



Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by 'Alqama, Shánfara, Labíd, 'Antara, Al-A'sha, and Dhu al-Rúmma (Wesleyan Poetry in Translation)

By Michael A. Sells

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According to legend, the Bedouin tribes of pre-Islamic Arabia held poetry competitions during annual fairs near Mecca. The winning poems called Mu'allaqat, or Hanging Odes, were embroidered in gold on banners and suspended from the walls of Arabia's most sacred shrine, Ka'ba. Desert Tracings is a translation of six classical sixth to eighth century odes. Arabic odes (qasidas) traditionally begin with the relationship of the lover to the loved. Usually set at opening in the beloved's abandoned desert campsite, where the only evidence that remains is tent marks and torrent beds in the sand - "naked tracings, / worn thin, like inscriptions/ carved in flat stones" - the qasida moves gracefully through the thematic parts, the lover's grief, the quest, and the final acceptance of a world deprived of the beloved. Like the oryx-doe trapped within the unyielding cycles of the desert world. As Michael Sells writes in his introduction, the qasidah has been overshadowed in the West by other Arabic literature, such as The Arabian Nights, but the qasida is the primary literary tradition in both pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabia. The remarkable richness of language and range of mood captured in these translations help explain their enduring fascination.

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Editorial Review

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"Michael Sells, combines scholarship with a poet's understanding of language, makes available an unfamiliar and fascinating poetic tradition, on which, strange to most of us in its cultural allusions though it is, is evidently both highly symbolic and sharply concrete, simultaneously sophisticated and primitive." (Denise Levertov)

"In Michael Sells's translation the early Arabic ode enters the world of modern English poetry. Strikingly contemporary in form and diction, his translation yet captures the complexity of imagery, the intricacy of del, and the power of the lyric that made the pre-Islamic ode the cornerstone of the richest of the Semitic poetic traditions. It is that tradition that continues to shape the literary imagination throughout the Islamic world and that promises now, upon the Western literary sensibility." (Jaroslav Stetkevych)

Language Notes

Text: English, Arabic (translation)

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