VII

PERFORMANCE

Written transmission may be the most certain method to ensure the survival of a poem in its original form for an indefinite period of time, but in other respects it is deficient in comparison to oral transmission. There is a crucial difference between a static written text and the dynamic recitation of a Nabaṭi poem. To the uninitiated, a Nabaṭi poem on the written or printed page is baffling, especially since the Arabic script, though quite adequate for writing literary Arabic, is not quite suitable for writing vernacular Arabic. A person who is not familiar with Nabaṭi poetry is likely to read the written text of a Nabaṭi poem as if it were written in literary—not vernacular—Arabic. As a result of this misreading, and consequent mispronunciation, the verses of the poem become unintelligible and unmetrical. The reader's distress is compounded by the fact that published anthologies rarely provide the exegetical remarks and background information necessary to comprehend this poetry, and many of these anthologies are produced carelessly with abundant typographical errors. In the oral process, however, where every instance of transmission is a living performance governed by a dynamic interaction between the reciter and the audience, the salient features of the poem—rhythm, diction, and rhetorical eloquence—are maintained and preserved.

The Performance Context

Before discussing the performance context of Nabaṭi poetry, it is pertinent to stress once more its important social function and the serious attitude with which it is viewed by the native audience. Just as the form and content of Nabaṭi poetry are governed by culturally circumscribed aesthetic conventions, the poetry itself exercises unrivaled influence on the culture and society of Arabia; this is especially true of premodern times. People quote Nabaṭi verses and compose them on all occasions, and they listen to poetry not merely to be entertained but, more importantly, to be edified and uplifted. Indeed, the popular attitude to poetry in Arabia is very serious. In addition to the names *šiʿir*, *giṣīd*, and *gāf*,

poetic verses are also called *amṯāl* or *miṯāyil* (exempla, guiding principles, parables, allegories). Poetry is held in high esteem, and it is said to provide (the best guide for discerning men) *al-amṯāl l-ar-rjāl ad-ḏhana xyār ad-dalāyil,* since it provides them with a system of values and a model for ideal conduct. Poetry is also called the "driving stick" of men (*al-giṣīd misāʿīb ar-rjāl*), because it spurs them to act with manliness in defense of their tribal honor and communal interests.

We have already observed in previous chapters how Nabaṭi poetry played an active role in the political affairs of premodern Arabia. On the whole, and especially among the nomads, poetry was viewed as a vehicle for social and political action over and above being a source of amusement, and its composition and transmission were a public responsibility and obligation. In the desert, every tribesman considered it his duty to memorize and propagate verses that glorified his tribe and recounted the deeds of its heroes. Of course, there were active and passive bearers of poetry; but the poetic tradition was considered a public record and a public trust, which each generation passed on to the next to nurture and cherish. It contained historical and genealogical information recorded in rich poetic language that gave it meaning and permanence and made its recitation an eagerly anticipated, emotionally charged experience.

There is no special time or setting for reciting Nabaṭi poetry. Whenever men gather together, they are likely to engage in such activity. When a poet begins to recite, silence reigns over the assembly and strict attention is paid to the message contained in the poem. Wilfred Thesiger, who lived for some time with the desert Arabs, wrote that "they find it an almost unendurable hardship to keep silent. Yet that evening when someone started to recite poetry, a hush fell over the camp, broken only by the sound of pounding as they crushed *saf* leaves which they had gathered in the wadi, before plaiting the fibre into rope. One after the other they gathered round, silent except when they repeated the final line of each verse" (1959:72).

Before he begins to recite, the poet clears his throat as a signal to the audience to lend him their ears. Then he proceeds to declaim his poem in a loud, full voice, repeating the choicest lines and pausing slightly after some of the lines to give the audience time to savor his words and ponder their meaning. All the verses in one poem end with the same rhyming syllable. To express their appreciation, members of the audience pick up this final rhyming syllable in unison with the poet: ". . . the kassād recites, and it is a pleasant adulation of the friendly audience to take up his last words in every couplet" (Doughty 1921:I, 306). After a verse of particularly appealing content, the audience expresses its approval by shouting "*hū ṣāžž*" ("That is the truth!"). To interfere with the poet or interrupt his recitation is a serious offense. The famous poet Mḥammad al-ʿŌnī

would stop reciting and leave an assembly if he noticed the slightest sign of lack of interest among his listeners (Ibn Khamīs 1958:13).

A Nabaṭi poem that is composed to celebrate a specific event does not give a detailed account of that event, but only makes allusions and cryptic references to it. To illuminate these allusions and put the poem in its proper social and historical context, the reciter provides his listeners with a prose narrative (*sālfih*) outlining the occasion (*mnāsibih*) on which the poem was composed or explaining the motives for its composition. When the poet recites his poem for the first time, the introductory narrative may not be necessary, because the listeners themselves are likely to be well informed about, or active participants in, the events with which the poem deals—the poem may even be addressed to them or to one of them. The more remote the poem becomes in space and time, the more urgent becomes the need for commentary and background information, which is spun into a narrative of flexible structure.

Generally speaking, poetic recitation alternates with prose narration dealing with the lives of various poets and the events celebrated in their poetry. The wording of the poetry is fixed, but the prose narrative is discursive and loosely structured. It usually consists of several episodes which the poet spins together as he goes along with no predetermined order. There is no established sequence in which the episodes must follow one another; even chronological sequence may not be observed. Once the narration begins, it can be developed in any of several directions. An individual narrator may have his own loosely arranged version of a narrative episode, but no two narrators will have identical versions; even a version by the same narrator will exhibit verbal and stylistic divergences from one performance to the next. The listeners contribute to the shaping of the narrative and to some extent direct its development by asking for missing details and by injecting comments and expressions of approval or disapproval. Audience participation in developing the narrative contributes further to the divergence of one version from another. This divergence is made even more pronounced when the narrators are partisans of different characters in the narrative.

The narrative associated with a particular poem is called its *sālfih* (pl. *sawālif*). The noun *sālfih* is dereived from the verb *salaf*, which means to have happened in the past, because the *sālfih* deals with historical events and biographical or social circumstances connected with the immediate or remote past. The telling of *sawālif* and the recitation of poetry are termed the "discourse of real men" (*kalām ar-rjāl*) because only discerning men can grasp their deeper significance, and because the poems deal with the actions of noble men and heroes, which are mainly the domain of adult males, just as folktales (*sibāḥīn*) are the domain of women and children. Although there are accomplished poetesses, and

poets whose poetic genius flowers at an early age, the women and children are generally passive but eager and attentive audience whose minds are molded by the poems and narratives recited by men.

The most favored time for telling *sawālif* and reciting poetry is at night, when the men gather around the hearth in the tent of a gallant nomad or in the coffee-chamber of a noble citizen. Behind the hearth sits the host, who is continually busy with the fire and the preparation of coffee, and is usually assisted by another person who sits to his left to hand him wood for the fire, and pound the cardamom and roasted coffee beans for him. A young man, usually the son of the host, stands up with the coffee pot in his left hand and small china cups in his right, pouring coffee for the assembled guests. The guests sit on the floor forming two lines facing each other. Important guests sit closest to the hearth—the more important, the closer. The guest of honor sits right next to the host on his right. Uninvited guests and men of lower rank sit at the end, by the door, near the outside, where guests remove and leave their shoes. (To indicate the low status of a man, one says, "So-and-so sits near the shoes.") Such guests rarely participate in the conversation, and they are the last to be served coffee. The conversation is concentrated around the fire-hearth. The flickering blaze, the smell of roasted coffee beans and crushed cardamom, the rhythmic pounding of the mortar, the rattling of the china cups, and the affability of the host infuse the atmosphere with a spirit of congeniality and comradeship. In a nomadic tent, this assembly of men is separated from the women by only a thin curtain. The wife or daughter of an important chief will feel confident enough to shout her comments and remarks from behind the curtain. The conversation round the coffee-hearth may begin in a desultory fashion, with short moments of silence alternating with tumultuous moments when almost everyone is talking at the same time. New guests may arrive, occasioning the rising of the assembly to greet newcomers and rearrange the seating, whereby each newcomer is given a seat according to his rank.

At the beginning of the evening the conversation is restricted to a discussion of mundane and frivolous matters and to the exchange of greetings and pleasantries with newcomers. But as the evening goes on, the conversation becomes more structured and elevated. The transition may be gradual, or it may be abrupt. After a few rounds of coffee, and after all the important men have been introduced to one another and have chatted for a while, there is a sudden lull in the conversation, followed by a moment of silence. Then, the host or one of the senior guests near the hearth asks a question such as: "By the way, which of you, honored men of this assembly, knows the poem composed by so-and-so on such-and-such occasion?" This prompts one of the guests to recite the poem and the occasion which led to its composition. This recitation

may be followed by a discussion of the historical accuracy and artistic merit of the poem. If another poet has composed a response to the first poem, then that poetic response may also be recited by whoever knows it. From there, the discussion may drift to which tribe has the best poets, or who is the poet most esteemed by the people and whose verses are the most appealing. Such questions can split the assembly into different factions which engage in a lively discussion interspersed with choice poetic examples. The conversation may focus on the artistry and beauty of poetry, or it may focus on poetry as the catalyst of noble actions. If a poet happens to be in the group, he will most likely contribute the most to the conversation, reciting not only his own poetry but also that of others. As it grows later in the evening, two or three men dominate the conversation, bouncing words between them like balls and passing the conversation gently from one to another in an orchestrated manner. Only an unpolished churl would talk when it is not his turn, or talk about irrelevant and trivial matters, thus tossing the conversational ball (*yašgil*) out of the field.

People compose and recite poetry all year round, but in the summer there is always an extraordinary flurry of poetic activity. In the rainy season, the farmers are busy plowing their fields and sowing their seed, while the nomads split up and disperse in the desert. Hence there are very few social activities. Summer, however, is the time of reunion when the various lineages congregate at their tribal wells and when the nomads and settlers come together to renew their social and economic relationships. Communication between these groups becomes very intense, and visitation very frequent. The nomads go to visit their friends in the settlements, and settled men go to visit the bedouin camps. Settled poets and nomads arrange for meetings to exchange newly composed and newly acquired poems, and to engage in friendly poetic competitions. Town amirs and bedouin chiefs call upon each other to drink coffee and talk about tribal raids and their own adventures. They recite the poems that they or some other poets may have composed on these occasions. For these men, the composition and recitation of poetry and the spinning of narratives are ways to review and synthesize the events of the past and to conceive future plans. Poetic correspondence between tribal poets and tribal chiefs increases in the summer when each tribe camps for ninety days at one particular spot. By the end of the summer, the nomads break up their camps to go back into the desert. The settled poets lament the departure of the nomads, and the nomadic tribes lament the dispersal of the tribe and the separation of friends and lovers.

The performance context which I have just described is disappearing rapidly. It has already been noted in an earlier chapter that the recent socioeconomic and political changes in Arabia have severely curtailed

the social role of Nabaṭi poetry and constrained its function. Interest in Nabaṭi poetry is on the wane, and the number of active bearers of the tradition is becoming ever smaller. Furthermore, radio and television, along with phonographic and tape recording machines, which have reached even the bedouin tents in the desert, have usurped or radically altered the traditional public roles of composers and reciters of Nabaṭi poetry. But in some measure these modern innovations are also contributing to the proper preservation of Nabaṭi poetry. The utility of the tape recorder in this respect cannot be overemphasized. A recorded tape of Nabaṭi poetry is in many ways superior to a printed anthology (inasmuch as oral transmission is superior to written transmission), especially if the poetry is recorded by the poet himself or by a qualified and competent transmitter. In a sense, such a recorded tape is a slice of reality. On it one can capture a fleeting instance of a living performance to enjoy, play over and over again, and reflect upon at leisure. Even more interesting is the videotape, on which one can capture the kinetic and visual, as well as the aural, aspects of the performance. The University of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, realizing the importance of Nabaṭi poetry and the potentials of the videotape, has for the last two years been sponsoring an annual three-day festival of poetry, with all aspects of the festival recorded on videotape and deposited in the university archives.

The traditional setting for poetic recitation and performance has in recent years gradually become replaced by special programs on Nabaṭi poetry which are broadcast on a weekly basis from the radio and television stations in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. Monitoring of these programs is a must for anyone interested in Nabaṭi poetry. The programs are very popular among certain segments of the population, and there is usually a close rapport between the program and those who tune in to it. Listeners frequently write the host of the program requesting to hear a certain poet or a certain poem, or asking about the correct version or correct attribution of a particular poem. Some even write to dispute or correct the wording, the attribution, or the occasion of a poem that they heard recited on a previous program. Usually, the hosts of these programs are illiterate or semi-illiterate, with no training whatsoever in public broadcasting, but with those unique abilities which are essential for the success of the program. They are authorities on Nabaṭi poetry who have wide knowledge about and connections with Nabaṭi poets, and some are accomplished poets in their own right.

Production of the above-mentioned programs is quite simple. On a particular day of the week at a certain time, poets and transmitters come to a designated studio in the radio or television station to be recorded for a small compensation (the radio program *Min al-Bādiyah* broadcast

from Riyadh pays 100 Saudi riyals for an original composition and 50 riyals to a transmitter reciting the composition of someone else). After recording, the tape is edited for broadcasting. To add a touch of spontaneity to these programs, the host will usually chitchat with the contributors, and the contributors are also allowed to talk with one another informally, as they would under normal circumstances. The setting of one program, *Maḍārib al-Bādiyah,* which is broadcast by the television station in Jidda, is a large tent completely furnished with rugs and pillows and a fire-hearth with all the necessary utensils for making coffee and tea. The host of the program sits by the hearth, while the contributors sit on the floor and line themselves up as they would in a coffee-chamber or a bedouin tent. The program is interspersed with the showing of various scenes from the desert, such as camel herds and droves of sheep grazing in lush desert pastures, or nomads drawing water from deep wells for their thirsty animals. Despite the formal and somewhat artificial setting of these programs, there are occasions when the recording session turns into a truly authentic, living performance, as is illustrated by the following selection which I recorded in the fall of 1978 from the archives of the radio station in Riyadh.

A Poem and Its Narrative by Riḍa Ibn Ṭārif aš-Šammari

The following poem and narrative are told in the voice of the poet himself. Riḍa Ibn Ṭārif aš-Šammari is a good example of the oral poet of the desert who not only composes poetry but also has many poems and historical anecdotes stored in his memory. He is a nomad with a distinctive Shammari accent and a resonant declamatory voice. He is a gifted raconteur of anecdotes and narratives.

In this recorded example Riḍa, prior to reciting one of his poems, relates the events that led to its composition. He has fallen in love with a bedouin lady who expresses her willingness to marry him. But when he sends a messenger to confirm her pledge of marriage, the messenger instead asks for her hand for himself. This leads to complications and misunderstandings; in the end, however, the treacherous messenger is found out. Riḍa and the lady make up, but by now it is time to break up summer camp and disperse into the desert; thus the marriage is postponed.

The recounting of narrative and poem takes up about fourteen minutes of recording time. The prose narrative employs a diction no less polished and a style no less refined than those of the poem. Although both narrative and poem deal with an actual event, each is cast in a traditional style and each constitutes an attempt to comprehend on a general level the

impact of tribal migration on individual lives. In that sense, narrative and poem give us an ethnographic portrayal of desert life cast in artistic form.

The difficulty of translating the poem and narrative is compounded by the no less problematic task of transforming a dynamic oral performance into a static written text. The dramatic changes of voice quality and intonation leave no traces on the written text. Unlike the poem, which is composed and memorized prior to delivery, the narrative is composed as it is performed. This is not to say that Riḍa is inventing fictitious episodes. Rather, he is arranging real-life events into a narrative sequence and making sure that the audience is following. Therefore, flashbacks, background information, exegetical remarks, clarifications, graphic details, hesitations, and repetitions are superimposed upon the narrative thread and interwoven with it.

Riḍa addresses his words to Brāhīm al-Yūsif (Abu Yūsif), the host of the radio program *Min al-Bādiyah,* knowing well that he will be heard by the many people who tune in to this popular program. The active participation of Brāhīm adds further complexity to the linear development of the prose narrative. Brāhīm and Riḍa exchange traditional expressions of courtesy which do not really contribute to the story, but which are expected in this situation since they serve to establish rapport between the narrator and the audience. Brāhīm often tries to direct the flow and wording of this recorded version of the narrative, not only because he has heard the story before and wishes to make this version conform to the one he heard previously, but because its traditional format makes it possible to anticipate what is coming next. Moreover, the active participation of an interlocutor is one of the constitutive elements in determining the structure of this type of narrative. Brāhīm interjects comments and expressions of support and encouragement and asks for missing details. At times he becomes so involved that he assumes the character and role of the poet and acts as his voice, and there are occasions when he literally puts words into Riḍa's mouth. By so doing, Brāhīm is acting as a truly interested and genuinely involved audience.

As a result of these conditions, which are characteristic of oral performance, the prose narrative as it is written down may appear somewhat loose in structure and hard to follow. The reader is advised to keep pretending, while reading the text, that he is not looking at it but listening to it—to imagine Riḍa delivering the narrative orally and addressing his words to Brāhīm, an eager and animated listener.

Brāhīm$_1$: May God grant you long life, my friend Riḍa.
Riḍa$_1$: May God preserve you.
B$_2$: There is a poem of yours—may your life be long—of which

I know one verse in which you say, "May God bring no good to a vile man who deceives a trusting Muslim." I believe this poem has an occasion?

R_2: Yes, it has an occasion; this is one of my poems.

B_3: I know it is one of your poems. Your poems are many and, praise God, you have memorized other poems [besides your own].

R_3: By God, such is my duty.

B_4: You are called the just poet. You are not prejudiced either toward Shammar [your own tribe] or toward any other tribe.

R_4: May your life be long—I am proud of the whole history of the desert; I am proud of the history of all the tribes.

B_5: And so you should be, may your life be long. That is why you are called the just poet.

R_5: Yes.

B_6: What is the occasion for it, the poem?

R_6: It has an occasion, and that is a long story. But I will give a brief summary so that it will not exceed the time of the program.

B_7: Yes. I think you dispatched someone as a go-between, or something like that.

R_7: A bedouin lady and I fell in love with each other. As you know, all my life I have lived in the desert with the nomads. I am still a nomad.

B_8: Of course, you are still.

R_8: Yes. When we fell in love it was the rainy season. Summer came—the time for making camp—came and we camped by the same watering place, her people at one well and mine at another; we were not all camped by the same well.

B_9: But you were close to each other.

R_9: Yes. We were close. We were all camped in the same plain.

B_{10}: In other words, you could visit each other.

R_{10}: Yes, we could visit each other. We were camped in one plain, we were all in the same plain which had about ten wells. I sent someone to her; that is, I sent him to ask for her hand.

B_{11}: You wanted to see if she had no objection.

R_{11}: I wanted to see if she held to her word, her promise [made] in the rainy season, or whether she had changed her mind. I had some doubts, because spring love always—it is always the case that a woman who does not love you very dearly, love you madly, I mean, she will most likely change in the summer, because in the summer there are many [other] faces.[1]

B_{12}: True.

R_{12}: There are many faces.

B_{13}: True.

R_{13}: Hah. So I sent a man; and when I sent him to her I told him. Go to her, give her my greetings; if she is still true to the vow we made, then I will ask her family for her hand.

B_{14}: Yes. And if she had changed her mind, then may God keep me and her above reproach.[2]

R_{14}: And if she had changed [it], then may God keep her above reproach. Hah. And there will be no reason [to pursue this affair any further]. He [the go-between] said: I have no objection. It is an honor to me to be of assistance to you; anyway, her family lives right next door to me.

He, you know, is acquainted with them[3] [her family], and visits them frequently. He is even related to them, related to them, to her family. But his relationship to them is not a close one, I mean not so close that I would have any misgivings about him. They are his maternal uncles.

B_{15}: His maternal uncles.

R_{15}: He claims they are his maternal uncles. He also had his tent pitched next to theirs.

B_{16}: He was their neighbor, yes.

R_{16}: He was their neighbor. And he had no wife. At that time such a man was called *ṣimil*. Among the nomads a man who had no wife was called *ṣimil*—a man who has no woman in his tent. He had his tent pitched next to theirs. She [the lady] and her sisters were helping him out, and so on.

B_{17}: You mean they cooked his supper and did his chores.

R_{17}: They cooked his supper, did his chores, fetched him water; his tent was pitched next to theirs.

B_{18}: Observe: in honor and good faith.[4]

R_{18}: Of course, in honor and good faith, yes.

Hah. He went [to the lady]. I do not know what he told her when he went, but the next day when he met me, he said: You there, your lady friend has changed her mind. I said: She has changed her mind? He said: Yes. I said: What did she tell you? He said: She told me that God ordains the going out on raids and the returning from them.[5] I said: Fine, but I am still on my way to the raid, I have not turned back. He said: But she is turning back. I said: Did you not ask her? Did you not say, What are the reasons? He said: Of course I did. I didn't leave anything out. She told me: It is true that I gave him [Riḍa] my word at the time that I was interested—I mean

interested in marrying him, nothing else,[6]—but after I inquired about him—I didn't know if he was married—

B_{19}: I see; she found out that you had a wife.

R_{19}: —I found out that he had a wife, and someone who has a wife does not suit me; a married man does not appeal to me. I said: Fine; but she [already] knew I had a wife!

B_{20}: Probably she knew [about] you before you sent this man.

R_{20}: She knew [about] me. I told her that I was married and she said: I do not care about the other wife; she is your responsibility. Even if you had three wives I would become the fourth. That is what she said to me before.

B_{21}: Those were her words then.

R_{21}: Then. But now this man brought me this last report. He said that she said: He [Riḍa] cheated me then. He said: I will marry you, and I have no wife. But when I inquired I found out that he had a wife and children. This does not suit me—I mean, a man with a wife and children! For God's sake, no. May God keep me and him above reproach.[7]

I got angry; you know, an honest man is inclined to believe what others tell him.

B_{22}: True.

R_{22}: I got angry. After I got angry with her I pursued this affair no further. Before, I used to visit her people; I used to go beyond all the tents close to mine and go over to their side of the camp. Love drew me their way.

B_{23}: I see; and then you decided to avoid their neighborhood entirely.

R_{23}: At this point I avoided their whole area completely; I switched wavelengths.[8] I never went in their direction, never. Then time passed and the wells began to dry up.

B_{24}: And perhaps the pasture was not as good as before.

R_{24}: Not as good as before. We, the people who raised camels, began to suffer. Only the people who raised sheep remained in the plain.

B_{25}: People who raised sheep.

R_{25}: Yes; and they [her people] raised sheep.

B_{26}: I see, they raised sheep.

R_{26}: They raised sheep.

B_{27}: And you raised camels.

R_{27}: We raised camels. My clan, who were close to me and to whom I was close, had already left. They had gone; where did they go at that time? They went to Iraq, to the marshes.

B_{28}: Toward Iraq.

R_{28}: Toward Iraq.

B_{29}: To the marshes.

R_{29}: To the marshes, at the beginning of fall, after the appearance of the star Canopus. There is good fall grazing in the marshes and at this time of year, when the weather begins to cool, the evil fever of Iraq, *az-zrēği*, which is dangerous to camels, goes away. So my people left, but I and my family remained behind. One day I went to visit them [the lady's people]. And there was this brother of hers who—like present company[9]—

B_{30}: The like of yourself is praiseworthy.

R_{30}: —is a man whose coffee pots are always brewing [i.e., generous]. I went to see him that day—all the neighbors with whom I used to spend my time before had gone—

B_{31}: And no one remained but you and her people.

R_{31}: And no one remained but myself, her people, and the other sheep herders, for those who raise sheep never go into the desert. So I went to see them. Her brother said: Hail, Abu Ṭārif, may God grant you long life, you've been avoiding us, it's a long time since you came to see us. I said: I am really a busy man, and as the saying goes: Summer camps are crowded; if your tent is not right next to mine, you might as well be dead [i.e., I would not see you].[10] Whenever I decide to come and visit you I am detained by the hundreds of hearths along the way. But today, here I am with you; my people have gone. He said: And you? Where will you go? I said: I really do not know. Maybe I shall follow my people when my camels come back for water, because my camel-herder is beginning to complain that the camels are restless and starving and that the plains are becoming barren. I am sure that I have to follow my people; I have no choice.

We talked for a while like this; then I went back home.

B_{32}: Perhaps she was listening to your conversation.

R_{32}: Of course; she was at home, in the tent—may your life be long—in the women's section, and she overheard our conversation. When I went home I took a nap in my tent, it was nearly noon; but my sister awakened me. "What is it?" She said: Someone is here to see you. At first I thought it was a man; but when I raised my head I saw that it was she who had come to our tent. The entire summer long she had never come to see us, except for this one time; she had never come to our neighborhood before. But after she overheard me say that we would go into the desert when the camels come back

to drink, she became upset and was anxious to get in touch with me.

B_{33}: Then the man you had sent to her was not telling the truth.

R_{33}: No, of course not. Had he been telling the truth she would not have come. I greeted her and after I greeted her [I said]: I am surprised by your visit! She said: Believe me, had I not heard today that you were preparing to move into the desert, I would not have come, because I am angry with you. I said: There is a saying, "Meet accusations with accusations and you will be safe."[11] What makes you angry? She said: I am angry because you gave me your word then, and I have been waiting for you until now. But I see that you have been avoiding me, and I do not understand the reason for this. I did not remain faithful to the pledge we made to each other all this time because I thought you were the most handsome of men or the most generous, but because of what you said to me and what I said to you. So now I want to meet with you face to face and clear up this matter. I said: I see; now that you have found out that I am about to go into the desert, you say these fair words to me in hope of rekindling my heart, so that I may compose a poem about you and make you famous.

B_{34}: But, on the contrary, I sent so-and-so to you—

R_{34}: But, on the contrary [i.e., to prove my serious intentions], I sent you, in the first place, I sent you a messenger; but you told him, "So-and-so [Riḍa] lied to me. He said 'I have no wife,' but I found out that he has a wife and children." She said: Your messenger, who is he? I said: My messenger is so-and-so. She said: This is not true. He did come and ask for me—

B_{35}: For himself.

R_{35}: —For himself. He said to me, "If you are not averse to marrying me, my maternal uncles wish me no evil; I shall ask for your hand from my uncles." I said, "May God keep you and me above reproach; but I am not really interested in men right now." As for you, he did not even mention your name—did not even mention your name.

B_{36}: He did not say, "So-and-so sent me."

R_{36}: He did not say, "So-and-so sent me." He did not mention your name, ever.

At that time it happened that my wife was not with me in the tent. She had taken the children and gone to her parents' tent. Her parents had no one to help them with the chores, so I gave her permission to go to her parents.

B_{37}: But your sister was with you.

R_{37}: My sister was with me to take care of household matters. My wife was not with us; she was at a different watering place, not the same one I was camped at. At any rate, the lady and I made up. However, when we made up it was time for me to move to the desert, and I moved. But now the matter had become clear to me.

B_{38}: You said to her that now it was time—

R_{38}: I said that—

B_{39}: That I promised—

R_{39}: I said that now I—

B_{40}: When the camels come back from pasture we will—

R_{40}: That I had made up my mind to move into the desert—

B_{41}: Yes; we shall move—

R_{41}: And when the camels come back I shall leave, I have no choice; but, God willing—

B_{42}: In the future—

R_{42}: In the future we shall meet again, under happy circumstances. She said: God is gracious. Hah. Things had become clear to me. It is a long story, O Abu Yūsif, but I only wanted to tell you the story and what happened. I moved into the desert, and after I moved I composed this poem. In the first part of the poem I castigated the land which had become barren and caused friends to be separated from each other.

B_{43}: Had dispersed you, yes.

R_{43}: Had dispersed us and took me away from my lady love.

1 When passions fill my breast, I say: Bring forth my graceful mount; put on her saddle and her trappings.

2 Put on her saddle and grant me leave [to go]; I must seek relief on the desert roads.

3 It's time to strike camp and move out, on spirited beasts which march on by day and by night.

4 We load up and leave on sturdy camels with great hooves, fleet and enduring.

5 Their ribs are broad, their gait is smooth; they groan and growl in foreign tongues.[12]

6 We quit the barren land and seek the verdant steppe, like a flock of birds in a gusty wind.

7 The barren wastes drive us on; the scanty pastures suffice no more.

8 Oh, so uncertain is fate; many a camp has become deserted; obliterated are the camps where once resided gallant men,

9 The stalwarts who roar on the battlefield like camels of burden, intoxicated by the sight of death so near.[13]
10 O land, why do you drive us so hard? You press upon us as the grass cutters prod their loaded beasts.
11 O land, you dispersed the camps; you scattered the large tents wherein lodge weary guests.
12 The tribesmen moved and left behind the sweet water in the wells; whoever had a wing to fly, took off.
13 The black ravens circle their deserted camps, like the little lambs which roamed there before.
14 Leave that; carry my verses, ye riders on stout mounts which travel the highways of waterless wastes,
15 Thoroughbred camels with muscular thighs whose male progenitor was of a noble line.
16 Hail, well-mounted riders; halt and listen to me, since you are going to her camp—the lady with thick, long hair.
17 When you alight by the camp of the faithful lady, the lady whose love has penetrated my heart,
18 Tell her that even if she were to stay away from me for thirty years, I should not forget her unless the nomads quit migrating,
19 Or unless the Riʿīlih ridge is moved amongst the peaks of the Salma chains.
20 Her love is causing me so much suffering; her red cheeks are painted the [bloody] color of death.
21 Her eyes are the eyes of a falcon swooping over a flock of birds: a hunting bird of reddish color; its talons tear off the feathers and spill the blood of the prey.
22 Its broad wings strike the bustards; when the male bustard sees it, he leaves the sky and seeks the ground.
23 Her legs are seemly, wearing new anklets. She is my choice among all fair maidens when she unplaits her wavy hair.
24 She is the branch of a sweet basil bush nurtured by the dew in the shade of a palm garden,
25 A supple branch with beautiful fragrance; its perfume is spread by the gentle breeze as it grows beside the running water.
26 I sent an emissary to my faithful lady, wishing only to hear from her a word of greeting.
27 My messenger proved useless as an old discarded garment; I found him putting obstacles in my path.
28 He brought me word from the fair maiden of lovely figure; that ill-omened messenger, he closed all doors in my face.
29 May God bring no good to a vile man who deceives a trusting Muslim.

30 The lady told me the truth; I heard it from her own lips, not from mounted couriers.
31 She warned me not to trust that man again; she said: Do not seek flesh from the bones of a starved camel.[14]
32 Thus ends this poem and I conclude the rhymes, my rhymes; precious verses which I did not compose in vain.
33 I close with an offer of prayers on the soul of the Prophet, like the rain which falls from laden clouds.

B_{44}: May your tongue be sound.[15]
R_{44}: May your body be sound.

Singing and Musical Accompaniment

The usual manner of delivering a Nabaṭi poem is to chant it or, most commonly, to declaim it in an elocutionary fashion. Declamation is called *hadd* or *hadb* (*hadb* refers to the swift pace of a trotting mount) because it is quick and takes less time than chanting. Chanting is called *dēwinih*, a word etymologically related to *dīwān* (a written collection of poems) and to *dīwāniyyah* (a coffee-chamber). Perhaps the etymological connection comes from the fact that in towns and settlements men gather together in the coffee-chamber of one of them and invite a professional reciter to chant poetry to them from a manuscript. However, *dēwinih* means chanting whether the chanter recites from a book or from memory. On rare occasions, especially when the poem is short and the moment of delivery is the moment of composition, the poet sings his verses to the accompaniment of the *ribābih*, alternating between the singing of verses and bowing on the instrument without singing. While bowing, the poet is silently composing in his head, and when he has composed a verse he sings it out to the tune of the *ribābih*.

Such methods of delivery are employed when the primary object of the performance for the reciter and the audience alike is the words and overall content of the poem. So far, this chapter has been dealing with this type of performance. But there are occasions when the focus of performance is singing and music, in addition to the words, and it is such occasions that I wish to discuss now.

Theoretically, any poem can be sung, but generally speaking some poems are sung and others are recited. Sung poems have the same meters as recited poems, but they are always short, on the average seven lines. A section of a long poem may be lifted out of it and sung as an independent piece. Singing may or may not be accompanied by musical instruments: the *ribābih* in the case of an individual performance, or the *ṭbūl* (drums)

in the case of a collective performance. I shall first consider the individual performance.

Although the word *rabābah* occurs in classical times (meaning a leather pouch in which the arrows used for drawing lots were deposited), we have no record of when the musical instrument of that name was introduced into Arabia, or who was the first to introduce it. The *ribābih* is a one-stringed instrument made in the shape of a rectangular wooden box covered with skin on both sides (nowadays a gasoline can may be used instead). The size of the box varies, but the one that I have measures 6½ by 10 inches with a depth of 3 inches. The skin used to cover the box is generally that of a goat, or a young camel or cow. Tradition has it that the best skin is that of a wolf; a *ribābih* covered with wolf skin is said to howl (*tʿawi*) like a wolf. Because the wooden box is covered with skin the instrument is also called *šannih*, a word meaning dry skin, which is more generally applied to an old shriveled dry water bag (*žirbih*) made of skin. The instrument and its bow, made of a thin rattan branch, are strung with *hilb* (hair from a horse's tail).

The *ribābih* player is not necessarily himself a poet, and will most likely be singing someone else's composition. While bowing on the *ribābih*, he will sing a verse once or twice, then wait a while and let the *ribābih* take its turn; then he will sing the next line, and so on. The audience may just sit and listen, or they may join the singer in a chorus.

The *ribābih* is played in several modes. To avoid monotony, the player continually shifts from one mode to another. Since different modes usually require different meters, shifting from one mode to the other implies shifting from one poem to another which, in turn, implies that a long poem is never sung on the *ribābih* from beginning to end, but that only a few lines of it are selected for singing.

The most popular modes played on the *ribābih* are the following:

Hlāli This is the *nisbah* (relative adjective) form derived from the Banu Hilāl, an ancient Arabian tribe that migrated to North Africa centuries ago. Strictly speaking, this adjective does not refer to the musical mode itself, but rather to the poetic meter that fits that mode. This meter is ˘– – ˘– – – ˘– – ˘– ˘–, which is the classical Arabic *ṭawīl* meter. (On the prosody of Nabaṭi poetry and its relationship to classical Arabic prosody, see the next chapter.) This meter is still employed by contemporary Nabaṭi poets, but it is called *hlāli* since it was the most popular meter during the days of Banu Hilāl.

Masḥūb or *majrūr* The two verbs *saḥab* and *jarr* are synonyms with several meanings, among them "to pull, to drag, to extend, to

stretch out, to draw out." This mode of singing is very slow, and the singer draws out the last syllable of every verse in a long drone which is sustained for nearly half a minute. The meter for this mode is – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – –, which is the most popular meter in Nabaṭi poetry.

Marbūᶜ This is similar to *masḥūb* in meter but has a lighter rhythm.

Xmiši Popular among the *al-xmiših*, a large section of the ᶜAnazah tribe, this mode shares the same meter with *marbūᶜ* and *masḥūb*.

Ṣxari Popular among the northern tribe of Bini Ṣaxar, its meter is ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – –, which is the classical Arabic *hazaj* meter with one extra foot.

Hjēni This is a very popular mode of singing in the Arabian desert. It is sung not only accompanied on the *ribābih* but also while traveling fast on riding camels called *hijin*, hence its name. (Nowadays, people still sing it when traveling in cars, trains, and even planes). Its rhythm is light and somewhat bouncy, to go with the swift movement of a trotting camel mount. It comprises several meters, the most popular of which are – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – – –; – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – –; – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – –; – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – – –; – ⏑ – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – –. These are all classical meters; the first two are varieties of *basīṭ*, the third *ramal*, the fourth *madīd*, and the last *mumtadd*.

An altogether different type of musical performance is collective singing accompanied by the beating of large round drums (*ṭbūl*, sing. *ṭabil*; also called *dammām* or *ṭār*). The individual *ribābih* performance is a casual affair compared with the collective performance, which is a very complex event, socially and artistically. There are various types of collective performances and various occasions for them; the most important are subsumed under the following categories, which are also used to designate the relevant musical modes.

Sāmri

The verb *sāmar* means to stay up at night talking and singing in a joyous mode, and *sāmri* means singing together at night. The *sāmri* is performed at important social events such as weddings, and on festive occasions such as *yōm al-ᶜīd*, or when the king or some high official visits. In ᶜUnaizah, my home town, every Thursday evening (because the next

day, Friday, is the Muslim sabbath and people do not have to get up early for work), those who know how to play *sāmri*, accompanied by a large crowd of enthusiasts, go out of town to sand dunes to sing and dance till dawn. The singers of the *sāmri* sit on the sand forming two lines facing each other; each line (*ṣaff*)is made up of ten to twenty singers and the lines are separated by a space about ten feet wide. The space between the lines is reserved for the dancers.

The *sāmri* has many melodies but only one basic beat, and any poem in any meter can be sung to fit this beat. Before the drumming begins, the melody is established by singing the first verse of the song four times. One group begins to sing this verse, which is repeated by the second group; then the first group sings the verse again, and the second group repeats it after them. Then the singers move to the next verse and sing it in the same fashion, and so on until the end of the song. Drumming begins with the second verse. Some of the drummers keep a steady beat, while others improvise on this beat.

In addition to the singers, there is always a large number of people socializing and enjoying the music. Anyone among the audience may get up and dance or may join in the singing; but those who have not yet mastered the beat, or the swaying, side-to-side and up and down movement of the upper part of the body which goes with the beat, must stay at the end of the line. Anyone wishing to learn *sāmri* must faithfully attend this performance every Thursday evening for a long time until he masters the beat and body movement. First, he goes out and only watches what the singers do. In a few months he learns the melodies and songs by hearing them repeated over and over again. Then he feels confident enough to sit with the singers at the end of one of the lines, singing, moving his body, and clapping his hands. After doing this for many weeks, the beat, melodies, and songs become ingrained in his mind and he begins to try to handle the drum. For the first few times he loses the beat every now and then, but eventually he becomes able to keep the beat steadily, and in a few months he will be able to improvise on the basic beat. The better he gets, the closer he moves to the center of the line, a place reserved for masters of the art. The singers are hesitant to admit anyone to the line who does not know the beat, because his unmeasured and erratic strokes could destroy the structure of the rhythm and cause everyone to lose the beat. The performance is best when all the singers and drummers are masters of the art.

It must be remembered that in *sāmri* the performance focuses more on the music than on the content of the poem. The *sāmri* songs are short poems, ten to fifteen lines long, and generally deal with erotic themes and physical beauty. Some are so popular that they exist in many versions,

and sometimes it is impossible to determine their original versions. They become true folk songs, and the singers feel free to change them or to add to them at will.

ʿArḍih or galṭih

The verb *ʿaraḍ* means to show, to exhibit, and the verb *galaṭ* means to step forward as in a duel or to advance as on a battlefield. The *ʿarḍih* is essentially a war dance, which is an exhibition of strength and determination. Unlike the *sāmri* in which singers sit on the ground, the *ʿarḍih* requires that the singers perform standing up, moving forward steadily with measured steps. Participants in the *ʿarḍih* dress as if they were going to battle; they wear badges and carry weapons. The dancers brandish their swords and spears and execute acrobatic movements indicating strength, agility, and endurance. In the past the *ʿarḍih* was strictly a war dance, but now it is merely a form of entertainment performed on important occasions. The drums used in *ʿarḍih* are the same as those used for *sāmri*, and the singing is done in a similar fashion, but the melodies and the beat are different. The *ʿarḍih* beat is a combination of two beats, one called *taxmīr* and the other *irćāb*. The most popular meters of *ʿarḍih* are: – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ –; – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – – –; – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ –; – ⏑ – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – –; and – ⏑ – – ⏑ – – – ⏑ – – –. All are classical Arabic meters; the first is *rajaz*, the second and third are varieties of *madīd*, and the fourth and fifth are varieties of *mumtadd*.

The original purpose of the *ʿarḍih* was to incite people and raise their courage on the way to battle. The poems sung on such an occasion usually contained some interesting and reliable historical facts inserted by the poet to add weight to his impassioned appeals to his people to defend their honor and property from aggressors. The songs for *ʿarḍih* were usually composed on the spot and made to fit the occasion; a poet would improvise one verse and the singers would pick it up after him and keep on singing it till he came up with the next verse, and so on till the end. Like the *sāmri* songs, *ʿarḍih* songs are short, but they are regarded with more seriousness; their attribution is always known, and no one dares change their words consciously.

Poetic Dueling

Like *sāmri* and *ʿarḍih*, poetic dueling is a collective performance, and it usually takes place on the same occasions as these other activities. It is called *galṭih* (from *galaṭ*, "to step forward") or *mrādd* (from *radd*, "to answer back"). A poetic duel, called *riddiyyih*, involves two poets, and consists of a few rounds of exchanges between them, each round consisting

of two verses.[16] The first poet steps forward and improvises two verses in which he greets the assembled audience-participants and, at the same time, asks for a challenger to come forward and face him. These opening verses are called *wisīmih* (from *wasm*, "brand," "mark") because they mark, or establish, the patterns of rhyme and meter for the entire *riddiyyih*. A second poet answers the challenge with two verses of his own following the rhyme and meter established by the first poet, who in turn retorts with two more verses; these two verses are answered by the second poet, and so on until the end of the *riddiyyih*. A *riddiyyih* is thus actually the work of two poets, but it is viewed as one unit and its verses all have the same rhyme and meter. Although it follows the established patterns of rhyme and meter, it is different from the regular *giṣīdih* in structure and function and it is composed in performance.

The verses of the dueling poets are repeated by the groups of singers who arrange themselves in two lines, standing up and facing each other with some space between them for the dueling poets to move in. Singing is accompanied by hand clapping only, with no drums or other instruments. This makes it easy for anyone present to join in the singing. Dueling poets do not come up with their verses one verse right after the other. It takes a few minutes for a duelist to decipher the meaning of his opponent's verses and form the proper response to them. Each verse, therefore, is repeated several times by the singer, until one of the poets comes up with the next verse. Each new verse is received enthusiastically by the singers with loud cheers or jeers, depending on its content.

Generally speaking, a *riddiyyih* consists of no more than eight or ten rounds (sixteen to twenty verses) of exchanges divided equally between the contesting poets. The pressure of performance and the constraints of rhyme limit the length of the *riddiyyih*. As in a regular *giṣīdih*, the *riddiyyih* has two rhymes, one for the first hemistich and one for the second, and a word cannot be used more than once in a rhyming position. At the same time, it should not take a dueling poet too long to compose his verses; otherwise, he loses. If a poet lingers in composing his verses, the singers shout at him, "*ʿlēt*," "You have been topped" (i.e., the other poet is above, literally over, you), which signals his defeat.

The topic and general tone of a *riddiyyih* are determined by whether the poets are friends or antagonists. In many cases, the poets are from different tribes or different districts, or one may be from the desert and one from the settled country. In such cases, each poet becomes the champion of his group and expresses pride in belonging to it while attacking the group of his opponent. Each draws on his vast repertory of historical and genealogical information to praise his group and ridicule that of his opponent, and the contest often turns into a match of wits. All of this, however, is taken with good humor by the poets and their

audience. If the dueling poets are friends, these exchanges are complimentary, but with occasional humor. Friendly poets may try to work out a misunderstanding between them in their *riddiyyih* or, if they had not seen each other for some time, may inquire of each other about some private affair, or one may ask the other whether a rumor that has been spread about him is true, and so on. This, however, must be done in a veiled and oblique way, almost like riddling, that only a discerning poet can understand. In many cases, although the singers repeat the verses of the dueling poets, only the poets themselves know what the verses really mean.

My purpose in discussing *al-mrādd* is not to give a thorough analysis of its thematic structure or social function, but to examine it as a performance in order to give a complete picture of how Nabaṭi poetry in its varied forms is performed in public. With regard to its structure and function and to the manner of its composition and performance, *al-mrādd* is considered a poetic genre sui generis independent from *giṣīd*, which is the primary topic of the present study. The native audience consider *al-mrādd* and *al-giṣīd* to be separate categories, each with its own enthusiasts, and a poet who excels in one of these categories does not necessarily excel in the other.

In this chapter we have surveyed the various contexts of performance of Nabaṭi poetry. We have seen that long poems are declaimed or chanted either from a book or, in most cases, from memory. Only short poems or selections from long poems are sung, sometimes individually to the accompaniment of the *ribābih*, and sometimes collectively to the accompaniment of drums. Love songs are performed in *sāmri* fashion, while war songs are performed in *ʿarḍih* fashion. In general, composition precedes performance except on rare occasions when the need for composition is urgent and the poet composes a few lines while playing the *ribābih*, or when he composes for the *ʿarḍih* singers. Only in *al-mrādd* does the poet always compose in performance. Here it should be pointed out that, in Nabaṭi poetry, composition in performance is a totally different procedure from that in epic poetry. The epic is an exceedingly long poem composed quickly at the rate of "from ten to twenty ten-syllable lines a minute" (Lord 1960:17). In Nabaṭi poetry the rigid constraints of rhyme and meter make composition in performance a slow labor; it takes a few minutes to compose each verse. Furthermore, these constraints make it impossible for a Nabaṭi poet to compose more than a few verses in performance. Spontaneous and improvised composition is, therefore, an infrequent feature of Nabaṭi poetic performance.