

Reviving the Effaced Other in Francis Thompson's "Arab Love Song": the Pre-Islamic Arabian *Qasidah*

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□ ABSTRACT □

This article critiques the hegemonic role of the textual space created by what Gérard Genette called the *paratext* in constructing a cultural boundary of otherness. Such paratextual strategy shapes the Catholic-oriented readings of "Arab Love Song," a poem by the British poet Francis Thompson, which have controlled its reception as a Catholic metanarrative on the pre-Islamic Arabian otherness. In particular, the authoritative paratext on "Arab Love Song" has maintained an undisputed projection of demonology and exorcism as pillars of the pre-Islamic Arab Bedouins' life. My proposed reading of "Arab Love Song" engages both narratology and postcolonial criticism to uncover the effaced pre-Islamic Arabian voice in the paratexts of Thompson's poem. In this context, this article demonstrates how Thompson's poem communicates a very non-Catholic perspective, regardless of the poet's objective. Arguably, "Arab Love Song" has both captured and revolutionized the theme and structure of the pre-Islamic Arabian love poem, the renowned *qasidah*.

Keywords: Orientalism, paratext, Arab Bedouin, Pre-Islamic *qasidah*

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استعادة حضور الآخر المغمور في "أغنية حب عربية" للشاعر فرانسيس تومسون: القصيدة العربية في العصر الجاهلي

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□ ملخص □

يقدم هذا البحث نقداً لدور الحيز النصي الذي ينشئه ما أسماه الناقد جيرارد جانيت "المناص" في بناء الحد الثقافي والذي يفضي إلى تكوين مفهوم الآخر المغمور. تنطبق إستراتيجية المناص على القراءات ذات المنظور الكاثوليكي لقصيدة "أغنية حب عربية" للشاعر البريطاني فرانسيس تومسون. حيث تسيطر هذه القراءات على التصدير الأدبي والثقافي لقصيدة تومسون كمرجعية شعرية كاثوليكية لترجمة الآخر العربي في العصر الجاهلي. وبشكل خاص، فإن مناص قصيدة "أغنية حب عربية" قد كرس الإعتقاد، والذي يعتبر غير قابل للنقاش، بأن المعتقدات الفارقة للروحانية هي من ركائز حياة البدو العرب في العصر الجاهلي. إن قراءتي البديلة لقصيدة "أغنية حب عربية" تعتمد على النظرية السردية و نقد أدب ما بعد الإستعمار لإستعادة الحضور العربي الجاهلي المغمور في مناص قصيدة تومسون. في هذا السياق، توضح هذه المقالة النقدية كيف أن قصيدة تومسون تقدم منظوراً عربياً جاهلياً أصيلاً و ليس كاثوليكياً بغض النظر عن غرض الشاعر. يمكن القول أن "أغنية حب عربية" قد استعادت وطوّرت مفهوم و صياغة القصيدة العربية الشهيرة عن الحب في العصر الجاهلي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإستشراق، المناص، البدوي العربي، القصيدة في العصر الجاهلي

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Introduction:

Illuminating the influence and dissemination of Arabian culture in European literary texts, travelogues, and other writings is not a ground-breaking project. Abundant studies, which present a rich scholarship on the manifestation of the Arabian cosmology in European literature and history, have already revealed how the literary works of the Arabs had always captivated the European orientalists. These studies have particularly recorded the dissemination of Arabian literature in European culture, starting approximately in the thirteenth century, flourishing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and continuing till our modern time. In retrospect, Arabian literature has directly influenced the tastes, thoughts, topics, psychological motives, and the linguistic constructions of the Europeans. The Arabian influence on the European culture has not been exerted by individual tasks or missions. History shows how three important bridgeheads have contributed to the dissemination of the Arabian culture in Europe of the Middle Ages. First of all, the commercial convoys, which used to travel between Asia and Eastern and Northern Europe by the Caspian Sea and through Constantinople, have helped spreading Arabian traditions to Europe. The Crusaders' long occupation of some lands between Syria, Egypt, and other Islamic countries is another bridgehead. The third bridgehead is the rise of Islamic states in Andalusia, Sicily, and other countries, which led to the spread of Arabic language there.

Embracing the Arabian literary modes of narration and organization has been one of the major offshoots of the Arabian influence on Europe. As major examples, the Italians Boccaccio, Dante, and Petrarch, the English Chaucer, and the Spanish Petrus Alfonsi all have the credit of reviving the ancient arts of Arabia in their respective cultures. In 1349, Boccaccio wrote his *Decameron* in which he adopted the pattern of *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as the *Arabian Nights*, which was then in circulation in Egypt and Syria. He composed one hundred stories that parallel those of the Arabian legendary tales, and ascribed them to his seven ladies and three men in *Decameron*. Concerning English Poetry, Chaucer composed his *Canterbury tales* along the lines followed by Boccaccio in *Decameron*, of which one is the story of "The Knight" that was borrowed from *One Thousand and One Nights*. As for Spanish literature, *Kalilah and Dimnah* has served as a model for Alfonsi's twelfth-century *Disciplina Clericalis*.

The scholarship on the revival of the Arabian culture and literature in European writings has taken a different direction with the emergence of the critiques of Orientalism. The foremost series of these critical writings was launched after World War II (Macfie, 2000: 5). Edward Said is one of the major post-colonial theorists and critics who have identified the factors that attract the Orientalists' reports, and uncovered their problematics. In *Orientalism*, Said contends that the Orient "was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1979: 6). The Orient was transformed into a discourse that invited "a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment" (6). Said's argument implies that the Europeans have always used the discourse of Orientalism to reiterate their superiority over a supposedly Oriental backwardness. This European ideology of hegemony and superiority explains why, according to Said, "there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presentation*, or a representation" (21). Thus, Said's argument problematizes the Orientalists' enterprise, for it suggests that there is always an ideology that motivates the Orientalists' readings of the oriental literary products. As such, Said's contention is integral to the proposed reading in this article.

Said's critique of the Orientalists' readings has generated the queries whether all these readings are objective and whether it is possible and effective to counter their hegemony. In this respect, Homi K. Bhabha has already posed these questions and criticized Said's contention. In "The Other Question," Bhabha claims that Said has ignored the self-representations of the colonized Orient and focused instead on the imposition of colonial power rather than on resistance. Thus, according to Bhabha, Said promotes a static model of colonial relations in which colonial power and discourse are possessed entirely by the colonizer and therefore there is no room for negotiation and change (1996: 42-44). Ania Loomba is another critic who problematizes Said's argument as an invocation of Michel Foucault's discourse theory based on a reductive conception of social change that does not present an alternative consideration of a "social formation" (1998: 42-43).

My proposed reading, however, integrates both Said's and Bhabha's debates to address the translation of the Orient, particularly the Arabian East, in the work of the turn-of-the-century British poet Francis Thompson (1859-1907). Thompson has been highly appreciated for his vital contribution to nineteenth-century literature and for the sensitivity and intellect he has brought to each of his poems. He belongs to the legacy of the British writers who have expressed through their narratives their interest in oriental cosmology, especially the Arabian cosmology. Thompson's poem "Arab Love Song" (1899)¹ represents the epitome of his orientation with Arabian philosophies and narratological strategies.

Methodology:

Critical readings of "Arab Love Song" have relied on Thompson's religious observations presented in his essay "Paganism Old and New," to articulate their strategy of effacing the Arabian voice in the poem. In this essay, Thompson argues that the Greek Pagan themes of love and sensitivity toward Nature are based on eroticism, lack of spirituality, and lack of sensibility (1947: 43). He also calls for dismantling "pagan paganism" and structuring Christian paganism. Thompson's religious ideology has invited a body of critical readings that build on it to suppress the Arabian voice in "Arab Love Song." In this context, Said's concept of re-presence and Bhabha's call for resistance and self-representation are crucial to the alternative readings that recover the effaced Arabian voice in Thompson's construction of "Arab Love Song."

To identify certain elements of cultural suppression in the criticism of Thompson's poem, this article addresses the role of the paratext in creating an undisputed territory of otherness between the author and the text. The geopolitics of this paratextual space is presented in Gerard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. According to Genette, the reader has to go through the paratext in order to interpret the written or visual text properly. The paratext combines prefaces, epigraphs, notes, illustrations, reviews, and critical apparatus that constitute an "undefined zone" (1997: 2) which in reality controls one's whole reading of a narrative, a painting, a photo, etc. This "undefined zone" is not only of "transition but also of *transaction*," for it presents a "privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2). The cultural boundaries created by the paratextual territory shape the Catholic-oriented readings of "Arab Love Song." These readings retain

¹ First published in *The Dome* (Vol. 2, Issue 4, January 1899), then reprinted in Wilfrid Meynell's *Eyes of Youth* (1910) and *Works* (1913). This paper adopts *The Dome*'s version.

a territorial control that circulates Thompson's poem as a Christian metanarrative on the pre-Islamic Arabian otherness. Such paratextual frame construes demonology and exorcism as essential pillars of the pre-Islamic Arab Bedouin life.

However, my proposed reading of "Arab Love Song" contests the poem's Catholic-oriented paratexts by recognizing Thompson's revival of the pre-Islamic Arabian culture and poetics. This subversive reading reclaims the Eastern presence in "Arab Love Song" by reconnecting the poem with the period, culture, and literature to which it refers. In particular, this article examines both the theme and form of Thompson's poem with reference to the Pre-Islamic period that has produced a rich bulk of Arabian literature especially poetry. As such, restoring the cultural elements that were effaced by the poem's critical scholarship relocates "Arab Love Song" within the genre of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry. Arguably, Thompson's poem celebrates the *presence* of the pre-Islamic Arabian concept of love through a poetic form that emerges as an innovative version of the renowned Pre-Islamic Arabian *qasidah*.

Review of Paratexts:

Reviewing the criticism of Thompson's "Arab Love Song" demonstrates its paratextual strategy which is shaped by a suppressive ideology. Recognizing a religious control on the readership of Thompson's poems, J.C. Reid observes that "in the twentieth century, the chief advocates of the poet [Thompson] have been Catholic writers, more specifically priests, like Father Terence L. Connolly, Father T.H. Wright and Father John O'Connor" (1960: 70). These writers have particularly discarded the significance of the theme of pagan love in "Arab Love Song." Particular examples of their derogatory presentation of the poem featured stigmatizing it as one of the manifestations of Thompson's opium experiences, reading it as an entirely religious text, or completely overlooking it in their criticism.

To begin with, "Arab Love Song" has been indirectly paired with the disparaging commentaries regarding Thompson's personal life. As a poem that depicts Nature, "Arab Love Song" has been classified by many critics as one of the manifestations of Thompson's opium experiences. Such readings have consequently led to the representation of the Orient as an opium fantasy. In this respect, Reid claims that Thompson's early poetry is considerably and "only doubtfully religious, in that it contains religious sentiment diluted and tainted by the memories of opium-fantasies, as well as by his original neurotic instabilities, so that it becomes self-indulgent, confessional poetry, rather than a valid religious statement" (1960: 73). To support this interpretation, Reid demonstrates how Thompson has turned to Nature as "his next refuge" and how "here, perhaps more than elsewhere, the poem ["Arab Love Song"] becomes inflated. Possibly Thompson, without being really interested in Nature, wanted another alternative to dramatize his loneliness" (85). Reid's suggestion implies that the natural setting of the Arabian Desert portrayed in the poem is a source of opium fantasy that reflects loneliness. In other words, the Arabian cosmos is rendered as an expression of opium-fantasy, not as an existing world in reality.

Along with locating most of Thompson's poems within religious contexts, some critics have construed "Arab Love Song" only as a Christian translation of Arabian culture. For instance, Peter Butter presents a close reading of "Arab Love Song" that fails to convey the presence of any oriental conventions or modes of organization in Thompson's poem. Butter specifically highlights the love-song's setting that conjures the magic of the Arabian Desert shaped by "the atmosphere of night, the East, of mystery and beauty and expectancy" (1961: 21). Butter alters this brief reference to the Eastern reality into "re-

presence” as he observes that “following Father Connolly, [he is] sure that there is a second level of meaning beneath the obvious one. The first six lines of the final section are reminiscent of the passages in the Gospels” (21-22). Building on this suggestion of double meaning, Butter argues that Thompson’s frequent association of the moon with Virgin Mary in his poetry may also be significant in reading the poem as an invocation of a Christian ritual in an Arabian setting (22). On the other hand, Butter’s reference to Father Connolly is coupled with a reference to Thompson’s use of primitive symbolism and his “recognition of a system of analogy inherent in the divine plan of the universe” (28-29). Butter’s references to Connolly and Thompson construct what Said has called the “determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism” (1979: 23). This discursive formation is Butter’s paratextual strategy to justify his strict Christian interpretation of the poem. Explicating Butter’s interpretation of “Arab Love Song” highlights a gap in the scholarship that reads Thompson’s poem from a religious perspective. Such gap is related to the critics’ exclusive focus on the Catholic orientation of the poem. Such presentation of a limited orientation also functions as a restrictive paratext for it has controlled all subsequent readings of Thompson’s poem (as will be demonstrated next). Thus, an alternative reading that expands the poem’s orientation and suggests the possible presence of another cultural outlook is crucial to uncovering what has been overlooked or effaced in earlier readings of Thompson’s poem.

Suggesting Thompson’s poem as a Christian statement has even led some critics to reduce it into a mere project of demonizing and exorcizing the Arabian East’s pillars, such as the camel. In *Bedouins and the Desert*, Suhayl J. Jabbur identifies the camel as one pillar of the Bedouin’s life and highlights its centrality to nomadism in the Arabian Peninsula. The camel is the progenitor of the genuine Arab nomad and the reason for his continued survival. It is a carrier of the Bedouin’s “tent, with its panels of cloth, poles, ropes, and pegs and whatever amenities, supplies, and furnishings it contains. The Bedouin woman can ride in a *howdah* [tent] on the camel’s back and make cloth cover for the howdah to protect her from the heat in the summer”(Jabbur, 1995: 19). So, it would be impossible for the Bedouin to live in the desert and move from one part of it to another without such carrier. The camel even becomes a holy trope in the Islamic culture, for it is described in Sūrat al-Mu’minūn of the Qur’an as the *fulk* (ship) of the desert. However, the Eastern trope of the camel, as mentioned in “Arab Love Song,” is translated in the poem’s paratexts into a reference to the shape of the clouds. In compiling “Arab Love Song,” critic Wilfrid Meynell follows the phrase “hunchèd camels” with an asterisk to interpret it in a footnote as “the cloud-shapes often observed by travellers in the East” (1910: 4). In general, the objective of Meynell’s anthologies and studies of Thompson’s works was “to present his poetry in a strictly conventional Catholic light in a period when fears about Modernism influenced the Church’s understanding of literature.”² Meynell’s objective generated his many notes, alterations, and deletions that were made to Thompson’s work posthumously. Meynell claims that all of these changes, including his note on the camel, were either governed by Thompson or oriented by his own knowledge of Thompson’s thinking acquired after a constant intimacy of nineteen years (1947: vii). This claim suggests that Thompson seems to be involved in this derogatory transformation of the Arab nomad’s camels into merely passing clouds. However, Brigid Boardman reveals that in *Eyes of Youth*, Meynell added the note and Terence L. Connolly attributed the note to

² See the publisher’s description of Brigid Boardman’s *The Poems of Francis Thompson: a New Edition* (2001).

Francis Thompson³ but it did not appear when the poem was first published in *The Dome* (2001: 271). Meynell's footnote has yet become a hegemonic paratext that circulates the undisputed association of "the camel" with clouds in future anthologies.⁴ This paratextual anthologization has even controlled the critics' translation of "the camel," as Butter's reading suggests, into a troubling cloud and a symbol of sin that hinders the redemptive call of Mary on the soul to find Jesus Christ.

The black tent is another Arab Bedouin's pillar that has been demonized in Thompson's scholarship. In this context, Jabbur discerns that the principle constituent of the Bedouin's household is the *khayma*, or tent, which has been inseparable from the Arab nomads and has figured in their accounts as far back as bedouins have existed (1995: 243). The Arab nomads' tents are originally associated with strength as their fabric provides protection from the sun and from cold weather. Their cloth panels are usually made of black goat's hair which is "generally stronger than spotted or white hair [for] the hair of goats that live in mountains or cold regions is generally stronger than the hair of those that live in lowland or warm regions" (249). The black tent, in particular, acquires a holy presence in the *Old Testament* and in one of the proverbs ascribed to Solomon, the wise man whose people in their earliest times lived the life of Bedouins. In "Song of Songs," ascribed to Solomon, he says: "Black I am, and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem; black like the tents of Kedar, like the cloth panels of Solomon" (1:5). However, these holy black tents are interpreted as abodes of sin in Butter's reading of "Arab Love Song." Butter's cultural decoding of the poem's images is again saturated in a Catholic consciousness that calls for exorcizing the East through a Christian ceremony. First of all, Butter indirectly locates "Arab Love Song" within the genre of Arabian love poetry shaped with hostility that needs to be urgently exorcised only through Christ's call re-enacted in Thompson's poem through the lover's call (1961: 22). Presenting the black tent as a target of this urgent exorcism, Butter translates the lover's call for his beloved to elope as an invitation "to leave the black tents of sin and come to the love and protection of the Sacred Heart" (22). In the same reading by Butter, the protective black color of the Bedouins' tents also becomes associated with sin and deviation from the right path to Christ's heart. Arguably, the ironic and contradictory aspect of Butter's reading lies in the realization that the camels (translated as symbols of sin) become carriers of the red *howdah* that Butter interprets as a reference to Christ's light.

By demonizing the camel and the black tent, Thompson's scholarship has consequently demonized the desert and the nomad, two other pillars of the Arab bedouin's life. In this context, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt demonstrates how the Arab Bedouins' renowned traits are defined as "courage of a different quality" and much admired "valour" (1903: xii). These traits are shaped by the harsh environment of the desert that compels the Arab bedouin to adapt his way of life to harmonize with his surroundings. The desert, in particular, "exerts its influence on [the Arab bedouin's] customs and manners" (Jabbur, 1995: 48) through its harshness that harmoniously develops strength, patience, and ability of challenge in his character. However, the harmony that shapes this relation is complicated by the paratextual suggestion that the Arab Bedouin's life in the desert is based on sinful pillars (camels and tents), as presented in Thompson's poem.

The only reading that somehow contributes to uncovering the eastern presence in "Arab Love Song" is *Francis Thompson: the Poet of Earth in Heaven* by R. L. Mégroz.

³ See Connolly's *Poems of Francis Thompson* (1941), p. 395.

⁴ Louis Untermeyer's *Modern British Poetry: a Critical Anthology* is a main example as it maintains the same note by Meynell about the "hunched camels." See page 35.

This work claims that "it is not an accident that the 'Arab Love-Song' is, with 'Love Declared', the most beautiful exception to the general truth that Thompson's finest poems are all explicitly in some degree religious poetry" (1970: 229). Mégroz even declares Thompson's poem as a "marvel of recreation" of "the Arab poetry of love" (230). Mégroz's focus on the oriental fervor of Thompson's imagery supports my reading as it catalogues the biographical entries that recognize the poet's influence by the ancient Eastern and Oriental philosophies, aesthetics, and poetics. Mégroz, in particular, contends that a contemporary and personal acquaintance of Thompson, Wilfred S. Blunt, did his most valuable work in turning Arabian poetry into English (230). Thompson's proposed acquaintance with Blunt's translations of Arabian poetry has been Mégroz's pretext to identify "Arab Love Song" as a poetic revival of the Arabian theme of love. This proposed relation has been even authenticated by Boardman who introduces Thompson's poem with a note that its "lines were influenced by Thompson's familiarity with Blunt's translations of Arab love poems" and that Thompson visited Blunt with the Meynells in October 1898, almost three months before the poem was published (2001: 271). However, Mégroz's reading of Thompson's poem converges with the Catholic-oriented scholarship as he proceeds in the same book to claim that Thompson has spiritualized the Bedouins' concept of pagan love (1970: 244-263).

These reviewed readings communicate the strategic use of hegemonic paratexts that have constructed a power-knowledge⁵ space and controlled all future readings of "Arab Love Song." These paratexts are a major demonstration of the Orientalist studies that project cultural stereotyping and imaginative demonology of the Arabian East. They establish what Said calls the intellectual "authority" over the Orient within western culture" (1979: 23). Such authority is therefore implicated with the western outlook that entails the project of constructing the Catholic Orient. Thus, displacing the hegemony of the paratextual interpretations of "Arab Love Song" demands a subversive reading that contextualizes the poem within Arabian culture and literature.

Objectives:

As far as extant Arabian literature is concerned, the Jahiliyya or Pre-Islamic Age covers scarcely more than a century, from about 500 A. D., when the oldest poems of which we have any record were composed, till the year of Muhammad's migration to Medina (622 A.D.), the starting-point of a new era in Arabian history. The influence of these hundred and twenty years has been "great and lasting" on Arabian poetry (Nicholson, 1998: 71-72). The themes of pre-Islamic poetry are almost as diverse as the moods and attitudes of the pre-Islamic Arabs. Records of Arabian poetry present enough evidence of this diversity. However, the production of the extant pre-Islamic poetry presents some patent and popular themes only. They are "*fakhr* (glorification of self, family, or tribe), *hamasa* (bravery and fortitude), *ghazal* (feminine love), *madih* (praise), *ritha* (elegy) and *hija* (censure or satire) and *wasf* (description)" (Fariq, 1972: 44). The *qasidah* (plural *qasa'd*) is the earliest form of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry and literature, which continued in the early Islamic era (during the first decade of the sixth century after Christ). The *qasidah* has functioned as a formal model for the *Mu'allaqat*, or the legendary "suspended poems or odes," that decorated the walls of the shrine of *Kaaba* during the annual fairs of Arabia in the Pre-Islamic era. The *qasidah* has contributed to the richness of pre-Islamic

⁵ See Foucault's theory of discourse that joins knowledge and power, examined in his *Discipline and Punish*.

Arabian literature and even extensively influenced medieval European literature through the Orientalists' works. The pattern of the classical *qasidah* somehow displays a tripartite structure of three sections that present various themes. The verses of the *qasidah* range from ten to over a hundred lines, sometimes more (El-Tayib, 1983: 38) and depict the lives of Arabian wanderers and travelers. The first section is called *nasib* (the amatory prelude). The second section is about *takhallus* or "disengagement" from the troubles of "discomfort and danger" (de Goeje, 1964: 225). The final section, the body of the poem, deals with the *gharad*, or motive. Historical records of Arabian poetry reveal how hundreds of odes fit this classical pattern of the *qasidah*. However, this pattern should not be regarded as "the invariable model" (Nicholson, 1998: 78) as the order of the *qasidah*'s sections may change and some sections may be omitted. Contextualizing "Arab Love Song" within pre-Islamic Arabian literature discloses the poem's adherence to the choice of subjects (love, separation, complaint, *madih*, and *hija*) and its revival of the generic structure of the *qasidah*.

"Arab Love Song" maintains the cultural trope of deserted encampment's revival that distinguishes the classical prelude. Thompson's poem consists of seventeen lines only. Though Thompson's poem is short, brevity is not a foreign element for the classical Arab poets. For them, the length or shortness of *nafas* (breath) is determined by the number of the lines of the *qasidah*. Thus, the brevity of Thompson's poem indicates shortness of breath on the part of the poet. The first section of the poem includes references to a certain past habitat in the desert, such as camels, springs, and maidens: "The hunched camels of the night./ Trouble the silver waters of the moon" (Boardman, 2001: 271). In the classical *nasib* or prelude, the speaker often tells of the camp ruins of the departed inamorata, which had once been the witness of a love affair (Fariq, 1972: 36). The *Mu'allaha* of Imru' al-Qays is one of the oldest odes that fit this generic description of the *qasidah*'s prelude. Al-Qays's *Mu'allaha* opens with reverie about the traces of encampment that witnessed the painful memories of love:

Halt, friends both! Let us weep, recalling a love and a lodging
by the rim of the twisted sands between Ed-Dakhool and Haumal,
Toodih and el-Mikrat, whose trace is not yet effaced
For all the spinning of the south winds and the northern
blasts. (Irwin, 2001: 7)

The speaker's everlasting love memory is reflected in the non-effaced traces of the beloved's habitat. Reshaping the prelude of al-Qays's classical poem, Thompson demonstrates how the speaker's non-effaced love is still present through the revived traces of the beloved's habitat. The livelihood of such habitat is initiated through the movement of camels and maidens. The scene, as I perceive it, describes the hunched camels that are drinking from a spring. Simply, drinking from the spring has troubled the tranquility of the water that appears bright and silver under the light of the moon. As such, the image of the moon which is reflected on the troubled surface of the spring's water has been shaken. Still within the first section of the poem, the speaker shifts the description of the camels to recollect a scene about the maidens who arrive to the spring and start singing in the early morning: "The Lady of the Light with dewy shoon,/ The pearled Girl of Dawning soon/ Through humid heaven will spring" (Boardman, 2001: 271). This description of camels and girls gathering around the spring is a revival of a natural picture in the Arabian desert habitation. This natural scene breaks the hegemony of its paratextual interpretation as an abode of sin and the lack of spirituality. Situating this scene in a pre-Islamic Arabian poetic

context also illuminates its connection to the narratological strategy of the classical prelude.

The amatory prelude of "Arab Love Song," however, presents an inventive variation from the classical prelude for it peculiarly comprises disengagement. In the classical *qasidah*, it is the second section that usually presents *takhallus* (disengagement). Such theme is cast in the form of a journey to escape the pain of love. In this so-called "travel section," the speaker usually describes his camel, his horse, his wanderings, the individuals he meets, or his courage while facing challenges. The second part of Antara's *Mu'allaqa* fits Ibn Qutayba's description of the travel section:

She spends- the evening and morning on the back of a
mattress whereas I pass-the night on the back of
a bridled black (stallion), and my mattress is a saddle on
a (horse) powerful limbed, fleshy in his kicking-places
(flanks), well-barreled in the girthing-place.(Bateson, 1970:
53-54)

As mentioned before, variations are not foreign to the structure of the *qasidah*. They may occur in the order or the number of sections in the *qasidah*. Abdulla El-Tayib mentions that the disengagement (travel section) may be omitted altogether, this being called *iqtidab* (cutting short), as in some of Zuhayr's *qasa'd*. Also, the *nasib* is sometimes substituted by reflection on the themes of life and death, as in some of al-Asha's panegyrics (Beeston, 1983: 44). Sometimes the order of the several sections of the pattern is changed or modified, as in Imru' al-Qays's *Mu'allaqa* which opens with the main theme of self-glorification, then turns to nostalgic mention of the loved one. However, Thompson's "Arab Love Song" adds an unprecedented variation. The disengagement section, which usually comes second, is integrated to the amatory prelude.⁶ The theme of disengagement is implied in the amatory part through the speaker's attempt at diversion from his love memory through a strategic involvement with his wanderings. The speaker, in particular, herds the stars ("Star gathering:"). By so doing, he recreates the narratological devices that shaped the theme of disengagement in the pre-Islamic odes by Arab Bedouins, such as passing the night "anxiously herding the stars" (Fariq, 1972: 36). The speaker's love agony in "Arab Love Song" is also diverted through the anxious activity of "Star gathering."

"Arab Love Song," on the other hand, presents another revolutionary variation, particularly related to the classical theme of disengagement itself. The *takhallus* section, which is supposed to highlight detachment, is transformed in Thompson's poem into a declaration about both the temporality and failure of the strategy of disengagement. The gathering of stars reminds the speaker of the darkness around him. And this dark scene recalls his nights with his beloved, whom he used to invite and whose presence used to bring light to the dark: "Now, while the dark about our loves is strewn,/Light of my dark, blood of my heart, O come," (Boardman, 2001:271). On the other hand, the invited beloved in the past is presented as silent: "And Night will catch her breath up, and be dumb!" (271). This reference to the silent beloved is consistent with the classical description through which the beloved is always depicted with images of chastity, confinement, and inaccessibility, such as the details of veiling and curtaining. In "Arab Love Song," the metonymic detail of the beloved's silence reflects distance,

⁶ In *The Dome's* version of "Arab Love Song," the poem is in two sections only. In Meynell's version, the poem is in three sections and only the first line that indicates *takhallus* is integrated into the prelude. In both versions, references to disengagement are implied in the first section.

inaccessibility, and absence of dialogue. Yet, the recalled scene of a silent beloved and a passionate lover recounts memories of love, suspends any challenging diversion, and ultimately provokes the speaker's urgent desire for reunion. This wish is even translated into a direct call to re-invite the beloved in the next section of the poem. As such, the *qasidah's* standard element of *takhallus* acquires new and subversive references in Thompson's poem. The *takhallus* of "Arab Love Song" becomes peculiarly strategic as it does not actually divert. Rather, it predicts the speaker's revolutionary *gharad* (motive) of reunion.

The last section of Thompson's poem also presents an inventive modification in the classical *gharad* by featuring a direct call for challenging separation in love. The third section of the classical *qasidah* usually recounts both the motive and act of will that succinctly encapsulate and comprise the centrality of the form of the *qasidah*. In *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, Suzanne Stetkevych explains how the act of will is part of the psychological drama that occurs within the full *qasidah* form. Stetkevych argues that there are many expressions that capture the crucial and decisive instant of resolve. These expressions are like that of "turn away!" and "leave off!" (2002: 10). Stetkevych identifies two responses in the Arabian poetic tradition to the pain of loss and separation. The first response is "to accept the finality of loss and to move on to other things—usually the poet's question-like *rahil* (liminal journey) that brings him to [the] praise [section]" (10). The other response is "to reclaim the past through reverie and recollection." However, double movement starts with this recollection and then with an act of will, the poet cuts it off through "the standard transition of *takhallus*" (10). Imru' al-Qays follows the first response in his *Mu'allaqa* by using the expression "ride on" (Irwin, 2001: 8). In the last section of Thompson's poem, the voice of the first person, which is the essence of the *qasidah*, evolves (El-Tayib, 1983: 42). Thompson's speaker demonstrates his instant of resolve by fighting for union. The speaker urges his beloved to leave her tribe's tents and join him in his travel: "Leave thy father, leave thy mother/ And thy brother;/ Leave the black tents of thy tribe apart,/ And Come!" (Boardman, 2001:271). Through this urgent call, the speaker introduces a revolutionary response that rejects loss and separation, denounces *takhallus*, and proposes challenge. The speaker's proposed journey in Thompson's poem also redefines the signification of travel in the classical *qasidah*. Travel becomes a means of conquering separation, not of securing disengagement from the agony of distance. The use and repetition of the imperative "leave" in this section of the poem functions semantically, phonetically, and conventionally to signal the end of recollection and dreaming that shape the first section, and the onset of serious progression in the poem. On the other hand, Thompson's poem features a certain redundancy (the repetition of the words "brother," "mother," and "father") to convey emotional complexity in the speaker's resolve to deny and deflate the inevitability of separation in love. The lover's call for challenge supported with a heavy structure of repetition-based resolve represents new thematic and linguistic elements in the *qasidah*. Such elements introduce a major development in the classical *gharad's* standard structure and themes.

The motive section in "Arab Love Song" still retains some of the prevalent themes of the classical *gharad* and maintains the prominent tropes that define pre-Islamic Arabian culture. The motive of the classical *qasidah* is usually concerned with either "panegyric (*madih*)" (de Goeje, 1964: 225), satires of tribes which were exchanged among the Bedouins (El-tayib, 1983: 55), or glorification of bravery and fortitude. So, the speaker may satirize an enemy, glorify a tribe, teach desert ethics and wisdom, or describe a chase, a battle, or a celebration. In Antara's *Mu'allaqa*, the speaker, identified as Antara,

describes a battle that foregrounds his expert horsemanship, skill in battle, and disposition: "And truly there restored my spirit, and there cast-out/ its disease, the saying of the horseman, "Woe,/ 'Antara, forward!" (Bateson, 1983: 56). As for "Arab Love Song," the poem combines both *madih* (glorification) of self and *hija* (satire) of the beloved's tribe:

Am not I thy father, I thy mother,
And thy brother?
And thou, what needest with thy tribe's black tents,
Who hast the red pavilion of my heart? (Boardman, 2001: 271)

The speaker's urging call communicates heroic boast and veneration of his power. The speaker's self-honoring is reflected in his care ("mother"), protection and confinement ("brother" and "father") of the beloved, not in defilement or debauchery. The narratological strategy that supports this self-glorification is the repetition of the pronoun "I," a conventional poetic persona in the classical *qasidah*. Through the comparison between the black tents and the red *howdah*, the speaker expresses his unique love that values marriage (the red *howdah* was used in weddings). So, the speaker *yahjoo* (satirizes) the kind of love presented in the beloved's tribe, with which she remains single, without marriage. The *howdah* becomes a symbol of the desired journey of marriage and union. The lover's call suggests that the black tents are still references to the temporary residence of Bedouin families where single daughters await transition into the married life. Again, the vehicle of this transition is the historical *howdah*. As such, the cultural implications of these Bedouin pillars are being restored through this scene of desired union. In other words, they are read in essence not in difference from the Catholic outlook. Such reading disrupts their paratextual translation into binary opposites (black tent/ *howdah*, sin/Christ's light) from a Catholic perspective.

Thompson's poem is structured as a thread of memory, a strategy that also recalls the tactics used by Arab poets who have relied on memory in organizing their poems and tales. The Arabian Bedouins have valued examining the ruins and used their imagination to revive the tropes of memory and recalled past in their narratives. So, the Arabian oral art of storytelling features memory as its center. Travel, as a way of living, is one of the compelling forces for exercising memory in Arabian literature. Historical records disclose how both memory and travel have significantly contributed to the organization of the Arabian *qasidah*. The travel trope shapes the structural definition of the *qasidah* as "no organic whole" for its "unity resembles that of a series of pictures by the same hand or, to employ an Eastern trope, of pearls various in size and quality threaded on a necklace" (Nicholson, 1998: 78). Thompson's "Arab Love Song" is organized through the trope of travel as well. This trope prevails through the presence of references to external movement in all the poem's images. The hunched camels, vehicles of travel, are drinking and resting from a journey. The water of the spring is shaken by the camels. The maidens are expected to come to the spring. Stars are gathering. The lover is calling the beloved to join him and to leave her tribe and the black tents that are already references to temporary residence. Even the speaker's call for union is expressed through a vehicle of travel, the *howdah*. These images of external movement are coupled with a suggestion of internal movement. The scene of the camels drinking from the spring leads the speaker to observe the troubled water and to recall the beautiful maidens who make trips to the desert's springs in order to bring water and wash clothes while singing. This beautiful scene initiates the speaker's recollection of his beloved and the pain of separation. Then, these thoughts drive him to propose his future plans of union. So, the poem is shaped both by external and internal tropes of travel. The travel-based organization of the poem contests and deflates the

paratextual claims that Thompson typically crams his poems with images and metaphors to the point of overlushness. J.C. Reid, for instance, denounces the language that Thompson uses and claims that Thompson, as a rule, is “carried on from image to image with scant regard for their congruity [hence reflecting] the idle fancies of a mind giving itself up to a dissolving shadow-show or a film negative on which several images have been superimposed” (1960: 107). As far as “Arab Love Song” is concerned, Thompson maps a counter-narrative that interrogates Reid’s reading for it presents a transition of images which particularly espouses the Arabian structure of travel and memory.

Thompson’s “Arab Love Song” introduces a variation to the rhyme scheme in the classical *qasidah*. Classical Arab poetry is built on the principle of monorhyme. Blank verse is alien to the Arab poets who regard rhyme not as a pleasing ornament or a “troublesome bondage” but as a vital organ of poetry (Nicholson, 1998: 77). This poetic strategy is typical of the *qasidah* where a single rhyme is repeated throughout its narrative form, whether long or short. The classical *qasidah* consists of halves that are called *abyat* (singular *bayt*). The arrangement of the rhythm is such that while the two *abyat* of the first verse rhyme together, the same rhyme is repeated once in the second, third, and every following verse to the end of the poem. Thompson’s “Arab Love Song” presents a revolutionized organization of the rhymed *qasidah* by integrating a rhyme pattern that somehow recalls that of the sonnet. Thompson’s poem maintains the rhymed two-hemistich lines that identify the structure of the classical *qasidah*. However, Thompson does not consistently retain the same rhyme in all of the lines. Instead, he presents rhymed couplets that end with six different rhymes (abbbccbdd, eeadeefa). However, both the first and last lines that posit travel toward union through the tropes of the camel and the *howdah* share the same enclosing rhyme. Thompson, as such, reconstructs the monorhymed *qasidah* by introducing a hybrid rhyme structure of sonnet-*qasidah*.

Conclusion:

In essence, Thompson’s Christian ideology and his conception of paganism do not necessarily make his knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry a totally pure one. Yet, Thompson’s Christian ideology has been used only to validate paratextual readings that efface the presence of Arabian literary themes and narrative strategies in “Arab Love Song” and to exclude any divergent interpretations. Thus, my reading of “Arab Love Song” in relation to the conventions of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry proposes that Thompson has both captured and revolutionized the form and themes of the renowned pre-Islamic Arabian love poem, the *qasidah*. “Arab Love Song” has communicated the major pre-Islamic Arabian pillars that identify the cultural orientation of the classical *qasidah*. Thompson’s poem has also retained the *qasidah*’s tripartite and memory-based structure and classical subjects, such as love, separation, travel, and glorification of bravery. However, “Arab Love Song” introduces a crucial contribution to the reconstruction of the *qasidah*’s genre. Such contribution is realized in the poem’s strategic *takhallus*, challenging motive of reunion, and hybrid rhyme structure of sonnet-*qasidah*. Regardless of the ideology that may govern Thompson’s composition of this poem, he successfully constructs a new version of the classical Arabian *qasidah*. As such, I surmise two major propositions at the end of this reading. First, if Thompson’s Christian ideology has not influenced his production of the poem, he has succeeded in recreating the Eastern presence in this poem. Second, if Thompson’s Christian ideology and project have shaped his composition of “Arab Love Song,” my reading of this poem as a revived *qasidah* has transformed it into a resisting literary product to the ideology of the composer. Either

proposition, the paratextual assumption that Thompson would be writing from a Catholic point of view has masked how completely "other" his poem is.

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