‘Arār’s “First Drops”

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ملخص

ينتال الدارس في هذا البحث بواكير الشعر عند عرار (مصطفى وهو الناقد)، محاولا الوقوف على المراحل التي تطورت فيها النبرة والخس شعري المتميز وتحديدها لدى الشاعر. وقد وجد الدارس أن هذه القصائد الأولى ذات موضوعات متعددة تنطلق الخب، والسياسة، والبغي بشرب الخمر، وتعبر عن الحنين للوطن، والأشادة بحياة الخارجين على المجتمع. غير أن آثار القصائد هذه تخلو من القصائد التي تعالج موضوع النور بالذات. ذلك الموضوع الذي كثيرا ما طرده الشاعر في أشعاره اللاحقة. وتبرز أواحل أشعار عرار من خلال نبضها وأسلوبها صفات مميزة لشعره كاستعمال اللغة العامية الممزوجة بالفصحي، اضافة إلى التنوع الكبير في النغمة والتأويل الشعري المتماشي السحري، والتهم، والغضب، والاعاقة الحارة واللقاءات اللاذع، والمرح العارم. ويجد الدارس لهذه القصائد احساس الشاعر الصادق القوي المثير عن الانتهاء للسكان والبيئة التي نشأ فيها الشاعر، وهو ما يعتبر علامة مميزة لأسلوب الشعر.

Abstract

This paper examines the juvenilia of ‘Arār (Mustafa Wahbi al-Tal) to determine when or how features of his distinctive poetic voice developed. The themes of these poems vary, including love poems, political poems, poems celebrating the drinking of wine, poems expressing homesickness or longing for his homeland, and poems praising society’s outsiders. However, there are no poems specifically concerning the gypsies, a theme for which his later poetry is widely known. In tone and diction the early poems display distinctive features of ‘Arār’s style, including abrupt juxtaposition of classical and colloquial diction. The early poems are characterized by a wide range of tones, including irony, sarcasm, outrage, sentimental longing, vituperation and rhetorical exuberance. His highly developed sense of the particularity of place can be found in his earliest poems and can be considered a hallmark of his style.

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The youthful poems (juvenilia) of ‘Arăr (Muṣṭafā Wahbī al-Tal) bloomed in a manuscript entitled ‘‘Flowers of the Forest.’’ These poems were discussed in ‘Arăr -- Poet of Jordan.' These poems are also mentioned in the edition of ‘Arăr’s works edited by Dr. Mahmoud Samrā, but they were not included in this edition on the grounds that they were translations or imitations and that the level of the poet’s technical skill was still undeveloped. The poems were edited for a thesis and first published in ‘Arăr: the Alienated Poet, by Aḥmad Abū Ḍajār. The poems were re-printed in the edition of ‘Arăr’s Divan (Complete Works) edited by Ziad Zu’bī. In footnotes to this edition, Mr. Zu’bī identified certain technical flows, including places where the rhyme or meter is uneven.

The goal of this paper is to examine this early poetry to determine when or how features of ‘Arăr’s distinctive poetic voice developed. Examination of the poems reveals that the poems are indeed derivative to some degree. A few are direct translations; some are imitations or versions of other originals; others contain isolated elements drawn from previous poems, genres or traditions. Nevertheless, virtually every poem contains features which mark the work as distinctively ‘Arăr’s, and each poem constitutes an important step in the development of ‘Arăr’s poetic voice.

The topics of these thirty one poems vary greatly. However, most of the themes which are developed in his later poetry can be found here. There are love poems, poems celebrating the drinking of wine, political poems, alternatively expressing patriotic chauvinism and outraged protest, poems expressing homesickness or longing for his homeland, and poems lauding the values of society’s outsiders. Perhaps the most numerous category consists of occasional pieces, written to commemorate a specific occasion, such as the opening of a school, the death of a brother etc. The one topic conspicuously absent from these early poems is the poet’s affection for the gypsies, but the gesture of holding up the gypsies as counter-culture heroes can be anticipated in the attitude toward society reflected in the early work.

Of the thirty one poems, fourteen can be dated, from 1912 to 1919. Although the rest are undated, most can be associated thematically or stylistically with the dated poems. At the time these poems were written, ‘Arăr’s age ranged from thirteen to twenty. His earliest known poem commemorates his leaving Irbid in 1912 to attend the ‘Anbar school in Damascus. His schooling at ‘Anbar was interrupted on various occasions. He sometimes returned to Irbid for vacations; he was banished at times to Aleppo and Beirut for instigating commotions; during 1916/17 he made an extended trip to Iraq, where he visited his cousin and acquired a wife. After 1919 there is a gap in the poetic record until 1925.
In the light of ‘Arār’s stature as a political poet, there are surprisingly few political poems among his early ‘‘Flowers,’’ a fact accentuated by the gap in the record of his poetry from 1919 to 1925. The major event of this period was the First World War, culminating, in the region, with the Arab Revolt and Prince Faisal’s assumption of authority in Damascus. ‘Arār’s early poetry contains few references to these events. In fact, there is little evidence to show whether, in principle, he supported the Turkish government or the Arab Revolt. There are two fragmentary poems which provide haunting but limited insights into his attitude toward these events. In one, ‘Arār joined a celebration of the victory of the Turkish armies near Suez in 1915:

May God bless our armies, for they
Are the elite -- the bravest of the brave.

They surpass all the world in courage;
No people can stand before them.'

It was the victory celebrated in this poem which galvanized the British into taking seriously the negotiations with Sharif Hussein which culminated in the Arab Revolt. However, there is surely no evidence in this poem that ‘Arār would have approved at the time of an Arab Revolt, in particular if such a revolt would have resulted in dividing the Muslim world.

On the other hand, and apparently flatly contradicting the above poem, there is a short piece in which ‘Arār contemptuously refuses to attend another meeting of the Turkish Party of Unity and Progress:

Forget about the club -- its members and directors.
I am not from among them.

Forget any oaths we may have sworn.
Never again will we darken its gate.8

This poem seems to indicate an opposition to the Turkish government as vehement as the support for that same government expressed in his previous poem. However, these poems are too fragmentary to draw more than tentative conclusions. The poem does not indicate why or exactly when ‘Arār adopted this stand. Nor can we say that this party constituted an official organ of the Turkish government. However, the party clearly promulgated pan-Turkish interests at the expense of the local Arab population.

The evidence of these two poems, fragmentary as it is, suggests that ‘Arār did not have a coherent political vision but rather reacted in a vehement fashion to particular incidents as they arose. In his reactions, he was, by turns, rebellious, cantankerous, and chauvinistic. Steady work toward a clear goal within an established political framework was evidently not one of his interests. In this regard, his temperament changed little throughout his life.
In 1918 the Arab Revolt swept past ‘Arār’s region of Irbid. There was a major battle in Dir’ā, near Irbid. Then Prince Faisal moved on to Damascus. There is no first hand record of these events in his poetry and little evidence that he participated directly in them. In 1919, however, we find ‘Arār addressing the Arab Club of ‘Ajlūn:

We the Arabs! We the Arabs!
We force our enemies to drink the glass of death!

Justice is just one of our marvels!
And victory is one of our habits!

Ask anyone about our customs --
You will be told about the strength of the Arabs.

Among us there are many people
As strong as Ţāriq bin Ziad:

As Faisal, who breathed life into a nation
And liberated the land and tribe of the Arabs."

In this piece of rhetorical exuberance, ‘Arār clearly foresees no shadow darkening the hopes of the Arab Revolt. He is swept along by the mood of the time. Perhaps in deference to his ‘Ajlūn audience, he emphasized the unity of all Arabs rather than the unity of Islam celebrated in his poem of 1915. In this poem he does not, for example, mention Saladin, who might easily have come to mind in a poem written under the shadow of the Rabad castle.

During the period from 1919 to 1925, Europeans established hegemony in the region, and Prince Abdullah assumed his position as leader of the newly defined territory. The part played by ‘Arār in these events is not recorded in his extant poetry. He may have written poems which are now lost. When the record begins again in 1925, ‘Arār was established as governor of Shobak. The poems from 1925 are as conventional as any of his early poems. They are generalized love poems, further laments for his vanished youth, and celebrations of drinking sessions. Evidently it was not until 1928, with the agreement between Great Britain and Transjordan, that ‘Arār conceived of poetry as a weapon which could be used to further a political aim. The record thus indicates that, although ‘Arār’s reactive temperament was fully formed from an early age, his appreciation of poetry as a political instrument was not fully developed until 1928. Once ‘Arār discovered this weapon, however, he wielded it with abandon.

Another distinctive feature of ‘Arār’s later poetry is its highly personal nature, signalled by his precise references to particular people in his life and
what these people did on specific occasions. Not only does 'Arār endow Prince Abdullah, Cox and Hübni with archetypal proportions, but, among his many poems celebrating his love for the gypsy girl from Wādī al-Yābis or the Circassian girl from Wādī al-Sīr, he also mentions on various occasions his Bedouin wife Ōfāh. Virtually every person who played a role in his life turns up in his later poetry. However, during the decade from 1917 to 1927, the major emotional events in his life must surely have been his marriage to a Kurdish lady from Iraq and the birth of his first son Wāṣfī. These events are conspicuous by their absence from his poetry of the period. 'Arār's early love poems addressed to such ladies as Hind seem to be primarily literary conventions or stylized games like chess, disassociated, sometimes as far as possible, from his own actual experience. This seems to have been the definition of poetry within the convention in which he started writing. Only gradually did he turn this convention into a means of confronting the major actual emotional experiences of his own life. His sense of the function of poetry broadened as he grew older. Nevertheless, the way in which he later confronted the particular was influenced by the conventions of the early poems.

The conventional character of the early poems can also be identified in those poems in which he appears to be coping with his own emotions, as in the poems in which he expresses his loneliness in the 'Anbar school in Damascus and his longing for his home town of Irbid. These poems tend to assume the form of a lamentation for his long vanished youth, a somewhat unexpected complaint to be made by a lad of fourteen years of age. Throughout his life, 'Arār seems to have imagined himself somewhat older than he actually was. Around age forty he regarded himself as an old man and wrote about the curse of being fātī. Perhaps such a convention is a means of disassociating oneself from one's actual experience in order to achieve a degree of objectivity.

Three distinctive characteristics of 'Arār's poetry, then, appear to have developed when he was around thirty years old: his fascination with the subject of the gypsies; his use of poetry as a weapon to be wielded in the heat of political battle; his propensity for coping with the major private emotions of actual people on specific occasions. However, these aspects of his poetry, along with other thematic and stylistic features, appear to have arisen out of the conventions of the early poems.

Although 'Arār studied some French along with Persian and Turkish in the 'Anbar school, the influence of contemporary European literary movements on his early poems appears to have been negligible. His attitude toward European languages and literatures seems to have reflected his exasperation with colonialism. The conventions of his early verse are those of Arab poetry. These conventions fall into two main categories: pre-Islamic and Abbasid.
Pre-Islamic poems tend to be long, but they are not narrative poems. The most noticeable feature of such poetry is stanza -- which oscillates between meditative and declamatory. The poems shift in subject according to specified conventions. The poet begins by addressing his camel or possibly certain companions. This step can be considered equivalent to the invocation of the muse. The poet then describes his camel. He then goes on to describe the difficulties he has had on a journey. He may then describe the desert or some ruins. The ruins reminding him of the home of his beloved, he will then proceed to describe his beloved. Then he will turn to praise the monarch. In addition to the shifts in subject, there may be shifts in the person(s) addressed in the poem. The shifts in subject, while abrupt, follow specified rules. Often the shift is prompted by certain signals, such as the singing of a bird. A distinctive feature of this poetry is that the poet usually has some goal -- such as winning a lady or gaining favor from a monarch. The poem usually has a climax in the sense that the poet attains his object.

The structural conventions of pre-Islamic poetry appear in 'Arar's early poems and continued to be a major influence on the structure of 'Arar's poetry throughout his life. All 'Arar's longer poems are characterized by abrupt shifts in subject and frequently by shifts in the person addressed in the poem. The stance adopted by 'Arar frequently resembles the meditative and declamatory stances of the pre-Islamic poet. Usually, like the pre-Islamic poet, 'Arar has some goal, but whether he always achieves his goal is another question. 'Arar's use of these structural conventions does not appear to be deliberate archaism. It is simply an aspect of a poetic tradition that he accepts without question.

The conventions of pre-Islamic poetry continued to predominate throughout the Umayyad period, when the capital was in Damascus. But during the Abbasid period, when the capital moved to Baghdad and new influences, in particular Persian, were introduced, new conventions began to develop. The Abbasid poets tended to write short poems dealing with one subject rather than long poems jumping from subject to subject. The purpose of the poem is to embellish the subject presented. The setting was crucial to such embellishment. For the Abbasid sensibility, the world had become an enclosed garden within which flowers bloomed and birds sang -- as a kind of timeless decoration. The Abbasid poem tends to present one subject within such a setting. It thus resembles a picture, like a Persian miniature.

The style and the diction used within these two conventions differed. The language of the pre-Islamic poet tended to be convoluted and declamatory. Attention was paid to elaborate modes of address. In the Abbasid poem the language was equally stylized, but simpler. Even when the same element
occurs in both types of poem, its function may differ. For example, in pre-Islamic poetry, a bird singing serves as a signal for a change in subject. In Abbasid poetry the bird singing is a feature of the unvarying background.

Examination of 'Arār’s early verse reveals that, while certain poems follow primarily or exclusively one tradition or the other, the majority of these poems are characterized by a mixture of the two styles and dictons, with contemporary or colloquial language also included. This distinctive mixture of diction, which is one of the trademarks of 'Arār's mature poetic style, appears in his earliest known verse, apparently by accident.

'Arār’s earliest known poem, ‘“First Light of Morning,”’ commemorates his leaving Irbid to commence his schooling in Damascus. The diction in this poem appears drawn from various sources. The terms used to describe the gesture leaving for the journey would not be out of place in a pre-Islamic poem; however the terms used to describe the setting could occur in an Abbasid poem; furthermore, there are a number of colloquial or contemporary words. It may be significant that the colloquial words tend to appear in the rhyming positions. Evidently the rhyming sound (ق) was sufficiently difficult to achieve that the poet had to grope for rhymes, at the expense of achieving unexpected juxtapositions of vocabulary.

In the final two lines of the poem, the pre-Islamic and Abbasid elements achieve a degree of fusion:

As we approach Bushrā
An ascending bird sings,
Sharpening the sadness in my heart,
Directing it eastward to my homeland.  

As the poet reaches his first resting place (Bushrā) he hears the song of a bird. This is clearly not a romantic bird. The poet does not know what the bird is feeling. But is this a pre-Islamic or an Abbasid bird? The overall structure of the poem follows the Abbasid model. It is a short poem expressing one main idea. The action of the poem takes place in a context defined by Abbasid formulae. The bird seems to be part of the background. Nevertheless, although the bird does not signal a change in subject as drastic as those of the pre-Islamic poem, the song of the bird does trigger a change in the direction of the poet’s thoughts. Furthermore, this change, signalled by the song of the bird, serves to provide a conclusion to the poem. Furthermore, the final word “homeland” (وطن) the object of this change, could be used to express the contemporary ideal of nationalism.

Certain geographical features of these lines deserve consideration. At the song of the bird, the poet’s thoughts turn “eastward” (شرق) from Bushrā to
his home town of Irbid. But Irbid is surely not eastward of Bushrā. Evidently the word “eastward” was included for the sake of the rhyme or meter. The later ‘Arār would be unlikely to sacrifice a geographical fact for the sake of the meter. Although the poet laments his departure from his “homeland” he does not mention this place by name. It could be any village in the Middle East. Everything about the poem is abstract, conventional, generalized and stylized -- the setting, the departure, the emotions, the donkeys and the bird. Hence the reader is startled to discover that the poet stopped to rest in Bushrā, a village famous for nothing and surely known at the time only within a perimeter of two kilometers. The gesture of stopping at Bushrā has no religious, romantic or symbolic overtones. The village is mentioned only because it was the actual place in which he stopped -- a naked fact which stands out in this otherwise abstract poem with no other specific detail. ‘Arār’s obsession with specificity of place, then, appears as a distinctive feature of his style from his earliest known poem, preceding other specificities by nearly two decades.

Examination of ‘Arār’s other early poems indicates that the mention of the specific village where he stopped to rest was not an accident. The main subject of his early poems is place. In many poems -- such as “Longing for Houran,” “Wādī Ghafar,” “Naqqāṭah Spring” and “Aleppo” -- the title indicates that the work is about the place mentioned. In other poems, such as “My Night in Ḥuṣn,” the place where events take place becomes as important as the events themselves. Like his first poem, these poems contain many conventional elements, such as traditional syntax, generalized emotion and a mixture of pre-Islamic, Abbasid and contemporary diction. Nevertheless, there is a twisting of the conventions, usually with the effect of emphasizing place. The Abbasid convention implies that the setting is significant because an action took place in that setting. ‘Arār reverses this equation. For him, an action is significant primarily because it took place in a specific setting.

An example of the way ‘Arār twists conventional formulae in order to increase the emphasis on place occurs in “Longing for Houran.” Lines five, six and seven of this poem are quite conventional:

I hope to live (O my brother) in a goat hair tent
In just such a vacant desert, surrounded

By people whose hearts are free from evil
And who are sincere in their love for me,

Far better this this than inhabiting a palace,

Citadel or fortress besieged by squalid buildings.¹²

These lines seem to have been taken from an Umayyid poem describing a Bedouin girl whose husband took her to live in a palace:
'Arâr transforms the Umayyid contrast of condition into a contrast of place.

لَيْتَ تَفَقَّدُ الأُرَّاحُ فِيهُ اْحَبَّةٌ رَأْنَ قَرْفُ مَنِيف
ولَيْسَ عِبَادَةً وَتَفْصِّلُ عَيْنِ اْحَبَّةٌ رَأْنَ لَسَ النَّفُوْح

For 'Arâr, sincere and generous people can only be found in Houran: they certainly cannot be found in Damascus.

The conventional tone of such a poem as "Longing for Houran" would be melancholy. However, in seeking to render his appreciation of place unconditional, 'Arâr may be said to have broadened this conventional tone. In the conclusion of the poem, 'Arâr declares:

If, O my companions, death comes one day
To take my soul to the Heavens,

Make my grave in Houran; for I would catch
The perfume of Houran as I take my final rest.13

The "perfume of Houran" is surely a synthesis of a variety of elemental aromas. Hence the tone of such a line may be said to vary from omnivorous gusto to discriminatory irony, but it is certainly broader than the conventional melancholy traditional for such a poem.

This poem is important for a study of 'Arâr's later poetry because the imagery 'Arâr subsequently used to represent the "free and sincere" gypsies in their tents appears to have been taken intact from the formulae used in this poem to describe the Hourani bedouin. And just as, through the magic of poetry, 'Arâr can transform the multitudinous aromas of Houran into "perfume," through the use of analogous means, he is later able to transform the squalor of a gypsy camp into an archetype of pre-lapsarian bliss. The changes in the original Umayyid poem which 'Arâr made in "Longing for Houran" provided him with a formula which he could use with little further alteration when he later chose to describe the gypsies.

"Naqqatâlah Spring" employs the structural conventions of pre-Islamic poetry, but the style shows further signs of 'Arâr developing his own voice.14 The poem displays the shifts in subject characteristic of the pre-Islamic poem. He begins by describing the spring; then he moves to describe the weather and seasons; then he contemplates the prospect of his own death; this subject prompts him to talk about his beloved; finally, the subject shifts to his own poetry. Evidently, like the pre-Islamic poet, 'Arâr had a goal -- which was, in this case, to write a poem. In the conclusion of the poem he declares the realization of his goal. The melancholy tone inherent in the subject is therefore changed into exaltation as the poet triumphantly announces that he has transformed his lugubrious meditations into art.
The figure addressed in this poem changes frequently. In the beginning, the poem appears to be addressed to no one in particular. Then the spring is addressed through the use of personification. In line ten, certain companions are addressed. In line twelve he is evidently continuing to speak to the companions, but the subject changes to his beloved. In line fourteen the grammatical subject (companion) becomes singular while the verb remains plural. In line sixteen, both grammatical subject and verb have become singular. Since the companion addressed is now supposed to be choosing a flower from the grave which, four lines before, had been visited by the poet’s beloved, perhaps the companion is here at some stage of undergoing a change into the poet’s beloved. Or perhaps the poet’s is addressing the (singular) companion, hoping that the beloved will overhear the request and pick the flower herself. Finally, the final two lines of the poem are again addressed to no one in particular.

In this poem, the changes in figure addressed appear to exceed the requirements of the convention, and the changes in figure addressed do not always coincide with the changes in subject. This poem represents a general tendency in these early poems. Whenever ‘Arār is closely following a tradition in all the formal elements of structure, syntax, style and diction, his mastery of proper rhyme and meter appears easy. But when he starts breaking new ground by introducing elements of his own style, he seems to find greater difficulty achieving correct and consistent rhyme and meter.

“Wādī Ghafar” appears to be a companion poem to “Naqqātah Spring.” Both commemorate a specific place: the spring is located in the valley in question, which is a steep, dry, desolate valley just west of Irbid. In these two poems ‘Arār makes this place sound like the Garden of Eden, with bountiful springs, lush pastures, and abundant game. At present this place serves as unofficial dump for the town of Irbid.

The two poems differ in the conventions from which they draw. In “Naqqātah Spring” there is an interchange of meaning between the place, events which occurred in that place (such as being buried) and the presence (however fleeting or imaginary) of the beloved in that place. “Wādī Ghafar,” being merely a rhymed couplet, the place must stand on its own as residuum of meaning. The poem appears to stand within the tradition of a description of an action within a setting. However the action has virtually disappeared, leaving only the setting, and the melancholy tone traditional for such a subject has hardened. The details of the setting are abstract and stylized in the Abbasid tradition, but they are here so compressed that, while remaining within the Arab tradition, the poem resembles a Japanese Haiku or Imagist poem by Ezra Pound. The poem conveys the essence of image -- representation of the object for its own sake -- rather than symbol -- reference to a separate source as ground of meaning.
The sense of the particular conveyed by the poem seems to have arisen, however, from the tension put on the poetic tradition rather than from the poet's observation of the actual features of the valley, with its layered outcroppings of jagged stone. The poem thus gives a convincing impression of a particular place which is highly credible until one sees the actual place in question. One then recognizes the poem as a symbol which has been compressed until the decorative elements have been squeezed out, leaving the fibrous pulp of the particular. 'Arār is thus forcing a stylized poetic of symbol into service of the particular. The thrust of his intention is steady, but his realization is uneven. He does not distinguish one place from another by virtue of precise description or minute observation. There is only one topographic feature which he can always count on to distinguish one place from another. Any specific place differs from any other place because its name is different. 'Arār thus relies on place names to carry a heavy burden of meaning.

The devices used to enhance the meaning of place may not be the same as those used to emphasize the uniqueness of place. In "Sighs" 'Arār uses an extended metaphor, comparing 'Ajlūn orchards to a lady:

In Damascus no lady comforts me  
When 'Ajlūn orchards return to my eyes

Like some lovely presented by the hand of spring,  
Garlanded in the finest of dresses,

Tinted in emerald green:  
Spring meanders in delerium

While I stand there making love to her  
By staring and reciting verse.¹¹

This metaphor makes 'Ajlūn significant, but it does not make 'Ajlūn unique because the metaphor could be applied to any number of other places. The conventional metaphor represents 'Ajlūn as a generalized symbol. The tone in this passage, however, is distinctively 'Arār's. There are two words in Arabic for poetry: sh'lr (شـعـر), formal poetry in conventional language; and zajal (زـجـال), verse written in dialect. If the poet intended serious praise of the "lady," he would choose the more formal medium of expression. Furthermore, it is hardly polite of him to stare at her, and it is presumptuous of him to be making love or even to be talking to her. The conventional figure of speech, which is traditionally used as a means of praising either the lady or the place, becomes, in 'Arār's hands, a vehicle for a kind of mocking exaggeration. The tone of exaggerated praise undercut by irony is a distinctive feature of 'Arār's work. One has the feeling that 'Arār could not praise anyone or anything without turning the venture into a kind of mockery.
‘Arār wants to tell us that certain places in Jordan are unique and important. But if they are important they are not necessarily unique, and if they are unique they are not necessarily important. In order to make these places important, he creates some kind of symbolic association. But since, to have meaning, a symbol must have a degree of universality, his attempt to make them important may work against his attempt to make them unique. If, as one critic\(^1\) has proposed, all valleys represent love and all mountains represent resistance to oppression, what makes any particular valley or mountain unique? Since ‘Arār does not use much description, and since he pays little attention to early historical periods of Jordan, such as the Nabatean, he asserts the uniqueness of place first by invoking the name of the place and second by commemorating certain actions or private incidents associated with the place.

Fully half of ‘Arār’s youthful poems can be classified as occasional works -- designed to commemorate a specific occasion. This traditional genre of Arabic poetry, called sh‘ir al-munāsabāt (شعر المناسبات), was usually used to dignify some such occasion as the coronation of a king. The general convention of such poetry is that the specific occasion being celebrated is important because it is similar to an equivalent occasion in the past, and leaders are praised for their similarity to former heroes. ‘Arār early demonstrated an easy mastery of such poetry, turning the conventions to various ends.

In “Say a Prayer for Me”\(^2\) ‘Arār employs a number of archaisms. The occasion is his departure for Iraq in 1917. The poem is addressed to his mother. The prospective journey is represented in pre-Islamic vocabulary: (Desert (ṣahrā, صحراء); empty place (al-Qa‘f القفر); departure (al-rajal الرحل). While contemplating his departure, he has a vision of the death of his beloved. The tradition of such visions was frequent in pre-Islamic poems, when the poet imagining or viewing certain ruins would foresee the future of himself or his tribe. The transitions from the initial subject to the concluding love poem also follow pre-Islamic convention. It may serve to put the conventional nature of the vows expressed in such poetry into perspective to recall that it was on this trip that ‘Arār married his first wife.

One of ‘Arār’s most memorable poems was prompted by an incident when someone from the village of Ḥuṣn stole some wheat from the people of Irbid. ‘Arār’s response demonstrates both skill and enthusiasm for invective, a mode of traditional Arab poetry called sh‘ir al-hijā, شعر الحجام. The focus of this poem is sustained throughout. This is perhaps the longest of ‘Arār’s early poems in which there is no change in subject. Usually ‘Arār does not stay with one subject (even love) for more than five lines at a time. To maintain the demeaning and derogatory tone, ‘Arār uses blunt, colloquial language.\(^3\)
Indeed, it is a general characteristic of 'Arîr that, when he wants to praise someone or something he uses stylized conventions and archaic language, and the length of his utterance is relatively short. For example, in praise of Aleppo he declares:

Aleppo! The fountainhead
Of singing and playing!

Aleppo -- field of the wild oryx
Whose eyes soothe our worries and miseries."

The convention of comparing a girl's eyes to the eyes of the wild oryx is as old as Arab poetry, and use of this convention tells us nothing specific about Aleppo. On the other hand, when 'Arîr wants to attack someone, he uses fluent, straightforward language, his descriptions are accurate, precise and realistic, and it is able to keep the subject in focus for an extended period of time.

Other special poems commemorate such occasions as the death of the poet's mother, the death of his father's sister's husband, and other events. One special form of occasional poetry, however, deserves particular consideration, namely written in commemoration of some drinking session. For 'Arîr, a drinking session is an occasion to be formalized, commemorated, even sanctified, through the use of poetry as formal invocation and incantation. The occasion is treated as a ritual, a treat the event as a ceremony; it isolates the moment from the onward movement of time and defines this moment as an important event in the same final function as the ceremony at the completion of a month of religious services during a funeral. The archetypal form is somewhat like that of the memorized epic of a king with no exacts like previous antecedents of the same genre. In 'Arîr's work, the normal elements recur, i.e., the poet, the king, poet, the king, the poet, the poet, the king, etc., which is a genre in which the poet presides over the celebration of a year, a new year, an hour of beauty. This poet, while a monarchy, is a king who, in his drinking and his ritual exercises.

Such drinking poems fall under two or three main types. The first type is an imitation of the Abasalid prince Abû Nuwâs, who wrote poems with lyricism, eroticism, and mocking. Although Abû Nuwâs tended to ridicule the excesses of his society, in form his poems belong to the conventions of the courtly period for "Among Gypsy Tents." 'Arîr acknowledges a debt to Abû Nuwâs.

How often I imagine Baghdad in our visits to their tents.
Just a handspan to the east of Māḥiṣ.

I derive pleasure from imagining myself

In the company of Abū Nuwās and Bashshār.\(^{21}\)

These lines assert that, in his drinking bouts among the gypsies, ‘Arār was re-enacting the sessions celebrated by Abū Nuwās. Furthermore, ‘Arār reproduces the full context. The gypsy tents become Abbasid Baghdad. Abū Nuwās is a member of a community of like-minded hearty imbibers. ‘Arār is indebted to Abū Nuwās not merely for certain ideas but for a context, a style of poetry, a world view.

Three pieces among ‘Arār’s youthful poems appear directly indebted to Abū Nuwās: "O My Two Drinking Buddies";\(^{22}\) "The Voice of the Grave";\(^{23}\) "Munkīr and Nakīr."\(^{24}\) The first of these poems contains various formulae for achieving happiness. The imagery reproduces the Abbasid view of the world as an enclosed garden:

Over there is my village nestling
Among gardens embroidered with daffodils.\(^{25}\)

The garden provides a decorative frame for this enclosed universe. Drinking wine serves as a substitute for or alternative to religion in the sense that it enables one to accept the conditions of life. The tone of the poem is optimistic:

We were created to live in tranquility, not sadness;
Our aim is to be happy and play forever

The flute and the rababa as we drink.\(^{26}\)

The pre-condition for the happiness is the cohesion of the ordered and protected world view. Before the poet begins drinking, he looks around him and describes the setting -- the garden which frames the poet and his companions. Certain of his place, secure in the friendship of his companions, the poet can then start enjoying himself. The drinking enables him to accept his lot in life -- even if this lot be represented as a hut instead of a palace:

Our hut is more sublime than the highest palace;
Its furnishings are just as they should be.\(^{27}\)

Abū Nuwās was accused by his contemporaries of turning drink into a religion, at least to the extent that drink imbued the drinker with the faith that the happiness which could be achieved through reconciliation with one’s lot was something tangible. This poem also contains echoes of a different tradition. A footnote in the Zu’bi edition reports:
‘Arâr continued for four days drinking wine and reading Omar Khayyam in the Arabic translation of Wâdi al-Bustânî. He then went to his room, locked the door and wrote this poem.18

The following lines show the influence of Omar Khayyam:

That is your world which I sold
For a jug of wine and a loaf of bread.

Pass around the wine, for life is a mirage.29

Within both Christian and Muslim traditions, Omar Khayyam is described as pessimistic in such an assertion that life is a mirage. A Buddhist would argue that such a belief is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. But Muslim and Christian alike believe that man’s life, while finite, is nevertheless real. Within these two traditions, to deny the reality of life is the very essence of pessimism. In this poem, for all the echoes of Omar Khayyam, the optimistic tone as well as the formal conventions are closer to the work of Abû Nuwâs.

Two other poems which exhibit influence from Abû Nuwâs represent the poet speaking from the grave, a convention also employed by Abû Nuwâs, who, like ‘Arâr, used the grave as a platform to proselatize for his religion of love and wine. The message is that God loves a lover and even tolerates a drinker. The “voice from the grave” has access to privileged information on this subject.

In these two poems, along with such other early works as “The Voice of My Brother,”32 ‘Arâr follows Abbasid convention in his representation of the grave as place or setting. The grave, like the world, is a specific enclosed place, like a garden. Lovers, in particular, feel comfort in the grave, which is enclosed and protected, like a womb. Perhaps the tradition of the cemetary as garden, now prevalent in the West, may have been influenced by Abbasid conventions.

Early Muslim conventions for representing the grave were rather different. To this day, a devout Saudi Muslim will be buried out in the desert, with no marker to identify the site. For him the grave is no specific place; it is literally no place. Since the grave cannot be located, symbolically, the person’s identity becomes like the transient shapes formed out of sand by the wind.

At least six of ‘Arâr’s early poems establish some relationship between love and burial in the grave. In these poems it is burial (a ceremony) in the grave (a specific place) that is emphasized more than the process of dying or the fact of death. The lover, like the drinker, takes an odd comfort in being buried.

The different burial conventions in the Abbasid and early Islamic periods are paralleled by different attitudes toward love. The early Islamic attitude
toward both love and death could be described as proud stoicism. The Ab
basid lover, on the other hand, complains, weeps and begs for favors. The
ey early Islamic lover appears as a staunch patriarch, brooding upon his re
donibilities.

'Arâr's conventions for representing both the lover and the grave fall
within the Abbasid tradition. The goal of the Abbasid lover is to return to the
womb; being buried in the grave will gratify this urge if the grave can be iden-
tified as a specific place, center, a cosmic omphalos, a lush garden em-
broidered with flowers. The stern early Muslim regards the grave as a place
for acknowledging responsibility, a place of judgement, a place of punish-
ment. 'Arâr, echoing the Abbasid poet Abû Nuwâs, regards the world itself as
the place of judgement and unreasonable responsibility. The grave is a place
where one can escape into a kind of pre-natal serenity. "Lines Over the Grave
of a Suicide" represent the idea that, in the grave, one can find not only
escape from unhappiness in life but release from judgement afterwards:

Such pain attacked me that I sought death
In the prime of my youth.
Sadness died with me at life's summit
Today my body dissolves into earth.
O you who chastise me for taking my own life:
Forget about your blame; listen instead to my answer --
Better it is for a man to die
Than to squander a life in the misery of grim routine."

In "The Voice of the Grave" 'Arâr repeats the idea that death can bring
freedom from judgement:

God does not torture the drinker of wine."
The drinker, like the suicide and the lover, finds freedom from judgement in
death. Drinking can also be the means of achieving the release from judg-
ment. The serenity and acceptance achieved by the drinker resemble the re-
lease from judgement which the lover can find in the grave.

One of 'Arâr's early poems celebrating drinking sessions seems to arise,
however, out of a quite different tradition. In "My Night in Hush" the place
where 'Arâr does his drinking is as significant as in his other poems. Hush is
primarily a Christian community, and the setting for this particular session
seems to have been the church itself. 'Arâr declares:

O Monasteries -- What congenial people you contain,
I could spend my life within your walls."
Since Christians in Jordan are permitted by law not only to drink but to handle, produce and sell alcoholic beverages, it was natural for 'Arār to do his drinking with Christians. But even in his later poetry, 'Arār carries this association rather far. In "Breath of Easter" 16 'Arār seems to regard the celebration of this sacred day as an excuse to go on a binge. The association of drinking with Christian ceremony seems, however, more than sacrilegious mockery. As is generally the case in 'Arār's poetry, commemoration of drinking sessions serves to sanctify occasions as ceremonies. The Catholic Mass provided a model for such ceremonies which stood entirely outside the tradition of Abū Nuwās. In the Mass, imbibing of wine is an assimilation of Christ's blood in ritual memory of the Last Supper. It thus serves not as release from memory and judgement but as an opportunity to recapitulate the agony of Christ.

It is surely significant that, when 'Arār is doing his drinking in a Christian setting, he gives us lines which would never appear in Abū Nuwās:

O companions -- if any among you
Suffers the burden of sadness --

Let my back be the one to carry
All burdens of pain, sadness and humiliation. 17

Drinking in this situation not only prompts 'Arār to face his own burden of guilt but to assume the guilt of his companions. 'Arār is taking on the persona of Christ.

Most of 'Arār's later drinking poems display an odd amalgamation of the Christian tradition as well as the tradition of Abū Nuwās. In general, 'Arār will begin an account of a session by declaring:

Here we are, O my companions, in a pleasant place.
Let us drink in order to have a good time and forget our troubles.

But the more 'Arār drinks, the more morose he becomes. Instead of forgetting his troubles he starts to brood on these troubles and often ends up assuming also the burdens of his entire society. These traditions are already fully articulated in his early poetry.

SUMMARY

The issues arising in 'Arār's early poetry fall into various categories:

Theme

The one specific theme for which 'Arār is known which does not appear in his early work is his appreciation of the gypsies. However, virtually every
other theme in his later work can be found in the early poems, including love poetry, expressions of political opinion, patriotic verse or appreciation of or longing for his homeland, and poems commemorating specific occasions, including drinking bouts. The formulae which he later used as the basis for his respect for the gypsies appears in an early description of Hourani bedouins.

Structure

The two main traditions of structure which appear in his later work -- the pre-Islamic and the Abbasid -- appear fully developed in his early verse.

Tone and Diction

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of ‘Arār’s style, the abrupt juxtaposition of classical and colloquial diction, appears in his early poetry, sometimes as if by accident or as a by-product of his quest for rhyme and meter. His use of irony, sarcasm, outrage, sentimental longing, vituperation, and rhetorical exuberance all appear in various of his early poems.

Person, Place and Occasion

‘Arār’s use of specific place names begins with his earliest poems and continues throughout his work. This habit can be considered a hallmark of his style. Its use in his earliest poems cannot be fully explained by the conventions he is following or imitating in these poems. His representations of persons in his early work is more conventional. His tendency to represent particular people in particular occasions evidently developed more slowly. From the first, ‘Arār exhibits as great a sense of occasion as he does of place. There is a symbiotic relationship between place and occasion. A place may be significant because of something that happened in the place, and an event may be significant because of the place in which it occurred. But although place and event are thus related, there are important differences between them. For ‘Arār, a place is important because it is unique whereas an event is important because it is similar to an equivalent earlier or archetypal event. His poetry must thus express the particularity of place and the universality of events, which are invoked in his poetry as ceremony or ritual. A distinctive feature of his style, therefore, is a dialectic tension between his mode of realizing place and his mode of invoking occasion.
Footnotes

1 Yacoob al-Oodat, ‘Arār: Poet of Jordan (Amman: 1958). ‘Arār’s early poetry is discussed in Chapter III (pp. 27 – 38). The title of the present article is taken from the title to this chapter.


4 Ziad Salah al-Zu‘bi, ed., Evenings of Wādī al-Yābis (Amman: 1983). This text is used as the source for all translations cited in the present article.

5 See, for example, “After the Battle”, Ibid., p. 537. This piece is a translation from Victor Hugo.

6 See, for examples, Ibid., pp. 557, 565, and 566.

7 Ibid., p. 554.

8 Ibid., p. 534.

9 Ibid., p. 532.

10 Ibid., p. 546.

11 Ibid., p. 547.

12 Ibid., p. 530.

13 Ibid., p. 531.

14 Ibid., p. 540.

15 Ibid., p. 547.


17 Zu‘bi, op. cit., p. 539.

18 Ibid., p. 552.

19 Ibid., p. 535.

20 Ibid., p. 344; Samra, op. cit., p. 1.

21 Ibid., pp. 224 and 225.

22 Ibid., p. 557.

23 Ibid., p. 565.

24 Ibid., p. 566.

25 Ibid., p. 558.

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21 Ibid., p. 557.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 558.
30 Ibid., p. 555.
31 Ibid., p. 540.
32 Ibid., p. 533.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 565.
36 Ibid., p. 146.
37 Ibid., p. 548.
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1 PRIMARY SOURCES

IA Newspapers and Journals which Published Arar’s Poetry

*al-Ordun* 1949: Jan 31, May 27, May 29, June 3, June 4, June 5, June 8, July 17, July 31, August 13, August 14, August 21.
*al-Jazira* June 11, 1939; Nov. 3, 1949; May 25, 1949; and posthumous.
*al-Seyasa* August 9, 1931.
*al-Karmil* 1925: July 25, August 12, August 15;
1929: August 7;
1931: June 6, July 10, June 27, July 1, August 8,
October 24, October 31, December 30;
1932 January 6, January 13, February 3, February 6,
February 16, February 20, February 24, March 2,
March 5, March 12, March 16, March 19, March 23,
March 26, April 2, April 4, April 6, April 13,
April 16, April 22, April 27;
1934: June 20, August 11;
1937: June 15.
*al-Nisr* April 26, 1938
*al-Wafa'* April 21, 1938
*al-Naged* No. 25, 1931: Article on Sufism

IB Manuscripts and Papers

Letters: ‘Arâr’s letters have not been collected or published. However, many
of his letters are extant and are held in private hands, in particular with
his sons Said and Murawid.

Translation: The manuscript of ‘Arâr’s translation of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar
Khayyam is held by the Jordan University Library.

Manuscripts: Original manuscripts of many of ‘Arâr’s poems are held by
Murawid al-Tal.
A manuscript of unpublished poems (Volume II) by King Abdullah is
held by Murawid al-Tal.
A manuscript of unpublished poems by Hamza al-Arabi is held by
Zuhair Hamza al-Arabi.

Diaries: A diary by Salah Mustafa al-Tal (the poet’s father) is in the posses-
sion of Murawid al-Tal.
An unpublished journal of recollections of his father is in the possession of Murawid al-Tal.

IC Editions of collected poems

1933 ‘Arâr made a preliminary collection of his poems, to be called Ashiyyat Wadi al-Yabis.
1983 Third edition of Collected Poems, ed. Ziad Salah al-Zu’bi. Prepared as MA Thesis under Mahmoud Samra. Contains many previously unpublished poems. Zu’bi divides the canon into five groupings: complete poems; poetic exchanges between ‘Arâr and other poets, including Prince Abdullah; juvenile poems and imitations; isolated lines or proverbs; mistaken attributions. Zu’bi finds eight of the poems in Samra to be mistaken attributions and three more to be sections of longer works.

ID Miscellaneous Works by ‘Arâr

1934 Happy Life and Many Children, Amman, 1934. A work assembled by ‘Arâr to be presented to Prince Talal on the occasion of his engagement.
1938 The Imams of Kuraish, Amman.
1938 “My Friends the Gypsies.” A sequence of radio broadcasts presented by ‘Arâr on the Jerusalem Broadcasting Station. These broadcasts were printed in Arar: Poet of Jordan, Yacoob al-Odat and are reproduced in the present edition.
1927 “An Open Letter to the British People,” Saut al-Shaab (Voice of the People), Bethlehem, Palestine (March 30).

II SECONDARY SOURCES

IIA Criticism (Books in Arabic)

Naser Eddin al-Asad, Modern Literature in Palestine and Jordan, Cairo, 1957.


Yacoob al-Oodat (pen name, al-Bedouin al-Mulatham -- the Bedouin enwrapped in his head cloth), *‘Arar: Poet of Jordan*, Amman, 1958. First and until now definitive biography of the poet. Contains period photographs now lost, gypsy songs and many lines of verse not included in the first edition of ‘Arar’s collected poetry.

### II (Articles in Arabic)

Amina al-Adwan, *‘‘Arar-- Poet of Jordan,’’ Afkar (Thoughts)*, No. 29, August, 1975, pp. 26 – 31. This Magazine is published in Amman by the Jordanian Ministry of Culture and Youth.


Fathi Maqbul, *“Arar: MWT, His Poems and Pictures of His Life and His Society,” Afkar*, No. 43, January 1979, p.7.


