

# Different Journeys: Place, Self and Imagination in the Classical Arabic Poetic Tradition

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*"The eye does not see things but images of things that mean  
other things".* Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Despite apparent difficulties, a modern reader's fresh "viewing" of ancient Arabic poems in the light of recent discourses on place, landscape, vision, memory and imagination can prove quite rewarding. To a certain extent, such a reading is bound to be subjective.

This is a preliminary exploration of aspects of the visualisation of place and landscape in the *imaginaire* of the Arabic literary tradition, in so far as this relates to place and self. It is part of a broader project that aims to undertake a fresh "reading/viewing" of a particular configuration of classical Arabic texts within their socio-historical and environmental context, in light of recent discourses on vision, viewing and representation. It is important to remind ourselves of the need to recognise, not only what is sometimes called "culturally specific", but also aspects of parallelism and commonality between ostensibly different cultural traditions, as well as variations and heterogeneity within the same tradition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, English trans. by W. Weaver (San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1974), 13.

<sup>2</sup> See Simon Goldhill, "Refracting Classical Vision: Changing Cultures of Viewing", in T. Brennan and M. Jay (eds.), *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight* (New York, Routledge, 1996), 15-28; also Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 1990).

The focus of this essay is on ancient Arabic poetry as the first moment in the Arabic literary tradition. The examples are essentially from pre-Islamic poets, with some reference to poets from the first Islamic century. (It is hoped to pursue this theme in subsequent moments of significance in the Arabic tradition, including: the Qur'an's (essentially moral) perspective on place and landscape, particularly visible remains of human-made structures, and what a journeying believing beholder is expected and enjoined to "read" in them; "urban" Arabic poetry, particularly from the ninth and tenth centuries CE, and in the context of a new convergence of factors that acted upon the aesthetic outlook of poets and their visual sensibility of place and landscape; and the works of Arabic geographer-travellers who represented in maps, drawings, or literary "images" their vision of regions and cities).

The approach of this study has been inspired, to a certain extent, by recent discussions on what has been called the "pictorial turn", as distinct from the "linguistic turn", in modern studies on verbal and visual representation.<sup>3</sup> This preliminary essay is in essence an attempt to "view/read" examples from classical Arabic poetry in the light of a number of open questions. For example, how do the ancient poets relate to, or identify with, places and landscapes? How do they "visualise" places and landscapes? What does an ancient Arab poet expect, or wish, his/her audience to "read/view" in the place, in both its social and personal significance? And at another plane: how, when, where, in what context, and in the light of which combination of factors, do different poets (or authors of other texts) "see" and "represent" places and landscapes? By considering aspects of the Arabic tradition in this light, I hope that this research would provide some additional nuance and thus complement work done by other researchers in cognate historical

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<sup>3</sup> On this see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays in Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago University Press, 1995); see also Martin Jay, "Introduction - Vision in Context: Reflections and Refractions", in T. Brennan & M. Jay (eds.), *Vision in Context*, 1-14.

areas, for example Asian, Classical Hellenic, Byzantine or Medieval and Renaissance studies.<sup>4</sup>

It will be apparent that the present essay is not concerned with theories of vision or sight as such, nor with the history or philosophy of vision and sight in Arabic or Islamic thought nor, for that matter, with theoretical questions of poetics, rhetoric or literary criticism. However, I am particularly interested in questions of the visualisation and representation of place and landscape as reflected in literature. My approach is that of a cultural historian who is interested in aesthetics and who focuses on a rather unusual range of texts for a somewhat unorthodox aim. In this instance the texts are ancient poems, and they are essentially lyrical. They are viewed not as sources from which to extract "objective" details for socio-cultural history, but rather as "subjective" narrative in which to comprehend aspects of the representation of place and landscape. While situated in the historical and environmental context of Arab and Islamic societies, this is an exploratory excursion to find a viable approach, or perhaps a convergence of approaches, to "view texts" that seem to "read places". By concentrating on the Arabic tradition, this study does not imply an acceptance of, nor a wish to engage in polemics with, any generalisations about a supposed "ocular-centric" or "perspectival" character of "Western culture".<sup>5</sup> Nor does it postulate a more "verbal" or a less "pictorial" character of "Arabic" or "Islamic culture".

The adjective 'Islamic' as used in this study is understood essentially in a chronological sense, to denote the period that begins with the rise of Islam as distinct from the pre-Islamic period; otherwise I use it within single quotation marks. I happen to share the view that the adjective 'Islamic' has often been used indiscriminately and misleadingly, by both modern Muslim and non-Muslim writers and communicators. It is methodologically

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<sup>4</sup> See Simon Goldhill, "Refracting Classical Vision: Changing Cultures of Viewing"; and Janet M. Soskice, "Sight and Vision in Medieval Christian Thought", both in T. Brennan and M. Jay (eds.), *Vision in Context*, 15-28 and 29-44.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin Jay, "Introduction", in T. Brennan & M. Jay (eds.), *Vision in Context*, 4.

inaccurate to use such an emotive adjective without qualifying it in terms of both time and place.<sup>6</sup> It will also become apparent in the course of this discussion that early Islamic Arabic poetry is essentially secular and that the terms "pre-Islamic" and "early Islamic", in the context of ancient Arabic poetry in particular, denote a chronological demarcation rather than a religious distinction or a cultural discontinuity. It is in this light that we can understand how early Islamic literary historians considered the Christian Arab poet al-Akhtal as a major "Islamic poet (*sha'ir islami*)" while at the same time pointing out that he was (together with his contemporary Muslim poet, Dhu'l-Rummah) the closest in style and aesthetic attitude to pre-Islamic poets.

I should also like to point out that, because of the limited number and range of surviving fragments of ancient Arabic poetry composed by women, it has not been possible to include texts by female poets in the present discussion. This is most regrettable, especially as there were many able female poets in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period. The relatively small number of extant ancient Arabic poems by women, and the fact that these have survived mostly as fragments, would need to be explained in historical and socio-anthropological terms. Perhaps this state of affairs was not entirely due to historical accident. Extant pieces which have survived of women's poetry, notably by al-Khansa' and several other female poets from the pre-Islamic and the very early Islamic period, reflect a high level of lyricism and artistic skill. But available examples, most of which are elegies, do not appear to lend themselves to the above questions of visualisation of place or landscape.

It is also necessary to remark that the study of place and landscape, from the perspective of visualisation in literary texts, does not seem to have attracted much attention among specialists in

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<sup>6</sup> See the remarks of M. Arkoun, "Building and Meaning in the Islamic World", *Mimar* 8 (London, Concept Media, 1983), 51; this is a point which Arkoun has rightly highlighted on several occasions.

Arabic literature and 'Islamic' aesthetics. However, valuable insights into the patterns and techniques of ancient Arabic poetry, including allusion to the role of desert landscape, animals and journeying, can be found in a number of recent studies, mostly in Arabic, although such studies are essentially concerned with literary appreciation and rhetorical technicalities rather than with the specific questions of the visualisation of place.<sup>7</sup>

Although some of the ancient poetry of the Arabs has been lost, and questions of transmission and authenticity should be kept in mind, a good number (a few hundred in fact) of significant and authentic poems are available to the modern reader. The main sources for the text of the poems examined here are listed in the footnote related to the present paragraph. Names of individual poets and their historical and sociological contexts are as a rule indicated in the body of the essay. Although actual quotations are clearly indicated, I have opted to keep the number of notes to a minimum.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A. K. Yafi, *Etudes esthétiques sur la littérature arabe* (Damascus, 1964), in Arabic, attempts to apply, with significant modifications, certain modern Western aesthetic concepts; the book includes an insightful study on "Arabic Poetry and the Notion of Time", but not of Place, however. Both Adonis, the eminent modern Arab poet, in the Introduction to his *Anthology of Classical Arabic Verse (Diwan al-Shi'r al-'Arabi)*, vol. I (Beirut, 1963), and the contemporary Arab philosopher Muta' Safadi, in his Introduction to *The Encyclopaedia of Classical Arabic Verse (Mawsu'at al-Shi'r al-'Arabi)*, vol. I (Beirut; 1974), offer illuminating, if brief, remarks on Place in pre-Islamic poetry. The many studies on classical Arabic literature, of which perhaps the best modern historical survey for the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period is still R. Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe*, 3 vols. (Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1952-66), do not pay enough attention to visualisation of place or landscape; see also Muhammad al-Nuwayhi, *Pre-Islamic Poetry (al-Shi'r al-Jahili)*, (Cairo, n. d.); Husayn 'Atwan, *The Prelude of the Pre-Islamic Ode (Muqaddimat al-Qasidah al-'Arabiyyah fi'l-Shi'r al-Jahili)* (Cairo, 1970); Ahmad al-Hawfi, *Love in Pre-Islamic Poetry (al-Ghazal fi'l-Shi'r al-Jahili)* (Cairo, 3rd. ed., 1973); Kamal Abu Deeb, "Towards a Structural Analysis of Pre-Islamic Poetry", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (April, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Poems consulted in *Mawsu'at al-Shi'r al-'Arabi*, 4 vols. of pre-Islamic poetry, ed. by M. Safadi and I. Hawi (Beirut, 1974); in such classical anthologies as Abu Tammam's *Hamasah*, ed. by A. M. Saleh (Baghdad, 1984); al-Dabbi's *Mufaddaliyyat*, ed. by A. M. Shakir & M. A. Harun (Cairo, 1979); Usamah Ibn Munqidh, *al-Manazil wa'l-Diyar*, ed. by M. Hijazi (Cairo, 1992); also *Diwans* (collected poems) of individual poets, including in particular Imru'ul-Qays, ed. by M. A. F. Ibrahim (Cairo, 1969); Labid, ed. by I. Abbas (Kuwait, 1962); al-Nabighah (Beirut, 1982); Tarafah, ed. by M. Seligsohn (Paris, 1902); Zuhayr (Cairo, 1946); 'Abid (Beirut, n. d.) among the pre-Islamic poets; as well as Dhu'l-Rumma, ed. by J. Carlyle (Cambridge, 1919); 'Umar Ibn Abi

The first moment in Arabic literary creativity begins with ancient (pre-Islamic) Arabian poets. Of these, the earliest surviving verses come from the fifth century CE, although the vast majority are from the sixth and early seventh centuries CE. While examples considered here are mostly from the pre-Islamic period, some examples by poets of the first Islamic century or so (about 622-740 CE) are also included in the discussion. These early Islamic poets (most of whom were Muslim but some were Christian) continued to reflect, to a considerable extent, the same perspective, outlook and social context, and to employ more or less the same type of "visual metaphors" and poetic techniques of "representation" as their predecessors. Differences can generally be explained more by social environment than by religious leaning. For although the rise and speedy triumph of the Islamic religion ushered in a new era, this fact does not necessarily mean that there was a clear rupture in the Arabic poetic expression. The new religion did, of course, present its moral outlook and code of behaviour, but these had to coexist with elements of the old outlook in a dynamic tension, sometimes leading to remarkable artistic creativity. It is important to make this point here, since it is often wrongly assumed that the coming of Islam was, somehow, like a torrent that took away all before it. In fact, and as usual in viewing change in a historical perspective, it is the distant view, the *longue durée*, that enables the historian to perceive turning points and processes of change.

### Place, Memory and Departure

In viewing ancient Arabic poetry, I start here by viewing that part of the classical Arabic poem which alludes, with some lingering, to a special kind of space. This is the *deserted dwelling place*, and the associated route of passage, of the poet's beloved, which should be seen in the context of seasonal movement between well known Bedouin camping areas. The "genealogy" of this theme seems to go

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Rabī'ah (Beirut, 1987); al-Akhtal, ed. by A. Salihani (Beirut, 1905); al-Farazdaq ed. by A. M. Zaytun (Beirut, 1997), from the Islamic period.

back to the earliest examples of ancient Arabic poetry, and it became the theme *par excellence* of the "overture" of the classical Arabic Ode. Although this theme was later reduced to a mere stereotype, a *topos*, (by certain eulogising poets, already in the last pre-Islamic decades), it is important to remember that in its original fresh form this kind of overture reflects distinct individuality, dynamism and variety.

The deserted abode of the beloved seems to have strongly confronted the poet's gaze and imagination. Its place in the opening of the ancient poem appear to represent the poet's desire to construct a specific kind of what I would call "emotive geography" - a geography of memory, of happy experiences. This could provide a trigger, then a diversion, for shadows of anguish that haunt the imagination of the poet. At another level, it represents the poet's intimate attachment and response to places which are associated with "someone special". It will be seen also that the poet's awareness and representation of the place would have significant social and existential dimensions as well. Despite common features, different poets, indeed different poems by the same poet, can emphasise different angles of vision of places and communicate different attitudes towards landscapes. What concerns me here is how the poet focuses on the visualised place: both as it appears in his "field of vision", a deserted place with elements of nature acting upon its features, and as a site of the poet's own memories. Other features of the poem, including non-visual metaphors and similes - and there are many types of these - do not interest me in this study.

While the poet's gaze scans the deserted place and its wider area, during a real or imaginary spatial journey, he is also able to travel in time between the present moment and moments in the past. If, in another and very different context of literary creativity, "vision is understood as a mode of narration rather than an actual medium of

perception"<sup>9</sup>, the ancient Arabic poet's vision of the place can be perceived, from a certain perspective, as an impressionist painting in words, composed of visual metaphors and similes. It can also be seen as a virtual screen on which the poet can re-view and show, in a moment of cinematic flashback, scenes from memories of time past, of happy personal encounters, adventures and, perhaps above all, of *un amour perdu*. Like the narrator-character in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the Arab poet may describe newly remembered landscapes, more than people, but unlike the modern French novelist, however, the ancient Arab poet's gaze, far from being in a 'closet', at the time of remembering, is actually able to scan glimpses of the open space and the wider horizon.

To the ancient Arab poet, the place, especially a deserted dwelling place, is not visualised as just a locality to be described or recorded for its own sake, let alone as a curiosity. Rather, it needs to be understood as a "sign" or an "indicating light". The deserted dwelling place may be difficult to "recognise" at first sight, but it will always reveal "its secrets", its real self as a locale of the poet's special and intimate memory and associations. It is therefore not the dwelling place as a structure or shelter (*bayt*) which concerns the poet in this context, but rather as the beloved's former abode (*dar, manzil*) which still preserves her people's visual signs, imprints, traces (*atlal, diman, rusum*). These imprints have somehow persisted on the face of the landscape, precariously but tenaciously, despite the force of winds, downpours and the passage of time. Like some modern person looking for old pictures and other precious reminders in a long-deserted but familiar and dear place, the ancient poet's gaze scans the beloved's old place looking for "pictures" and memories.

At another plane, we may contrast the ancient poet with other modern types who, in their different ways, are known to scan

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<sup>9</sup> See a semiotic consideration of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, by Mieke Bal, "The Gaze in the Closet", in T. Brennan and M. Jay (eds.), *Vision in Context*, 139-154; quotation from M. Jay's Introduction to the same book, 8.



deserted places: for example, the tourist and, especially, the archaeologist. It has been rightly remarked in different context that the poet's "field of vision" may be comparable to "the ground of an archaeological excavation".<sup>10</sup> Indeed the ancient Arab poet and the modern archaeologist both share a desire to recover things of the past. Both are interested in sighting fragments in the debris. But while scanning the minute details of the site, the poet's eye does not search for mere "objects". The poet's gaze remains that of the "feeling knower, or "seer", and this is an elemental significance of the Arabic word for poet: *sha'ir*.

The ancient poet's eyes scan the deserted dwelling place as if reading an unrolled parchment scroll, or tracing an ornamental pattern on the scabbard of his own sword. So intimately familiar are such details. If he sees the place as through glass faintly, this is only because of the tears in his eyes. The ashes and stones of fireplaces, the remains of ditches and raised edges that once protected the tents from the rain, the pegs where animals were once tethered, the remnants of firewood once collected by teenage girls, the traces of the horse troughs – all these are "signs", or imprints (*ma'alim, athar*) which convey much more to the poet than to the archaeological excavator. In Italo Calvino's novel, *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo reminds Kublai Khan that "a print in the sand indicates the tiger's passage".<sup>11</sup> To the ancient Arab poet, the imprints on the ground not only stand for the beloved's passage, they also can be understood to speak, "if only they could", on behalf of the original place and those who dwelled in it which, although "a mere imprint of its former self (*athar ba'da 'ayn*)", is in his imagination's eyes, still as visually vivid as it once was, and is capable of evoking strong personal memories and emotions.

Beyond this, the ancient poet wants his audience to visualise with him his first encounter with his beloved, in or near this deserted place. He also wants their eyes to follow him and her to

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Virilio, quoted by Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 13.

other places of the past. His eyes then may scan the horizon for a "long distance shot" of her as she departed suddenly, one early morning. And he asks his companions whether they too could see her, riding away into the distance in a brightly decorated *howdah*, surrounded by her female companions, each on her thoroughbred camel, with riding men of her clan at a considerable distance behind. As if reading a travel map, he would name several actual places along their passage, indicating where the party turned right or left and at what water hole they stopped. The poet's gaze then turns higher up as he scans the sky to see whence that sudden flash of lightning came, and to visualise, and measure by counting, the distance to places where the heavily laden clouds might soon let loose their downpour. In praying audibly for the good rain to drench other seasonal places of the beloved, the poet often locates such places, by their real name, on his virtual poetic map.

But there is another important aspect of the connection between the poet's vision of the place and his memory of it. From a distance the totality of the remains (*rusum, atlal*) would appear (*taluh*), in a sense as a waving hand, resembling familiar but fading visual patterns to the poet's eye. It is as if these patterns are weathered "inscriptions on rocks", or "old tattooing on the back of a hand", not easy to work out. At close range, the old traces or special "signs" of the place may be deciphered, especially when "the wind pulls away layers of dust revealing recognisable patterns" which now appear as clear as "writing on a piece of parchment", "decoration on a scabbard", "ornamentation on a rug" or "embroidery on a piece of cloth displayed in an open seasonal fair". Several poets envision the action of the winds in uncovering buried traces of the original place like "the action of a scribe who with reed-pen and ink traces lines of old writing on a parchment scroll", or "a woman redoing an old tattoo pattern with needles and fine kohl powder". Sometimes the poet invokes the movement of the artist's hands and implements, thus perhaps evoking his own effort to retrace the patterns of his visual memory of personal adventures associated with the same

place. In using the technique of flashback to visualise these memories on the place where he now stands, the poet can be seen to move effortlessly between "now" and "then"; between the "amphitheatre" and the "stage".

Perhaps we need to think of certain modern photography techniques to help us understand the poet's situation. In this instance, the ancient poet may be said to move like a modern photographer who sets the camera timer and then gingerly moves forward to join into the imminent group photograph whose visual frame he/she has just pre-set. Like the photographer, the poet is temporarily in the spot at which he had gazed intently only a few seconds earlier. He is also now within the virtual frame that he has visually set in advance. Both modern photographer and ancient poet would need to cross from the position of the "viewer" to that of the "viewed". But from the point where each stands behind the "view finder", the one moves forward spatially, the other moves back across time. In both cases, once the film or the poem is "developed", a precious "moment" can be said to have been captured and preserved: in one case by means of a skilfully composed photograph, in the other by means of an artfully composed set of words. But while the former captures a present moment to make of it a special memory for the future, the latter retrieves a personal memory from the past to have it re-lived fleetingly in the (poet's) present. Subsequently, both can be "viewed/read" differently by others, each in a variety of ways.

There are, it seems to me, particular aspects of the observing techniques of some ancient Arab poets which can be termed as the "visualisation of movement", or the "movie vision", in both time and space. Some parallels and contrasts with the work of a movie photographer might help throw light on this point. Several ancient Arab poets appear to represent the impact of natural forces, such as rain storms, winds and the behaviour and movement of wild animals upon the open landscape, in a kind of "movie" perspective. It is as if the poet focuses on the action of such natural agents from a

studied distance, by choosing the most suitable range and vantage point according to the nature of the scene and the action. For example, the poet may record the working of the south and north wind alternating to weave netted surfaces of sand, or the east and west winds pushing and pulling away more vigorously as each “unfurls broad lengths of dust, spreading them like the tail of a garment”. Some of these images also figure, as mimesis but occasionally with added nuance, in the overtures of poems from the first Islamic century, by such poets as the desert-oriented Dhu'l-Rummaḥ in northern Arabia and southern Iraq, the partly desert-oriented, partly urban Arab poet, al-Akhtal al-Taghlibi in Syria (who was Christian), or the more urbane 'Umar Ibn Abi Rabi'ah of Medina in the Hijaz.

Several pre-Islamic masters of the Arabic poetic art paint impressive scenes of rain storms against the backdrop of the desert vista. This can be best illustrated from the celebrated Ode (*Mu'allaqah*) of their undisputed “standard bearer”, Imru'ul-Qays al-Kindi, in central and northern Arabia (early sixth century CE), royal vagabond, inveterate adventurer and highly skilful observer and presenter of the desert scenery.<sup>12</sup> As one such storm is about to gather on the far horizon, and initial flashes of lightning begin to flicker, Imru'ul-Qays seems to want his “audience” to assume the attitude of “spectators”. In his attempt to capture “long distance” scenes, he clearly indicates how he chose a spot that provided both protection and a prime vantage point. “With my companions, I installed myself for it (*qa'adtu lahu*) between [the two locations of] Hamir and Ikam; a long distance indeed for viewing (*bu'da ma muta'ammal*)”.<sup>13</sup> The sequence of scenes is then presented: more frequent flashes of lightning, contrast of light and shade in the clouds' thick layers, then the rain “with successive downpours (*an*

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<sup>12</sup> See the brief insightful remarks of Irfan Shahid, “Arabic Literature”, in P. M. Holt, A. K. S. Lambton & B. Lewis (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), vol. 2, 658-59.

<sup>13</sup> Imru'ul-Qays, *Diwan*, 24: (or between 'Udhayb and Darīj, according to another reading of the text).

*kulli fiqatin*)", forcing large acacias to fall "on their faces". We can watch the visible impact of the storm on the surrounding landscape along and far beyond the large *wadi* (probably the famous Wadi al-Rummah in north Najd)). Palm trees and houses in the oasis of Tayma' (in northern Arabia) are not spared, "except structures built with large rocks". As the poet's eyes scan different sections of the panorama, he focuses for a moment now on mount Thabir, where "the many parallel streams rushing down its slopes make it look like an old man wrapping himself in a rough and thick striped gown". On the further edges of the torrent, one could see dead beasts of prey that had drowned overnight, appearing in the distance in the early morning light like huge uprooted wild onions.<sup>14</sup>

Some poets, such as Labid, another major sixth-century poet from north Arabia, can powerfully portray scenes of the cycle of changing seasons and the more positive impact of the rain upon the landscape. He is keen to observe the regeneration of the flora that decorate the landscape after downpours, and the peaceful and sometimes more energetic display and performance of various wild animals, particularly antelopes, upon nature's theatre.<sup>15</sup> Several poets, notably Imru'ul-Qays and Labid in a number of their long poems and with certain variation in emphasis, focus their gaze on animals, their physical profiles in different poses, and especially their behaviour as dynamic actors upon the landscape.

While representing lively images of the powerful build and graceful features of his own noble she-camel or thoroughbred horse, usually depicted in motion and often in action, the poet envisions scenes of hunting and lively movement and behaviour of wild animals.<sup>16</sup> Because the textual starting point for such scenes is usually the poet's concern to portray his own camel (in the case of Imru'ul-Qays also his horse) in a dynamic way, this technique of

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<sup>14</sup> Imru'ul-Qays, *Diwan*, 24-26 (the last eleven lines of the long *Mu'allaqah* are devoted to the storm).

<sup>15</sup> Labid, *Diwan*, 297 (Labid's *Long Ode (Mu'allaqah)*, like most of his output, was composed before he converted to Islam).

<sup>16</sup> Labid, *Diwan*, 297-99.

representation has usually been assessed by both early and modern commentators in terms of similes and other clever rhetorical devices, in which the poet is said to digress, or get carried away, from his supposed theme.

I should like to suggest that we need to view this technique in the light of the poet's effort to represent the action of wild animals and birds upon the landscape as an expression of his genuine "visual engagement" with the living environment. He represents his vision of what he has actually seen and intently observed with his naturalist's eyes. The fact that the poet's original lively images were later frozen into mere clichés by imitators should not distract the modern reader/viewer from the original dynamics of the "moving" scenes. While later versifiers may consciously indulge in literary mimesis, the early creative artists should be recognised as expressing their vision and their reading of the living landscape. That is why such poems lend themselves, more naturally, to a modern "viewing/reading" perspective.

Thus, the fast moving scenes of the chase in different hues of light, the behaviour displayed by antelopes and other wild animals, either in pairs or in herds, enveloped by dust or emerging from different parts of the landscape, are skilfully captured by Imru'ul-Qays and Labid, among others, with individual variations. Here, Labid is concerned with the dramatic spectacle of the courtship behaviour of antelopes. He also provides some movie-like scenes of the responses of herds of antelopes as they suddenly sense some unseen danger or when they are actually confronted or chased by beasts of prey or a hunter's dogs.<sup>17</sup> There are several such lively scenes of animals or birds in action represented by other pre-Islamic poets, for example, a family of ostriches on the move; buzzing and dancing flies in a lush meadow after an early spring downpour; or a dramatic and elaborate sequence of the action of an eagle descending to capture a frightened fox. There are also some comparable scenes from the first Islamic century, particularly in

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<sup>17</sup> Labid, *Diwan*, 304-12; also 111-14, etc.

poems by the Christian Arab al-Akhtal, for example of an eagle targeting a fox (in scenes that appear original and differ from earlier ones); or a hawk swooping on a flock of sand grouse as these were fetching water for their young across the distance, or elaborate scenes of the behaviour of a herd of antelopes in their long journey from one *wadi* to another in search of water.<sup>18</sup>

I have intentionally used "cinematic" terms to convey the poet's technique of viewing and presentation. I should like to make the unorthodox suggestion that, apart from familiarity with scenes from the Arabian environment, viewing of wild life documentary films has greatly enhanced my reading of the ancient Arabian poems discussed in this essay. For despite the difference of centuries and the huge gap in aims and techniques of observing, which obviously separate the two situations and sets of images/texts, it seems to me that our ability to "receive" both types of image at the same time can provide us with a new, if unexpected, comparative perspective for "viewing" the ancient poems.

### Different Journeys

Many of the ancient Arabian poets were seasoned "travellers". Or, more accurately, most of the prominent poets were purposeful wanderers (*jawwab, tawwaf*). This is true of pre-Islamic poets, such as Imru'ul-Qays, Labid, A'sha Qays, al-Nabighah, al-Mutalammis, the two Muraqqishs, Tarafah, A'sha Nahshal as well as the Sa'alik group of poets. It is also true of several poets from the Islamic period, such as al-Akhtal (1st/7th century), Abu Tammam and al-Buhturi (both 3rd/9th century) and al-Mutanabbi (4th/10th century). All these poets highlight the significance of their peregrinations; and all of them had strong links with tribal culture, while many of them also had more or less regular connections with urban environments. Their journeys were undertaken out of a

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<sup>18</sup> On ostriches, see 'Alqamah, in *Mufaddaliyyat*, no. 120, lines 18-30; on the flies, 'Antarah's *Mu'allaqah*, in *Ten Odes*, collected by Tabrizi, ed. by F. Qabawah (Beirut, 1969), 278; on the eagle, 'Abid, *Diwan*, 29-30; also in *Ten Odes*, 480-4; for al-Akhtal, see, I. Hawi, *al-Akhtal* (Beirut, 1981), 469-72; 500; 504, 507-8; 510-12; for al-Farazdaq, *Diwan*, vol. 2, 136.

variety of motives whether political, economic or sheer personal restlessness. Apart from this, most ancient poets (and this applies to a few from the early Islamic period, including Malik Ibn al-Rayb, al-Akhtal and Dhu'l-Rumamah) would have had to cover considerable distance, whether in the course of seasonal migration of their clans, or on hunting excursions or war expeditions. It is therefore quite natural for the poet to represent himself often on the move, with the result that so many classical Arabic poems, especially from the pre-Islamic period, are set in a kind of journeying framework.

Space, like Time, is deeply recognised by the ancient poets as an agent of separation, understandably. It can only be bridged by "crossing" it in an actual or imaginary journey. At the individual level, either the poet or the phantom (*tayf, khayal*) of his beloved would appear to undertake the journey to "meet" the other, if only fleetingly. My concern in the present essay is not with the concept of Space as a general theme in poetry, but rather with places and landscapes with which the ancient poets identified for personal and social reasons. The poet often identifies such places by name, or indicates their known geographical or topographical features. These places are not abstract, or imaginary, or fictional. The question of the Space as a factor of separation is therefore not a philosophical but an existential one for the ancient Arab poet. Separation across space has to do with the social environment and patterns of seasonal and daily life. Nor should these patterns of life be conjured up in our modern mind as stereotyped and misleading images of Bedouins "roaming" the inhospitable desert aimlessly.

The connection between place and journeying is to be understood, at a certain level, in the context of what I would call a "geography of social reality". This is the reality of the life of individuals, families and clans and the pattern of their movement between familiar seasonal abodes, water holes and, in certain cases, villages and towns. Such places and areas are, as a rule, identified with particular clans - an identification that often spans centuries. In some cases, particularly in connection with areas around water



holes, or near areas of common pasture or seasonal trade fairs, a group of clans may share the same wide area, living next to each other as neighbours for shorter or longer periods annually. There is naturally a dialectical relationship between this practical arrangement and patterns of tribal alliances, possible individual friendships and marriage relations. This aspect of the social configuration whereby different clans "mingle" in the same area can explain, among other things, the frequent occurrence in ancient Arabic poetry of the expression "mixture of neighbours (*khalit, qatin, jami'*)". Thus "the neighbours have departed, separated (*bana al-khalit, khaffa al-qatin*)", is a poetic register for a social reality with intimate personal implications. The poet's clan and that of his beloved had shared the same area for a season; and one group, say her people, are now moving on to another seasonal ground and she has to move with them.

The ancient Arab poet envisions and represents several kinds of journey for the eyes of his audience/spectators. A typology of these journeys does not concern me here.<sup>19</sup> Whether these journeys are real or imaginary, whether undertaken by the poet himself or by his sweetheart or by his own people, each journey can provide a setting in which to perceive the poet's attitude towards the place, and how he both identifies, and identifies with, places along such a journey. The poet is usually represented as travelling with companions; and it is often during such an excursion that he represents himself as halting for a while at deserted dwelling places of his sweetheart, i.e. former camping grounds of her clan. From another perspective, the journey or departure of the clan of the beloved is almost always depicted as a departure of the "women in howdahs (*za'a'in*)", an attractive sight on the horizon with the colourful bright red trappings of their litters as their camels move at visible speed. It is usually implied and always assumed that they would be protected

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<sup>19</sup> Both Shukri Faysal, *The Evolution of Love Poetry (Tatawuwur al-Ghazal)* (Damascus, 1964) and Wahb Rumiyyah, *The Journey in Pre-Islamic Poetry (al-Rihlah fi'l-Shi'r al-Jahili)* (Cairo, 1975) in different ways attempt a typology of the journey in ancient Arabic poetry, from a perspective of literary analysis.

and watched over from a safe distance by men of the clan on camel back or, if need be, horseback. The poet sometimes sees himself as undertaking a real or imaginary journey in order to catch up with the beloved and her people. The route of passage of the departing beautiful women, including the poet's beloved, is often clearly indicated on the landscape, as if on a map, with known landmarks and place names. As the *za'a'in* move away in the distance, the poet is keen to systematically name all the places along their passage, indicating points of reference to the right and left, as they emerge from a known *wadi*, descend or ascend a slope, halt at a water hole and finally reach their destination at another seasonal camping site.

It is perhaps instructive to view another kind of journey by the poet himself, a journey ostensibly undertaken as a diversion from the pain caused by the memory of the beloved's departure, or from her deserted dwelling place. As the poet re-saddles his noble camel, he directs his gaze towards the open landscape and looks for adventures of hunting and other pursuits. Here, his journey does not seek any known destination, unless the poem is a panegyric. No longer dwelling on his internal mood, nor fearful of the space confronting his eyes, the poet can respond positively to the landscape both in its awesome totality and its friendly distracting details, as we have seen in references to storms, animals and birds along the way.

### **The Poem as a Map; the Place as a Text of Memories.**

There is a significant variation of emphasis in the poet's representation of places according to their association in his vision of things. Both the journey of his beloved as well as his flashback journey in "memory lane" are usually associated with specifically named localities and landmarks. These are both real and familiar, such as known hills, mountains, wadis, pools, water holes. Thus the journey can easily be visualised in an exercise of the imagination that could be shared with the poet's audience. Although the poet's

beloved is occasionally identified by her actual first name or that of her father or clan (the latter may some times be the poet's own clan too), she is often deliberately given a fictitious name; and the poet may intentionally digress to memories of other women in other places. However, the names which the poet uses for places associated with the beloved and with her clan (and also with his own people) are never fictitious. Thus, journeys which dwell on places associated with the abodes and departure route of the beloved and her clan reflect a real concern for identifying these places by name. By contrast, the poet's other personal journey through the desert, away from his beloved and his memories, is usually represented in the context of expansive landscapes which may or may not be named, but which are nevertheless powerfully visualised in his representation of their topography and wild life.

Whatever the motive or destination, each journey demonstrates the poet's sense of observation of the landscape and association with the place. However, while representing the route of his departing sweetheart, or the areas within which the clan moves, he is more interested in the place as a setting for human habitation and living. The place can also be the setting for the poet's own personal memories, especially of youthful adventures and past encounters, real or imaginary. Hence the physical features of a place, its scents, and its response to the poet's sight at close range, and also to his touch, would make it intimately identifiable with the beloved. But as the poet turns away from his beloved's deserted place and from memories of his *amour perdu*, his journey as well as his gaze face the wider landscape. Here, the poet's eyes may scan the horizon for lightning, thick clouds, for an impending or actual rain storm, or he may intently observe groups of antelopes, or ostriches in the distance, birds of prey in action, and anxious flocks of sand grouse on the wing or at a water pool, or even smaller flying or crawling insects and other creatures close by.

Although certain parts of his route have to go through difficult terrain or unfriendly territory, the poet usually identifies with the

places he sees, whether at a personal, social or existential level. Despite his feeling of awe towards the desert's uninhabited barren parts, the poet does not see it as a "void", let alone a forbidding one, as some modern "travellers" would. Indeed, empty and out-of-the-way places might be the abode of those fiery but usually invisible *Jinn* who, like the muses, might inspire a poet with some unusual verses. On a cold night around his own camp fire with his companions, the poet might even share his meal with a hungry wolf. Or he might sense some comfort in observing a bright light, shining on top of a distant hill, of the oil-lit lamps in a Christian monastery by which trade caravans might be guided in their homeward journey. Or he might even "see", beckoning to him across the distance, the fire that is being lit at his beloved's distant abode. In such light, we can appreciate the poet's sympathetic responsiveness to places - those associated with his own people and his beloved and open landscapes and the living environment - as remarkable spectacles in their own right. But above all, the poet is keen to identify with special familiar places that have personal and group connection with his memories.

It is evident that sight, in this instance the sheer ability to see, is a most valued natural gift, especially for a poet. If the ancient poet was no longer able to see familiar places and things "with his own eyes", he would find this as a calamity. This is so whether it is the result of political upheavals, for example his tribe may have to leave its territory under pressure from a regional power, or he is in exile, or simply but more seriously, if the poet becomes visually impaired. It is perhaps in this light that we can understand the attitude of those poets nicknamed "the Blind (al-A'sha)". The most celebrated of these, the A'sha of Qays (6th century CE, central Arabia but travelled most extensively), on one occasion while in southern Iraq and as a rain storm was gathering on the horizon, requests his drinking companions to figure out where the rain would fall further south. And "they" named several familiar places. Presumably if "he" could see the lightning, he would join in this visualising exercise. Another

blind poet, the *A'sha* of Nahshal (6th century CE, also a great wanderer), complains that: "It is one of the calamities, I tell you, that the world has become totally blocked out before me; no longer can I find my way to see any familiar hill or slope, anywhere from Iraq to the land of Murad [in the Yemen]".<sup>20</sup> Looking at the situation from the opposite perspective, Dhu'l-Rummah (first Islamic century) tells his beloved *Mayah* that whenever he knew that he was approaching her land (which was also his own clan's), he felt like a blind person whose eyesight had just been miraculously restored.

### **The Place as a Personal and Social Address**

In a real sense, places as represented by ancient Arabic poets can also be seen as addresses. A place may be a former or present personal address, for example of the beloved; or it may be a long-term, though not permanent, social (tribal) address. In the context of the life of non-sedentary clans, seasonal migration means regular change of habitat, that is to say seasonal change of address. But this was usually within a well known range of areas and places associated with the various tribes and clans. Thus certain ancient Arabic poems can be viewed as maps of personal addresses for the poet's beloved, and also of tribal addresses. It is only in such a perspective that one can comprehend both the insistence and the remarkable ability of many poets to identify so many places, usually in their geographical sequence along the familiar lines of passage between two camping areas, or across the whole range of tribal homelands, including villages and oases associated with particular clans. It is possible to count many, in some cases over a hundred place names, in the work of a single poet such as *Imru'ul-Qays* or *Labid*. This is in addition to places which are identified only by their physical features, although some of these become proper place names in time. Here we are thinking of the poem not as a dry didactic list of place names, but rather as a spontaneous multi-

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<sup>20</sup> For *A'sha* *Qays*, see *Ten Odes*, 434-36; for *A'sha* *Nahshal*, see *Mufaddaliyyat*, no. 44; see also *Mawsu'at al-Shi'r*, vol. 3, 261-265.

layered lyric in which places may some times figure prominently, for aesthetic, social and above all personal reasons.

That the ancient poem was occasionally and consciously viewed as such a map is clearly seen in a piece by the pre-Islamic al-Akhnas al-Taghlibi, a sixth-century scion of a prominent pre-Islamic Christian Arab tribe, whose area stretched as far as the upper Euphrates. In a melodic lyric, he succinctly identifies the homelands of practically all important Arabian tribes of Ma'add, that is the two great branches (or confederations) of Rabi'ah and Mudar, stretching across the whole area of Arabia (including parts of Syria and Iraq).<sup>21</sup>

Such interest was of course not lost on keen Arab geographers of the Islamic period, such as Hamdani (4th/10th century), or Yaqut al-Rumi (7th/13th century). In the historical perspective, this response by the ancient poets to actual places – whether as homelands and seasonal addresses of clans, or as personal addresses of loved ones, or as locales of war actions, or a habitat of types of wild life, e.g. antelope, sand grouse – the ancient poets provide a most significant early reservoir of rich literature on Arabian toponyms. This was later utilised by philologists and geographers to great advantage. Indeed, the poets' attachment to such places and their lively visual mapping of them in many poems, have enabled modern scholars not only to verify the human geography and toponymy of Arabia, but also to re-trace the journeys and visual maps of at least two of the major poets, Imri'ul-Qays and Labid, whose names have occurred several times in the present study.<sup>22</sup>

Although I have used many of these poems in my other research (on Arabic human geography), I have here focussed on a different aesthetic reading of the visualising approaches of the Arab poet as a

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Akhnas al-Taghlibi, in *Mufaddaliyyat*, no. 41, especially verses 8-18.

<sup>22</sup> On Arabian place names in general, see Shaykh Hamad al-Jasir and other modern Saudi Arabian scholars, for example in various issues of the periodical, *al-'Arab* (Riyadh, Yamamah Publications, years 1386-1414 H); for an approach to a famous poem, see Jacques Berque, "In Search of Imru'ul-Qays", in his *Cultural Expressions in Arab Society Today*, trans. from French by R. Stookey (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1978), 113-128; see also Labid Ibn Rabi'ah, *The Golden Ode*, Translation, with Introduction and Commentary by William R. Polk, Photographs by William J. Mares (Chicago University Press, 1974)

participating spectator. I hope my approach may provide some fresh perspectives into studying this kind of poetry and afford insights into the sensibilities of Ancient Arab poets in relation to place, time, memory and love.