

MEM Awards

**Remarks by the Recipient of the 2017 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award
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I am honored and grateful to be the 2017 recipient of the Middle East Medievalists Lifetime Achievement Award. I will first say a word about the distinguished previous recipients, most of whom I have known for years, not only through their influential and often groundbreaking academic work that has shaped our disciplines—Arabic, Middle East and Islamic studies—as we know them today, but also as friends and colleagues who offered kindness and support over the years.

Pierre Cachia took over as my dissertation chair after my marriage to Jaroslav Stetkevych, and encouraged me to publish one of my early articles, “Toward a Redefinition of *badī‘* Poetry” (*Journal of Arabic Literature* 12, 1981: 3-29). George Scanlon invited my husband and me to lunch at his lovely Garden City apartment in Cairo a couple of weeks after the birth of our first child—most welcome as I was

still in shock at new motherhood. Jere Bacharach, who has known my husband since their Harvard days, must have been on the same sabbatical schedule as me as we repeatedly spent time together in Cairo over the years, in addition to graciously hosting us while I was the Solomon Katz Distinguished Professor at University of Washington in the spring of 1999. In Cairo, too, I remember us sitting at the Gezira Club with Richard Bulliet, now many years back. Then of course, there is the University of Chicago connection, where I intersected over the years with Stephen Humphreys, Fred Donner and Wadad al-Qadi. I regret that I never met Patricia Crone, whose work brought so much life to our field but who died so early. In brief, I am honored to be in such company.

I am also a bit surprised, partly because I am still laboring under the illusion that I am too young to fall under the

* This essay is based loosely on my notes for remarks made at the MEM Members’ Meeting held during the MESA conference in Washington, DC, in November 2017.



“lifetime achievement” rubric and partly because I have so many projects I still hope to complete. A glance in the mirror belies the first misconception. As for the second, I can only hope that my current much anticipated—at least by me—magnum opus on Abū al-‘Alā’s al-Ma‘arrī’s poetry will not meet the fate of becoming an opus posthumous.

Middle East Medievalists has asked me to take this occasion to give a brief retrospective on my academic career. As I am a person who looks forward more than back, it has been a useful if somewhat stressful exercise. Although I have recently been exploring the post-modern Arabic prose poem (*qaṣīdat al-nathr*), I have thought it better on this occasion to attempt to impose some narrative coherence on my somewhat chaotic academic career—although that may ultimately prove to be a fictional exercise.

I entered the field of Middle East studies almost entirely by accident when, as an Art History major at Wellesley College, I had to fill in an elective course my junior year, and *Introduction to Islam* fit the available time slot. That led, however, to a course in Arab history; and when taking my senior year at Johns Hopkins University, to the study of the Arabic language and the writing of my senior thesis on Arab Maqāmāt illustrations. Intrigued by this, to me, new world and civilization, I applied to graduate school with the idea—and a rather convincing application essay—of studying the modernization of Islamic law.

I chose the NELC department at the University of Chicago on the strength of its Arabic program, and settled into what we would now term an Orientalist course of study, of languages—Arabic, Persian and Syriac (and a bit of additional Greek and

Latin)—and the close reading of texts in a variety of fields, or what we would now call disciplines (history, theology, Qur’ān, Kalām, philosophy, Sufism, literature, but never, however, law!). When it came time to think of a more focused field, I thought first of cultural history. However, when studying history texts with Wilferd Madelung we came across a couple lines of poetry. I dutifully looked up the words I didn’t know and translated the lines—completely wrong as Prof. Madelung informed me. And that was the reason I decided I’d better study classical poetry in graduate school, because I couldn’t read it on my own. The rest is (literary) history.

The greatest advantage of the University of Chicago approach was that it covered a variety of disciplines and focused on the mastery of close reading of original texts. This was before the advent of the age of literary criticism and the age of “disciplines.” It is not accidental then that one of my most important critical breakthroughs was in the linking of the high rhetorical *badī‘* poetry of the Abbasid age to *‘Ilm al-Kalām*, a science whose abstract thinking was expressed in terms remarkably similar to the “far-fetched” metaphors of *badī‘* poetry at the caliphal courts. Nor is it merely coincidental that one of my earliest publications—which still manages to get hits on Academia.edu—was “The ‘Abbāsīd Poet Interprets History: Three Qaṣīdahs by Abū Tammām” (*Journal of Arabic Literature* 10, 1979: 49-65).

That early article set the stage for much of my subsequent work, particularly in exploring the means by which poets and poetic conventions created cultural memory of historical events, transforming them into perduring hegemonic myths of what I later termed “Islamic Manifest

Destiny,” that is, a teleological ideology of history along the lines of the 19th century US expansionist idea. This formed the groundwork of my dissertation (1981), which I subsequently developed into my first book, *Abū Tammām and the Poetics of the ‘Abbāsīd Age* (Brill, 1991).

By the time I obtained my Ph.D., the age of theory was upon us and with it the move to abandon the broad text- and language-based Orientalist studies for a particular discipline. For me, that was Arabic poetry, clearly text-based and grounded in a variety of Islamic and Middle East Studies fields, but now engaging as well a wide range of exhilarating ideas, from linguistics to literary theory, from structuralism to ritual theory, that held the promise of bringing classical Arabic poetry out of the Orientalist closet and engaging and integrating it into a broader humanistic enterprise.

My first big step was both backwards and forwards. Backwards, in that I wanted to understand the pre-Islamic roots and origins of the 1500-year tradition of the Arabic *qaṣīda*, and forward, in that I wanted to engage current anthropology- and religious studies-based theories of ritual to explain why a particular poetic form—seemingly arbitrary and distinctly non-narrative—could dominate a literary culture for so many centuries. To me, ritual, with its tradition-rooted repetition of formal structures and symbolic sequences, laden with inexplicit but profound meaning and capable of producing spiritual and social transformations while still serving as a bulwark of the social structure, seemed an obvious place to look. I began with Victor Turner’s and Mary Douglas’s revival of Van Gennep’s rites of passage, and proceeded with Mauss’s formulation of

ritual exchange, as the foundation for my subsequent work, including my book *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Cornell UP 1993) and article “Pre-Islamic Panegyric and the Poetics of Redemption: Mufaḍḍaliyyah 119 of ‘Alqamah and Bānat Su‘ād of Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr” (in *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. by Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, Indiana UP, 1994, 1-49).

In the course of these works I incorporated as well work in the field of orality and literacy studies, especially that of Walter Ong and James Monroe, to integrate the formal structure of the Arabic *qaṣīda* into a scheme of oral-formulaic poetics and to conceptualize the effect of literacy on the abstracted rhetorical expressions of the Abbasid period. Further, I was able to dispense with the textual isolation—quarantine—that the Structuralists had imposed on the *qaṣīda* to examine poetry within a tribal or court social structure, and within a historical and cultural setting. I except from this general critique of Structuralism in Arabic poetry, the fine and influential study of Stefan Sperl.

My engagement with the ritual aspects of Arabic poetry left me perfectly poised to absorb and apply the work that appeared in fields as diverse as the classics, folklore, linguistics and literary theory on rituals of royalty and court ceremony, together with performance and performative (speech act) theory. This allowed me to deepen my understanding of the *qaṣīda* and further integrate it into its political and cultural environment, particularly as that setting is presented in the literary *akhbār*, anecdotes or notices, that accompany so many poems in the classical Arabic literary compendia. These texts not only evaluate the poem

in terms of verbal art and performative success, but also show the poet pledging—or retracting—his allegiance, and negotiating for rank and status in complex religious and political settings. Above all, the awareness of this exceedingly delicate political role or negotiation that the *qaṣida* performed alerts us to fine points of imagery, rhetoric, metaphor, etc. that had otherwise been overlooked. The further exploration of the *qaṣida* in this light led to my book, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode* (Indiana UP, 2002), whose chapters range from the pre-Islamic royal ode to the Cordoban court panegyric of al-Andalus.

Then things got out of control. Some colleagues suggested that since I had written on the first ode to be given the sobriquet of “Mantle Ode” (*Qaṣīdat al-Burdah*), that is, Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr’s renowned Bānat Suʿād poem of apology to the Prophet Muḥammad, that I should also write about the even more renowned *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* of al-Būṣīrī, the 13th century master-poem of Prophetic praise (*madīḥ nabawī*) from Mamlūk Egypt. Why not? I thought, it’s only one poem.

Little did I know that this poem is the centerpiece of an entire world of post-classical devotional poetry. Then, too, the same well-meaning colleagues insisted that if I were to write about al-Būṣīrī’s *Burdah*, then I had to write about the neo-classical poet Aḥmad Shawqī’s (d. 1932) anti-colonial response to it, *Nahj al-Burdah*, famed throughout the Arab world to this day through its performance—you can find it on Youtube—by Umm Kulthoum. Of course, I am a believer in life-long learning, but what was supposed to be couple of one-off articles on a couple of poems

turned into a book-length study on the three center-pieces of Islamic devotional poetry—the two *Burdahs* of Kaʿb and al-Būṣīrī and *Nahj al-Burdah* of Aḥmad Shawqī—and a plunge into the poetics and politics of the post-classical and colonial periods. My book, *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muḥammad* (Indiana UP 2010) is the result of these endeavors.

Far from being a dead end, however, this has led me to study some of the multitude of poetic offspring of al-Būṣīrī’s *Burdah*, such as the 14th c. al-Fayyūmī’s *Takhmīs al-Burdah* (a poetic amplification in which a new poet adds his own lines to incorporate the original) and the 14th c. Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī’s *Badīʿiyyah* (an imitation of al-Būṣīrī in which each line exemplifies a particular rhetorical device). So, by some strange providence—or curse—my earliest work on the first *badīʿ* rhetoric in the Abbasid poet Abū Tammām has led to the *badīʿiyyah* of the post-classical age and to my reformulation or recontextualization of rhetoric in both the High Abbasid classical court *qaṣida* and the post-classical praise poem to the Prophet.

As I see it, in the Abbasid period, the rhetorically dense and complex *badīʿ* style served as the linguistic correlative or verbal embodiment of divinely ordained caliphal power and was therefore *de rigueur* in court panegyric. Given its status as the most elevated form of language (other than the Qurʾān, of course) this rhetorical ornateness, which was then buttressed by the classical Arabic rhetorical formulations of *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, became equally compulsory in medieval poems of prophetic praise. The prophet deserved a level of language at least equal to that for a caliph!

Having made what contributions I could to the newly flourishing field of post-classical/pre-modern Arabic literature, my current project is to return to where I belong—the Abbasid *qaṣida*. I am now grappling with the poetic works of the blind Syrian acerbic ascetic Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 1059). While his first collection, *Saqṭ al-Zand* (*Sparks of the Flint*), is what I would call somewhat hybrid forms of the High Abbasid *qaṣida*, his second collection, the celebrated *Luzūmiyyāt* (Compulsories) is a programmatic alphabetically ordered collection of double-rhymed poems in every rhyme consonant of the Arabic alphabet and with every vowel, plus *sukūn*, ending. The argument that I hope to present is that in the transition from his worldly performative *Saqṭ al-Zand* poems to his ascetic programmatic *Luzūmiyyāt* we can see the transformation from classical to post-classical Arabic aesthetics.

Should I survive that trial, I will follow al-Ma‘arrī’s obsession with rhyme, to return to the roots of Arabic poetry in the Jāhiliyyah, in an attempt to understand how the mono-rhyme and monometer serve both compositionally and mnemonically to shape the Arabic *qaṣida*. For example, the monorhyme at once limits the length of the poem, but also—especially when we include the vowel patterns that are part of the consonantal rhyme—bestows a unique sonority that both defines and preserves the poem in an oral-formulaic setting.

This should bring us full circle in the issue of poetry and history. As I know that most MEM members are historians, I am aware that we are all grappling with issues of the authenticity and historicity of materials—particularly vexing in the early Arab-Islamic period. Poetic texts are

doubly problematic: first, as poetry, they are eminently non-narrative and what is expressed is conveyed through allusion, metaphor, simile and in the context of a performative and ritual negotiation. The poet does not record events, rather he transforms them into the material of negotiation and cultural myth. The “texts” of early Arabic poems (until sometime in the Umayyad period), as we now know, were largely oral-formulaic in composition and, for the most part, orally transmitted, until the *tadwīn*-project of the 8th-9th century linguists. However—and this is key—what we know now of the mnemonics of oral poetry, and of the even more stringent case of Arabic poetry with its mono-rhyme and monometer (as opposed to mere parallelism, or meter but no rhyme, or varying rhyme) is that the poetic materials we possess from the pre-and early Islamic periods should be more stable, and therefore more authentic, than the prose narratives that have come down to us. [By this I mean the “high” *qaṣīd* poetry, not the more common-place and eminently imitable *rajaz*-type poetry such as we find in *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*.] So, we may have a body of material that is authentic, but, nevertheless, does not say what it means—or rather, does not provide the information that historians are looking for—or at least, not in the form we are looking for.

What then remains before us, concerning the problematics of poetry and history, is to ascertain what poetry aims to do and then see if it can answer any of our historical questions. It is not meant to record names and dates and battle descriptions, rather, at least as I now see it through my work, it is a key part of a performative ritual that negotiates issues

of legitimacy, status and allegiance. In this regard, it is ripe for further exploration as we deal with political, religious and cultural history.

If this presentation has seemed altogether too solipsistic, it is because it would take far too long to name all the teachers, colleagues, students and friends, not to mention scholars and poets, whose

dedication to scholarship and poetry and whose kindness and generosity to me has made my work possible. My greatest hope is that the new generation will find something in my work to inspire them to continue in the exploration and explication of Arabic poetry and Arab-Islamic cultural history.