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Postclassical Poetics: The Role of the Amatory Prelude for the Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters

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The prophetic encomia—panegyrics dedicated to the prophet Muhammad—are one of the most often recited forms of Arabic poetry up to today and are grounded in a cultural milieu where hagiography, competitive circulation of narrative and counter-narratives, rituals and esoteric practices, and educational institutions have a role in its formation. The unifying of the classical erotic poetic with the postclassical devotional created out of the encomium a vehicle that encapsulated palpable memory, nostalgia, and aspirational ideal for a greater past and beloved subject and successfully left a lasting cultural imprint. Against a general disregard for the postclassical tradition as one of decadence argued by Arab modernists, I join the ongoing effort to debunk the myth of premodern decadence as interrogated by Muhsin al-Musawi's two-part article "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity?" by considering the role of the postclassical prophetic encomia's amatory prelude—a convention from the classical Arabic ode—as a site of continuity and innovation. Within specifically the famous Qaṣīdat al-Burdah *(trans.* The Mantle Ode*) by Muhammad ibn Sa'īd al-Būsīrī (*d. 693/1294*) and the badī'iyyāt modeled after the Burdah in meter and rhyme initiated by Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d. 750/1349), the prelude takes a significant poetic turn replacing the classical abandoned desert campsites of the Arabic ode with the city of Madīnah. Operating as a unifying repository of the medieval Islamic Republic of Letters, the amatory prelude continued to perform its classical function as a liminal space but innovatively transformed that space for the reading/listening public as a collective reimagining of the Beloved as Muhammad and the abandoned desert campsite as the City of the Prophet outside of the discursive borders of the imperial.*

Keywords: prelude, poetics, arabic-islamic literature, encomium, *Burdah*, Muhammad, Eros, nostalgia

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"What ails your eyes? If you say, 'Cease!' they flow with tears/What ails your heart? If you say, 'Be still!' its passion flares once more."[1]

—From *The Mantle Ode* by Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd al-Būṣīrī (d. 693/1294)[2]

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

—From "Preludes" by T. S. Eliot (d. 1965)

According to postclassical[3] Arabic rhetoricians, a well-crafted opening—whether an invocation or prelude in verse or prose form—would creatively indicate through diction and imagery the work's subject matter as well as offer a hermeneutical frame that could situate and guide the reader through the rest of the text. Taking into consideration Muhsin al-Musawi's theory of the medieval Islamic republic of letters in the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*'s two-part article "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity?" which dismantles the age of decadence thesis developed and argued by Arab modernists, I examine in this article the specific role of the amatory prelude in the postclassical prophetic encomia as a site of continuity and innovation in subjectivity formation. The prophetic encomia—odes dedicated to Muhammad the prophet—are one of the most often recited forms of poetry up to today.[4] I will argue that the postclassical amatory prelude of the prophetic encomia functioned as a unifying liminal space of shared experience for the medieval Islamic republic of letters in which its composers, audience, and participating interlocutors performatively imagined and recollected an idealized time and place.[5] Although a critical site of nostalgia, the relevance of the structures of feeling embedded in the prelude was lost on many Arab and other African and Asian modernists, a point that al-Musawi raised and that I take as a starting point for considering the ramifications and significance of prelude poetics.

1 Translation by Suzanne P. Stetkevych, *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 93.

2 The first date indicates the *hijrī* year of the Islamic calendar, and the second date indicates the year of the Gregorian calendar.

3 The postclassical period from the mid-thirteenth century to the late eighteenth century is also referred to as the medieval or premodern period in Arabic and Islamic studies. The terms and periodization is not without critique. For a full reading of the problem of periodization in Arabic literary studies, see Muhsin al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), pp. 1–3, 15–17, 89–90, and Thomas Bauer, "In Search of a Post-Classical Literature: A Review Article," Mamluk Studies Review 11.2 (2007): 137–48. See also Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? Part I," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 1.2 (2014): 273. See Roger Allen and D. S. Richards, *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

4 The prophetic encomia, or *al-madā'ih al-nabawiyya*, a genre of poetry, also includes the *badī'iyyāt* as a subgenre.

5 I say performatively here because the poetry's form begs to be recited out loud before an audience for the poem's full effect and complete affect to occur. In this genre of poetry, I would argue, form is as significant as content in terms of invoking memory.

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Imagining a Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters

Over the last decade, Arabic literary critics and scholars have been sifting through and challenging modernist-*Nahḍa* rhetoric that relegated medieval Arabic-Islamic literary production to the decadent, stylistically imitative, uninspired, and hegemonically overshadowed by an Abbasid Golden Age. This led to a dearth of North American and European academic studies on postclassical Arabic literary production in the twentieth century, the neglect of which is being rectified through Mamluk and Ottoman studies scholarship as well as the works of contemporary Arabic literary scholars.[6]

Celebrated late-nineteenth and early twentieth century Arab intellectuals such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Salāma Mūsā, and Jurjī Zaydān wrote prolifically about the medieval period in a way that paralleled if not duplicated their European counterparts' Enlightenment understanding of the medieval as the Dark Ages.[7] These prominent *Nahḍa* writers characterized the medieval period between the mid-thirteenth century fall of Baghdad to the Mongols until the encounter with European colonialism in the late eighteenth century as the Age of Decadence (trans.'*Aṣr al-Inḥiṭāṭ*). Identifying the Abbasid Golden Age (132–367/750–978)[8] as the pinnacle of classical Arabic literary excellence, these *Nahḍa* intellectuals mirrored the European construction of a modern genealogy rooted in the ancient Greco-Roman world and thus ultimately indebted to Greek philosophy and science.[9]

Following this argument, and working along an Enlightenment discourse, modernists envisioned the early Arab empires as the final patrons of Arabic literary innovativeness until the Arab world's proto-nationalist consciousness was awakened from its medieval slumber by European colonization and Arabs began their struggle for independence from European colonialism.[10] A review of Orientalist and post-colonial Arab nationalist proponents of the '*Aṣr al-Inḥiṭāṭ* thesis, which encompassed the centuries of non-Arab[11] Muslim empires—including the gunpowder empires of the Safavids, Mughals, and Ottomans[12]—demonstrate that such analyses reinforce

6 In the realm of Arabic-Islamic science, historian George Saliba has compellingly argued for reenvisioning the medieval period—also called the Age of Decline in Islamic intellectual history—as the Golden Age of Arabic science, especially with regard to the field of astronomy. See George Saliba, *A History of Arabic Astronomy: Planetary Theories During the Golden Age of Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

7 See Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? Part I," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1.2 (2014): 273. Also see Muhsin al-Musawi, *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), xxx.

8 Like other "Golden Ages" of other literatures, the framing of the Abbasid Golden Age set the standard for the academic study of Arabic literature even more than the earlier Umayyad period.

9 Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? Part II," *Cambridge Journal of Post-colonial Literary Inquiry* 2.1 (2014): 4.

10 Another aspect of such periodization is the manner in which the term *the medieval* is deployed against the *Renaissance* and *Enlightenment* that connotes a lack of civilization, complexity, dynamic cultural exchange, and literacy. See Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul's important edition on *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "The Middle Ages" Outside Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

11 Here, non-Arab as an identity marker—in contradistinction with the modern national and ethno-racial category of Arab—does not, however, sufficiently encapsulate and characterize the identity of the premodern Muslim subject and specifically the border-crossing intellectual enmeshed in the medieval Islamic republic of letters.

12 See Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Volume 3: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

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modern racialized proprietary views of Arabic literary production geographically limited within the borders of the modern Middle East. Furthermore, racialized proprietary views of Arabic literary production further reify the notion of the Middle East as the Islamic "center" by neglecting the significant contributions of premodern Arabophone writers and the African, Asian, and European libraries archiving precolonial Arabic-Islamic literary production.[13]

The tenability of the decadence thesis and Arab modernists' insistence on reproduction of European claims about the medieval in a postcolonial milieu of racialized nation-states, however, rests at best on a misreading of a massive corpus of evidence and at worst a deliberate neglect of an incredibly vast undertaking of postclassical literary production that ranged across classical and innovative genres as well as across premodern imperial borders.[14]

Both Arab and European modernists relegated medieval Islamica to the stagnant gaps. Pursuing these gaps would have led to accounting for the pathways of transmission of ancient texts reconfigured, interpreted, and translated through the lens of a robust Arabic scholarly and literary tradition epistemologically rooted in ancillary Qur'anic sciences such as Arabic grammar, rhetoric, and morphology, which were specifically targeted during the colonial period. It is no coincidence, as al-Musawi notes, that European colonial administrations developed policies directed at "native and national languages to dislodge their main domain in Qur'anic and religious studies and communication" knowing that Arabic and Islamic knowledge production was a unifying cultural force.[15] Such a culture of letters informing and shaping highly developed networks of shared poetic registers, libraries and scholarship, and seminary curricula was more far-reaching than ethno-racially bound nationalist discourses in a multiethnic and multilingual postclassical and precolonial Islamic literary world. For this reason, many Muslim intellectuals in various regions took Arabic lexical exploration particularly seriously as a countermovement to colonial education practices during the earlier phases of Arab and Islamic revival.[16]

Stretching across and circulating within the Iberian Peninsula in the West to the Chinese east, Arabic-Islamic literary production emerged not as rare and elitist modes of mimesis but as a rigorous, discursive phenomenon in which there was lively critique and debate as well as competitive showmanship.[17] This is what is encapsulated by the theorization of a medieval Islamic republic of letters, referring to

13 On the contributions of the Mamluks, for example, see 'Umar Mūsā Bāshā, *Tārīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī: al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu'āṣir, 1989).

14 For more detail about the literary production of the period, see Muhsin al-Musawi, *Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

15 "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? Part I," 277.

16 Ibid.

17 According to Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*, eighteenth-century Paris as "the locale and armature" functioned as "an intellectual centripetal and centrifugal force" creating a republic of cultural networks that ran counter to national communities. Decentering France as a model, al-Musawi argues that the existence of a medieval Islamic republic of letters demonstrates a far more extensive project informed by multiple shared cultural registers including poetics. Challenging the constructed secular-religious binary in which the secular equals humanist, al-Musawi directs attention to traditions that problematize a universal application of Casanova's theory. See "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? Part I," 268.

"a general condition that makes it possible for scholars, modes, genres, and ideas to consort with each other over time and . . . create new cultural trends and projects along with an ethos of reciprocity, exchange, and obligation."[18] Not exactly the ideal city-state of Plato's *Republic* nor a republic defined by the European Enlightenment and in the form of modern nation-states, the qualifier "of letters" is key to understanding how this particular discursive formation is organized. The qualifier "Islamic" points to the notion that the affinity to Arabic in such a literary republic was not because it was the "mother-tongue" of its interlocutors but that it is the language of Muslim communities' shared sacred text and shared intertext—the Qur'an and the final prophet, his family and community—and therefore the language itself is associated with a unique prestige and cultural capital that enabled it to become the language of scholarship. This point in particular is important when considering the invocation of sentimentality and nostalgia by the amatory prelude of the postclassical prophetic encomia and the *badīʿiyyāt* in particular.[19]

From the encyclopedic to the anecdotal from prose to poetry from the ribald to the mystic from satire to meticulous rhetorical critique, the massive corpus of Arabic-Islamic literary production emboldened the "republic." With the rise of other imperial Muslim languages—including Persian and Turkic dialects—the producers of Arabic literature increasingly received patronage and occupied spaces outside the imperial court and in transformed institutions like the chancery and the seminary.[20] Instead of following the trajectory of vernacularization north of the Mediterranean during the medieval period,[21] the Islamic republic of letters witnessed a "lexical turn" in Arabic production initiated in the eleventh century coinciding with the rise of other forms of Islamicate literary production such as in the realms of Persian literature.[22] Disciplined and codified, medieval and premodern Arabic discourse invited the compilation of numerous dictionaries,

18 Ibid., 3.

19 The postclassical *badīʿiyyāt* are a subgenre of the prophetic encomia, the emergence of which was inspired by al-Būṣīrī's famous panegyric *The Mantle Ode* or *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah*. The *badīʿiyyāt* were composed along the same rhyme and meter of the *Burdah* in praise of the Prophet but are distinguished by the attempt to create within each verse an example of a rhetorical trope (i.e., *badīʿ*). Alī Abū Zayd's defines the *badīʿiyyāt* as

> a collection of odes that appeared in the 8th/14th century and continued until the 14th/20th century; the purpose of which was to praise the Prophet and the aim of which was to collect all figures of speech within its verses (by way of) incorporating one trope in each verse.

Translation is mine. See Alī Abū Zayd's excellent work documenting the proliferation of *badīʿiyyāt* in the postclassical period in *Al-Badīʿiyyāt fī l-Adab Al-ʿArabī: Našʾatuhā, Taṭawwuruhā, Aṯaruhā* (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1983), 7.

20 See Muhsin al-Musawi for how culture provided shared codes not lost on either the *khawāṣṣ* (elite) or *ʿāmmah* (the common public) in "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? Part I," 267.

21 This important medieval European moment of vernacularization is the period in which famous figures moved away from composing works in scholastic Latin like Berceo (d. 1264) who, for example, composed hagiographical accounts in Castilian Spanish and others like Dante (d. 1321) and Boccaccio (d. 1375) who wrote prose and poetry in Florentine Italian.

22 Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? Part II," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2.1 (2014): 16. Also see Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

lexicons and grammatical compendia including the well-known *Lisān al-ʿArab* by Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1312) and the its later popular successor *Tāj al-ʿArūs* by al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790).[23] Such lexicographic production manifested a commitment to knowledge and skill outside courtly engagements.[24]

Considering *adab* as both field and practice, the prolific output of such production also points to an extensive and highly literate public that existed as readers and patrons. Cairo—a major African metropolitan center at the crossroads of pilgrimage caravans and merchants coming from the north, east, west, and south—was witness to this particular postclassical scholarly and literary culture.[25] Like Abbasid Baghdad, postclassical Mamluk Cairo later represented a central city of power in socioeconomic, political, and symbolic terms as can be seen in *The Thousand and One Nights*.[26] Neither imperial Baghdad nor Cairo, however, held the position of Madīnah—the City of the Prophet—as the poet-lover's locus of pious devotion, sentimentality, nostalgia, desire, recuperation, and ideal destination as it emerged in the poetics of the prophetic encomia to which I will soon turn. Because the change in the role of the amatory prelude builds on a history of a convention, however, it is worthwhile to provide a brief overview of the *qaṣīdah* form, the classical functions of the amatory prelude, and its continuities before considering its postclassical transformations and modern inflections.

The Prelude of the Classical Arabic Ode

The *qaṣīdah* or Arabic ode has persisted through changing eras of empires and aesthetics although its form has undoubtedly transformed. The different functions of the *qaṣīdah* were explored at length by classical literary scholars like Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/885) who is known for his description of the form of the panegyric ode.[27] The Arabic ode, much like other poetic traditions of the ancient world, has been used to praise (*madḥ*) or, in reverse, to mock (*hijāʾ*); to mourn (*rithāʾ*) the dead; and to celebrate (*fakhr*) conquests and victories.[28] One of the most popular forms of *qaṣīdah* composition in the classical period was *madīḥ* poetry or the panegyric and the elegy.[29] Like the Homeric epic form, the central figure of the ancient Arabic

23 Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? Part II," 16. Also see Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

24 Ibid., 277.

25 See Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's discussion on *adab* "Al-Adab al-Ṣaghīr," *Rasāʾil Al-bulaghāʾ [A Collection of Literary Epistles by 'Abd Allāh Ibn Al-Mukaffa' and 'Abd Al-Hamīd Ibn Yaḥya Al-Kātib*, ed. Muhammad Kurd ʿAlī (Cairo: Al-Zāhir, 1908). Also see *Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction*, 180.

26 See Muḥsin al-Mūsawī, *The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

27 See ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muslim Ibn Qutaybah, *Kitāb Al Shiʿr wa al Shuʿarāʾ: Introduction to the Book of Poetry and Poets*, trans. Arthur Wormhoudt (Oskaloosa, IA: William Penn College, 1973). Also, for a translation, see Reynold A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 71–140.

28 See Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Stetkevych offers three theories of structure to the tripartite *qaṣīdah* showing that each structure is interdependent, 1–26.

29 See Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 80.

panegyric was praised and celebrated through extended narratives about the subject's martial valor, sexual strength, and displays of socially valued virtues such as hospitality and generosity, as well as metaphorical allusions and descriptive accounts of harrowing journeys.

The tripartite structure of the early *qaṣīdah*, which emerged from the pre-Islamic period and continued to survive in the classical period, consisted of the amatory prelude known as the *nasīb*; the adventurous journey known as the *raḥīl*; and the celebratory praise known as the *madīḥ*.[30] This tripartite structure of the *qaṣīdah* eventually transformed over the course of the pre-Islamic, Umayyad, and Abbasid periods. According to Jaroslav Stetkevych, who takes a utilitarian rhetorical approach to poetics as craft, these are the three main nuclei of the *qaṣīdah* in which the theme of loss and yearning in the prelude is crucial.[31]

As the *qaṣīdah* form moved through time and different spaces—from the desert to urban centers of trade and institutions of learning and power—the *qaṣīdah* fluidly took on a bipartite structure, gradually leaving behind the descriptions of the desert journey including beasts of the desert characteristic to the *raḥīl* or journey section.[32] The poetry of al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965), for example, reproduced the prelude and the celebratory praise. An investigation of the *qaṣīdah* encounter with other Muslim cultures and languages such as Swahili and Bahasa further illustrate the impact of the *qaṣīdah* form and its transformation.[33]

What remains an important component to the ode is the transformative journey of the poetic voice initiated within the prelude and carried through until the end of the ode. The function of the ode to legitimize power and serve in a form of supplication, diplomatic exchange, and gift giving also continued from the classical to the postclassical period.[34] One of the most famous examples of this role of the medieval ode is during the episode when Ibn Khaldūn met the ruler Tamerlane and gifted him al-Būṣīrī's *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* upon meeting the feared and powerful Mongol ruler.[35]

The Amatory Prelude of the Arabic Ode: Continuities of a Convention

The lyricism of the *nasīb* or amatory prelude remained within the postclassical and modern Arabic ode as a "vestige of the past."[36] Jaroslav Stetkevych, who has written on the amatory prelude as both theme and poem, likens the prelude to the sonata form.[37] As such, he says that the prelude theme of the abandoned

30 See Renate Jacobi's argument in Stefan Sperl and C. Shackle, *Qaṣīdah Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1996), 21–31.

31 *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb*, 2.

32 The poetry of al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965), for example, reproduced the *nasīb* and *madīḥ*. For examples of the camel-section, see Jacobi's "The Camel-Section of the Panegyrical Ode" for a detailed structural analysis of the changes within the *qaṣīdah* form over four periods, 21–22.

33 *Qaṣīdah Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa*, xv–xxvi.

34 See *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode*.

35 Sharaf al-Dīn Abī ʿAbd-Allah Muḥammad al-Būṣīrī, *Burdat al-Madīḥ al-Mubārakah* (Abu Dhabi: Dār al-Faqīh, 2001), 12.

36 *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb*, 50. Also see Hussein Kadhim, *The Poetics of Anti-Colonialism in the Arabic Qaṣīdah* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004).

37 Ibid., 16, 79.

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encampment, or *aṭlāl*, establishes the tone upon which the rest of the poem is harmonically dependent.[38] That established tone is exactly what medieval Arabic rhetoricians indicate as crucial to the trope "*barāʿat al-istihlāl*"—or felicitous beginnings—in which the poet encapsulates the significance of the poem and guides the reader/audience through a deft poetic hand.[39] Conventionally infused with the erotic, the prelude of the ancient *qaṣīdah* began with a physical description of a beautiful woman (and later young man or boy) to primarily provoke the audience's interest and draw their attention to the poet before introducing the main subject of the ode, who could be a warrior or tribal chief. The prelude subject was not hidden, allegorically implied, or signified through associative signposts; rather, she was often unabashedly and directly identified by name.

In fact, the first mantle ode by Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr (d. 41/662), which he composed as a panegyric seeking Muhammad's intercession, follows suit in the amatory prelude of his ode seeking the Prophet's intercession and protection from being a targeted enemy of the young Muslim community.[40] Instead of beginning with a prayerful invocation addressing the divine and supernatural, Kaʿb's opening verses invoke the classical style and lament over the departure of a beloved woman named Suʿād as in the following verse: "Suʿād is gone, my heart stunned/Lost in her traces, shackled and unransomed."[41]

The poet identifies the beloved of the prelude by name, and she is invoked as having left the poet heartbroken. She, however, is not the subject of the panegyric for whom it is dedicated. Although later mystical preludes allegorize the body, that is not entirely the case in the ancient prelude.[42] Once the poetic voice crosses the prelude threshold, the poet must travel across treacherous physical terrain before encountering the Prophet, initiating praise of him, and seeking his intercession. Between the pathos of the prelude and the ecstatic praise of the Prophet is a far greater distance in time and space in Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr's early panegyric than later postclassical prophetic encomia.[43]

The symbolic register of the erotic prelude continued to survive within the *qaṣīdah*.[44] The *aṭlāl*, or "places of lost bliss," constitute the dominant motif of the amatory prelude, which Stetkevych translates as the lyric-elegiac prelude for its lyrical tone as well as elegiac landscape of "things irrecoverable."[45] For example, the following

38 Ibid., 20. In another analysis-by-metaphor, Stetkevych explains that the amatory prelude is the first act of a three-act play in which the emotional drama of the *qaṣīdah* is performed and transmitted to the audience.

39 I address the critical role of this particular trope in my dissertation.

40 His ode is referred to as a "mantle ode" because after the recitation of the poem, Muhammad gifted Kaʿb his mantle as a sign of intercessional protection and allegiance. Al-Būṣīrī reports dreaming of the Prophet performing this very same gesture for him while writing his most famous poem known affectionately as the *burdah* or "mantle." For a study on the mantle odes of Arabic literature, see *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad*.

41 Translation from Michael Sells, "'Bānat Suʿād': Translation and Introduction," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21.2 (1990): 148.

42 Ibid., 69.

43 For example, see the encomium of ʿĀʾishah bint Yūsuf Bāʿūnīyah's (d.923/1516) in *Sharḥ Al-Badīʿīyah Al-Musammāh Bi-Al-Fatḥ Al-Mubīn Fī Madḥ Al-Amīn* (Damascus: Rand lil-Ṭibāʿah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʿ, 2010).

44 Jaroslav Stetkevych situates the *qaṣīdah* in a larger corpus of lyric poetry in *The Zephyrs of Najd*, xi–xii.

45 Ibid., 79.

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opening verses of the *Muʿallaqah* of ʿAnṭarah Ibn Shaddād al-ʿAbsī (d.15/608) illustrate the poetic voice before the abandoned home of his beloved ʿAblah:[46]

> Have the poets left a single spot for the patch to be sewn,
> Or did you recognize the abode after long meditation?
> The vestige of the house, which did not speak, confounded you,
> Until it spoke by means of signs, like one deaf and dumb.[47]

The prelude, rather than being a declarative space of clarity, invites the audience to an interrogative space of open ambiguity in which the poet's subjectivity—the lover's trial—is foregrounded and where signposts of place and time as well as intimations of the ode's subject are embedded. The *qaṣīdah* of ʿAntarah begins with a series of two interrogative statements opening with the interrogative vocative *hal* and separated as parallel statements by the article *am*. The first is a question that calls attention to the absence of the inhabitants, which in this case are identified as poets. The second question addresses the second-person "you," which can function as a direct address to the introspective self as well as the lover's addressee and wider audience collectively participating in an act of recollection and recognition.

Nonverbal objects and apparently nonsentient signs—such as the "vestige of the house"—inhabit the space of the abandoned encampment. When the addressee sees only the abandoned home as a nonverbal material structure, it is confounding and useless; however, when the addressee sees meaning conveyed in the nonverbal as sign and symbol, it begins to "speak" without words "like one dead and dumb" and signify meaning "by means of signs." Within ʿAntarah's verses, the poet is indeed before the physical abandoned campsite; later, however, the prelude occasions "poetic deflection from eye sight to insight," particularly when the material approximations of the beloved are infused with ideas of the sacred.[48] The persistent questioning and recalibrating of the poetic voice within ʿAntarah's prelude not only opens up a space of ambiguity but also imbues that space with heightened significance through nostalgia and memory and an explosion of feeling like the bursting of a dam deftly directed and manipulated by the poet throughout the ode.

46 The *Muʿallaqāt* (i.e., *The Hanging Odes*) or the *Mudhahhabāt* (i.e., *The Golden Odes*) refer to seven famous pre-Islamic odes reported to have been written in gold and hung inside the Ka'bah as a reward and tribute to their composers' eloquence.

47 Translation by A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes: The First Chapter in Arabic Literature* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1957), 148–84. The translation, however, is of one version of the ode. In other versions, the poet says,

> Have the poets left anywhere in need of patching?
>
> Or did you, after imaginings, recognize her abode?
>
> O abode of 'Ablah in Jiwa,' speak (to me)!
>
> Morning greetings, O abode of 'Ablah, and be safe from ruin!

See Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 48.

48 *Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction*, 302.

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The poetic voice that emerges within the prelude immediately associates nostalgia to place and love to material nonverbal sites. By the eleventh century, amatory prelude themes of pre-Islamic lamentations over abandoned campsites had transformed into symbolic openness including nostalgia for homeland as well as desire for the divine in mystical poetry.[49] Thus, claims of medieval stagnation and imitation mentioned earlier certainly do not hold up before the innovative transformations within the poetic space of the prelude itself, let alone the entirety of the *qaṣīdah* form and its multiple genres.

The classical prelude trope that also continued to persist in postclassical poetics is the trope of the beloved for whom the poet yearns. The prelude's evocation of a past or elusive love is a hallmark of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah*. ʿAntarah's love for ʿAblah, despite his status as a slave, was legendary and immortalized in the Ode. ʿAntarah claims, "Indeed you have settled (in my heart) so do not entertain another/Other than me in the place of a generous lover."[50]

Invoking structures of feeling, the poet refers to the metaphysical space in which the heart is a physical space that mirrors a desert camp site and its tents.[51] That is, love resides in a location. Once the beloved occupies the site of the heart, the lover suggests that another figure cannot occupy that same "space" without uplifting the occupant already settled there. Moving back and forth from physical to metaphysical space, the prelude plays with notions of the material, immaterial, and its coexisting significance.

Prelude poetics maintain that immediately perceptible and more visible than the description of the beloved-subject's body that is absent from the campsite are the objects present in the abandoned space that once shared or witnessed the beloved's presence. As a given, each material object is an artifact of memory representing a semiotics of lost love and the erotic tension of a touch desired but never acquired. Moreover, the poet insists these objects are sensible. Touched and inhabited witnesses of the beloved, they are subject to the lover's jealousy and rivalry that continues within addresses to the earth of Madīnah and the Prophet's grave in the encomia. Within the prelude, this pleasurable pain of the erotic memory is carefully constructed and is later ecstatically dispelled in the sections of joyful praise of a heroic character, a powerful conqueror, a majestic ruler, or a generous patron.

Unlike the amatory prelude of the prophetic encomia, the classical prelude did not necessarily inform the audience of the subject of the entire *qaṣīdah*; rather, as mentioned before, the *nasīb*'s discourse focusing on a young, desirable woman or boy was a convention of classical poetics regardless of the subject. In other words, the subject to which a panegyric was dedicated and the beloved of the prelude opening that same panegyric were two different individuals. The prelude indicated to its audiences the commencement of the ode and drew their attention through the familiarity of intimacy and accessibility of the beloved invoked. The prelude, furthermore, allowed for the poet to introduce him- or herself and for the audience to dwell momentarily with the trials and experiences of the lover-poet before moving on

49 See *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb*, 77. Also see *Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction*, 290.

50 This translation is my own.

51 See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977).

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to the ode's subject of praise (or blame). In the panegyric of al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897) for example, the praise of his new patron the Abbasid Caliph Muntaṣir (d. 248/862) comes after the following prelude verses:

> She smirks with teeth, white and serrated
> And gazes with eyes dark and languid
> She sways like the bough of an Arak tree
> Swept from the side by cool zephyrs
> Among the scenes that stir the heart of a staid man
> Are a graceful figure and a languid gaze
> Though I forget, I will not forget the years
> Of youth and ʿAlwa when old age rebuked me.[52]

The verses of al-Buḥturī's prelude do not specifically indicate that the subject of the panegyric will be the ruling Caliph himself. Instead, al-Buḥturī draws in his audience with a conventional description of ʿAlwa's desirable body. Her stark contrast between the whiteness of her teeth and darkness of her eyes are also conventional descriptions of beautiful bodies. Her body appears gracefully and supple before her audience, and it is significant that she is noted for her ability to catch the attention of the most composed and grave of individuals—a description that could also be directed toward the poet's potential audience members including al-Buḥturī's patron the caliph. The lover-poet situates both the woman's body and the listener/reader in the space of the familiar—the metaphorical natural terrain of the familiar Arak tree and zephyr winds. The poet nostalgically directs attention to the loss of memory when he states "though I forget, I will not forget," making an exception for youth. In this case, the poet associates sexual strength and tempestuousness with youth as indicated by "old age's" critical view of youth. This is significant because the memory of youth is both inextricably linked to an erotic memory—to ʿAlwa—as well as distinguished from all other memories. This also immediately establishes a familiarity and intimacy between poet and audience before the poet formally introduces his subject of praise who, by virtue of status and political power, would be a far more inaccessible and distant figure. Here, the prelude is a site of shared experience in which the poet's patron is also included. The poet, through the prelude, initially forgoes an overt performance of deference to power for a performance of sameness through the invocation of erotic desire.

The persistence of the amatory prelude and continuity of the motif of the ruined desert campsite was not lost on urban poets like Abū Nuwās (d.199/814). In the following verses, he mocks poets' continued use of the classical ruined desert campsite motif in spite of their new urbanized context within cosmopolitan Baghdad. He says, "The lovelorn wretch stopped at a deserted camping-ground to question it/And I stopped to enquire after the local tavern."[53] In these verses, the trope of the lovelorn wretch and the ruined desert campsite of the first hemistitch are juxtaposed in

52 The ode is constructed along a *mutaqārib* meter. Translation by Samer Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages: Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 141–42.

53 Translation from Reynold Nicholson, *Translations of Eastern Poetry and Prose* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 33.

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contradistinction with the poet's preference for the city tavern in the second. The site of satirical yearning, the tavern, provides the poet with wine, shelter, and sociability as the urban replacement for a desert poetics of nostalgia for the absent beloved that the poet does not seek to emulate nor invite his audience to emulate.

I will now turn to the poetics of the postclassical amatory prelude within the prophetic encomia, one of the most recited forms of *qaṣīdah* to present day, and the multiple poetic registers through which postclassical audiences would have received them and modern publics would experience them as classical inflections indexing cultural memory.

A Different Campsite in the Postclassical Prelude

The prophetic encomia are a genre of panegyric dedicated to the prophet Muhammad (d. 11/632) and were first composed in Arabic during his lifetime, including one of which was composed by his contemporary Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr as mentioned earlier. During the postclassical period, an important subgenre of prophetic encomia known as the *badīʿiyyāt* emerged. Inspired by the immense popularity and success of Muḥammad ibn Saʾīd al-Būṣīrī's (d. 693/1294), *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* or *The Mantle Ode*, the specific emergence and popularity of the post-classical *badīʿiyyāt* is a particularly striking example of innovative literary production and of how the medieval Islamic republic of letters thrived on a highly literate audience steeped in knowledge of Arabic rhetoric as well as the biography of the Prophet. As a subgenre of prophetic encomia and as a pedagogical device encapsulating *ʿilm al-badīʿ*—a subfield of Arabic rhetoric focused on rhetorical tropes—within each verse, a scholar's *badīʿiyyah* was an exercise in showmanship and performance of devotion to the Prophet, Arabic language, and literariness. It represented for the composer a powerful cultural capital[54] that imbued the poet with prestige while also inviting patronage.[55] The fluid use of intertextuality and wordplay through *jināṣ* (i.e., paronomasia) and *tawriyah* (i.e., double entendre or dissimulation), for example, assumes an audience that has the requisite knowledge to appreciate and be entertained by the skill with which the poet manipulates his or her verses.[56] Such intertextuality as an aesthetically *pleasing* element could be successful only with an audience aware of textual and aural genealogies.[57] Similarly, double entendre, which the subgenre celebrated, is only rhetorically successful when the reader or listening audience is enabled to identify and enjoy wordplay through a shared understanding of the surface significance as well as the intended secondary meaning.[58]

54 Here, I am considering Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. When poets needed other sources of patronage outside of the court, social prestige offered considerable mobility, attention, and recognition, as well as attracted other forms of patronage. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

55 This raises other questions about the context in which these pedagogical concerns regarding Arabic language arose as well as the challenges for a poet and litterateur's employment.

56 For a concise translation of rhetorical tropes, see Pierre Cacchia, *The Arch Rhetorician: Or the Schemer's Skimmer: A Handbook of Late Arabic Badīʿ Drawn from ʿabd Al-Ghanī An-Nābulsī's Nafaḥāt Al-Azhār ʿala Nasamāt Al-Asḥār* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1998).

57 *Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction*, 135.

58 Ibid., 138–39.

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Within such a geographically expansive literary culture in which scholarly and literary communities' trafficked texts, the amatory prelude of the prophetic encomia transformed the classical poetics of the lost desert campgrounds into a literary space of collective memory and yearning for an Islamic past.[59] By refurbishing and deploying recurring allusions, images, and historical narratives, the prelude simultaneously decontextualized and innovatively reconstructed the City of the Prophet—simply referred to as Madīnah—as the center of nostalgia and recuperative pious desire for the Muslim subject. For this reason, as I will discuss in more detail, the amatory prelude remained a popularly used classical convention within the postclassical *qaṣīdah* as it circulated among assemblies, meeting sites such as pilgrimages, and personal libraries.

Inspired and challenged by the overwhelming popularity and influence of Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd al-Būṣīrī's (d. 693/1294) thirteenth-century panegyric entitled *Al-Kawākib al-Durriyah fī Madḥ Khayr al-Barriyah* and better known as *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah*, writers competitively participated in the vogue of *badīʿiyyāt* composition as an exercise of devotion to the Prophet, devotion to knowledge, and celebration of rhetorical panache. By doing so, scholars as poets accrued prestige that had much currency outside of the courts and among a larger Muslim public in which a subject such as the Prophet would be a common point of interest, affinity, and affection unlike the imperial beloved subjects of classical Arabic panegyrics.[60]

For the remainder of this paper, I will investigate how the amatory prelude within the postclassical prophetic encomia subgenre continued to carry its classical function as a liminal space within the postclassical period as it also underwent innovative transformations reflective of and informing the transformation of its audiences. One of those innovations, I argue, is that the prophetic encomia prelude replaced the abandoned desert campgrounds over which the figure of the classical Arabic poet-lover weeps with the City of the Prophet—Madīnah.

A Receptive Audience: Postclassical Rhetoric and Poetic Registers

As demonstrated earlier, the amatory prelude immediately created a familiar intimacy between poet and audience. Drawing from the metrical rhyming schemes of classical Arabic prosody and recited orally for a public, these odes could be memorized and retold.[61] The entertainment value of the *qaṣīdah*, similar to the ancient Greek or Sanskrit epic, was in the innovative recounting of a familiar (anti-) hero's tale immortalized by verse—not in the novelty of the story following the opening auspicious verses in the case of Sanskrit poetry, invocations in the case of Greek epics, or Arabic's conventional amatory prelude. Regarding the reception of postclassical prophetic encomia, an audience of the medieval Islamic republic of letters would have been prepared for the rich poetics of the prophetic encomia—and the *badīʿiyyāt* in particular—through multiple avenues.

59 Ibid., 187.

60 Ibid., 182.

61 One of the important roles of the postclassical *qaṣīdah* form is its ability to encapsulate and be used as an effective pedagogical tool for conveying various Arabic-Islamic disciplines including rhetoric as in the case of the *badīʿiyyāt*. This aspect of the ode, however, will not be addressed in this paper.

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An encomium carried its audience through the process of acquaintance, familiarity, and then (if successful) love and adoration for its subject of praise. Equally, if not more important, the prelude positions the audience as participants in the performance of collective longing.[62] Replete with figurative language indexing references to physical traits, places, major events, and significant characters related to the beloved-subject, the postclassical prophetic encomia indicates a shared symbolic language between poet and intended audiences. This would also suggest that the *sīra* or biography regarding the character and life of the prophet Muhammad was knowledge about which premodern audiences would have been familiar.

In terms of subjectivity formation, the prelude of the prophetic encomia gestures toward the incorporation of the audience also as empathetic lovers alongside the poet-lover. On the other hand, the prelude simultaneously and significantly gives access to the personal singularity of the poet's subjectivity. That is, the audience is privy to the private suffering of the poetic voice that at once wavers between bold confidence and defensive anxiety. In the classical panegyrics of al-Mutanabbī, for example, the poet takes on a heroic cloak in the prelude for embarking on the task of praising another. Even in his blame of Sayf al-Dawlah, for example, al-Mutanabbī begins with praising himself. Likewise, Abū Tammām does not allow for his own persona to be ignored in the court of the Caliph within his critique of the astrologers and praise of the Caliph al-Mu'taṣim.[63]

By the seventh/thirteenth century, however, the postclassical poet al-Būṣīrī introduces himself in the prelude as a lovesick poet who is unambiguously present in the first person and transparent in his vulnerability. He is a lover, like other poet-lovers, who weeps until his eyes bleed and who cannot sleep; conscious of the judgment cast by his peers; and defensive of his character deemed as excessive. After a series of questions addressing the self in the second person "you," al-Būṣīrī affirms, "Oh yes, the phantom of the one I love did come by night/And leave me sleepless; love does indeed impede delight with pain."[64]

The lover identifies the unnamed beloved—which the audience familiar with the poem would know is Muhammad—with the classical image of the "*ṭayf*" or desert phantom that haunts the lover and keeps him from sleep. From this verse until the final verse of the prelude, the self-consciousness of the poet is consistently foregrounded by use of the first-person address replacing the earlier and slightly more distant second-person point of view. Responding to the poet's self-consciousness, Al-Būṣīrī places directly after the prelude an unconventional chapter on disciplining the self-ego where he continues to address himself in the first-person only to suggest that the egotistical self must submit. Thereafter, the poet recedes to the background throughout the body of the *qaṣīdah* in what I would describe as a

62 The role of the encomia has been debated even by the ancient Greeks. In Plato's *Republic*, praise is shown to be "a powerful forces in the Athenian *polis*," and his rendition of Socrates suggests that praise is one of the most effective ways of teaching people. See Andrea W. Nightingale, "The Folly of Praise: Plato's Critique of Encomiastic Discourse in the Lysis and Symposium," *The Classical Quarterly*, 43.1 (1993): 112.

63 See "*Al-sayfu asdaqu anbā'an min al-kutubi*," by Abū Tammām Habīb ibn Aws Al-Ṭa'ī, translated by Suzanne Pinckney Stetkeveych in *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, 304–08.

64 Translation from *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad*, 93.

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poetic gesture of bowing before his subject of praise until the final two supplicatory chapters when the "I" of the poet comes forward again. The postclassical *badīʿiyyāt* composers similarly foreground their own voices in the prelude that later subtly submerge in their craft.

Intended to invoke and provoke *shawq*—love and yearning—for the Prophet as the beloved, the prelude's participatory implications encapsulate beliefs in the physical and spiritual healing powers associated with remembering, loving, and praising such a poetic subject. One of the most significant texts to advance the idea of healing through poetic provocation of the remembrance of the beloved in the Iberian Peninsula and across North Africa was Qādī ʿIyāḍ's (d.543/1149) *Al-Shifāʾ bi Taʾrīf Ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā* or *Healing by Recognition of the Rights of the Chosen One*, popularly known as *al-Shifāʾ*. For at least a century before the composition of the *Burdah* and the emergence of the *badīʿiyyāt*, *Al-Shifāʾ*—as indicated in the title itself—was considered to have the power to heal the spiritually and physically ill who read or listened to the text by virtue of its subject.[65] Qādī ʿIyāḍ affirms that remembrance of the Prophet leads to healing and narrates and lists traditions and virtues upon which this belief is based. In the section on "What is related from the Salaf and the Imams about their love for the Prophet and their yearning for him," Qādī ʿIyāḍ includes a story about ʿAbdullah ibn ʿUmar's foot going numb. When he was told, "Remember the most beloved of people to you and it will go away!" ʿAbdullah ibn ʿUmar shouted, "O Muhammad!" and the narrative ends with the feeling returned to his foot.[66] The narrative connects the remembrance of Muhammad and the love for him to the immediate healing of Ibn ʿUmar's foot.

Many other similar narratives inform the pathos of the prelude moment. Beyond the classical evocation of erotic desire, the prelude of the prophetic encomia took on both physical and metaphysical significance in generating and engendering a state of nostalgia and yearning for Muhammad in particular.[67] Moreover, narratives of healing attached to the composition of popular prophetic encomia were recited and circulated in Sufi assemblies including the story of the healing of al-Būṣīrī when he composed the *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* and the healing of Ṣafi al-Dīn al-Hillī when he composed his *badīʾiyyāh as a* contrafaction to the *Burdah*. Such narratives function to confirm the belief in the healing power of loving the Prophet and furthermore serve to lend the poet legitimacy as a true lover of the Prophet, ensuring the popularity of the genre.

Furthermore, studies in *ʿilm* al-*balāghah*—or Arabic rhetoric—also had reached new heights in the medieval period, particularly in Andalus or Muslim Spain and were later criticized by modernists as irrelevant, cumbersome, and elitist.[68] What is

65 See Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 33.

66 See ʿIyāḍ ibn Mūsá, *Muhammad, Messenger of Allah: Ash-Shifāʾ of Qādī ʿIyāḍ*, trans. Aisha A. Bewley (Inverness, Scotland: Madinah Press, 1991), 226.

67 Both *Al-Shifāʾ* and the *Burdah* are mentioned in the nineteenth-century *Maqāma* of *Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār* as texts in which French colonizers took great interest. See Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979). Also see Shaden Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

68 See *Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction*.

the implication? Codified and canonized, texts of the three subfields of Arabic rhetoric *bayān, badī'*, and *khiṭābah*—literally translated as *exposition, creativity*, and *oratory*—were deeply familiar to the writers of the *badī'iyyāt*, a popular subgenre of prophetic encomia that derives its name from the subfield *al-badīʿ*, or the study of rhetorical tropes. The *badī'iyyāt* as poetry, therefore, were devotional as well as pedagogical works intended to encapsulate all existing Arabic rhetorical tropes in a panegyric about the Prophet. In spite of the rising Persianate and Turkic empires, the study of the Arabic language and its ancillary fields remained important for individuals aspiring to a life of scholarship in what were categorized in this period as the rational (*ʿaqlī*) and transmitted (*naqlī*) sciences or a position in the chancery and legal courts. The pedagogical value of the discipline of rhetoric for critical disputation, analysis, and communication with a scholarly and popular audience were not lost on public figures. Moreover, Arabic poetry was the medium used during the postclassical period to instruct students in some of the most technical disciplines including grammar, Qur'anic recitation, and hadith terminology and criticism. This leads to the production of some of the most important poems included in seminary curriculums including the thirteenth-century *al-Ajurrumiyyah* and the fourteenth-century *al-Shāṭibiyyah*.

The *badīʿiyyāt* merged Arabic language pedagogy with celebration of the human personage of the Prophet. Regarding this point, al-Musawi argues that this medieval trend broadened the appeal of the study of language and rhetoric for a wider Muslim and noncourtly elite audience that moved away from the discourse on the inimitability of the Qur'an prevalent in classical studies on Arabic language. Thus, the factors that informed the specifically significant role of the prophetic encomia's prelude for a medieval Islamic republic of letters were the postclassical audience's familiarity with the classical *qaṣīdah* form and poetics; popular conceptions of the praiseworthiness of Muhammad as a beloved figure; circulation of popular narratives on the benefits of recalling his memory, including dream visions and physical healing; and the pedagogical concerns of conveying the Arabic linguistic sciences outside of the court and for the broader public.

Accordingly, I argue that the prelude read even outside its poetic structure is a powerful written and vocal enterprise that cuts deep into structures of feeling reaching the contemporary period and generates a political unconscious that cannot be easily dismissed in postcolonial studies. The cultural imprint of such texts as al-Būṣīrī's *The Mantle Ode* and Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's *al-Shifā'* so successfully encapsulated nostalgia and longing for an absent-present beloved and greater past—sentiments that dominate the poetics of the amatory prelude—that the mere mention of the texts' titles in modern Arabic literature commands attention. The affective nods to al-Buṣīrī's *Burdah* in the nineteenth-century work *Maqāmah fī l-Faransīs* by Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār or the twentieth-century novel *The Seven Days of Man* by ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, for example, evoke ecstatic longing and sentimentality paralleling the prelude poetics of the *Burdah* and other prophetic encomia.[69]

69 I address the inflection of postclassical poetics in these works in my article "The Book Shelf in the Inner Room: Post-Classical Poetics in Modern Arabic Literature" for a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Arabic Literature*.

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The Sufi Register and a Poetics of Remembrance

As I demonstrated earlier, the prelude verses of the postclassical prophetic encomia are poised to invoke from memory several registers including chains of authoritative poetic and rhetorical references.[70] The other important register includes the Sufi treatment of the erotic, which communicated material as well as cosmic and metaphysical yearning through symbolic representations of the body, masculine and feminine beauty, intoxication, and desire.

By the thirteenth century, for example, the Sufi Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d.633/1235) began his famous *Khamriyyah* or *Wine Ode* with a familiar address to the beloved: "We drank in remembrance of the beloved."[71] The second hemistich, however, does not situate the poet in a temporal past among material ruins of a campsite; rather, he completes the verse with the following: "We were drunk with it before creation of the vine." Instead of stopping before abandoned materiality, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's opening verses invoke nostalgia for pre-eternity situated in the nontemporal and immaterial Divine Realm.[72] Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry influenced the style of a number of *badīʿyyāt* composers including the famous seventeenth-century Damascene scholar ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulsī, who was deeply influenced by Sufi intellectuals and practitioners as reflected by the esotericism in his *badīʿiyyah*.[73]

In terms of both form and content, it is al-Būṣīrī's *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* that informed and inspired the *badīʿiyyāt* as an innovative and incredibly popular genre of prophetic encomia. Abū ʿAbd-Allāh Muḥammad ibn Saʿīd al-Būṣīrī (d.694/1294) wrote in the same century as Ibn al-Fāriḍ what would arguably become the most recited Arabic *qaṣīdah* by Muslims—Arabs and non-Arab—in the world until today.[74] Al-Būṣīrī invokes the pre-Islamic and classical motif of a bygone place and trope of a yearned-for beloved deploying the prelude as a liminal space. His prelude is simultaneously concerned with material such as the ancient preludes of the *Muʿallaqāt* and with the esoteric such as his contemporary Ibn al-Fāriḍ's prelude, which encapsulates the cosmic, the symbolic, and the spiritual.

A series of rhetorical questions, the first verses locate the poet—and the audience by virtue of participating with the poet in recollection—among familiar prelude motifs of loss, memory, significant places, and painful weeping. The prelude of al-Būṣīrī's *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* recalls in the first verse, "Was it by the memory of those you loved at Dhū-Salam/That you wept until your tears mixed with blood?"[75] The imagery of tears mixed with blood suggests the intensity and longevity of time passed in weeping over a powerful memory. That is, blood flows because the addressee's eyes literally can no longer produce tears. Like the poets of the *Muʿallaqāt*, al-Būṣīrī immediately situates

70 Ibid.

71 Translation by Th. Emil Homerin from'*Umar Ibn Al-Fāriḍ: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

72 See Qur'an 7:171 and the related narratives regarding pre-eternity in ʿAbdallāh ibnʿAlawī Al-Ḥaddād, *Lives of Man: A Guide to the Human States: Before Life, in the World, and After Death* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003).

73 Private Seminar with Abdallah Adhami, "Introduction to *Badīʿiyyat*" at Columbia University, New York City, July 2014.

74 A Google search of simply "burdah" will lead to numerous links to translations and audio recordings from around the world.

75 My translation.

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the prelude space of the *Burdah* in the desert environs of the Arabian Peninsula; unlike the aforementioned classical preludes, the identification of three locations intimates rather than directly expresses the specific location of lost bliss as well as the beloved-subject. The following verse poses two more questions: "Or was it the wind that stirred in the direction of Kāzimah?/Or the flashing of lightning in the darkness of Iḍam?"

Unlike the *muʿallaqāt*, the *aṭlāl* are not among the ruins of a campsite that is by nature temporary and unsettled but the *aṭlāl* approximates settled urban space within the volcanic valley of the Arabian Peninsula's Hijāz. Through the mention of familiar locations and an apostrophic address of the loved ones of Dhū Salam, the audience is led to conclude that the unnamed beloved of this ode is none other than the prophet Muhammad, and the place of lost bliss is Madīnah.[76] Dhū Salam, Kāẓimah, and Iḍam are all sites close to Madīnah, the city and resting place of the Prophet. Taking an innovative turn, the poet mentions these place names as signposts of the beloved-subject and the beloved's city. Seeing this in the larger context of the *hajj*, or pilgrimage, as the material journey to a land of bliss and human redemption, we may overlook the everlasting appeal of the encomia to large Muslim audiences. In other words, postcolonial inquiry has to come to grip with these realities in order to go beyond the limits of the colonial encounter. Madīnah as a representative space continues to shoulder immense symbolic power as the prophetic sanctuary regardless of the aggressive presence, interference, or neglect of a state apparatus.

In the classical deployment of erotic memory, the poetic voice intends to both entertain and focus the audience's attention through crafting a space of shared bodily experience that leaves a physiological as well as emotional memory. In the case of the postclassical prophetic encomia, that space is transformed, and the erotic is redirected entirely toward a shared experience of loss in which the figure of Muhammad signifies the beloved and the imagined Madīnah signifies the ruins of an ideal place and time. The *badīʿiyyāt* also incorporated within the prelude the exact method of naming the same signposts signifying Madīnah and the Prophet. Hence, for example, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d. 750/1349) began his *al-Badīʿiyyah al-Kāfiyyah*, the first prophetic encomium in the form of a *badīʿiyyah*, as follows: "If you arrive in Sal', inquire about the loved one/And convey greetings to the people of Dhū Salam."[77]

Like al-Būṣīrī, al-Ḥillī mentions the people of Dhū Salam in order to situate the audience by familiarity of form and content within Madīnah—the same space of the *Burdah*'s prelude. Unlike al-Būṣīrī, the poet does not initiate his ode with a series of questions and ambiguity; rather, it is an open and confident request of a voice that is experienced and knowledgeable of the layout of the land. Similarly, the sixteenth-century 'Ā'isha al-Bā'ūniyya (d. 922/1516) mentions Dhū Salam in her opening verse, *Fatḥ al-Mubīn fī Madḥ al-Amīn*. Unlike al-Ḥillī, however, al-Bāʿūniyyah not only begins her *badīʿiyyah* with demonstrative statements rather than questions or conditional statements, but she refers directly to the first trope she has incorporated in

76 *Madīnah*—often spelled as *Medina*—literally means "city" in Arabic. Originally known as *Yathrib* before Islam, the adopted city and resting place of the Prophet was resignified as *al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah* (trans. *The Illuminated City*), *Madīnah al-Nabī* (trans. *The City of the Prophet*), or simply *al-Madīnah* (trans. *The City*). Madīnah as *aṭlāl* is repeatedly invoked in the prophetic encomia.
77 My translation.

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her opening verse: "It is a felicitous opening with the moons of Dhū Salam/I have become a banner among the party of ardent lovers."

In her opening verse, al-Bāʿūniyyah's voice is less coy and more forthright by way of her incorporation of the image of the moon—an image of beauty—by which the Prophet has often been described. This is significant because although she does not initially mention the beloved by name as does al-Būṣīrī or al-Ḥillī, she also does not shy away from directly praising the beauty of her subject unlike her predecessors' deployment of the more indirect address to "the people of Dhū Salam." The image of the moons is both celestial and strikingly beautiful rather than earthly and mundane, and therefore, al-Bāʿūniyyah's prelude initiates with a celebration of physical beauty expressing a form of intimacy with the Prophet that is distinct.

A poetic of unifying force, the figurative language of these three poets utilizes the space of the prelude convention to incorporate within it the images of Madīnah and prophetic presence. To consider the mythical space Madīnah occupies is to locate the spiritual Madīnah within the material Madīnah delineated by geographical signposts at the threshold including Dhū Salam, Kāẓimah, and Iḍam and occupied by archetypal characters such as the *lā'imi fī l-haw*—or love's critics—cautioning the poet-lover before entry. They take on a folkloric and atemporal quality, having been present in the prelude even prior to the singular focus on the Prophet as beloved, and they continue to remain as witnesses to the poetic voice after.

Innovative Transformations: Temporal and Spatial Dimensions of Imagining Madīnah

After considering the multiple registers by which a medieval Islamic public would receive the prelude of the *badīʿiyyāt* and other prophetic encomia, I will now discuss how the prelude functions to invoke a collective memory reifying a literary republic whose imaginative center is the *idea* of a timeless Madīnah. The City of the Prophet also known as the Illuminated City, as the *polis par excellence*, is addressed as a representation of the Prophet and retains its symbolic power by virtue of both its past as a witness to the prophetic community and its present as a tomb housing the body of the Prophet.

Postclassical scholar Taqī al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd al-Kāfī al-Subkī (d. 756/1355) narrates that Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ (d. 20/640), the well-known Abyssinian companion of the Prophet known for his *adhān* or call to prayer, left Madīnah after the death of the Prophet.[78] The city—as a representation of the Prophet—continued to painfully

78 See Taqī al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd al-Kāfī al-Subkī, *Shifā' Al-Saqām Fī Ziyārat Khayr Al-Anām* (Ḥaydrābād al-Dakan: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Dā'irah al-Maʿārif al-Niẓāmīyah, 1897), Al-Ṭabʿah 1: 39-40. The narrative includes an account of Bilāl's reunion with Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, the grandchildren of Muhammad, who request from Bilāl his *adhān*. He acquiesced, and the people of Madīnah left their homes and took to the streets upon hearing his voice and cried in anguish at the memory of their days with the Prophet. It concludes that he left Madīnah a few days later and died in Damascus. Hadith critics dispute this incident, and some deemed the narrative as a fabrication while others like al-Subkī classified it as sound. The story is often referred to in contemporary contentious discourses regarding visiting Madīnah in order to visit the Prophet's grave. The story of Bilal's *adhān* upon the request of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn is also included in Emmanuel K. Akyeampong and Henry L. Gates Jr., *Dictionary of African Biography* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 448.

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remind Bilāl of the beloved, echoing the poet-lover's attachment to the beloved's deserted campsite and its function as a painful reminder of the beloved's absence. The narrative continues: after having been away for some time, Bilāl saw in a dream the Prophet saying, "Oh, Bilāl! How is it that you never visit me?" and upon waking, he set out for Madīnah.[79] The interpretation of Bilāl within the narrative is significant for the purposes of understanding later permutations of prelude poetics in the prophetic encomia. Within this anecdote, Bilāl does not understand his dream metaphorically in which visitation of the Prophet is understood to mean increasing devotion or pious deeds; rather, he interprets the dream to suggest that the Prophet has literally requested a physical visit to the city that both houses his body and signifies the representation of the living Prophet.

In the imagination of the medieval Islamic republic of letters, the Madīnah of the Prophet is a paradise lost. In a time of immense instability and conflict as well as migration and movement including the gradual expulsion of Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula and the incursion of the Crusaders into Jerusalem, the ideal Madīnah is constantly resurrected into being and reconstituted by way of the prelude. Reflective of the period, it is not a coincidence that, although both the composer of the *Burdah* and the first *badīʿiyyah* as a prophetic encomium lived in Cairo at the time they composed their poems, they came from other regions with al-Būṣīrī descending from a North African Berber Sanhaja tribe and al-Ḥillī from Iraq. Both compose their most famous works about the Prophet, focusing their nostalgic sentiment in verses composed about Madīnah rather than Cairo.

Unlike the prelude of the classical odes mentioned before, the preludes of prophetic encomia such as the *Burdah* and al-Ḥillī's *al-Kāfiyyah al-Badīʿiyyah* never mention explicitly by name the beloved at the abandoned campsite or the subject of the poem, who are both one and the same. The verses subtly intimate, instead, the identity of the beloved by mentioning prominent signposts of Madīnah as well as addressing its "people," or inhabitants. This synecdoche of "the people of Madīnah" encompassing excellent character exists in early classical poetry. For example, in the famous first/seventh century competitive poetic exchanges between al-Jarīr and Farazdaq, Jarīr takes Farazdaq to task for even claiming that his camel yearns for Madīnah. Jarīr says,

> He is filth, people of Madīnah, so beware
> Of incoming filth that knowingly commits evil
> Indeed Al-Farazdaq's departure from you
> Is purification for what lies between the prayer grounds and the city's borders[80]

Jarīr addresses the "people of Madīnah" in contradistinction to the unworthiness of his rival Farazdaq, who he refers to as "*rijs*" or filth. Farazdaq's "filth" then takes on a

79 In another narrative, Bilāl refers to the moment of death as a celebratory moment of union with his beloved Muhammad saying, "What a happy occasion! Tomorrow I will meet my beloved—Muhammad and his host!" See ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Qushayrī, Al-Qushayri's *Epistle on Sufism: Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya fi 'Ilm al-Tasawwuf*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2007), 313.
80 See Jarīr ibn ʿAṭīyah and Farazdaq, *Kitāb al-Naqāʾiḍ: Naqāʾiḍ Jarīr wa al-Farazdaq* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1998), 285. This translation is my own.

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metaphysical quality by Jarīr's invoking the "*khabīth*," or evil and malicious elements. By insulting his opponent, he praises the city and all those who occupy the space of the city. The inhabited city as a symbol of the Prophet's perfection is also attributed extraordinary and peculiar qualities itself.[81] At the conclusion of the third chapter of the *Burdah*, al-Būṣīrī says, "No perfume is as redolent as the dust that holds his bones/ The one who inhales or kisses it is blessed."[82] The poet places in comparison two apparent material opposites in terms of stability and value—evanescent fragrance and dirt—in the first hemistich emphasizing the peculiarity of the soil of Madīnah and denying any parity between it and other forms of perfume. By association with the body of the beloved, the dust attains sublime status. Thus, al-Būṣīrī affirms in the second part of the verse that the earth of Madīnah is consecrated.

Because of its symbolic power and sentimental resonance as an imagined ideal time and place, Madīnah—and not Jerusalem or even Makkah—became the symbolic sacred space upon which the medieval Islamic republic of letters directed its nostalgia and which the prelude cultivated. Thus, Madīnah as a signpost directed the poet-lover and the audience's ecstatic *shawq*, or yearning to Muhammad as the beloved at the center of both the panegyric and the larger Islamic republic of letters. The prelude of the postclassical prophetic encomia effectively encapsulated the poetics of Arabic-Islamic nostalgia through the space of Madīnah and the figure of the Prophet. Transmitted and circulated across discursive and military borders, it reaches into the modern period notwithstanding modernist narratives of rupture in Arabic literary historiography.[83]

Deflecting bodily eroticism to metaphysical yearning, the postclassical prelude begins with the signposts of Madīnah as the threshold and locus of nostalgia before encountering the form of earthly perfection ultimately embodied by the Prophet. The prelude's ritualistic recitation and reception, then, functions as a liminal space in which both poet and audience experience the pleasure of pain and yearning for Madīnah and the Prophet as a rite of passage. The rite of passage—to cross over the threshold of meaning—is a necessary component before proceeding to the next stage of the ode that explicitly mentions and praises the beloved-subject. The spatial and temporal dimensions of the prelude verses inform the quality of ambiguity and disorientation as a result of erotic tension.[84] Furthermore, the prelude serves to initiate the production of an imagined representational space encapsulating a literary imagination of an ideal center from which the celebratory voice of the postclassical panegyric emerges.[85] Within the premodern prelude, we see not only the intersection

81 For a review of characteristics attributed to Madīnah within Islamic discourses, see Daoud S. Casewit, "Fada'il Al-Madinah: The Unique Distinctions of the Prophet's City," *Islamic Quarterly* 35.1 (1991): 5.

82 Translation from *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad*, 99.

83 In some ways, echoes of Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities as precursors to nationalism could be read here. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso, 1991). On the other hand, this republic of letters is distinct from Anderson's imagined community that would not have met but *felt* bound together by other factors. Considering the function of *isnād* in the scholarly community as a means of acquiring prestige and authorial legitimacy and permission to transmit, writers of *badīʿiyyāt* would have been placed in direct conversation with each either through textual encounters or in actual space and time.

84 See Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (New York: Penguin, 1969), 155.

85 Lefevbre states that spaces of representation include homes as well as representational spaces such as drawings. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991).

of space and time in the motif of Madīnah as the new campsite, but it is at once mythical and real, sacred and profane.[86] As Arabic-Islamic communities went through violent transformations from the sacking of Baghdad in the east and the conquest of Andalus in the west, the impulse to make the Prophet the center of poetic discourse on Arabic rhetoric and creativity redirected attention to the City of the Prophet and away from contested urban centers of Baghdad, Cairo, and Grenada, as well as from the temporally and spatially distant memories of desert campsites. Madīnah, as an ideal replacement of the *aṭlāl* of the desert, could function as a unifying representation of an idealized place within Arabic poetics and outside of a time of immense uncertainty, movement, and identity fluctuation.

The prelude situates the lover's campsite approximating the environs of Madīnah, which itself is not crafted as a utopia in biographical literature, sacred history, or the poetry informed by it. Madīnah as a city within history is associated with a range of sentiments on the spectrum of joy and sadness; joy for the presence of the Prophet and sadness for his simultaneous absence and the power politics of conveying his presence in his absence. The prelude of the prophetic encomia re-creates a Madīnah that functions like Foucault's heterotopia in which "it is a kind of effectively enacted utopia" that is "outside of all places even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" and "these places are absolutely different from all (other) sites." The prelude establishes a sense of poetic time in which visions of the past are re-created in the present tense where the *aṭlāl* is a "personal lost circle of perfection."[87] The prelude preserves and nurtures a nostalgic state of yearning for a beloved-subject, and the associated time and place is revived through each recitation.[88] This act of interactive recollection and reciprocity reflects the aspirations and sensibilities of the poet and audience in which the audience also becomes a part of the poetic voice.[89]

Through active and collective recollection, the postclassical prelude of the prophetic encomia and the *badīʿiyyāt* in particular celebrates Arabic-Islamic poetics and calls attention to Arabic rhetoric through the subject of the Prophet with an immanence less distant than the inimitable speech of the Divine and a transcendence that subtly subverts and critiques by decentering figures of political authority ethnically and linguistically distinguished. Significantly, the genre of prophetic encomia is never referred to as the elegy (*rithāʾ*) of mourning but as the celebratory panegyric (*madīḥ*) emphasizing the aspect of the beloved-subject's presence in the world more than the subject's absence from it. The category, moreover, assumes that the poetry addresses a living subject who can respond. If we consider the erotic prelude as a liminal space, the unnamed beloved-subject emerges as a character both within and outside space and time. Within the encomia, the reader-listener is no longer in the realm of a linear temporality but a dimension outside of time that is located within an imagined idealized Madīnah existing in tandem with the material and temporal Madīnah.

In conclusion, the poetics and transformations of the prelude of the prophetic encomia are not outside the domain of postcolonial inquiry. On the contrary, their

86 See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Architecture/Movement/Continuité* (1984): 1–9.

87 See *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb*, 24.

88 Ibid., 43.

89 Ibid., 52. Also see *Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction*, 301.

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continuity in recitation among large Muslim communities in Asia and Africa reflect the deep cultural imprint of the popular Arabic-Islamic prophetic encomia and the success of the prelude's encapsulation of nostalgia and longing. Their presence in colonial discourse and modern literature since the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt should alert us to the need to further explore the make-up of popular culture where the poetics of the prelude is strongly functional, dynamic, and continues to resonate.

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