-hawā}
   \texttt{qad shaffahu l-wajdu ilā Kalthami}

2. \texttt{raʿaṭīn ʿaynī fa-daʿānī l-hawā}
   \texttt{ilayki li-l-hayni wa-lam aʿlami}

3. \texttt{qatalānā ya ḥabbadhā antumū}
   \texttt{fi ghayrī mā jurmin wa-lā maʿthāmī}

4. \texttt{wa-l-Lāhu qad anzala fi wahyihi}
   \texttt{mubāyyīnān fī āyati l-muḥkāmī}

5. \texttt{man yaqtuli l-nafṣa ka-dhā zālimān}
   \texttt{wa-lam yuqidha nafṣahu yaziṣāmu}

\textsuperscript{3} Compare, for example, \textit{Dīwān Imruʾ al-Qays}, ed. Muḥammad Abū ʿl-Faḍl Ibrāhīm,
Cairo 1964, no. 2 and Schwarz, no. 1, Cairo, no. 1, Beirut p. 120.

\textsuperscript{4} See, for example, Schwarz, nos. 88, 190, 194, 256; Cairo, nos. 88, 190, 194, 256;
Beirut pp. 361, 319, 324, 53.