

Ántara

(late sixth century)

Ántara's Ode

Ántara is one of the great romantic figures of Arabic literature. Born in the sixth century to an African slave woman and an Arab sheikh, he was at first despised and assigned to herd his father's animals. But he was spurred to greatness by love for his noble cousin 'Abla. Even though custom allowed a man first claim on the hand of a cousin, when Ántara claimed 'Abla the family refused because his mother was a slave. Soon, however, Ántara had his chance when the fortunes of war turned against the tribe. With the enemy closing in on their encampment, his father called him to battle. He followed the call and soon proved himself the most valiant warrior in Arabia. In doing so he held his family to the ancient rule that only a free man with full rights may join in battle. The rule freed him of the taint of slavery and entitled him to marry his beloved.

In the centuries that followed, Ántara's exploits in war became the subject of hundreds of tales that made him into a chivalric hero similar to King Arthur and the knights of European romances. These tales were mostly legendary, yet the finest testimony to his greatness is the poem he himself composed, "Ántara's Ode," where we hear the real man tell 'Abla and the world of his love for her and of the victories that made him worthy of her hand.

"Ántara's Ode" is what Arabs call a *kasida*. In ancient times the sons of sheikhs and kings would travel among each other's courts, forming personal bonds and learning more about their vast land. In the evening, they would entertain their hosts with poetry about themselves, delivered extemporaneously in one of the traditional metrical forms. These forms are complex and intricate, so the ability to stand up and produce a poem was a key test of a young man's mental prowess and a source of pride for his family back home. Whenever a really talented poet emerged within a tribe, it was considered an important event, celebrated by a great feast.

In addition to the demanding metrical form, every *kasida* must have a specific four-part structure. The poet always begins by painting a melancholy scene about some empty place that once was filled with joy. Then he sings a *nasib*, an erotic prelude dwelling on the sweetness of his beloved. In the third section, he sings in praise of his camel. Then comes the main section of the poem, a panegyric declaring the poet's own virtues and exulting in his victories over lesser men. Like many of the cultures of nearby Africa, the Arabs expected the poet to boast grandly about himself—his luck with women and gambling, his generosity to others, and his prowess on the field of battle. Even the *nasib* can be boastful, often describing not only the sweetness of the beloved but the depth of her passion for the poet and the fullness of their joy in love-making.

Although the poet is bound to these four sections and to the severe demands of the traditional metrical forms, the imagery of a *kasida* is free-wheeling, inventive, and very individualistic. In "Ántara's Ode," for example, the praise of Ántara's camel is like a surrealist painting. To ride on this tall, important creature, the poet says, makes him think of the grandeur of the male ostrich who strides purposefully across the desert toward his nest, attended by his fluttering young. This feeling of stateliness amidst flutter yields instantly to a similar image of camels that follow after their "swaggering" herdsman, who is a slave as Ántara himself once was. Thus we see two Ántaras in one image, the noble warrior of today and the slave of yesterday who swaggered because he knew who he really was. In the same way the image of the tall male ostrich is doubled in the young birds who follow it, and those young ostriches are in turn doubled by the image of the eggs in the nest. As the images backtrack, dovetail, and multiply upon themselves, they dazzle the senses and display the inventiveness of the young poet's mind.

A few of the men who fought in the battles that Ántara describes lived long enough to see the day when Islam unified the tribes of Arabia, in the following century. The new religion condemned the *kasidas* and banished them from Arab culture. The Koran even made a jest of the poets' boastfulness: "Hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley and how they say that which they do not?" (Sura XXVI). Because it was oral, most of this poetry was lost to posterity, but fortunately seven of the most famous *kasidas* were memorized by others and eventually collected and written down.

This collection is known today as the *Muallaqat* or *Seven Golden Odes*. It is not well known in our culture because Western readers are often put off and perplexed by the boastfulness, the unrestrained flights of imagery, and the yoking together of themes which western literature segregates into separate genres, such as tender love and brutal violence. Yet the reader who takes the time to get into the spirit of a *kasida* is richly rewarded, for in each poem the turbulent images and seemingly incongruous themes gradually coalesce, come into focus, and reveal as if in a holograph the living image of a proud young warrior from long ago.

The Ode of Antara

I

HOW many singers before me! Are there yet songs unsung?
 Dost thou, my sad soul, remember where was her dwelling place?
 Tents in Jiwá, the fair wadi, speak ye to me of her.
 Fair house of 'Abla my true love, blessing and joy to thee!
 Doubting I paused in the pastures, seeking her camel-tracks, 5
 high on my swift-trotting nága tall as a citadel,
 Weaving a dream of the past days, days when she dwelt in them,
 'Abla, my true love, in Házzen, Sammán, Mutathéllemi.
 There on the sand lay the hearth-stones, black in their emptiness,
 desolate more for the loved ones fled with Om Héythami, 10
 Fled to the land of the lions, roarers importunate.
 Daily my quest of thee darkens, daughter of Mákhrami.

1 There are so many ancient songs: Is there anything left to say? 8 Few place names in the poem are identifiable; El-Hazn may be 150 miles east-south-east of Jerusalem

II

Truly at first sight I loved her, I who had slain her kin.
 ay, by the life of thy father, not in inconstancy. 15
 Love, thou hast taken possession. Deem it not otherwise.
 Thou in my heart art the first one, first in nobility.
 How shall I win to her people? Far in Anéyzateyn
 feed they their flocks in the Spring-time, we in the Gháïlem.
 Yet it was thou, my beloved, willed we should sunder thus,
 bridled thyself the swift striders, black night encompassing. 20
 Fear in my heart lay a captive, seeing their camel-herds
 herded as waiting a burden, close to the tents of them,
 Browsing on berries of khímkhim, forty-two milch-camels,
 black as the underwing feathers set in the raven's wing.
 Then was it 'Abla enslaved thee showing her tenderness, 25
 white teeth with lips for the kissing. Sweet was the taste of them,
 Sweet as the vials of odours sold by the musk sellers,
 fragrant the white teeth she showed thee, fragrant the mouth of her.
 So is a garden new planted fresh in its greenery,

watered by soft-falling raindrops, treadless, untenanted. 30
 Lo, on it rain-clouds have lighted, soft showers, no hail in them,
 leaving each furrow a lakelet bright as a silverling.
 Pattering, plashing they fell there, rains at the sunseting,
 wide-spreading runlets of water, streams of fertility,
 Mixed with the humming of bees' wings droning the daylight long, 35
 never a pause in their chaunting, gay drinking-choruses.
 Blithe iteration of bees' wings, wings struck in harmony,
 sharply as steel on the flint-stone, light handed smithy strokes.
 Sweet, thou shalt rest till the morning all the night lightly there,
 while I my red horse bestriding ride with the forayers. 40
 Resting-place more than the saddle none have I, none than he
 war-horse of might in the rib-bones-deep is the girth of him.

37-8 bees' quick, intermittent buzzings sound like a light blacksmith's hammer

III

Say, shall a swift Shadaníeh bear me to her I love,
 one under ban for the drinker, weaned of the foal of her
 One with the tail carried archwise, long though the march hath been 45
 one with the firm foot atrample, threading the labyrinths?
 Lo, how she spurneth the sand-dunes, like to the ear-less one
 him with the feet set together; round him young ostriches
 Troop like the cohorts of Yémen, herded by 'Ajemis,
 she-camel cohorts of Yémen, herded by stammerers. 50
 Watching a beacon they follow, led by the crown of him
 carried aloft as a howdah, howdah where damsels sit,
 Him the small-headed, returning, fur-furnished Ethiop,
 black slave, to Thu-el-Ashíra;—there lie his eggs in it.
 Lo, how my nága hath drunken deeply in Dóhradeyn; 55
 how hath she shrunk back in Déylam, pools of the enemy,
 Shrunk from its perilous cisterns, scared by the hunting one,
 great-headed shrieker of evening, clutched to the flank of her.
 Still to her off-side she shrinketh, deemeth the led-cat there
 Clawing the more that she turneth;—thus is her fear of them. 60
 Lo, she hath knelt in Ridá-a, pleased there and murmuring
 soft as the sweet-fluting rushes crushed by the weight of her.
 Thickly as pitch from the boiling oozeth the sweat of her,
 pitch from the cauldron new-lighted, fire at the sides of it,
 Oozeth in drops from the ear-roots. Wrathful and bold is she, 65
 proud in her gait as a stallion hearing the battle-cry.

43 Shadaníeh: a breed of running camels 46 drinker: the foal of this (female) camel

47 ear-less one = ostrich (believed to be deaf) 49 'Ajemis = foreigners

50 foreigners speaking in broken Arabic 54 In folklore the female ostrich abandoned

her eggs to the care of the male. 57 The ancient Arabs were said to have hunted with leopards, carrying them with them atop their camels. The poet is comparing the terror a camel would feel in such circumstances to the way his nága shrinks back from the water pools of the poet's

IV

Though thou thy fair face concealest still in thy veil from me,
yet am I he that the captured horse-riders how many!
Give me the praise of my fair deeds. Lady, thou knowest it,
kindly am I and forbearing, save when wrong presseth me. 70
Only when evil assaileth, deal I with bitterness;
then am I cruel in vengeance, bitter as colocynth.
Sometime in wine was my solace. Good wine, I drank of it,
suaging the heat of the evening, paying in white money,
Quaffing in goblets of saffron, pale-streaked with ivory, 75
hard at my hand their companion, the flask to the left of me.
Truly thus bibbing I squandered half my inheritance;
yet was my honour a wide word. No man had wounded it.
Since that when sober my dew-fall rained no less generous:
thou too, who knowest my nature, thou too be bountiful! 80
How many loved of the fair ones have I not buffeted
youths overthrown! Ha, the blood-streams shrill from the veins of them.
Swift-stroke two-handed I smote him, thrust through the ribs of him;
forth flowed the stream of his life-blood red as anemone.
Ask of the horsemen of Málek, O thou his progeny, 85
all they have seen of my high deeds. Then shalt thou learn of them
How that I singly among them, clad in war's panoply,
stout on my war-horse the swift one charged at their chivalry.
Lo, how he rusheth, the fierce one, singly in midst of them,
waiting anon for the archers closing in front of us. 90
They that were nearest in battle, they be my proof to thee
how they have quailed at my war-cry, felt my urbanity.
Many and proud are their heroes, fear-striking warriors,
men who nor flee nor surrender, yielding not easily.
Yet hath my right arm o'erborne them, thrust them aside from me, 95
laid in their proud backs the long spear,—slender the shaft of it.
See, how it splitteth asunder mail-coat and armouring;
not the most valiant a refuge hath from the point of it.
Slain on the ground have I left him, prey to the lion's brood,
feast of the wrists and the fingers. Ha, for the sacrifice! 100
Heavy his mail-coat, its sutures, lo, I divided them
piercing the joints of the champion; brave was the badge of him.
Quick-handed he with the arrows, cast in the winter-time,
raider of wine-sellers' sign-boards, blamed as a prodigal.
He, when he saw me down riding, making my point at him, 105
showed me his white teeth in terror, nay, but not smilingly.
All the day long did we joust it. Then were his finger tips
stained as though dipped in the íthlem, dyed with the dragon's blood,
Till with a spear-thrust I pierced him, once and again with it,
last, with a blade of the Indies, fine steel its tempering, 110

72 colocyth: *bitter fruit often used as a medicine* 85 Kinsmen of 'Abla. *Antara had killed some.*
101 Coats of mail were worn *mostly by princes and great chieftains. Because they added weight they were*
used only by those who had exceptionally powerful horses. 103 *gambling game, later forbidden under Islam*

Smote him, the hero of stature, tall as a tamarisk,
kinglike, in sandals of dun hide, noblest of all of them.

Oh, thou, my lamb, the forbidden! prize of competitors,
why did they bid me not love thee? why art thou veiled from me?
Sent I my hand-maiden spy-like: Go thou, I said to her, 115
bring me the news of my true love, news in veracity.

Go. And she went, and returning: These in unguardedness
sit, and thy fair lamb among them, waiting thy archery.
Then was it turned she towards me, fawn-necked in gentleness,
noble in bearing, gazelle-like, milk-white the lip of it. 120

Woe for the baseness of 'Amru, lord of ingratitude!
Verily thanklessness turneth souls from humanity.
Close have I kept to the war-words thy father once spoke to me,
how I should deal in the death-play, when lips part and teeth glitter,
When in the thick of the combat heroes unflinchingly 125
cry in men's ears their defiance, danger forgot by them.
Close have I kept them and stood forth their shield from the enemy,
calling on all with my war-cries, circling and challenging.
There where the horsemen rode strongest I rode out in front of them,
hurled forth my war-shout and charged them;—no man thought blame of me. 130
Antar! they cried; and their lances, well-cords in slenderness,
pressed to the breast of my war-horse still as I pressed on them.
Doggedly strove we and rode we. Ha, the brave stallion!
now is his breast dyed with blood-drops, his star-front with fear of them!
Swerved he, as pierced by the spear-points. Then in his beautiful 135
eyes stood the tears of appealing, words inarticulate.
If he had learned our man's language, then had he called to me:
if he had known our tongue's secret, then had he cried to me

Thus to my soul came consoling; grief passed away from it
hearing the heroes applauding, shouting: Ho, Antar, ho! 140
Deep through the sand-drifts the horsemen charged with teeth grimly set,
urging their war-steeds, the strong-limbed, weight bearers all of them.
Swift the delúls too I urged them, spurred by my eagerness
forward to high deeds of daring, deeds of audacity.
Only I feared lest untimely drear death should shorten me 145
ere on the dark sons of Démdem vengeance was filled for me.
These are the men that reviled me, struck though I struck them not,
vowed me to bloodshed and evil or e'er I troubled them.
Nay, let their hatred o'erbear me! I care not. The sire of them
slain lies for wild beasts and vultures. Ha! for the sacrifice! 150

114 *perhaps a reference to Antara's being the son of a slave-woman* 146 *Huséyn Ibn Démdem and his kinsmen. The tale of their treachery in the breaking of a truce is the subject of one of the other odes from this period.*