

‘ANTARAH IBN SHADDĀD

DID POETRY DIE?

TRANSLATED BY JAMES E. MONTGOMERY WITH RICHARD SIEBURTH

‘Antarah ibn Shaddād lived in the second half of the sixth century (CE), on the eve of the advent of Islam. The greatest warrior of pre-Islamic Arabia, the black outcast son of Shaddād, a free-born Arab father, and Zabibah, an Ethiopian slave mother, ‘Antarah was doomed to the life of a slave in the highlands of Najd, in what is today Saudi Arabia. The story goes that it was on the field of battle, when he single-handedly defended the tribe from a surprise attack, that ‘Antarah won his father’s recognition and his freedom.

‘Antarah was a poet as well as a warrior and a small corpus of poetry attributed to him was written down in Iraq in the early ninth century. This is his most famous poem, one of a collection of the canonical poems of pre-Islamic Arabia known as the *Mu‘allaqāt*, “the Suspended or Hanging Poems.” Legend has it that these poems were so called because they were inscribed on fabric and “suspended” from the walls of the Kaaba. The original meaning of the word was probably “Choice or Precious Odes.”

‘Antarah’s *Mu‘allaqah* is a complex work in which its poet’s crazed war-lust and psychotic bellicosity plays itself out in radically paratactic fashion against a background of his hunt for ‘Ablah, the unattainable woman who is the object of his obsessions. Grotesquery abounds and the ode is driven by a manic energy. Many pre-Islamic odes engage in a conversation, whether with the poet’s beloved, his patron, his tribe, or his opponents. ‘Antarah’s ode is not in conversation with ‘Ablah, as we might first suspect, but with Death, who, with its avatars (the hyenas and vultures), arrives at the end of the poem like a god in response to a prayer. Through its presence in the world and in the poem, Death, the ultimate absence, sanctifies the poet’s worshipful act of killing and the soundscape in which he piously chants its majesty. In the end, the exultant savagery to which the ode gives voice wreaks havoc on all but its own stridency, as ultimately meaning is found only in Death, and in the poetry that sings of it.

–J.E.M.

DID POETRY DIE?

Did poetry die in its war with the poets?¹
 Is this where 'Ablah walked? Think!
The ruins were deaf—denied reply,
 then shouted out in a foreign tongue.²
My camel tried to withdraw—
 I couldn't move,
ranting at the charred stones.
 "Speak. Live. Prosper.
Here in Jiwā' 'Ablah dwelled,
 a timid gazelle, doe eyes,
sweet smile, soft neck."
 I reined in my camel, big as a fort—
I needed to weep, needed the shame.
 'Ablah lived in Jiwā',
our people in Ḥazn, Ṣammān, and Mutathallam.³
 Rise, desolate traces, from dust,
now that 'Ablah's gone
 too far for a lover to chase.
The pursuit's too hard, Bint Makhram.⁴
 By chance we came together
as I battled your tribe.
 By God, this is no idle boast.
You seized my heart,
 make no mistake
about my love—
 with your people in 'Unayzatān,
ours in Ghaylam, how can I come?
 Did you decide to leave?
The night was black, your camels
 readied. I shuddered at the sight
of pack camels by the tents,
 chewing khimkhim⁵, and forty-two
dark milch-camels,

their sheen like a raven's wing.
 Then a sudden light, a flash
 of teeth sweet to mouth and tongue.
 I'm caught—the thought
 of this young fawn and her tender stare,⁶
 her scent wafting before her smile,
 sprung from a merchant's musk pouch⁷
 or strong Adhri'āt wine
 which foreign kings like to age,
 or from a rain-soaked field of flowers
 known to few beasts of the wild,
 where showers have been kind
 and pools glint like silver coins
 in downpours from the clouds—
 evenings when water flows unchecked
 and the lone hopper, look,
 screeches its drunken song
 scraping out a tune
 leg on leg like a one-arm man
 bent over a firestick.
 By day and dark she lies on her pillow.
 My nights I pass in the saddle
 of a black horse, bridled,
 its leg strong, flank round, girth lean.

Can I reach her on a shadanī camel⁸
 her teats snipped, cursed to be dry?
 She's a high-stepper, tail still twitching
 after a long night's ride,
 feet like mallets as though
 I were smashing stones and hills
 on the back of a dock-ear, pinch-toe
 ostrich dashing to his flock
 as Yemenis rush to a stuttering stranger,⁹
 sprinting to his nest in Dhū l-'Ushayrah¹⁰

his crown like a cover draped
 over bier posts held high,
tiny head and thin neck
 a dock-eared slave wrapped in furs.

My camel drinks at Duḥruḍān and sprints
 from Daylam's wells with a mad stare¹¹
swaggering to and fro, groaning
 as if fleeing a cat strapped
to her right flank, against whose claw
 and fang she wheels in a rage.¹²
At the ride's end, she looms, massive
 as a fortress, kneeling at Ridā's well
long legs like hoarse bass horns¹³
 sweat oozing from her neck like syrup
or the tar blacksmiths boil for pots—
 an angry, noble tail-switcher
bulky, big as a bite-scarred stud.

Turn away, if you wish, 'Ablah.
 Hide behind your veil!
I crush knights in armor and mail.
 Praise me for what you know me to be—
easy when not wronged
 but when wronged, savage in wrath
bitter as a desert gourd.
 After the midday heat I drink
good wine from a streaked yellow glass
 strained from a gleaming jug
held fast in my left hand,
 paid for with minted gold.
I squander all I have on drink—
 keeping my honor whole.
Sober again, I'm still lavish
 'Ablah, as you know.

With quick thrust of my pliant spear
I felled a decent man
his jugular hissing, split like a harelip,¹⁴
spurting ‘andam resin red.¹⁵
‘Ablah, Daughter of Mālik, ask
the riders if you want to hear
how I live in my horse’s saddle
swimming through troops
exposed to spear thrusts
wound after wound
charging the great harvest of bows.
The riders will tell you—
I enter the fray
then decline the spoils.

I gave the iron-mail warrior
relentless, feared by his foes
a swift thrust with my war-tested spear
straight and true.
A gash opened, wide as a bucket
the thud a signal
to hungry hyenas—
nobles like this are fair game.
My spear mucked him up.
He didn’t look so fancy
lying there, a feast for night predators
ripping him head to wrist.¹⁶

Next came the standard-bearer
that fierce champion—
My sword split
the ripples of his mail!
He was nimble
gambling in winter

and blamed for his largesse
 with the year's stock of wine¹⁷—
a hero born for battle
 sarḥah-tree tall¹⁸
an only child¹⁹
 in soft leather boots.
He saw me charging and bared
 his teeth without a smile.
I speared him and finished him off
 with a keen, hard Indian blade.²⁰
That morning his chest and head lay
 dyed dark in indigo.

Why, my doe, is it lawful for others
 to hunt you, but not for me?²¹
I said to my slave girl, "Go!
 Find out what you can."
Her news: "Your enemy's distracted.
 The freeborn doe is yours for the taking—
a snub-nosed gazelle offering
 her tender neck."

'Amr, I hear, didn't like my gift—
 ingratitude blights the soul.
When battered by waves of war
 heroes do not gripe,
their teeth aglint in a grimace
 as the fighters grunt
in a sea of battlerage.
 I heeded my uncle's counsel.
The soldiers used me as a shield
 against lances—
even sore pressed, I wouldn't flinch.
 The army was on the march.

I wheeled and charged—
 true to my code.
“Antar!” they roared—
 spears taut as wellropes
pierced my black steed’s chest.
 Again I battered them, and then
again. My horse, its withers and chest
 robed in blood, withdrew
from the spearclash,
 grumbling softly
—if he could speak
 he’d have grumbled more—
as the steeds
 and giant mares
scowled and sank
 in the soft soil
and the knights shouted
 “Ho ‘Antar, Onward!”
And how it healed my soul.

My camels go where I wish.
 My heart and will comply.
You think you know why I’ve been unable
 to visit you, ‘Ablah
with Baghīd²² barring the way with spears
 petty warmongers, picking a fight?
I wheeled my bloodied colt.
 The knights cowered
behind Ḥidhyam’s sons.²³

I feared I’d die before war’s mill²⁴
 could grind ḌamḌam’s sons to dust.
Unprovoked, they vowed revenge
 and stained my honor.

There's still time for them to act!

I killed their father—
carrion for gimpy hyenas
and grizzled vultures!

ENDNOTES

1 My rendering of this famous opening hemistich may seem unusual to those familiar with the standard renderings such as Arberry's "Have the poets left a single spot for a patch to be sewn?" (*The Seven Odes*, 179). The pre-modern commentators and lexicographers focus on *mutaraddamī*, a hapax in the corpus of 'Antarah and in the anthology of the five other pre-Islamic poets to which 'Antarah's poetry belongs. The line is then construed in terms of the meaning ascribed to this rare and obscure epithet and in terms of the unexpressed substantive the epithet is presumed to qualify. The missing substantive is implicitly and invariably taken to be *shī'r*, "poetry." Thus, al-Shantamarī (d. 476/1083) glosses the half-line as follows: "The phrase *min mutaraddamī* has the sense of 'I patched (*radamtu*) the thing,' i.e., I fixed it and repaired its weaknesses." He then explains the hemistich as follows: "What he means is, 'Have the poets left any theme (*ma'nā*) for anyone that they have not already used?' This resembles the phrase, 'Has the first person left anything for the second person <to do>?'" This is corroborated by the variant ascribed to Abū 'Ubaydah (d. 209/824-25): *mutarannimī*, i.e., "trilled, or modulated <presumably chant, or verse>." My reading of the line seeks to give full weight to the verb *ghādara*, and harmonize it with its two other occurrences in the corpus of 'Antarah's poetry and with the meaning it carries in the wider corpus of pre-Islamic poets, where the verb invariably means "to leave an opponent lying dead, and unburied, on the battlefield." This raises several possible interpretations. If the sense of the hapax *mutaraddamī* is that of being patched up or sewn together, then in the context of the verb *ghādara*, it could mean "a piece of cloth that requires patching up as a result of the thrust of my spear and slash of my sword." The trope of a weapon spoiling an opponent's fine clothing is found in line 56 of our poem, for example ("My spear mucked him up.//He didn't look so fancy//lying there."). The lexica also note that the root *r-d-m* can be applied to the protracted nature of a conflict or illness or fever. The example given is *taraddamat al-khuṣūmah*, "the conflict became long-lasting, protracted." In this case, the meaning would then be something along the lines of: "Did the poets leave <poetry>, which had persisted so long <like a conflict or hostility or fever>, dead and unburied on the battlefield." I find the grotesquery of my reading of the line much in keeping with similar instances of the grotesque and crazed bellicosity I hear in the rest of this magnificent poem.

2 Both of these first two verses begin, unusually, with a double instance of a technique (known as *tarṣīf* in Arabic) encountered in the opening verses of many poems, whereby the first hemistich of the verse closes with a repetition of the rhyme of the ode (in this case, *mutaraddamī*—*tawahhumī* and *yatakallamī*—*al-a'jamī*, respectively). Some scholars have

construed this as a sign that line 1 is a later addition to the poem, which would then have originally started with the current line 2. The *Mu‘allaqah* (the “Suspended Ode”) of Zuhayr is a companion piece (known in Arabic as a *mu‘araḍah*) to this poem. Zuhayr’s ode is a panegyric in honor of the chieftain who brought peace to the warring clans of ‘Abs and Dhubyān and thus brought to an end the conflict (known as the War of Dāḥis and al-Ghabrā’) that nearly annihilated ‘Antarah’s clan and its wider tribal group. For example, both poems share the same rhyme consonant, though they do not share the same meter, and there are resemblances between ‘Antarah line 1b and Zuhayr line 4b, and ‘Antarah line 7b and Zuhayr line 1b. See Arberry, *Seven Odes*, 170–71.

3 The topography in line 7 and in line 12 is geographically precise, however polysemous the names in the ode may be. Larcher, “Fragments d’une poétique arabe,” argues that the toponyms and proper nouns that are scattered throughout the poem contribute to the poem’s linguistic and semantic polyvalence.

4 That the beloved has four names in this poem—‘Ablah, Umm al-Haytham (i.e., Daughter of Makhram), Bint Makhram, and Bint Mālik (i.e., Daughter of Mālik) (line 49)—is a sign of the poem’s instability. Most pre-Islamic poems attribute only one name to the object of the poet’s desire.

5 *Khimkhim* was a non-stinging nettle (*Forsskaolea tenacissima*), dried and used as camel fodder. The name is variously given: it is also written as *khumkhum*, *ḥimḥim*, and *ḥumḥum*.

6 The fawn described in this line is said not to have a twin. This is balanced by the same claim made for the hero felled by ‘Antarah in line 60 (“an only child”).

7 Musk heralds the presence of the divine.

8 A *shadanī* camel was one bred in Shadan in Tihāmah, the western littoral of Arabia.

9 The “Yemenis” who “rush to a stuttering stranger” are usually taken to be Yemeni camels, though the phraseology is also used elsewhere by ‘Antarah of a “troop” of raiding horsemen.

10 Ostriches live in groups of about fifty birds, led by an alpha female. They lay their eggs in a nest dump, tended diurnally by the female (which is dust-colored) and nocturnally by the male (which is black and white). They do this to take full advantage of the camouflage offered by their different plumage coloration. The Arabian ostrich (*Struthio camelus syriacus*) was declared extinct in 1966.

11 The commentators explain that “Daylam” is the mountainous region of northern Iran on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. Presumably an alternative local toponym has been masked.

12 The origins of the image may lie in the practice of conveying cheetahs by camel to

the hunt. See Montgomery, “The Cat and the Camel.”

13 A difficult verse. The groans made by the camel as she kneels to drink are compared with the bass notes of the *qaṣab*, properly a reed fife or pipe, and not a horn. One commentator proposes that the poet is describing the sounds of the camel drinking from the water.

14 This line is fully, “<the air from> his jugular hissing like <breath from> the lip of a hare-lipped camel.”

15 ‘*Andam* was a red tree resin or plant dye used by women to color their hands.

16 One commentator suggests that the monorhyme constrains the poet to say “wrist” (*al-miṣamī*) rather than “toe,” though the bottom half of the slain warrior may be clad in full-length chain mail, thus preventing unhindered access to the scavengers.

17 There are two distinct heroic virtues intoned here: excessive generosity at the communal game of chance, when camels were slaughtered to feed the tribe in winter and times of famine (known in Arabic as *maysir*); and excessive generosity with and consumption of alcohol.

18 *Sarḥah* here means a large tree, in what is a poetic usage, as the word *sarḥah* generally designates the plant *meru* (*Maerua crassifolia*) or the shrub *Cadaba farinosa*.

19 The reference to leather boots does not mean that the poet’s opponent is soft, but rather that he is rich and so has never wanted for anything or gone hungry: in other words, he is at full strength. The remark that he is an only child (properly, “he does not have a twin”) has the same force. The commentaries suggest that having a twin makes a person weak.

20 The curved Indian blade (*hindī*, *hunduwānī*, and, as here, *muhannad*) is distinct from the straight Yemeni blade (*yamānī*).

21 In other words, the object of the poet’s obsession, ‘Ablah, is both a wild animal in a sacred demesne (*ḥimā*), and so cannot be hunted, and a woman promised as bride to another.

22 Baghīḍ was an ancestor of ‘Antarah’s clan, ‘Abs, and their kinsfolk Fazārah (a clan within the larger group of Dhubyān), foes in the War of Dāḥis and al-Ghabrā’.

23 The Arabic specifies “the two sons” of both Ḥidhyam and Ḍamḍam, in the next verse.

24 The pre-Islamic poets often think of war as a mill-stone that moves on its pivot and grinds combatants to death. Some seem also to have viewed the cosmos as such a mill, i.e., as a universe of war.

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--J.E.M.