“Whenever we crossed a mountain / on this Earth, yet another one appeared”: Circumstantial Poetry in ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī’s (d. 1143/1731) Travelogues

Tom J. Abi Samra
Tom.J.Abi.Samra.GR@Dartmouth.edu

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“Whenever we crossed a mountain / on this Earth, yet another one appeared”: Circumstantial Poetry in ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī’s (d. 1143/1731) Travelogues*

Tom J. Abi Samra

Beginnings: The Early Modern Self, the World, and the Mundane

In 1563, the mannerist Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo produced a series of four paintings entitled *Four Seasons*. All four are “composite” portraits of an androgynous person, literally constructed from flora associated with each respective season. The face in *Summer* (fig. 1), for instance, is composed of wheat, grapes, an artichoke, an eggplant, plums, corn, a chickpea pod, and so on. Each of the four portraits is a punctum at which the world and the self collapse. The self, which by metonymy is the face, is constituted of all that which is worldly, the flora.¹ This worldliness is two-fold: not only does the constitution of the self from flora indicate a relationship between the self and that which is outside of it—i.e., its world; it also points to a world that is ever-expanding, for much of the flora from which the portrait is composed, such as

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* Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The transliteration system I use for Arabic is the style set out by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. I respect prosody in the transliteration of poetry. I use the pausal form when transliterating prose unless case effects an orthographic change (e.g., accusative *tanwtn*). But unless necessary, I prefer to quote the original (both prose and poetry) using the Arabic script. When I provide only one date, it is the Common (i.e., Christian) Era date. When I provide the Hegira date, I write the Hegira date before the Common Era date (e.g., 1/622). Death dates are based on those reported in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second and Third Editions (Brill Online). A word must also be said about periodization. Conventional Arabo-Islamic (literary) history is divided into the following periods: (1) rise of Islam: 610–632; (2) Rāshidūn period: 632–661; (3) Umayyad period: 661–750; (4) Abbasid period: 750–1258; (5) Mamluk period: 1250–1517; (6) Ottoman period: 1517–1798; (7) *nahda* (Arab Renaissance): early 1800s–1914 (or 1950s for some). The Mamluk and Ottoman periods are fused together to form the “postclassical” period, while the periods before are considered “classical.” Although the Ottoman state remained in power until its fall in 1922, in literary history 1798 onward is considered the beginning of the modern period, since 1798 is the year Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt, bringing with him the printing press. This is a problematic historical narrative, and I do not endorse it. But for my purposes here, it is heuristically useful.

¹ “A composite head in human form may stand for a conception of nature. This way of thinking relies on a metaphysical system of correspondences according to which what is above is also below and the macrocosm of the universe parallels the microcosm of man. This system supplies the basis for the poetics of correspondence found in Arcimboldo’s witty images.” Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo: Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still-Life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 93ff.
corn, is native neither to Italy nor Europe at large. Yet, one wonders: what a mundane, domestic way to represent the vastness of the world. In comparison to Summer, take, for example, the anonymously composed Fool’s Head World Map (fig. 2). Similarly, the image brings together the world (the map) and the self (the face). As Ayesha Ramachandran writes of this map, “the image allegorically explores the relations between the global and the local, the universal and the particular, as it juggles the vast abstraction of the mapped world alongside the circumscribed particularity of the persons who inhabit it.”

If in Summer the flora represent the world, in the Fool’s Head World Map the map itself represents the world—a much more grandiose, if also more obvious, metonymy.

While they stage the same problem, or question, of the relationship between the world and the self, these images differ in one crucial way: how they choose to present this tension. If the Cordiform aspires to be worldly in an explicit fashion, as evidenced by the employment of a literal map in the image, Summer on the other hand is more subtle: Arcimboldo presents us with the same tension using a more complex metonymic system, as I have detailed above. Whether Arcimboldo was thinking of the self/world tension in our terms we cannot know for sure, but we can ascertain that he was inspired by the scientific activities of the period and region he lived in: “natural philosophy, natural history, and nature painting.” Despite this, Arcimboldo represents the explorations of the natural philosophers by drawing on a domestic visual repertoire.

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2 See, for example, A. Brandolini and A. Brandolini, “Maize Introduction, Evolution and Diffusion in Italy,” Maydica 54 (2009): 115–49. Kaufmann does not discuss the foreign flora in the paintings of Arcimboldo but rather focuses on animals foreign to Italy, although what he calls “exotica” includes both fauna and flora; see Arcimboldo, 152ff.


4 See Kaufmann, Arcimboldo, 115–48.
Contemporary scholarship on the early modern world has picked up on this problem of scale—between self and world, local and global, domestic and public. For instance, Ramachandran excavates different early modern European writers’ conceptions of the world, and hence their respective worlds’ limits. In so doing, she works through the relationship between the self and the world in early modern European culture, with a particular focus on the grandiose and epic (e.g., Camões’s Os Lusíadas). Katie Kadue, meanwhile, identifies an aesthetic of the everyday—what she calls a “domestic georgic” aesthetic of preservation—in early modern literary culture. Although Renaissance authors such as François Rabelais and John Milton are often considered original and authoritative thinkers, she argues that they “were intently focused on the interior work and housewifely task of merely, laboriously, and not always successfully preserving the materials of life and culture, a process that often involved wading through waste, or at least tedium and a nagging feeling of irrelevance.” If Ramachandran focuses on the worldly, Kadue emphasizes the mundane. These are two quite divergent ways of thinking about the early modern world. By privileging the epic, Ramachandran reveals the expanses, if also the limits, of the cartographic imaginary of the early modern thinkers of Europe. Kadue, conversely, and in the spirit of feminist criticism, reveals an undercurrent of usually female labor that allows for the grand narratives of the Renaissance to exist.

In this essay, I identify an early modern aesthetic that mobilizes the mundane to make a point about the world or the grandiose. Paradoxically, the mundane plays a crucial role within early modern Ottoman aesthetics in a world characterized by the rise of mobility as a result of the Empire’s expansion. By focusing on travelogues—which suggest a minimum degree of

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(regional) cosmopolitanism—but turning to the mundane aesthetics therein, I move away from universals, the grandiose, and the epic in favor of the local and the pithy that nonetheless seem to be suggesting something about the grandiose—be it the material or the divine world. Through a close reading of the poetry in the travelogues of the 17th-century Ottoman Damascene scholar ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731), I theorize and historicize early modern Arabic circumstantial verse, a riff on the term vers de circonstance, the poetic subgenre credited to the 19th-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé. By situating Nābulusī’s travelogues within the Arabic travelogue tradition by recounting its genesis and antecedents, it becomes clear that the genre of Nābulusī’s travelogues is distinctively early modern despite the existence of Arabic travel-writing since the 13th century. Rather than simply ornament the text, the poetry in Nābulusī’s travelogues fits within, and sometimes advances, their linear narrative. If poetry is expected to transcend the chronotope in which it is recited or composed, Nābulusī’s poems fail to do so. The distinctiveness of Nābulusī’s circumstantial verse comes to the fore by comparison, both to poems within the Arabic poetic tradition, and to non-Arabic circumstantial poems. I also pay special attention to Nābulusī’s Sufism, or mysticism, since it complicates the notion of circumstantiality; Sufism’s teachings call for transcending the material world, the mundane.

Finally, a comparative reading of these poems alongside the poetry of the 18th-century German poet Goethe—who read, adapted, and translated Persian Sufi poetry—reveals that we may consider Nābulusī’s circumstantial poems as parables. In short, this essay is a literary history of circumstantial poetry in premodern Arabic literature that is simultaneously diachronic and

synchronic. It pays particular attention to the genre of circumstantial poetry as it developed in the early modern period, whether the poets discussed were aware of their contemporaries across the world or not. This essay follows recent attempts to not only work against the problematic narrative that “postclassical” Arabic literature (13th–18th centuries) is one of decline and unoriginality (inhiṭāt), but also to theorize and identify some of this period’s aesthetic principles.\(^8\) Second, it expands the definition and purview of the subgenre of circumstantial poetry outside the French tradition and before the 19th century. This essay is a definitional intervention that, in the spirit of an inclusive comparative literature and a global early modern studies, unshackles literary history from its Eurocentric subgeneric definitions and expectations, revealing new ways of thinking about genre and genealogies, and more importantly, proposes new ways of reading.

**The Ottoman Travelogue Tradition, Its Antecedents, and Nābulusī’s Place in It**

Nābulusī’s travelogues are markedly early modern. Although there are records of travelogues in Arabic from the 13th and 14th centuries—most famously those of Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217) and Ibn Baṭṭūta (d. 770/1368–9 or 779/1377)—it is misleading to consider these earlier narratives as cognates to Ottoman-era travelogues, since this tradition was likely not known beyond the Maghreb and al-Andalus, that is, the western Islamic world.\(^9\) Nābulusī’s travelogues therefore form part of a different corpus: an Ottoman tradition of travel-writing that began in the 16th

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Indeed, the earliest hitherto known travelogue, or *riḥla*, from the Muslim East, or Mashriq, is an anonymous manuscript from the late 15th century documenting the author’s journey to Mecca.11

Genres do not develop in a vacuum, and the *riḥla* as a genre of course has cognates. The closest predecessor is the *fadāʾil*, or “religious merits” genre, which celebrate places’ sacredness—usually Mecca and Jerusalem, but also Damascus—by employing anecdotes that are, as Nancy Khalek puts it, “concerned with sacred time as much as with sacred space, and hearken back to biblical prophets as well as forward to eschatological events.”12 This tradition is particularly evident in Nābulusī’s Jerusalem travelogue,13 where the specter of the past looms large, especially when he visits important Sufi landmarks such as Ibn al-ʿArabi’s (d. 638/1240) tomb.14 The *riḥla* also draws from the *tārīkh* (sometimes transliterated as *taʾrīkh*), or history writing, genre. The *taʾrīkh* genus of texts is a broad one, and includes biographical dictionaries. These works often specific to a place, e.g., Damascus or Egypt, and they are often prefaced by a *fadāʾil* section dedicated to that locale.15 The most notable example in the Damascene context is Ibn ʿAsākir’s (d. 571/1176) magisterial work, *Taʾrīkh madīnah Dimashq* (History of the City of

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10 Shafir, “Nābulusī Explores,” 144; Nir Shafir, “The Road from Damascus: Circulation and the Redefinition of Islam in the Ottoman Empire, 1620-1720” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2016), 242–47.
Damascus) (it is 57 volumes in one edition, and 80 in another). Dana Sajdi considers “Ibn 'Asākir’s marking of Damascus as a city of God with the Great Mosque as its central and definitive feature” the beginning of “the tradition of Damascene topographies.”

The Ottoman travelogue also shares features with a third genre, that of the (contemporary) chronicle. Although documented throughout Islamic history, the contemporary chronicle flourished in the Ottoman period. It is referred to as a kind of tārtkh, or history, but can also have other names such as hawādīth, or “events,” “happenings,” and ayyām, which literally means “days.” Written initially by scholars, or 'ulamā’ (sing. ‘ālim), such as Nābulusī, by the 18th-century, these chronicles document the everyday of the non-'ulamā’ written by literate men—e.g., a barber—who often mingled with the elite scholarly class. The chronicle and the travelogue, in their early modern iterations, share an investment in the mundane—what we might call the remarkable unremarkable—albeit in differing ways. These three genres serve as precedents to—and in the case of the chronicle a development of—the Ottoman travelogue. The latter borrows from, or contributes to, these distinct genres in Arabic letters. Although Nābulusī was very much a ‘ālim and part of elite circles, he was also interested in the happenings of the everyday.

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16 For the editions of the Ta’rīkh, see James E. Lindsay, ed., Ibn ‘Asākir and Early Islamic History (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 2001), 127–33.
20 I use the word literate quite loosely to mean someone able to write; how well and what kind of writing they are able to compose, is another question. For reflections on non-western, non-modern notions of literacy in the Islamic world, see Nelly Hanna, “Literacy and the ‘Great Divide’ in the Islamic World, 1300–1800,” Journal of Global History 2, no. 2 (2007): 175–93.
21 For an account of the 18th-century chronicle and its antecedents, see Sajdi, Barber of Damascus, 115–44 (ch. 4).
In what follows, I will develop a definition of what I am calling “circumstantial verse,”
which demonstrates the interest in the mundane, from the ground up, taking as my starting point
poetry from one of Nābulusī’s travelogues.

**Nābulusī’s Bored(om)**

Toward the beginning of his travelogue to Tripoli (modern-day Lebanon), entitled *al-Tuhfa al-
nābulusiyya ft-l-rihla al-ṭarābulusiyya* (The Nābulusian Masterpiece: A Trip to Tripoli),
Nābulusī writes:22

> َلا َخُطَر َلَّا َكَأْنَا َبِئْتَا ْمَارِداً ِوَلا َمَّا َهَنَاكَ ْوَلَا َصُوْتُ َغَيْرِ َالضُّدْرَ َوَالضَّدُّ. َوَالبِّيْتُ َهُوَ ِقَوْلُناُ: َكَأْنَا َقَطُّناُ ِخَبٍّلًا َمِن َجِبَالَ َالأَرْضِ َيَنُمُّ َخَبٍّلٌ

It was Wednesday morning, which was the third day [of our trip]. With God’s help, we followed the road
between these valleys and mountains that [even] birds hardly flew between. In the absence of water and
sounds, besides echoes and echoes, a single verse of poetry [*baytan mufradan*] occurred to us [*khaṭara la-
nā*]. We recited the following—

> Whenever we crossed a mountain
> on this Earth, yet another one appeared

Through this single line of poetry (*bayt mufrad*) that “occurred to us” (*khaṭara la-nā*), Nābulusī
distills his feeling of boredom and agony as he and his travel companions (*rifāq*) traverse
endless, lifeless mountains. In classical Arabic texts, and modern Arabic literature that directly
draws on these texts, poetry often played a more affectively charged role. For instance, in his
reading of Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s (d. 1873) travelogue recounting his journey from Egypt to
Paris, *Takhliṣ al-ibrīz ft talkhīṣ bārīz*, Tarek El-Ariss shows how poetry, although emerging

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22 ʿAbd al-Ghant al-Nābulusī, *al-Tuhfa al-nābulusiyya ft-l-rihla al-ṭarābulusiyya* [Die Reise des ʿAbd al-Ḡant An-
nābulust Durch Den Libanon], ed. Heribert Busse (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 1971), 3; my scanion. Here, the
complete *ramal* meter [*fāʾ ilāṭun fāʾ ilāṭun fāʾ ilān*] becomes slightly shorted as [*fāʾ ilāṭun fāʾ ilāṭun fāʾ ilān*].
This is a rare meter; however, I was unable to scan the verse using the *khaft*, which is most similar to the *ramal*. See
Geert Jan van Gelder, *Sound and Sense in Classical Arabic Poetry* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 353,
351.
spontaneously, is a symptom of epistemic confusion and shock as a result of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s encounter with the European metropolis.\textsuperscript{23} Likewise, in the classical tradition, poetry’s spontaneity does not discount its affective charge.

Consider a poem by pre-Islamic brigand-poet (ṣu’lāk), al-Sulayk ibn Sulaka. The khabar, or anecdote, quoted below comes from one of the most famous anthologies of poems in Arabic, Abū al-Faraj al-ʾIṣfahānī’s (d. 356/967) \textit{Kitāb al-Aghānt} (The Book of Songs).\textsuperscript{24}

> نقل السكريب في خبر مقتله: إنه لقي رجلاً من خنوم في أرض يقال لها: غزة، بين أرض عقيل وسعد تميم، وكان يقلل للرجل: مالك بن عمير بن أبي شعاع بن قيس بن دخان. فأجابه ومعه أمة له من خفاحة يقال لها: النوار، فقال له: السليخ. ذلك كله، على أنه غني، ولا تطلَع على أحداً من خنوم. قاله على ذلك، ورجع إلى قومه، وخلف أمه رهينة معه، فنكمها السليخ. وجعلت تقول: احذر خنوم! فإن أخلص على عليك. فأنشأ يقول: [من الطويل]

> وقد علمت أتي أمر غير مسلم
> إلى الدلل والباحة مثلى وتفصي
> قال: وبلغ ذلك شبل بن قلادة بن عمر بن سعد، وأسق بن مدرك الخليطين، حالفًا إلى السليخ، فلم يشعر إلا وقد طرفا في الجليل
> فأنشأ يقول:

> [من الرجه]
> ومن مبلغ خذي بأتي مقتول
> يا زب بهب قد حويث تفكول
> وزرب قرب قد تركت مجدول
> وزرب زوج قد كشكط غطول
> وزرب عان قد فككت مكول
> وزرب واد قد فدل سملول

Al-Sukkārī said of his [al-Sulayk ibn Sulaka’s] murder: he met a man—called Mālik b. ʿUmayr b. Abī Dhirāʾ b. Jusham b. ʿAwf—of the Khath’am tribe in a land called Fakhkha, between the lands of ʿUqayl


and Sa’d Tamīm. The Khath‘amī man took with him a woman, who was called al-Nawwar and was from Khafāja. He told told Sulayk: “I want nothing to do with you!” Sulayk responded: “For sure! As long as you don’t betray me to anyone from the Khath‘am tribe.” Mālik promised Sulayk, and he returned to his tribe, while keeping his wife with Sulayk as a pawn/collateral [rahīna]. Sulayk fucked her [nakaḥtu], and she kept on warning him: “Be wary of Khath‘am. I fear their wrath!” He responded:

She warns me to be wary of Khath‘am,
even though she knows I’m no pacifist!
What is Khath‘am but a wicked tribe [worthy of] my contempt?
To the wicked and pulverized she belongs!

He [al-Sukkarī] said: The news reached Shībl b. Qallāda b. ‘Amr b. Sa’d and Anas b. Mudrik—both of the Khath‘am tribe. And so, they approached Sulayk from behind and struck him with their horses. He [Sulayk] recited:

Who will tell my tribe I’ve been killed?
How many camels I’ve looted!
How many courageous men I’ve left powerless on the ground!
How many beautiful, married women I’ve fucked [nakaḥtu]!
How many sufferers I’ve unshackled!
How many empty valleys I’ve crossed!

This latter poem, which ostensibly is Sulayk’s last, is composed in the rajaz meter, which suggests a certain degree of informality or spontaneity. Dmitry Frolov characterizes rajaz poetry as “primitive verse,” and considers it “a means of improvisation or expression of an emotional or ecstatic state, in short, as a kind of metrical saj’ [rhymed prose].” Rajaz, therefore, treads a fine line between poetry and prose, the poetic and prosaic. Indeed, the Abbasid litterateur al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868 or 869) writes in his Kitāb al-Ḥayawān (Book of Living Beings) that “the Arabs, in their Time of Ignorance [before Islam] used to immortalize their glorious deeds (maʾāthirihā) by relying on metrical poetry (shiʿr mawzūn), as well as on rhymed speech (al-kalām al-muqaﬀā [i.e., with a qāfiya, or rhyming phrases]). And that was their archive (dīwān).” Al-Jāḥiẓ here groups together rhymed prose and poetry, as if pointing to the fact that, although different, they

played a similar role as a result of their mnemonic qualities. To return to the poem, despite the supposed informality that its rajaz meter suggests, the suʾlāk poet writes what we might call a self-ritchāʾ (self-elegy), wherein he recounts, moments before his death, his variegations, escapades, and good deeds, while also commemorating his valor, pride, and courage—actions and qualities for which he wanted to be remembered. It is a poem for posterity, for the archive.  

The grounds for comparison between Sulayk and Nābulusī are the last line of Sulayk’s poem, in which, like Nābulusī, he mentions the many valleys he has crossed. But what sets these two examples apart are first, the poetry’s affective spectra, and second, the respective prose’s contextual work. Not only does Sulayk’s poem—despite its rajaz meter and the affective connotations it implies—recount his whole life, but it also emerges, if spontaneously, at a moment between life and death. The image of courage and valor the poem evokes, including the crossing of the valleys, is an intense and charged one. Meanwhile, Nābulusī’s poem achieves a different affective result. The descriptive elements of the narrative—the birds, the road between valleys and mountains, and so on—evoke what we might call, after Sianne Ngai, “minor affects.” In contrast to the valor and courage that Sulayk’s self-elegy promulgates, Nābulusī’s “one-liner” evokes a feeling of boredom, and perhaps irritation.

How do Nābulusī’s and Sulayk’s (via Iṣfahānī) texts—despite describing a similar act, that of crossing endless mountains—stir radically different emotional responses in the reader? In the case of the Sulayk anecdote, there are two chronotopes, or worlds, operational in the text: first,

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27 Recall the famous saying: “al-shīʾ ʾr dīwān al-ʿarab” ‘poetry is the archive of the Arabs’. See Heinrichs, “Prosimetrical Genres,” 249 and 249n1. It is also worth noting that the pre-Islamic poetry that has come down to us has been selected and anthologized by Abbasids, and thus reflects an Abbasid aesthetic rather than a pre-Islamic one. What the Abbasids chose to retain is what conformed to their aesthetics tastes. This does not affect my reading of Sulayk’s poem, but it is an important detail to note, so as to not to assume a pre-Islamic aesthetic. I thank Lara Harb for pointing this out to me after I presented a shorter version of this essay.

the world in which Sulayk is reciting his verses moments before he is killed, and second, the world of the poem, or the poem’s diegesis. We begin with an existential question, follow Sulayk on his escapades, and end with him crossing endless, dry mountains. The poem’s diegesis does not overlap whatsoever with the context in which it is being recited, namely, his fateful confrontation with the Khath’am tribe. In Nābulusī’s text on the other hand, the world of the text and the poem are one and the same. Not only does the poem develop themes first introduced in the prose, but also remains chronotopically faithful to it.

I borrow the term “chronotope” from literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin writes: “We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” He adds: “What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space).”29 In the context of Nābulusī’s travelogues and my argument about them, the imbrication of time and space, as such, isn’t of interest to us inasmuch as the chronotope, whatever it may be, is consistent across prose and poetry. I am taking Bakhtin’s concept at face value, and appropriating it to describe the texts’ various settings, or the (in)consistency of settings across prose and poetry.

In contradiction to the prosimetric relationship present in the Sulayk excerpt provided above, whereby the prose and poetry are in fact separable without the poetry suffering as a result of a lack of context, the prosimetric relationship in Nābulusī is one of harmony. Put differently, the

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poem can stand on its own without the *khabar*, and thus cannot be considered a circumstantial poem. A poem is circumstantial only if it shares a chronotope with the prose that precedes and/or succeeds it. This appears to be a unique feature of the poetry in question, and, perhaps of Ottoman-era aesthetics more broadly; it is an early modern aesthetic. This early modern aesthetic extends beyond the Ottoman Empire, and we see traces of the circumstantial in various traditions across the Mediterranean. In this essay, I will provide two examples: in what immediately follows, I work backward from Mallarmé’s *vers de circonstance* and trace its early modern cognates—and in the conclusion, I take up the German poet Goethe and his rewriting of Sufi poetry.

**Theorizing Circumstantial Poetry**

Before delving into the discussion of the French tradition, a few comments on terminology are in order. Circumstantial poetry is not to be confused with occasional poetry. For while all poems are in some sense occasional, meaning that they were prompted by an occasion, one cannot say the same about circumstantial poetry. Indeed, the phrase “circumstantial poetry” can come across as somewhat of an oxymoron. For if, according to Hegel, “poetry is exempt from the complete embodiment of its productions in a particular material, and therefore a talent for it is less subject to such specific conditions and so is more general and independent,” and if, consequently, “the poet is required to give the deepest and richest inner animation to the material

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30 For the point that all poetry is occasional, see Marian Zwerling Sugano, *The Poetics of the Occasion: Mallarmé and the Poetry of Circumstance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), intro.

31 Natalie Melas also suggests that Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* is a *vers de circonstance*, the “circonstance” being decolonization. Yet again, this is a towering event, a major event to be celebrated. Moreover, Melas translates *poème de circonstance* as both “a poem of circumstance” and “occasional poem,” thus collapsing the distinction I am making between occasional and circumstantial poetry. See Natalie Melas, “Poetry’s Circumstance and Racial Time: Aimé Césaire, 1935–1945,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2016): 469–93, esp. 472.
that he brings into his work,”32 then, for Hegel, circumstantial poetry is not poetry, or at least not good poetry. Circumstantial poetry is not “exempt from the complete embodiment of its productions in a particular material,” but rather draws on this material, qualifies it, extends it, challenges it.

Similarly, vers de circonstance — the genre championed by Mallarmé — makes the embodiment of its material its premise. He wrote his poems on material objects, and physically imbricated the material with the circumstance. For instance, Mallarmé inscribed the following poem on the exterior of an envelope he sent to Gabrielle Wrotnowska:

Ma lettre, ne t’arrête qu’à
La main petite et familière
De Gabrielle Wrotnowska

My Letter, do not stop but at
The petite and familiar hand
Of Gabrielle Wrotnowska

Here, the letter is not only the subject of the poem but is materially linked to it. This is but one example; he often wrote his vers de circonstance on objects such as envelopes and hand fans, and sometimes even perishable objects like candied apples.34

What I am calling “circumstantial verse,” however, is somewhat different from Mallarmé’s vers de circonstance,35 although many of its features are evident in Nâbulusî. The definition of

33 Mallarmé, qtd. and trans. in Sugano, Poetics of the Occasion, 169–70. This poem comes from “Loisirs” (“Leisures”) section of the Vers de circonstance.
34 An exhaustive treatment of Mallarmé’s Vers de circonstance is provided in Sugano, Poetics of the Occasion, ch. 5.
35 The first three occurrences of the phrase vers de circonstance, according to the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)’s Gallica online search engine appear in the following sources, in chronological order: I. D. B., L’Observateur, no. 18 (September 19, 1789), https://www.google.com/books/edition/L_observateur/f6HRv0kdl-kC; M., Review of Contes fables, chansons et vers by L.-P. Ségur, Mercure de France, no. XXIX [29] (August 19 [1 Fructidor], 1801 [An 9]): 347–60, at 358, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k3750274n/f27.item; and Couplets pour les fêtes patronales, anniversaires, etc., vol. 2, Le chansonnier universel (Paris, 18??), 36. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5454853g/f40.item.
circumstantial verse as chronotopically situated, as evidenced by the examples from Nābulusī’s travelogues, differs from the *vers de circonstance* in the 19th century. If circumstantial verse’s space-time matters, in the Mallarméan *vers de circonstance* the object in and of itself is all that matters. The material object on which the poem is inscribed *is* the poetic object. According to Séverine Martin, this aesthetic is associated with two 19th-century French phenomena: “the influence of the decorative arts and a general interest of the nineteenth century in the category of the ‘real.’”36 There is no prose to do any contextual work; one could say that the objects’ materiality assumes the role the prose plays in Nābulusī. However, this category of the “real” was not always dominant. In the 19th century, there was a shift from the separation of discursive representation of objects on the one hand and the objects themselves on another, toward a collapse of the poetic and the material.

Like Nābulusī’s circumstantial poems, Mallarme’s *vers de circonstance* have predecessors. Martin identifies early modern poets who feature objects, albeit discursively, in their poetry.37 The major forerunner she identifies is the *hymne-blason*, a “genre [that] favored the proliferation of a poetry dedicated to inanimate objects.”38 Despite the mundanity of the *hymnes-blason’s* poetic subjects—or objects, rather—the investment in these mundane objects is purely thematic. The *hymnes-blason’s* affect, meanwhile, remains major and intense, unlike what we see in Mallarmé and Nābulusī. This intense affect is facilitated, I believe, facilitated by the *hymnes-blason’s* length. While most of Mallarmé’s *vers de circonstance* are a couple of lines long at most, the Pléiade’s *hymnes-blason* live up to their name: they are hymns that run for tens of lines. For instance, Rémy Belleau, one of the Pléiade poets of the 16th century, wrote 14 poems

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under the heading *Petites inventions* (Little Inventions) on “little” objects such as corals, elephants, cherries, snails, butterflies, and so on; one of the poems, “La Tortue” (The Turtle), although mundane in subject matter, spans 144 lines.\(^{39}\) The other poems in *Petites inventions* are of similar length. These *hymnes-blason* are circumstantial in the sense that objects are the poems’ subjects—they are inspired by an encounter with a mundane object. But they also transcend the realm of the mundane, singing their praises—a discursive and intense affective mode reminiscent of court poetry, a genre that Belleau excelled at as well.\(^{40}\) Belleau also composed a collection entitled *Les Amours et nouveaux eschanges des pierres précieuses* (Love and New Exchanges of Precious Stones, 1576), in which he wrote poems about precious stones such as diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. Like his contemporary Joachim Du Bellay, Bellau renounced the epic,\(^{41}\) which may lead one to argue that these poems are circumstantial. However, as Jean Braybrook has argued, these “poèmes sur les gemmes étaient de nature à plaire à la Cour” (‘poems about gems were pleasing to the Court’); the collection is even dedicated to the French king Henri III himself.\(^{42}\) Thus, in addition to their length, the fact that they don’t remain faithful to their objects’ mundanity, and are written very much in the tradition of court poetry, makes them less akin to Mallarmé’s *vers de circonstance*. Moreover, while many of these are

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39 See Remy Belleau, *Oeuvres poétiques*, 6 vols., vol. 1, ed. Guy Demerson (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1995), 191–95. It should be noted that Belleau translated epigrams from the Greek and therefore knew of the form and was interested enough in it to translate some of it. For a historical-generic account of the genesis of the *hymne-blason* from the medieval *blason*, with an eye to Belleau, see Marilynn Roach Cloutier, “Remy Belleau’s *Petites Inventions* of 1566: A Generic and Stylistic Study” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1976), esp. ch. 1. Although some critics suggest, as Cloutier shows, that the *blason* is partially inspired by the Ancient Greek epigram, the length of the *blasons*, I believe, poses a challenge to its subsumption within the genealogy of the epigram—inspiration is not imitation.

40 There is an edition of collected the “circumstantial” poetry of Belleau’s contemporary Joachim du Bellay. Circumstantial is probably a misnomer—a more accurate word would be “occasional.” They are poems from the court such as panegyrics. See Joachim Du Bellay, *A Critical Edition of the Circumstantial Verse of Joachim Du Bellay*, ed. David J. Hartley (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 2000).


mundane or everyday objects (or creatures) for us in the 21st century, that was not the case for Belleau in 16th-century France. These objects were exotic, and they fell in line with a Renaissance culture that promoted the practice of natural history and encyclopedism, a practice reminiscent of Arcimboldo’s paintings with which I opened this essay. What Arcimboldo does with the visual, Belleau does with the linguistic. The hymnes-blason, although inspired by real objects, were undeniably poetic according to Hegel’s definition; they transcend the mundane.

Notwithstanding the hymne-blason’s affective quality and length, they share with Nābulusī’s circumstantial verse the distinction between discursive and material object. Another way to characterize “circumstantial verse” in Nābulusī is that it is a hybrid form that mixes between the Pléiade’s hymnes-blason and Mallarmé’s vers de circonstance. From Mallarmé we take the poem’s brevity and minor affect, and from Belleau & Co., we take the discursive interest in the mundane, with the noble qualification that the discursive affect in the circumstantial poem is usually minor (e.g., boredom, amusement, relaxation) rather than major (e.g., grief, love, passion). That said, in both the Pléiade’s hymnes-blason and Mallarmé’s vers de circonstance, the chronotope remains missing, at least explicitly. The poetry’s chronotopic contextualization is unique to Nābulusī’s texts.

**Historicizing Circumstantial Verse: Qaṣīda, Maqṭū’a, Circumstantial Poem**

As is the case in the French tradition, Arabic poetry until the Ottoman period was rarely chronotopically situated, and it was seldomly concerned with the minor, be it minor affects or occasions. The most celebrated of Arabic poetry is either epic (or epic-like), as is the case of the

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pre-Islamic odes, or courtly, as is the case with Abbasid poets of the “golden age” such as Abū Tammām (d. 231/845 or 232/846) and al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965). Nonetheless, the Arabic circumstantial poem does have antecedents in the Arabic tradition as well. One can trace its rise in Ottoman-era Arabic texts from the pre-Islamic period, through the rise of Islam and the Abbasid period, to the Mamluk period, and until the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1516–17.

While the most celebrated pre-Islamic Arabic verse from approximately the sixth century AD is often considered “polythematic,” “monothematic” subgenres of the Arabic poem, or qaṣīda, soon developed. Examples of these monothematic qaṣīdas include the ghazal (elegiac-erotic poems), tardiyyāt (hunting poems), khamriyyāt (wine poems/bacchic verse), and marāthī (elegies). For example, the early Abbasid poet Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 296/908) composed tardiyyat, some just two lines long. Although short, like many circumstantial poems, we are given no context. It appears as such in his dīwān, or collected poems:

He said of a dog:

_I shall describe him:_ of saffron coat,
The body slender, firm the joints,
Shod with aptly hollowed paws,
Every avid huntsman’s pride

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Glossing this poem, Jaroslav Stetkevych argues that “although their purported subject is a hound, the poet is concerned more with affect than description.” This characterization further justifies the non-circumstantial quality of the poem. This isn’t to say that circumstantial poetry is not concerned with affect—for it is, as I have argued in my analysis of Nābulusī—but rather that it is also chronotopically situated. The poem’s ekphrasis of the poet’s hunting companion, while it provides a somewhat clear mental image of it, does not give us any indication of the space-time in which the animal is described. We have no details of the hunt itself, and there is no active movement in the poem. It is as if the dog is suspended in an ether. The poem does not have a chronotope. The poetry’s aesthetic is self-contained.

In the Mamluk period, as Adam Talib has persuasively argued, these monothematic poems become formally known as epigrams, or maqṭū’a (sing., maqṭū’a) in Arabic—a standalone genre—not least because of a self-conscious effort on the part of anthologizers of that period to account for the maqṭū’a, either by dedicating full anthologies, or parts of anthologies, to the genre. The Mamluk period witnessed the rise of more mundane literature composed by figures who traditionally did not participate in the sphere of adab, or belles-lettres—this paves the way for the circumstantial poem, a genre also invested in the everyday. As Thomas Bauer has argued, “we have enough data [about the Mamluk period] to show that even the lower strata of urban society participated, in one way or another, in the production, or at least consumption, of literature,” including civil servants, high- and low-ranking religious scholars, judges, entrepreneurs, traders, and craftsmen. Since many of the poets of the Mamluk (and Ottoman

49 Talib, *How Do You Say “Epigram” in Arabic?*, 13 and passim.
50 Thomas Bauer, “‘Ayna ḥādhā min al-Mutanabbi!’ Toward an Aesthetics of Mamluk Literature,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 17 (2013): 5–22, at 7. For a social and political explanation of why this kind of poetry burgeoned,
periods were not only poets, and as such were not necessarily (or only) court poets, the *maqṭūʿa* as a form, with its focus on artifice and play on language, burgeoned. As opposed to, say, a 70-line poem panegyrizing a caliph for sacking a city,\(^{51}\) the *maqṭūʿa*’s main purpose—the vast majority being two-lines long\(^ {52}\)—was to show off the skilled use of literary figures (*badīʿ*), most notable among these devices being the *tawriya* (double entendre).

However—and in contradistinction to the circumstantial poetry we see in the Ottoman-era travelogues—in the anthologies that have come down to us, the poems’ contexts are almost always excluded, like in the example by Ibn al-Muʿtazz. Instead, there is one-line header or phrase that introduces the short poems. For example, a poem by Mamluk poet and litterateur Ibn Nubāṭa (d. 768/1366) reads:\(^ {53}\)

*Ibn Nubāṭah on a market inspector:*

Be congratulated on this appointment that came
unexpectedly during blessed days [of repose].
For you are from a chosen family,
and how you earn your money, no one knows!

This presentation of an epigram is characteristic of the Mamluk period. After introducing the subject matter in a couple of words, the short poem is cited.\(^ {54}\) There is often no context associated with the poem.

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\(^{52}\) Talib, *How Do You Say “Epigram” in Arabic?*, 18–19.


So, I consider the circumstantial verse that we see in the Ottoman period a development of the Mamluk *maqṭū’a*, whereby the circumstantial verse is a sort of *chronotopically situated maqṭū’a*: the prose that introduced the poem does not merely indicate the subject of the poem, and it doesn’t simply tell us of the occasion that the poetry was recited in. Rather, the prose and poetry supplement one another.\(^{55}\)

**Can Sufi Poetry Be Circumstantial?**

In light of the literary history I have provided, Nābulusī’s poetry constitutes an organic extension of preexisting forms and genres. But his poetry’s circumstantiality is in direct tension with his Sufi, or mystical, bent. In the introduction to one of his *dīwāns*, or collections of poems, entitled *Dīwan al-ḥaqāʾiq wa-majmūʿ al-raqaʾiq* (The Collection of Truths and Fineries), Nābulusī claims that “those who possess amiable hearts” (*aṣḥāb al-qulūb al-insīyya*) “left behind conceptions of sensation and imagination […] and broke free from the chains of time and place” (*kharajū min ṣuwar al-hiss wa-l-khayal […] wa-kasarū mikhāl al-makān wa-l-zamān*).\(^{56}\) This is a deconstructive argument on Nābulusī’s part: his larger point is that “those who possess amiable hearts,” i.e., the pious, aspirant Sufis, free themselves of binaries such as east and west, heaven and earth, reason and revelation. This is one way of explaining Sufi ontology, whereby there is nothing but God, and everything in this world is, in essence, God. As William Chittick writes, glossing Ibn al-ʿArabī, “True Light [i.e., God] is Nondelimited Being (*al-wujūd al-mutlaq*), and

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\(^{55}\) I am using the word “supplement” in Jacques Derrida’s sense. In *De la grammaticologie*, he shows that speech and writing supplement one another, such that one does not have supremacy over the other. Similarly here, the poetry and prose have a symbiotic relationship. See Derrida’s discussion of the “supplement” in *Of Grammatology* [*De la grammaticologie*], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998 [1967]), 229–42.

it discloses itself as delimited being (al-wujūd al-muqayyad). It is precisely this Light that brings about finding, awareness, and perception. Just as there is no true being but God, so also there is no true finder but God and nothing truly found but God.”57 How, then, can we critically account for the poetry’s undeniable circumstantial aesthetics, i.e., how can poems about “time and place” be written by someone who aspires to be freed from their shackles? And how can one make sense of this circumstantial aesthetic within both a Sufi context and a postclassical/early modern one?

To elucidate this point, we may turn to another poem from Nābulusi’s longest travelogue, the three-volume al-Ḥaqīqa wa-l-majāz fī riḥlat bilād al-shām wa-miṣr wa-l-ḥijāz (The Real and the Figurative in the Travels to Damascus, Egypt, and the Hijaz). He writes:58

وَلَمْ نَزَلْ سَائِرْنَى إِلَى أَنْ وَضَعْنَا إِلَى قَرْيَةِ النَّبِكَ قَبْلَ الْفَجْرِ بَعْلِيْلٍ، وَقَلَّنَا فِي ذَلِكَ بِمَلْكَةِ الْمَلِكِ [مِنْ مَلِكَةِ الْبَسِيَّ]

فقد أدناك لأرض نبك
وإذا كثرت تسبك
لنا دعاعي النها جبلك
بِنَبِيِّ حِيْبَابِ لَبَكَ
وقبدها شكرنا59 بشبك
ثم بثنا تلك الليلة في هذه القرية، وقد كنا في أتفاك شديد من غير سبب، يضحت ذلك التكادي. وأصبحنا في فرح وسرور، وكال نشاط وحور، وهو اليوم السادس من المحرم يوم العلاء المبارك، إن شاء الله تعالى. وفي ذلك نقول، على الله تعالى حصول الأموال:

فَبَدَا مِنْ كِرْمِ السَّورِ نِيَكَ
وأصْحَبْنا بِفِرحٍ وسَرْوٍ
وَلَكِنْ مِنْ تَصَارِفِ التَّجْلِي

We continued walking until we arrived to the village of al-Nabk a little bit before noon. And we said, with the Exalted’s assistance:

59 On the relationship between shukr, ni’ma, and qayd/whyd, see Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, Tāj al-‘arās min Jawāhīr al-qāmūs, s.v. “sh–k–r.” http://arabiclexicon.hawramani.com/ (“and it is said: giving thanks is the condition/requirement for acquired blessings, and [it is also] the chasing of the unattained blessings”
Halt (qif)! Of happiness we cry (nabkī),
for we arrived to the lands of Nabkī
Today’s silver is pure, even if it
was impure during its casting (kuddirat bi-sabki)
A pure moment (waqtunā rāq); we tamed (ma’annat la-nā)
happiness with a net (bi-ḥabki)/with your love
The veil (ḥijāb) of anxiety/the heart (lubkī) doesn’t
prevent us from attaining the One who is manifest (tajallā)
God’s blessings are ever-increasing,
and His only condition (qayd) is our thanks and closeness [to Him]

[...] We spent the night in this village. We were severely depressed (inqibād shadīd), for no particular reason. And [suddenly] we became full of delight, energy, and cheer. It was the sixth day of Muḥarram [first month of the Islamic calendar] on a blessed Tuesday, God willing. Of this we say (it is in the hands of God that what is desired occurs):

Upon our arrival to al-Nabk, we became depressed (qubidnā):
[but soon enough] we were about to cry of happiness
We stayed [the night] after that [also] in bliss,
cheerful and laughing
Thanks to the workings of manifestation (tajallī)
of our Generous Lord, without a doubt

On the one hand, this poem complies with a postclassical poetic aesthetics, characterized by brevity and the use of literary devices such as tawriya, as outlined earlier. Nabkī means “we cry,” and it is also the name of the village he arrives to. What’s more, the first hemistich “qif fi kathīri s-surūri nabkī” (‘Halt! Of happiness we cry’) is reminiscent of the first hemistich of one of the premier poems in the Arabic literary tradition, the pre-Islamic Mu’allaqat of Imru’ al-Qays, which begins: “Qifā nabkī min dhikrā ḥabībin wa-manzīlī” (‘Halt, let us weep, you two and I, as we remember beloved and campsite’). This complex linguistic play packed in just one

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60 Two readings can emerge here. Although the edition and the manuscripts I was able to consult vowel the word has ḥabki, it can also be read as ḥubki, or “your love.” Therefore, I think there are two readings of this line, which is rather characteristic of postclassical Arabic literature.

61 Here, too, there are two possible readings. Lubki means anxiety or worry, but lubb also means heart, with the “ki” being a third-person possessive suffix — although it is unclear who that “ki” may be referring to. Nonetheless, I still do think this is a possible reading.

62 This poem is one of seven pre-Islamic mu’allaqat, or “Hung Ones.” “The seven acclaimed qasidas [poems] were hung up in the Ka’aba area [in modern day Saudi Arabia] — hence their name, Mu’allaqat, the ‘hanging ones’. However, the story of the display of poems in the sacred enclosure is almost certainly a retrospective projection, a fabrication generated to explain the puzzling term Mu’allaqat. The real origin of the term is unknown, but it was perhaps based on the metaphor of hanging jewels.” Robert Irwin, ed., Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 2000), 6–7.

63 Imru’ al-Qays, qtd. and trans. in Stetkevych, Zephyrs of Najd, 110.
This poem, from a purely formal point of view, is a maqṭūʿa. But it comes to us in a travelogue, and the travelogue’s prose situates the poem for us, grounding the otherwise cognitive linguistic play in the “real” world, a poetics reminiscent of Mallarmé’s. Moreover, here again we have description of a feeling that we may consider “minor”: happiness (surūr; hanā) is a relatively minor vis-à-vis the gradioseness of other (i.e., earlier) Arabic poetry. To mobilize the words of Sianne Ngai once again, if later, or “postclassical,” Arabic poetry “is a bestiary of affects,” it is a poetry “filled with rats and possums rather than lions, its categories of feeling generally being, well, weaker and nastier” than earlier, Abbasid poetry. The poem’s brevity, chronotopic situation, and “minor affect” make it a circumstantial poem. The symbiotic relationship between the prose and poetry is evident. If we aren’t told the name of the city, al-Nabk, the poem’s most obvious linguistic trick in the first line—a tawriya (double entendre) on the word “nabkī”—may escape the reader; and even if the prose isn’t needed per se, the poem exists in harmony with the prose, and there is no interruption in the diegetic space between the prose and the poetry—it is a poetry of the moment, of the here and the now.

Notwithstanding the poem’s circumstantial qualities, it is also heavily laden with key Sufi terminology. The employment of words such as tajallāt (divine manifestation), hijāb (lit. veil; used in Sufism to refer to an obstacle between the believer and God), qayd (lit. limitation;
like *ḥijāb*, an obstacle on the Path to God,\(^{67}\) and *qabd* (lit. contraction, “a state of distress and agony that may assault a Sufi”\(^{68}\)) points to a non-mundane world, and perhaps not to the world at all, but to God—*for God is the material world and everything else; he is the Universe.* Indeed, the poem’s arch goes from the specific to the more general, from the mundane to the grandiose; it begins with al-Nabk, a specific geographic place, and ends with *qayḍ* and *tajallī*.

Yet constructing this binary between the specific on the one hand and the magnificent on the other is a violence to the Sufi ontology that does not distinguish—or at least aspires not to distinguish—between the material and immaterial worlds, for everything is a sign (*āya*) of God. As al-Qushayrī recounts in his *Epistle on Sufism*, in the chapter on *tawḥīd* (the Oneness of God):\(^{69}\)

> I heard Sahl b. ʿAbdallah say, when asked about the essence of God – may He be great and exalted: “The essence of God is described by [religious] knowledge, [yet] it cannot be grasped by any comprehension nor seen by the [human] sights in this world. It is found in the realities of faith without having any limit, being subject to human grasp, or dwelling in any creature. It will be seen by the [human] sights in the Hereafter plainly in its royal might and power. Creatures are barred from knowing its inner reality (*kunh*), yet it shows itself to them by means of its signs (*ayatuh*). The hearts know it, while the intellects cannot grasp it. The faithful look at it with their eyes, yet they cannot ever comprehend or grasp it.”

Here, as in Nābulusī’s introduction to his *dīwān*,\(^{70}\) reason does not serve us much. We must instead use our heart, to apprehend the signs (*āyāt*, sing. *āya*) of God in the world. (And what better way to see with the heart than through poetry?) As a result, circumstantial poetry, by focusing on the signs of God even in the most mundane of things, and by documenting the everyday of the Sufi, embodies this ethos of seeing signs of God in everything, every day.

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\(^{68}\) al-Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayri’s Epistle on Sufism*, 422.

\(^{69}\) al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 495; *Al-Qushayri’s Epistle on Sufism*, 309.

\(^{70}\) I don’t discuss it above, but Nābulusī, in the same introduction, chastises those who seek to know God with *ʿulām* (sciences) rather than through religious texts (*nuṣūṣ sharʾiyya*) such as the Quran and Hadith. al-Nābulusī, *Dīwān al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 8.
This act of noticing God’s manifest existence everywhere and in everything is facilitated by the Sufi notion of *waqt* (lit., time)—the “mystical moment in time; the eternal ‘here-and-now’ of the Sufi,” as Alexander Knysh defines it. It is another pillar of Sufi practice, and cannot be ignored when speaking of circumstantial poetry. The phrase “eternal ‘here-and-now’” effaces the binary between the mundane and the grand, the moment and Eternity. For the Sufi, therefore, being in mystical time (*waqt*) means being present in the moment, in harmony with God, but also surrendering to Him, at any moment in time. It is simultaneously the here-and-now and the mystical, or, more accurately, there is no distinction between the moment and Eternity. The poet brings together the moment and God, fusing them together, blurring the distinction between the circumstance and God, for in essence, they are One.

Many of these Sufi ideas—and also many of the defining aesthetic features of Mamluk- and Ottoman-era Arabic literature—are evident in another circumstantial poem from *al-Ḥaqīqa wa-l-majāz*, coming a just few pages before al-Nabk. Nābulusī writes of his arrival to Ma’lūlā:

Then, we walked until we reached the village of Ma’lūlā. We were in absolute bliss, and God quenched our thirst. We wandered in these fields, and walked between those streams. As a damp breeze blew, we said the following verses:

We came to the land of Ma’lūlā,  
where the breeze is mild (*ma’lūlā*)

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72 See al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 130ff; Al-Qushayrī’s *Epistle on Sufism*, 75ff.
The dew weighing down
blades of grass in the meadow
We wandered\textsuperscript{74} in its meadows,
walking toward our goal
Until we (\textit{al-rifā′qū}) settled
and saw the water flowing—a sword unsheathed—
Its [i.e., Maʿlūlā′s] gardens like the hill of Damascus.
Whoever arrived there gently [by coincidence?] is] full of good qualities,
And whoever went toward it [i.e., Maʿlūlā′] became, like [the word] \textit{al-rajā\textsuperscript{,75}}
both affected and able to affect.

In addition to the characteristic aesthetic features of postclassical Arabic poetry such as punning
(Maʿlūlā′ referring both to the city itself and its mild breeze) and \textit{tawjīh} (“affected and able to affect”),\textsuperscript{76} this poem is both of the moment and beyond it. The punning on the word Maʿlūlā′ contributes to its circumstantial quality—the poem acquires a contextual specificity. At the same time, the poem carries the reader toward a mystical understanding of the world. This is especially evident in this poem, which includes wonder-evoking images of nature, such as the simile that compares the river to an unsheathed sword.\textsuperscript{77} The poetry’s dreamy qualities challenge the mundane/grandiose binary I proposed we use to evaluate circumstantial poetry, and instead transcend these boundaries to demonstrate that nature (e.g., the river) is a sign (\textit{āya}) of God. He is manifest everywhere, and one must seize the moment (\textit{waqī}) and admire Him.

It seems too facile to attribute any non-circumstantial elements of poetry to Sufism, for this tension between poetry’s artificiality and Sufism’s asceticism, or \textit{zuhd}, is attested, by no other than the Persian poet Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d. 672/1273), perhaps the most famous Sufi poet of our

\textsuperscript{74} Although this word in Arabic, \textit{jalasnā′}, literally means “we sat,” in this context it seems to me that it is an action that involves motion.

\textsuperscript{75} I am unsure of this line’s meaning, but I think what is going on is as follows: \textit{rajā′} has two definitions, (1) to ask for something, and (2) to hope for something—one active and one passive. This makes sense in the context of the next line, which is about affecting and able to affect.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Tawjīh} is “a literary device whereby a series of related technical terms are used in their non-technical senses.” Marlē Hammond, “\textit{tawjīh},” in \textit{A Dictionary of Arabic Literary Terms and Devices} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Also see Bauer, “Toward an Aesthetics,” 13–14. The grammatical terms \textit{ʿāmil wa-maʿmul}, “affected and able to affect,” are used in their non-technical sense. On the grammatical meaning of these words, see G. Weil, “ʿĀmil,” in \textit{Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition}, eds. P. Bearman et al. (Brill Online, 2012).

\textsuperscript{77} Wonder as an aesthetic ideal in classical Arabic literature has been identified by Lara Harb; see her \textit{Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
time. For Rūmī, insofar as one draws attention to one’s *zuhd* (via ascetic poetry or otherwise), one in fact is not yet a true ascetic. Likewise, rhyme and meter are formal (mudane?) conventions that shackle. As Amin Banani writes,

> On a more practical level, controlled tension is evident in the manner in which Rūmī perceives his own poetic activity in relation to the Persian poetic tradition: at once in it, but not of it. All the polite carping about lapses in technique, the occasional coarseness of language, the “unpoetic” imagery of the kitchen and the stable, the grotesqueries, the bawdy humor, and so on, come from academic mediocrities who apply traditional canons of judgement…. [Rūmī writes the following verse:]

> Let the floodwaters carry off rhyme and meter
> It’s shell, it’s shell fit for the brain of poets
> I’m freed of this couplet and *ghazal* O king of preeternal poems
> Scanning, scanning, scanning is killing me.

To convey the true tone of the lines in English it would not be amiss to say, “To Hell with rhyme and meter” …

In a sense, it seems that Rūmī is doing away with the poetic order, yet he holds on to the tradition. So, the question is: how radical are both Nābulusī and Rūmī in their Sufism if they never let go of artifice, of poetry? We may conjure here the Greek root of the word poetry, *poēsis*, which means “the process of making; production, creation; creativity, culture.” In the Greek sense, poetry, necessarily and by definition, is artificial. Still, the Arabic word for poetry, *shiʿr*, shares a root (*sh-ʿr*) with the word “feeling.” So, is poetry feeling or making? While we may view the Sufi poets’ resort to poetry as a means to an end, to *tajāllī* (revelation) and *tawḥīd* (mystical unity), how do we reconcile the fact that mystical union can be achieved only by being restricted by rhyme and meter, that is, by hanging on to that which is merely a “shell”? Is there a way to reconcile *poēsis* and *shiʿr*? The 18th-century German poet Wolfgang von Goethe (d. 1838) …

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1832) provides us with a strategy to read Sufi poetry that may shed light on some of these vexing questions.

**Endings: The Circumstantial as Parabolic?**

Some of Goethe’s poetry bears a trace of the mundane, the circumstantial—particularly the poems in the section of his *West-östlicher Divan* (West-Eastern Divan, 1819) entitled “The Book of Parables” (Buch der Parabeln). Goethe was influenced by the Persian Sufi lyric in general and the Persian poet Ḥāfiz (d. 792/1390) in particular, which he read in Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall’s German translation of Ḥāfiz’s *divan* (Arabic: *dīwān*). Taking inspiration from these poems, Goethe composed the *Divan*, a sort of response to Ḥāfiz’s poems as well as the “Eastern” poetic tradition.81

In “The Book of Parables,” Goethe for example adapts an anecdote from a famous Persian work entitled *Qābūs-nāma*, a mirror-for-princes prose work from the 11th-century (which he read in Heinrich Friedrich von Diez’s translation) and writes the following poem, numbered 173:82

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82 Goethe, *West-Eastern Divan*, 290–91. Although not a Sufi work per se, there is evidence in the book that Kaykāvus b. Eskandar, the work’s author, was sympathetic to the Sufi ideas of his time. On the *Qābūs-nāma* and its author, see J.T.P. de Bruijn, “Kaykāvus b. Eskandar,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica Online*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: 2010). The German reads:

Ein Kaiser hatte zwey Cassire,
Einen zum Nehmen, einen zum Spenden;
Diesem fiel’s nur so aus den Händen,
Jener wußte nicht woher zu nehmen.
Der Spendende starb, der Herrscher wußte nicht gleich,
Wem das Geber-Amt sey anzuvertrauen,
Und wie man kaum that um sich schauen,
So war der Nehmer unendlich reich,
Man wußte kaum vor Gold zu leben,
Weil man Einen Tag nichts ausgegeben.
Da ward nun erst dem Kaiser klar
Was Schuld an allem Unheil war.
Den Zufall wußt’ er wohl zu schätzen
A king had two cashiers, one to receive funds, the other to disburse them; the latter spent so lavishly that
the other didn’t know where to get any cash. The spendthrift died; the king didn’t know at first to whom
the disburser’s office should be given and he hardly had the time to look around when the receiver became
so enormously rich. Nobody knew what to do with so much gold for in one single day not a cent had been
disbursed. Only then did it become clear to the emperor what the source of all that mischief was. He knew
how to take advantage of chance to refrain from ever filling that post again.

Translating didactic prose into poetry, Goethe’s rendition is necessarily prosaic, perhaps even
circumstantial, insofar as the poem’s subjects are mundane. Although there is no chronotopic
situating at work here, this poem, like some of Nābulusī’s circumstantial verse, explodes beyond
the circumstantial into the world of universals. At the end of the day, it is a parable both in its
original context, the Qābūs-nāma, and Goethe’s work.

Another poem, that comes right after this one, is even more mundane, and does not seem to
be a direct rewriting of an already-existing text. Poem 174 reads:83

The brand-new pot said to the kettle: ‘What a grimy belly you have!’ ‘This is the result of kitchen-use;
come, come, you shiny nincompoop, soon your pride will be brought low. Your handle may have a clear
surface but don’t get puffed up, just take a look at your backside.’

Like poem 173, this poem also operates on two levels. While it tells a fantastical story using
mundane, everyday objects, its purpose is also didactic, the lesson being perhaps that one should
not judge others. Again, like Nābulusī’s poetry, the poem begins with the mundane (pot and
kettle), but by the end explodes into something greater. In Goethe it is a moral (“just take a look
at your backside”); in Nābulusī it is a reinforcement of God’s greatness and all-permeating

83 Goethe, *West-Eastern Divan*, 292–93. This poem was added by Goethe in the second edition of his *Divan* in
1827. The German reads:
Zum Kessel sprach der neue Topf:
Was hast du einen schwartzen Bauch! –
Das ist bey uns nun Küchgebrauch.
Herbey, herbey, du glatter Tropf,
Bald wird dein Stolz sich mindern.
Behält der Henkel ein klar Gesicht,
Darob erhebe du dich nicht
Besieh nur deinen Hintern.
existence. An uncanny resemblance emerges between Goethe’s parables and Nābulusī’s circumstantial poetry.

In his *Divan*, Goethe recasts, or translates, the Sufi Persian lyric as a parable, a poetic subgenre in which he had written before he composed the *Divan*. In his *Sämtliche Werke* (Collected Works), there is a section entitled “Parabolisch” (Parables), and many of the poems therein predate the *Divan*. Translating the autochthonous Persian, but also Arabic, genre of the *mathal* (roughly: parable; the Persian title, also provided by Goethe, of “The Book of Parables” in the *Divan* is *Mathal Nameh*) into a German idiom familiar to him, Goethe synthesizes some Sufi poetry, and Islamic texts in general, as parabolic. Setting aside reservations one might have about the possible Orientalism that underpins such a translation of genres, I read Goethe’s translation as an interpretation of, or an argument about—in short, a reading of—Sufi poetry. Can we engage Nābulusī’s poetry with Goethe’s interpretation in mind? Can we read Nābulusī’s circumstantial poetry as parabolic?

If Nābulusī’s poetry is circumstantial and mystical, then the circumstance illustrates something about the world, i.e., about God. Operating at two levels simultaneously—the local and the cosmological—then, perhaps, Nābulusī’s circumstantial poetry is to be read as a

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parable:85 interested in the circumstance insofar as it is illustrative of something greater. For, as al-Ghazālī, a 6th/12th-century Sufi put it,86

Travel is of two kinds. The first, traveling with the body (al-safar bi-zāhir al-badan): leaving one’s residence and homeland [and heading] toward the vast, deserted lands. The second, traveling with the heart (al-safar bi-sayar al-qalb): transcending from the lowest of lows to the Kingdom of Heaven. And spiritual travel (al-safar al-bāṭin) is the nobler of the two. And in Nābulusī, every circumstance, every encounter, and thus every poem he writes throughout his travels, is also an opportunity for inner reflection. The circumstantial verse in Nābulusī is shīʿr and poēsis— poēsis at the circumstantial stratum and shīʿr at the cosmological one.

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85 For a semiotic theorization of the parable, especially in relation to the two levels operational therein, see Susan Wittig, “Meaning and Modes of Signification: Toward a Semiotic of the Parable,” in Semiology and Parables: An Exploration of the Possibilities Offered by Structuralism for Exegesis, ed. Daniel Patte (Pittsburgh, PA: The Pickwick Press, 1976), 319–47. I thank Samuel Catlin for his numerous references on parables, including this one.

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Appendix of Images

Figure 1. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Summer*, 1563, oil on panel, 67 × 50.8 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arcimboldo_Summer_1563.jpg
Figure 2. Anonymous, Fool’s Head World Map, after 1587, map, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-206385