Epic Splitting:
An Arab Folk Gloss
on the Meaning of the Hero Pattern

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Epic narrative typically spells out departures and arrivals very clearly (see Bowra 1952:179 ff). The Arabic migration epic *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, in its many different cultural transformations and retellings, has a structure based on geographic displacements. Narrators from Egypt to Tunisia and the Lake Chad area all construct their versions of the story cyclically around a basic morphology of: LACK — DEPARTURE — CONTRACT — VIOLATION — RESOLUTION (battle or trickery/victory or defeat) — LACK LIQUIDATED or NEW LACK (which engenders a new geographic displacement, be it a return or a new departure) (see Connelly 1973, 1986; Ayoub 1982b).

Versions of the legendary saga collected from a Shuwa Arab *muᶜallim* follow the African epic pattern (see Okpewho 1979:88) of structuring the narrative around the cycle of the hero. I have shown elsewhere how a 13- cycle pattern of alternating scenes forms the gross constituent units out of which the narrator constructed his version (Connelly 1973). Each episode of the hero's life—from his birth through his early adventures or tests, to his adult adventures and conflicts, to his old age and succession by his children and his eventual death—appears as a journey. Each journey begins with a council scene of some kind during which a need or a lack is identified (be it childlessness, famine, drought, or some other sterility or threat). A journey is made away from home (be it the tribal group in council or literally the mother in the boy hero's first adventures); a boundary is transgressed; a conflict ensues, resulting in either victory or defeat; and the hero returns to the group for another council scene which sets up a repetition of the cycle.

Egyptian or Tunisian oral narrators emphasize different episodes from the whole *sīra*, for it is rarely told in these areas in its "entirety," from the birth to the death of the hero. In Egypt, professional singers of tales called *shuᶜarā' al-rabāba* (or *rebab* poets) compose verse narratives in oral performance to musical accompaniment (see Abnoudy 1978, Canova 1982, Connelly 1986). The performance tradition in Tunisia is much less

formal, less ceremonial. Its active bearers are amateur tale-tellers who spin prose versions at informal gatherings (Baker 1978, A. Guiga 1968a and b, Galley and Ayoub 1983). Tunisian narrators dwell mostly on the middle and later portions of the legendary autobiography of the Hilālī tribe; they detail the conflicts of the tribe in its conquest of Tunis the Green, the eventual victory of the Hilāl over the Zanātī Berber tribe, and the final disruption and dispersal of Banī Hilāl through fratricidal territorial conflicts. Egyptian narrators like to tell the birth of the hero episode and to chronicle the early years of the tribe in Arabia before their arrival in Egypt and the Maghrib. Whatever the form (sung verse or spoken prose, or a mixture of the two), whoever the main hero of the piece, whichever the episode stressed, one thing remains the same in the fluid re-creation of this living, oral tradition: the key theme of journey comprised of a separation, an adventure, and a return. These motifs comprise the basic constituent units, the repeating frame around which individual storytellers and singers reconstruct the Banī Hilāl epic.[1]

This stable morphological pattern which the Arabic *sīra* tradition evinces (Connelly 1973, 1986; Ayoub 1982b, Heath 1983) coincides closely with the hero pattern identified variously by von Hahn (1876), Nutt (1881), Rank (1959), Raglan (1934, 1956), Taylor (1964), and J. Campbell (1956) as the Expulsion-Return pattern. Albert Lord (1960) and Michael Nagler (1974) have termed this pattern Withdrawal-Devastation-Return. More recently both Archer Taylor (1964:129) and Alan Dundes (1977/1980:231) have agreed that an empirically demonstrable pattern for the heroic biography does indeed exist.[2] Dundes qualifies this to include the Indo-European and Semitic hero only, whereas Taylor implies that the pattern is much more universal: "The discovery of a biographical pattern is not very surprising. . .. It is a natural utilization of a pattern easily inferred from life itself, or from biography, history, and human psychology.... We are only at the beginning of studies that will interpret its importance" (1964:129).

Dell Skeels (1967) and Dundes (1977/80) have attempted to offer

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[1] See Claude Bremond (1982) for a critique of Thompson's *Motif Index* and Propp's functions. Bremond makes a plea for a less randomized concept of the motif, one which deals in constituent units as opposed to "interesting details."

[2] Victor Cook concludes in his cross-cultural analysis of Raglan's hero pattern that "no accurate description of that ephemeral rascal, the hero, exists" (1965:151). Despite this negative conclusion, Cook's comparative data do in fact suggest that the long-identified Aryan Expulsion-Return pattern may well be universally present; for, although all of Raglan's criteria do not overlap when applied to the lives of 25 culture heroes (including five major cultures outside the Curcum-Mediterranean), there does appear a larger-scale abstract paradigm which Cook overlooked: DEPARTURE (Separation/Expulsion/ Abandonment) — ADVENTURE (Conflict/Battle/Triumph/ Defeat) — RETURN (Reconciliation/Recognition). Cook himself points this out incidentally in his comments that the midlife of the hero has a high frequency of coincidence (151).

psychoanalytic interpretations of the meaning of the pattern, Skeels proposing that there are two potentially universal morphological patterns: 1) the departure-return (or flight) pattern, and 2) the interdiction-violation-consequence pattern. The first pattern in Skeels' schema parallels the psychological pattern of regression (the psychopathology of schizophrenia) marked by too great an attachment to the mother and similar in its expression to the wish-fulfillment or anxiety dream. The second narrative sequence (interdiction-violation-consequence) parallels the psychological pattern of obsessive-compulsive paranoia, marked by too much fear of the father and expressive of repressed erotic and aggressive drives. Dundes' foray into the meaning of the hero pattern highlights but does not go beyond Freudian oedipal interpretation. He defends the Freudian stance against Rank's rival birth-trauma theory, maintaining that Rank's interpretation of the hero pattern as a re-individuation of birth trauma is an error.

While Rank's interpretation may not work in every specific, as Dundes amply details (1977/1980:240), it does work symbolically to gloss what might be the essence of the larger key, constituent units of the heroic pattern; for the "trauma" of birth represents a universal life passage marked by separation. Dundes' insistence on the hero's tribulations as essentially oedipal misses the fact that the key themes in the heroic biographical pattern parallel much more directly other normal, prior developmental processes identified by more recent post-Freudian psychiatry.

In infancy, as Massie has described in his developmental research (Massie and Rosenthal 1986), infants and mothers are closely attached to each other in a mutually reciprocal pattern of gazes, touches, smiles, holding, and clinging which defines both their physical and emotional relationship. This changes dramatically when the infant becomes a toddler and embarks on the both physical and intra-psychic task of separating from his mother. According to Margaret Mahler, the separation-individuation process "signals the very beginning of normal and pathological identity formation" and "the ordinary way of becoming a separate individual with a separate identity" (McDevitt and Mahler 1980). Mahler's observational studies of mothers and infants in the first three years of life demonstrate typical spatial-displacement behavior patterns which parallel the deep-lying epic-hero narrative patterns to a very exact degree. Near the end of the first year of life, as they master locomotion, babies crawl or toddle away from the mother, experiment with the world beyond her, and then, often "devastated," hustle back. They use mother as the "home base" to which they periodically return for "libidinal refueling" (Mahler 1963:314). She also documents how the physical separation from and return of the infant to the mother begin what she calls the "hatching process" (McDevitt and

Mahler 1980:400). The circular interaction of mother and infant (the baby's cues, the mother's responses and choices of what cues to respond to, and the child's response to the mother's selective response) give rise to patterns of behavior and to the personality of the child. The child emerges as an individual and the mother functions as a "mirroring frame of reference" (401).

These spatial-displacement behaviors, Mahler's research shows, parallel later verbal behavior. They mark the beginning of a "succession of migrations by means of which the individual progressively moves away from his first objects" (Grinberg and Grinberg 1984:19). This pattern furthermore reappears in various manifestations during normal developmental (or identity) crises of the maturation process (Erikson 1950). The normal, real-life biography thus universally evinces the same pattern of separation and return which appears as a key framework in the heroic narrative. The remarkable coincidence between the developmental pattern Mahler identifies, the separation-individuation process, and the compositional pattern the *sīra* reveals might be termed a universal pattern of experience (Burke 1931:149 ff). The expression of that pattern in the *sīra* (or more generally in heroic epic) represents a "verbal parallel to a pattern of experience," which is Kenneth Burke's definition of the symbol. Burke conceives of art forms as just this sort of re-individuation of the rhythms and forms of basic human biological and psychological experience.[3]

The Arabic term designating what is known in European tradition as the oral epic genre indirectly calls attention to the parallel. The orally originating folk genre is known as *al-sīra* (pl. *siyar*). The word may be translated as "biography" (or even "folk auto-biography") to reflect more closely the proper Arabic meaning and connotation. Etymologically, the root from which the word derives implies a going, so the word *sīra* may also be translated "path" or "ways," as the Ways of the Hilāl.

Universals can always be pointed out, similar patterns remarked, but what remains interesting is not so much the documented fact of an observable pattern but rather, as Taylor has reminded us (1964:129), the significance of the pattern and the particular meaning with which specific groups in given times and places endow the pattern. According to Burke, the symbol becomes more or less highly charged as outside life experience coincides with the pattern articulated by the symbol.

Of all the Arabic *sīra*s, the one which appears to have remained most highly charged, by virtue of the frequency and continuity of its retellings

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[3] For a study which points to the universality of the pattern, see J .A. Campbell 1985. When the term "re-individuation" appears in the text, the reader should distinguish Burke's term "re-individuation" from Mahler's more purely psychological "individuation." Both are defined above.

in living oral tradition, is the Banī Hilāl epic. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* chronicles, from the folk point of view, the migrations of an Arab confederation of bedouin tribes from the Arabian peninsula to Upper Egypt, across North Africa and the Sudan to Libya, Tunis, Algeria, and parts of the Lake Chad area during the tenth through twelfth centuries. Sub-clans of the tribe (e.g., the Sulaym, Zughba, Riyāḥ) settled in these various regions. Their version of the history of the migrations to and resettlements in the "lands of the West" has been told and retold through the centuries and makes up the corpus of epic tales known as *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*.[4]

What makes these tales retain their symbolic charge? Why do they still survive for the telling across a broad expanse of Arabic lands some 800 years after the events which they commemorate? To answer these questions, we propose in this essay to focus on one case history and to look at the re-individuation of the saga (or symbolic pattern) in contemporary and Protectorate Tunisia. The tradition in Tunisia offers a particularly interesting gloss on the meaning of the *sīra* (as well as the meaning of the larger epic hero pattern) in the form of reverse-glass paintings of the heroic story material. Most of these paintings were the products of folk artists who commemorated visually the material celebrated verbally in poetry, song, and story by other performers. M. Masmoudi (1968, 1969, 1972) documents cases of folk artisans' workshops which flourished under the French Protectorate in areas such as Sfax. Here poets, singers, storytellers (*fḍāwiīn*, s. *fḍāwī*) congregated. Their common subject matter and mission was commemoration of the great trek westward by the Muslim, bedouin Arabs and their conquest of the Maghrib.

Specimens of reverse-glass paintings dating from the Protectorate years hang today in the private chambers of very old grandmothers, in antique shops, in museums, and even in beauty parlors. Stalls in the Tunis souks today overflow with more recently rendered reproductions of the heroic paintings. Many of the paintings reproduce the same scene—a swordsman splitting his opponent's head in two. The name of the hero may vary—ᶜAntar bin Shaddād or Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, the main protagonists of two important Arabic *siyar*. In one typical painting we purchased in 1978 from a rue Zarkoun antique dealer, a camel-litter-borne woman and a small retainer on foot accompany the black hero who is astride a horse, wielding his sword. The hero (Abū Zayd) and his retinue thrust into the picture from the left periphery of the frame to fill it. In the mid-section of the painting, two mounted riders confront each other. Written tags

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[4] For a hypothesis concerning the transmission of the Hilālī saga in both its oral and written manifestations, as well as its professional and amateur retellings, see Connelly 1986:ch.10. Baker 1978, Berque 1972, and Breteau et al. 1978 offer convenient summaries of the scholarly literature (primary and secondary) pertaining to the history of the migrations.

identify them as Abū Zayd and al-Haras. The enemy appears to be guarding a city fortification or a green area which is depicted to the right. The central focus of the painting, however, is the encounter of the hero with the enemy as the hero slices his opponent in half, cleaving him through his helmet, his nose, the cleft in his chin, and his coat of mail, which sometimes in other paintings unlinks in a puddle of blood on the ground. (See accompanying illustrations.)

Tunisian Reverse-Glass Painting of Abū Zayd (anonymous)

ᶜAlī and the Ghoul, Tunisian Pulp Print (Dār al-Menar)

The hero appears to look straight at the viewer while he is hacking the enemy in two with one hand. The opponent whose head is being split in two also stares at the viewer. The camel-borne lady too views the spectator rather than the spectacle before her. Only the retainer seems to look at the scene depicted, while all the others appear to make direct eye contact with the viewer.

Tunisian vendors and owners of reverse-glass heroic paintings attest to the historical-biographical intent of the tradition. Antique art dealers interviewed in the spring of 1984 informed us that the reverse-glass paintings which hung in their shops represented tales of the Muslim heroes who fought in the name of Islam and the Prophet of God. Heroes from the Arabic *siyar* (ᶜAntar and Abū Zayd) hung side by side with figures from official Muslim history, Islamic saints and Companions of the Prophet (ᶜAlī and Ḥusayn). When asked about the relationship between the *sīra* heroes and the Islamic historical figures depicted, dealers related that they were all holy subjects, that Abū Zayd and ᶜAntar were Arab ancestors who brought Islam to North Africa. When asked more specifically about a picture of Abū Zayd splitting a foe in half, dealers would tell the story of the marriage of Zāziya (the famous Hilālī heroine) to the Zanātī Khalīfa (the Berber ruler of Tunis in the *sīra*) in exchange for green pastures and grain to feed her tribe's people and herds. One dealer summarized: "it's about a marriage, that is an abduction, a bride-stealing."

We had first noticed paintings of Abū Zayd and ᶜAntar hanging alongside Koranic verses, other religious inscriptions, and painted, decorative invocations of the name of God on the walls of the private chambers of the grandmother of Tunisian friends in 1972 (Connelly 1974). The elderly lady said that the paintings had been commissioned by her family as part of her trousseau to decorate her bridal chambers and to bring *baraka* ("grace, blessings, good fortune"). The subjects, she continued, were sacred ones. The heroes depicted represented to her ancient Muslim heroes who fought in the name of God and Islam. She herself claimed descendants from the Turkish bourgeoisie and the nineteenth-century Ottoman rulers of Tunisia. The paintings had hung in her private quarters for some sixty years. Her children and grandchildren knew little about the pictures save that their grandmother kept them close to her and cherished them as good luck pieces to guard against the evil eye.[5]

Departing from the fact that pictures of Arab epic material decorate the nuptial chambers in the traditional homes of many elderly ladies throughout Tunisia, two scholars have suggested that the paintings function as protective emblems of fertility. Ayoub and Galley (1977) analyze in

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[5] Sarah Moussa and the Ezzine family generously provided the above information.

detail a reverse-glass painting of the Hilālī heroine al-Jāziya, called Zāziya in local parlance. They demonstrate with parallels from the legendary story tradition circulating orally in the Maghrib how Zāziya is viewed as a guarantor of group survival, as a procurer of food, and as a model of group values by virtue of her sacrifice of herself in marriage to the citified, sedentary, local Berber ruler in exchange for food for her nomad tribe and grazing ground for their ever-hungry herds. This interpretation may be true, but it is a partial truth and one that only touches at the surface of the matter and does not reach the deep-lying cultural meaning and intention of the folk representations.

The more frequent visual interpretation of the *siyar* is the fully bloody and violent encounter of swordsmen. Storytellers between the two world wars used to lay out in marketplaces cheap pulp-printed copies of the reverse-glass paintings. According to one witness[6] to such performances, the *fḍāwī* used the prints laid out on the ground as a vehicle for telling the heroic narratives of the coming of the Arabs to North Africa. Tunisians who comment on the painting do not mention the violence of the scene. Rather, they tell the condensed *sīra* story; they describe the Arabo-Islamic conquest of North Africa. The rupture, the dramatic sundering, the bloody explicitness of the blow rendered and the wound received are not mentioned. Yet artists reproduce the same type-scene again and again in their representation of the *sīra* heroes. Art vendors sell them, elderly brides cherish them as keepsakes, scholars comment upon them, museums now collect them.

Why, one might ask, is this scene of rupture and mayhem preserved as a visual commemoration of Tunisian history? And why is this one scene so often chosen to represent the whole of the *sīra*?

Certain texts can be turned to in search of an answer to these questions. The scene appears as a repeated battle motif in Arabic siyar, in several medieval European epics, as well as in at least one ninth-century Arabic encyclopedic history. *Taghrībat Banī Hilāl ilà bilād al-gharb* (Beirut: n.p., n.d: Books 15-20) gives the narrative of the epic encounter of the Hilāl against the Zanātī Khalīfa who holds Tunis the Green, which is the very encounter depicted in many Tunisian glass-paintings:

> The two meet like two mountains; dust flies under them;
> the horses' hoofs strike fire as the two heroes meet.
> Abū Zayd and al-Hasīs meet in combat like two mountains,
> the crow of discord flies overhead. They hit hard blows.
> The blows unlink the metal mail chains
> Abū Zayd remains firmly seated on his charger.
> He hits Hasīs with the spear and throws him on the ground

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[6] Thanks to A. Aissa for his generous assistance and information about the pre-World War *sīra* tradition in Tunisia.

The strong spear broke his coat of mail.
While the girls cried out their pride in the tribe of Abū Zayd
and Abū Zayd follows after Hasīs's fleeing tribe to gather up the
stray horses and cattle lost in the melee.

(Book 15)

In this nineteenth-century printed edition of the *sīra*, the blow is not emphasized as such. Curiously, the most explicit textual commentary on the blow depicted in the Tunisian folk paintings comes not from Tunisian oral versions of the *sīra* nor from the many *kutub ṣafrā'* (pulp editions) of the Banī Hilāl epic circulating throughout North Africa, Egypt, and other parts of the Middle East. Rather, the famous early eleventh-century French epic, *The Song of Roland*, offers the most striking textual parallel. I cite but one of the four repetitions of the motif wherein Pagan and Frank meet in the battlefield encounter (Terry 1965:1644-60):

He tries to flee, but cannot get away
Before Count Roland stops him with such a blow
That his whole helmet down to the nose-piece breaks,
The sword blade cleaves through nose and mouth and teeth,
Down through his body encased in shining mail,
Into the saddle all silver-trimmed and gold,
And drives on deep into the horse's back.
Nothing can save them—both man and beast fall dead.
Spaniards cry out in horror at the sight
The Frenchmen say, "Our lord knows how to fight!"

The wondrous battle is spirited and grim
Blow after blow the angry Frenchmen strike.
Their sword blades cleave through fists and ribs and spines,
Through cloth and armor into the living flesh.
On the green grass the bright blood flows in streams.
The pagans say, "This is too much for us!
Mohammed's curse upon the Empire fall!
There are no men as hard to kill as these."

A late tenth-century document, known as the Hague Fragment, contains a similar description of a battle encounter between Muslims and Charlemagne's men. The Latin prose schoolboy's rendition of an original poem describes fearful massacres and man-to-man combat scenes which, as Menéndez-Pidal (1960:376) has commented, show a very great coincidence of detail with the *Roland*:

Bertrandus strikes a young pagan. The sword crosses through his head, his chest, his navel. His guts flow out. The hard armor is useless and the sword splits the backbone of the horse and nails itself in the ground half its length. Bertrandus pulls it out and brandishes it to massacre more enemies.

Such blows in the European medieval genre were epic

commonplaces. Menéndez-Pidal indicates others: in Alicsans (1348) where the hero Vivien's sword stops short of the saddle and does not rend the horse; in the Danish version of the *Roland*, the sword blow cleaves from helmet to saddle (Aebischer, ref. in Menéndez-Pidal 1960:378). The Cid slices the Moor Bucar from the head to the belt (l. 2424); and in two passages of the *Chançun de Williame* (ll. 796 and 1838), the sword slices to the ground, though the description is rapid and does not dwell on the details of the blow. Although Menéndez-Pidal does not pursue references outside the Mediterranean, the Icelandic saga tradition, in which realistic fiction for the most part dominates the fantastic, also contains at least six such vertical epic blows.[7] Menéndez-Pidal terms the superhuman proportions of the splitting motif in the *chansons de geste* and other medieval epics a consecrated formula "à la fois si outrancière et si durable." One wonders what the epic audience response must have been to such violent scenes of rupture. Norman Daniel argues at great length that the violence is all hyperbolic good fun (1984:17, 77, 104, 105, 117, 118). The jongleur's audience of professional soldiers greeted such impossible feats of physical strength and endurance with the "good-tempered envy of real soldiers, who no doubt could smile at exaggeration as well as anyone" (Daniel 1984:105a). He claims that the brutality of these set pieces was not meant to be realistic or to be taken literally (97) and that

> It is sometimes difficult to recognize a joke across the centuries. . . especially when the author takes frivolously what our own age takes more seriously. The reverse also happens. The poets often make a joke of killing and torture, but hardly of loyalty. It is not a matter of approval or disapproval, but just what we can laugh about. It is much like the way one nation thinks funny what another does not—"the past is a foreign country." (17)

Daniel continues that the repetition of impossible feats was not meant to be accepted seriously, callously, or credulously. He sees a calculated, cumulative effect of all the violence, for even whether credible or not, repeated scenes of violence create an atmosphere. Though the audience can dismiss each separate inflated statement, it still retains an overwhelming impression of violence. The calculated effect of such use of hyperbolic set-piece scenes and formulas is to treat violence as a macabre joke: "the grisly humour is an evasion of authentic violence naturalistically recounted" (97). The extravagance serves to dilute the tragedy (100).

An Arabic historical chronicle from the mid-ninth century suggests that Daniel may be quite correct in his interpretation of audience response to the hyperbole of the epic blow. Abū Ḥānīfā Aḥmad al-Dīnawarī (d. 895 A.D.) in his encyclopedic history Kitāb al-Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl (The Book of Long Reports) reports the following battle scene which contains not only

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[7] Thanks to Dr. Linda Durston and Professor John Lindow for this information.

the splitting motif but also the response of the observer.

> And Kisrā (Chosroes) marched with his army, and approached Armenia, and when he reached Azerbaijan, his maternal uncle Bundawayh and Musil the Armenian joined him, as well as his satraps (*marzubān*) and those of Fars (Persia). News of this reached Bahrām Shūbīn, and he marched with his soldiers in forced marches until he met up with him (Kisrā) in Azerbaijan, where he set up camp at a parasang's distance from Kisrā's encampment, in preparation for battle. A golden throne was set up for Kisrā and Thiyādūs (a Byzantine ruler) on a hilltop overlooking the battlefield, and when the bodies of cavalry had lined up, one of the *Hazārmardīn* (lit., "1000 men"= Byzantine soldiers) came up to Kisrā and said, "Show me the one who has gained mastery over your kingdom!" Now Kisrā was smitten with *anafah* ("hurt pride, shame") from this soldier's upbraiding of him, but he concealed it, and pointed out Bahrām Shūbīn, saying, "He is the veiled one on the piebald horse, wearing the red turban, standing in front of his men." The Byzantine went over to Bahrām Shūbīn and called out to him as follows, "Come let us duel together!" Bahrām came out to him, and they exchanged a couple of blows, but the Byzantine's sword left no mark on Bahrām, because of the excellence of his armor. Bahrām struck him on the top of his head which was covered with a helmet of iron (*bayḍah*), and his sword cut through the helmet lengthwise until it reached the Byzantine's chest, and he continued cutting until the Byzantine fell in two pieces, one to the right, the other to the left.
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> Kisrā saw this, and burst out laughing. Thiyādūs became angry and said, "You see one of my men, who is the equivalent of 1,000 men, has been killed, and you laugh as if you are pleased to see Byzantines being killed." Kisrā said, "My laughter was not out of delight at his being killed: however, he upbraided me, as you heard, and I would have liked him to know that the one who has gained mastery over my kingdom, and from whom I fled unto you, is the one whose blow killed him!"[8]

Dīnawarī's text focuses as much on the reaction of the two onlookers as on the details of the blow itself. The audience-in-the-text's response to the dramatic scene points to (1) the ambivalence of the response to the blow, (2) the hyperbolic meaning and intent of the blow, and (3) its symbolic meaning and intent. To summarize the text, the powerful Chosroes, who has fled his own land to take refuge with the Byzantine forces against the Persian hero Bahrām Shūbīn, laughs when he sees the outlandish scene before him—a man split in two! The laughter is both an appropriate and an inappropriate response, we learn. The Byzantine leader angrily points to the inappropriateness of the laughter. The Chosroes explains his reaction to this truly awful scene: it's funny to see the soldier sundered because the latter had insulted him. The soldier had rubbed in the fact that Bahrām Shūbīn had routed the Chosroes from his powerhold. Kisrā's delight was in seeing his denigrator know just exactly how absurdly mighty was his Persian conqueror (Bahrām Shūbīn). The

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[8] Guirgass 1888:96-97. The passage is translated by Michael Chyet.

ambivalently bitter "last laugh," so to speak, belonged to Kisrā. The blow of such epic, superhuman proportions represents here in this particular text, if we infer from our observer's comments, the blow to one's pride (*anafa*—"hurt pride, shame") that being conquered means. The man who laughs has been invaded and his lands conquered by the extraordinary might of the Persian invader. His pride and sense of self have been wounded in the necessity of taking flight. He gains satisfaction (delight, laughter) and release from his hurt in seeing graphically before him how absolutely, hyperbolically powerful is his foe. The absurd force of the blow releases all the repressed anguish and rage experienced at the sword of the Islamic conquerer.

The Arabic text states clearly that we are in the realm of hyperbole. Thiyādūs equates one man with 1,000 men; that is, one soldier stands for his whole cavalry squadron. The splittee (the man rent) thus metonymically represents the whole group sliced down—the flanks of the army spread on the battlefield to the left and to the right. This early text dwells in its details on the result of the mighty sword blow— how it splits the soldier into two pieces, one falling to the right and the other to the left. The splitter (the swordsman) is the invader. The splittee represents the invaded, the conquered. Likewise, in Tunisian folk paintings the invader, the outsider arriving at the borders of settled land, deals the blow that splits the inhabitant in two.

The oft-repeated scene in folk epics, history, and story-paintings represents the pain and anguish of being invaded—how deeply the confrontation and clash of cultures wounds, how profoundly such invasion (and the assimilation of identities it causes) splits people in two and traumatizes them to their very core. And it is thus that Tunisian folk artists rework the splitting motif as the essence of the epic encounter and the essence of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. Of all the many stock scenes which are the commonplaces of epic and *sīra* alike, the Tunisian artist chooses to paint this particular scene time and again, repeating it, reinterpreting it only slightly. The scene metonymically stands for the whole of the *sīra*, which itself stands as an autobiography of the people who have made up its traditional audience and artists through some 800 years after the events it memorializes.

A dramatic sundering that represents in the popular imagination a marriage of East and West, of Arab and Berber, of nomad and sedentary populations—this is the gloss the folk-paintings provide for the *sīra*, especially the cycle called the *Taghrība* (westward migration). To judge from the metonymy provided by the Tunisian glass-painters, the mass identity conversion that the successive Islamic migrations and military campaigns effected in the wide territory which became Islamicized and Arabicized was not an easy one. Beneath the apparent homogeneity of

Arabo-Muslim cultural identity in Tunisia lie many anomalies and many traumas. Harry Norris (1985:51) claims that the "clash of color and the position of the [invading] Arab *vis à vis* the [African inhabitant]. . . is a theme of central significance in all the *siyar*." *Sīra* literature and the other Arabic material which might be termed epic, the pseudo-Maghāzī literature, each chronicle the Arabo-Muslim conquests. They differ from each other in their attitude toward Islam. While the Maghāzī are full of zeal and fervent faith, the *siyar* contain a secularly ambivalent, even paradoxical, stance toward official Islam (Norris 1980).

Southern Tunisian *rāwīs* ("narrators") taped by Anita Baker in 1971-73 betray profound ambivalence concerning the Islamic invasions and their own relationship with Arab-Berber adversaries whom they claim as direct ancestors (Baker 1978:612-17; Connelly 1986:ch. 9). One episode recounted by many of the Baker *rāwīs* tells about the arrival of the Hilālīs at a garden in the outskirts of Tunis and how the tribe devastated the lush fruit bearing trees and green lands. Baker comments that the sedentary, agricultural community narrators she recorded all reckon how Tunisia used to be a fertile paradise before the Hilālī invasion. Yet, at the same time, as rural folk, they identify with the camel-riding herdsmen who routed urban authority and disrupted the centers of officialdom (Baker 1978:614). Southern Tunisian *rāwīs* take it for a commonplace that the Hilālīs Arabicized the North African countryside which, until their arrival, spoke Berber even though Arabic had long become the language of the urban center (612-16). Tahar Guiga suggests that Tunisian oral versions of the Hilālī epic probably reflect a period of Maghribi history dominated by problems of cohabitation of invaders and invaded—"une cohabitation plus ou moins tolérable mais rendue nécessaire entre Hilaliens et habitants du pays et en premier lieu avec les éléments nomades locaux qui partageaient le même genre de vie et obéissaient aux mêmes valeurs, je veux dire la puissante confédération des Zénètes" (1985:36). Guiga analyzes the ways in which new bonds of identity were established between Berber inhabitants and invading Arabs, represented symbolically in the *sīra* by Zanātīs and Hilālīs. He suggests that the descendants of the Arab tribes who were integrated willy-nilly into North African society came to feel attached to the land where they were living and indeed attached to the whole of society. These new bonds of attachment, Guiga hypothesizes, led the Hilālī (1) to consider their own ancestors as invaders, (2) to cultivate a sincere admiration for the Zanātīs as defenders of the threshold, and (3) to dream (the conflicts now appeased) of a new society restructured on the basis of the nomadic values practiced by both Zanātī and Hilālī (1985:36).

Although Guiga's reading of the Banī Hilāl epic stresses the integration and the positive identifications of the two groups forged to merge into a single identity, the "rhetoric of the image" offered by

Tunisian traditional artists argues differently. Apparently, the scars still remain from the cleavage of identities soldered into one in the "epic" encounter of East and West. The antagonists whose gazes transfix the viewer from the walls of elderly Tunisian brides memorialize a trauma in the identity formation of North Africans. The past literally "hangs over the present as memories that are profoundly in conflict" (see Vance 1979:378, on the violence in the *Roland*). The figurative representation of the invader splitting the invaded stands for the splicing of identities (or violent "marriage") that formed Tunisian Arabo-Muslim identity. The hyperbole of the image represents a hyperbolic feeling—all the pain and anguish of migration, separation, invasion, foreign language acquisition, and cultural assimilation implied in the Arabicization and Islamicization of the North African population. The trope thus represents a trauma.[9]

The precise nature of that trauma is the one the image expressed hyperbolically and synecdochically: splitting. The Arabic rhetorical term closest to hyperbole is *mubālagha*. According to the medieval rhetorician al-ᶜAskarī, it means "to reach the ultimate limits of the meaning and its furthest borders.... [It does not] twist, but stretches the traits as far as possible" (Ghazoul 1980:116, citing al-ᶜAskarī, *Kitāb al-Ṣināᶜtayn*, p. 378). Following the Arabic concept of hyperbolic expression, this analysis will pursue the meaning of the splitting image to its furthest reach.

The term "splitting" in psychoanalytic parlance refers to an ego-defense mechanism which "protects the ego from conflict by means of dissociating or actively keeping apart contradictory experiences of the self and significant others" (Kernberg 1977:107). This defensive operation serves to prevent or control anxiety; it also protects the threatened individual from further disintegration and increases social adaptation (*ibid*.:108). In Freud's initial definition of the mechanism, he comments on its ingenuity as a solution to what a person perceives as a dangerous reality and a threat (1938/1964:275-76):

> On the one hand,. . . the person rejects reality and refuses to accept any prohibition; on the other hand,. . . he recognizes the danger of reality, takes over the fear of that danger as a pathological symptom and tries subsequently to divest himself of the fear. It must be confessed that this is a very ingenious solution of the difficulty. Both of the parties to the dispute obtain their share: the instinct is allowed to retain its satisfaction and proper respect is shown to reality. But everything has to be paid for in one way or another, and this success is achieved at the price of a rift in the ego which never heals, but which increases as time goes on.

Splitting can be a psychopathological symptom, but as a defense

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[9] On the close relationship between rhetorical tropes and the psychic defense mechanisms, see Benveniste 1971:75, Todorov 1977/1982:248, Bloom 1976:1.

mechanism it is part of normal human development and identity formation. In the rapprochement phase of the separation-individuation process which Mahler describes, splitting arises as a normal defense mechanism in the two-year-old's well-known intense ambivalence toward his mother. The child splits his mother into good and bad. This separation of his love-object occurs as a result of the infant's physical separation from his mother, his discovery of frustration and conflicts, and other worrisome events which meet him in his forays into the unknown territories beyond Mom. The toddler, hurtling back to his mother's arms (often to suckle at her breast), projects his very real fears and loss of self-confidence onto his rescuer, viewing her at once as an idealized All Good and denigrated All Bad. Such projection of his own impulses and negative experiences creates at once a fear of the other upon whom the impulse has been projected, and a need to control that person. Tantrums, negativism, and other nay-saying to mother become a way of experiencing control over an otherwise overwhelming environment (Mahler 1963, Kernberg 1977, McDevitt and Mahler 1980, Abelin 1971).

At other times in the course of normal human development, when certain situations take on the proportions of crises and threaten the individual's identity, regression may occur and the separation-individuation mechanisms reassert themselves. Migration is one of these crises which normally cause a variety of anxieties and confusions. Grinberg and Grinberg's psychoanalytic studies (1984) show that most migrations are somehow failed ones. Migration myths too always in some way represent a failure. The myth of the promised land, the fantasy of a better future, a richer, larger way of life is often a lie. Frustrations about the reality of the new land give way to anxieties about the new life and a yearning for the old, lost way of life and the lost place.[10] The migratory experience can trigger (1) separation anxiety, (2) depressive anxieties and a sense of loss and mourning, (3) persecution anxieties stemming from confrontation with the new and unknown, (4) confusional anxieties because of a failure to discriminate between the old and the new, and (5) super-ego anxieties over conflicting loyalties and values (13-14). The Grinbergs propose that the traumas of migration (including language and culture loss, and often war or other violence) parallel the separation-individuation process. The experience is marked by the same spatial displacement pattern of departure-separation-arrival. The arrival often culminates in feelings of helplessness and separation anxieties which cause the individual to yearn for a return to the old, or conversely to over adapt to the new.

The migratory experience is shared by numerous people in a variety

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[10] Much Arabic lyric poetry centers around this sense of loss as told in the frequent topos of the lamentation over the abandoned encampment and the blackened forts of the former abodes of the beloved.

of ways: foreign workers, exiles, refugees, displaced persons, and even colonized or invaded populations (see Grinberg and Grinberg 1984:21, Spicer 1971, Barth 1969). Migration, the boundary disputes which arise from it, the violence such geographic encroachments engender, the problems of exogamous marriages, and the genealogical synthesis of groups (Berber, Arab, and Black African in the person of the Black hero) form the key thematic material of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* (Connelly 1986). Tunisian narrators dwell almost exclusively on the third cycle of the epic, known as *al-taghrība* (westward migration). Sayyid Hurreiz believes that Hilālī legends in the Sudan reflect the dilemma of African-Arab identity and "spell out clearly the nature of the process of acculturation resulting from the interplay, compromise and accommodation of two different cultures" (1972:162). The tales attempt to identify the tribe ethnically with both Africa and Arabia through an African maternal ancestor and an Arab paternal ancestor. The Banī Hilāl tales in the Sudan, as in Tunisia, form a part of a traditional lore about Muslim ancestors who arrive from the outside to live with the African natives, intermarry with them, and introduce them to Islam.

Other legends which circulate orally in Tunisia and parts of the lands conquered by the Arab Muslims also point symbolically to the traumatic splitting caused by the fusion of identities that the successive Arab migrations set off. Another reverse-glass painting, for example, shows the famous sword of Muḥammad, called Dhū'l-Faqār ("the possessor of a split"; see Lane 1863-93:2425-26).[11] In paintings of ʿAlī and the Rās al-Ghūl (the Ghoul), the Muslim hero wields a split sword, that is, a sword with two points or a cleft in the blade. Here the split or separation becomes part of the weapon rather than a vertical splitting of the conquered infidel.

Muḥammad's sword's name calls attention to the split: Who possesses it? The sword which renders the blow or the victim who receives it? The cause and the effect become interchangeable. Whichever the representation, the split itself stands as a displacement and condensation

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[11] According to legends, the famous sword belonged to a heathen whom Muḥammad killed in battle. The sword is said to have borne an inscription ending with the words *lā yuqtal Muslim bi-Kāfir* ("no Muslim shall be slain for an unbeliever"). Muslim swords often bear the engraving: *lā sayf illā Dhū'l-Faqār* ("there is no sword save The Split Sword"), with the words *wa-lā fatā illā ʿAlī* ("and there is no hero save ʿAlī") sometimes added. The grooved blade (*fuqra* or *sayf mufaqqar*) with its two points was supposed to be used to pierce the eyes of an enemy. My account follows the *EI²*, under the entry "Dhū'l-Faqār."

Southern Tunisian Hilālī *rāwīs* like to highlight the famous scene where the hero Diyāb puts out the eye of the Zanātī Khalīfa. The term used is literally "the stirrup of the eye," or the eyeball (see Baker 1978:143, Connelly 1986:ch. 9). The dead metaphor points to an upward displacement of the wound which metaphorically represents the psychic castration and penetration experienced by the invaded population at the swords of the Arabs.

of the force of the blow, in both its physical and moral qualities. The blow separates, it sunders as it solders, and it splices as it slices. It cleaves (apart/onto) and it cleaves (apart/together). The oxymoron contained in the antonymous homonymy of the English words exactly expresses the psychic operation of the fusion of identities rendered by the sword of the conquering Arab Muslims.

As in the encounter of Persian and Greek in the Dīnawarī text, as well as in the encounter of Arab and Berber in the Tunisian paintings and Hilālī legends (and in the medieval French encounter of Arab "pagan" and Frank), the split is symbolically insisted upon as the point of connection between the invader and the invaded. The force of the blow in both the *Roland* and the Dīnawarī texts is equated with honor and one's value as a man (*anafa*). Eugene Vance quotes a passage from Roland to show how a hero's identity and fame are connected with the blows he deals; indeed, it may be "the commemorative posterity of the singer that inspires the epic blows of the hero" (1979:380; cited from *Roland* 1013-16):

> Now let each man take care to deal great blows,
> Lest a bad song be sung of us!...
> A bad example shall never be made of me.

Victory in the *gestes* is a victory of memory over oblivion, and the more violent the deed the more memorable (387, 393). Oral epic, Vance tells us, is elegiac. It commemorates and ceremonializes the "tortuous paradox of joy born of death and suffering" (395). For Vance, the violence memorialized in medieval narrative is not so much a "trauma in the authorial unconscious" as the "conflicting nature of words and signs" (378). He concludes that the transition from oral culture to scriptural culture involved some kind of violence (402).

In the case of the Arabic *sīra* at least, the violence, trauma, bloodshed, and conflict seem much less abstract than any "radical anxiety" about the difference between utterance and writing (Vance 1979:402). The splitting image as a symbol re-individuates a pattern of experience based on a real, historical, foreign penetration and political incorporation. The image re-individuates the repressed emotional and psychic responses of the people who experienced the resulting social and cultural upheaval. The symbol remains fresh today for a large population of the Tunisian south not so much by virtue of the memory of the past it contains, but rather its relevance to the present. Contemporary Tunisian artists use the Hilālī lore ever more frequently. Brahim Dhahak, for example, has completed a series of 30 engravings celebrating the whole Tunisian version of the *sīra*. The film-maker Tayyeb Louichi, in his movie "Shadows of the Earth," uses references to the Hilālī migrations as a symbol for the experience of migrant workers from southern, rural areas who leave to earn their living

in France. The audience of Baker's 60 *rāwīs* as well as the *rāwīs* themselves, were mostly farm laborers and seasonal workers. Many had endured the anguish associated with migration since they had spent time in France as migrant laborers or served in the French army. As part of the Tunisian south, they live daily in an "inferior economic and political position" (Baker 1978:372 n., Connelly 1986:ch. 9).

The "bonds of attachment" forged between invader and invaded to form the racial history and ancestry of these people came at great cost. In order to assimilate the Arabic language, the Arab's religious and cultural identity, the Berber group had to repress almost certain feelings of persecution and hatred. The emphasis on positive bonds of attachment, such as Guiga argues was the case during the Ḥafṣid period, involved a certain denial of ambivalence. Identification with the powerful aggressor and the necessity of submission to the disruptive force of the immigrant Hilālī tribesmen destroyed old group cohesion and threatened the group itself. Such a migration becomes, the Grinbergs argue, a true catastrophe and the agent of catastrophic change (1984:35-36); it sets off psychic defense mechanisms. Ambivalence denied results in a defensive splitting of the ego, which in turn results in a wound that "never heals, but which increases as time goes on" (Freud, cited above; see also Douglas 1966:140-58). The "split" Berber image thus represents this denial and the wound caused by the incorporation of the aggressor and the denial of a certainly justifiable xenophobia.

Tunisian versions of the Hilālī legend express the repressed confusional anxieties and persecution anxieties metaphorically. The *rāwīs'* language abounds in dead metaphors expressive of the fear of being eaten up by the enemy or gobbled up by the Old Sabbath Woman Witch (see Baker 1978: Arabic texts, Connelly 1986:ch. 9). Survival anxieties dominate and fear of hunger becomes a central theme. The poems and stories almost all have an elegiac tone of mourning and loss counterbalanced by idealized hopes for a better life in the Green Promised Land of Tunis which will be their salvation. Conflict is most often met not by direct confrontation and battle but rather by means of trickery, ruse, and wiles. The woman becomes the mediator in disputes. The tribe turns to the Amazon-like beauty Zāziya time and again to save them. She does so in various ways: she sacrifices herself, in one of the most frequently told episodes, by marrying the enemy Bin Hāshim in order to procure fertile lands and food for her tribe; when all else fails and the tribal entity is in utter confusion and disarray with internecine wars, Zāziya dons male clothing and battle armor to lead the orphans of the tribe to avenge themselves. This theme of confusion of male-female sexual identity recurs several times in the tales Baker collected. In one, a male becomes a female or a female a male three times (see Connelly 1986:ch. 9 for a fuller

analysis of this theme).

Themes such as these (irresolution of bisexual identity, food obsessions, incorporation-dependency fantasies, yearning for an idealized past or future) are the very ones the Grinbergs cite as the conflicts experienced by immigrants. One's "mother tongue" is "invested with libido," they claim, and its loss is traumatic. A certain identity crisis is involved in giving up one's language. They also show how over adaptation to a new culture often causes denial, splitting, and regression—a wish to return, like the toddler, to "mother" or home or to some symbolic reincarnation of her secure arms. The migrant often finds "libidinal refueling"—which we all seek in times of severe crisis (and growth)—symbolically in rhetorical, ceremonial events such as epic narration (see Spicer 1971, Grinberg and Grinberg 1984, Bowra 1964).

Vance has suggested that all oral epic memory by nature involves repression and regression. The Arabic *sīra* becomes for its audiences a narrative quest for origins and a symbolic return. In the underlying, buried cyclical mode of composition which progresses by retrogression, the listener returns symbolically to a primitive, familiar structure. The narrative repetitions of the separation-conflict-return pattern enable the listener to participate metaphorically and ceremonially once again in the rhythms of the primal human biological pattern and to re-experience the greater group narrative quest for its identity in the re-individuation of the biography.

As Kenneth Burke teaches us, form is the appeal, and form in art is what offers an arousal and gratification of desires (1931:124, 138 espec.). Much as the child listening to the rhythmic incantation of nursery rhymes re-experiences on a primordial, unconscious level the rhythms of its mother's heartbeat, its first familiar pattern of experience (*ibid*.:140-41), so the group re-experiences narratively the rhythmic forms of the separation-individuation process. The narrative quest for group identity becomes not so much a solution to any crisis as a ventilation of anxieties experienced by the audience. In the case of the Banī Hilāl epic in Tunisia, commemoration of the old migration saga in words and images functions to spell out the rupture, to expose the "cleaving" of Berber onto Arab.

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