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The Arab precursors /  
Modern Arabic Readings



# The Arabic Ghazal: Formal and thematic aspects of a problematic genre

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When we were invited to attend this symposium, hardly any of us, I think, was in great doubt about what to speak. We are supposed to speak about the *ghazal*, of course, and we all know – or at least believe to know – what a *ghazal* is. However, in the course of its long history the *ghazal* underwent such numerous changes that in the end the different poems that were considered by their poets to be *ghazals* do not seem to have much in common. The term *ghazal* has been used to designate things as different as the description of an abandoned encampment introducing an old Arabic lampoon poem, a two-line epigram from Abbasid times on the downy beard of a beloved youth, and a wine or anacreontic poem in Persian or Turkish. One may well ask if it makes sense to make all these different kinds of poetry the subject of a single symposium. However, since all these poems were considered by their poets and their audiences as *ghazal*, they were felt to be part of a literary tradition of undisputable reality. And it is, of course, exactly the diversity of this tradition that makes it so fascinating to study and so valuable an object, allowing us to learn more about literary and cultural history.

But the diversity of the tradition of the *ghazal* makes it nearly impossible to find an exact definition that would match all its different manifestations. If we look at several definitions that have been proposed for the term *ghazal*, we find that some of them use purely thematic criteria, others purely formal criteria, and others a combination of both. A purely thematic definition is, for example, that put forward by Julie Meisami who says that the *ghazal* is “poetry about love, whether incorporated into the *qaṣīda* or in an independent, brief poem.” (Meisami 1998) According to this definition of the Arabic *ghazal* it is only the content that is relevant, whereas according to the definition of the Persian *ghazal* by Bausani it is only the form. Bausani describes the *ghazal* as having a certain length (five to twelve lines; consequently, only independent poems can match this definition), a certain rhyme scheme and the *takhalluṣ* in the final line, whereas in terms of content the *ghazal* may treat such different subjects as “love, spring, wine, God etc.” (Bausani 1965:1033b).

This definition can, of course, not be applied to the Arabic *ghazal*, since an Arabic *ghazal* must deal with love in one or another form. A poem about spring, wine and God without love as its central theme would have never been considered as a *ghazal* by Arab poets in any period. But does this mean that we can confine ourselves to purely thematic criteria for the definition of the Arabic *ghazal*? It does not. Even here there is an interplay between thematic and formal elements that

shape the *ghazal*-tradition. I will demonstrate this phenomenon taking as an example the poetry of Ibn al-Mu'tazz, the famous "caliph for one day", who was one of the finest and most celebrated poets of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century and one of the founding fathers of Arabic literary theory.

His *dīwān* has been collected and organized according to genres by the famous philologist Abū Bakr al-Šūlī.<sup>1</sup> Even a superficial glance at the *dīwān* of this poet shows that a purely thematic definition of the *ghazal* is not sufficient. As we would expect, the *dīwān* contains a chapter that bears the heading *ghazal*. All 400 poems in this chapter deal with love. But in other chapters there are many other poems or parts of poems in which the same theme is dealt with. So we find a poem where the subject of winning the favour of the beloved is treated in the manner of pre- and early Islamic Arabic self-vaunting poetry. Consequently, it has been included in the chapter entitled *fakhr* (no. 6). Then we find a chapter on wine poetry of which Ibn al-Mu'tazz was a great and acknowledged master. Needless to say it contains many lines in which the beautiful *sāqi* is described and treated as an object of love. All this is "poetry about love", but it was not considered to be *ghazal*.

The situation is even more complicated if we turn to the introductory part of the polythematic *qaṣīda*. In this case, Arab critics would have called the first part – provided it deals with love which is indeed most often the case – either *ghazal* or *nasīb*. Arab critics did not distinguish between both terms.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Western scholars did, and it became customary to term the first part of the polythematic *qaṣīda* a *nasīb*, in contrast to independent poems dealing with love, for which the term *ghazal* was reserved. Apart from the basic assumption that both have something to do with love, it is again a purely formal definition: "dependent vs. independent love poetry". But again, reality proves not to be so simple as to match this criterion. The reason is again that already in the time of Ibn al-Mu'tazz poets were looking back to several rather different strands of traditions of love poetry. In particular, we can distinguish between a) the tradition of the pre-Islamic *nasīb* and b) the tradition of the independent *ghazal*, formed in turn by different strands of tradition.

The first tradition, the one going back to the pre-Islamic *nasīb*, is characterized formally by the fact that it is always the first part of a polythematic *qaṣīda*. In pre-Islamic times, there was no other form of love poetry than that.<sup>3</sup> Thematically, this form of love poetry is also conspicuously different from the later *ghazal*-tradition. Its main themes are, as Renate Jacobi has pointed out, a) the "deserted campsite":

<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad Bādī Sharīf (ed.) 1977-78; poems are quoted according to their number given in vol. 1 of this edition.

<sup>2</sup> It seems possible, however, that in Mamluk and Ottoman times both terms were used for two different genres. So, for example, in al-‘Aydarūsī 1985: 264, we learn that Māmaya al-Anqashārī "bara'a fī ṣ-sinā‘atayn fī l-ghazal wa-l-nasīb" ("excelled in both the disciplines *ghazal* and *nasīb*"). In any case, the difference between both terms must have been very similar to the conclusions that will be drawn in the present article.

<sup>3</sup> The existence of pre-Islamic Arabic love songs can be ruled out with almost complete certainty, cf. Bauer 1998: 23-25.

the poet stops at the traces (*atlāl*) of a forsaken campsite, shedding tears, b) the “vision” of the beloved, the *khayāl*, that the sleepless poet perceives while he spends his night in the desert, and finally c) the “morning of separation” when the poet watches the departure of the people of the beloved’s tribe.<sup>4</sup> A very typical example attesting to the continuation of this tradition is the following text, consisting of the seven initial lines of a self-vaunting poem comprising in total 32 lines.

Sample no. 1: *Nasīb* (Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, chapter entitled *fakhr*, beginning of poem no. 17: *Wāfir/-āhī*):

1	بَهْرُ الْكَرْخِ مَهْجُورُ الْوَاحِي	لَمَنْ دَارْ وَرِيعٌ قَدْ تَعْفَى
2	عَلَى أَطْلَالِهِ أَيْدِي الرَّيَاحِ	إِذَا مَا التَّقْرُبُ خَلَاءَ تَلَاقَتْ
3	بِبُؤْلٍ مِثْلِ أَفْوَاهِ الْلَّفَاقِ	مَحَاهَ كُلُّ هَطَالٍ مُلْحَ
4	صَرِيرِ النَّجْمِ مَتَّهِمُ الصَّبَاحِ	فَبَاتَ بِلَلِ بَاكِيَةً ثَكُولٍ
5	كَانَ نَجْوَهَا حَدَقَ الْمَلَاحِ	وَأَسْفَرَ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ عَنْ سَمَاءِ
6	وَلَا سَقَى الْعَوَادِلَ وَالْوَاحِي	سَقَى أَرْضًا تَحْلُّ بِهَا سَلَيْمَى
7	وَأَحْشَاءَ تَضَيِّعُ مِنَ الْوَشَاحِ	مُهَمَّهَةٌ طَأْ نَظَرَ مَرِيضٍ

- 1 To whom belongs an abode and a dwelling place in Nahr al-Karkh, effaced already, forsaken all around?
- 2 When the raindrops abstain from it, the hands of the winds grasp each other over its remains.
- 3 It has been erased by all the clouds that bring heavy rainfall, unceasingly producing downpours, clouds that resemble the mouths of milk camels.
- 4 They brought about a night of (clouds pouring down water like the tears of) a weeping woman, bereft of her child, a night with its stars blinded and people in doubt if dawn would ever approach again.
- 5 Then, when they dispersed, they revealed a sky the stars of which resembled the pupils of beautiful (girls).
- 6 May it water the land where Sulaymā settles, but may it not shed water on those who reprove and revile!
- 7 (Sulaymā:) a slender girl whose glances are sick and whose intestines fade away when she girds herself.

The main subject is the “deserted campsite”. Ibn al-Mu‘tazz was aware, and made it quite clear to his listeners, that he was referring to an old tradition. Note the initial words: *li-man dārun*, which are reminiscent of a formulaic expression used in numerous pre- and early Islamic *qasīdas* (cf. Bauer 1993). Further, we find other keywords like *rab‘un*, *ta‘affā*. Even the name of the beloved, Sulaymā, brings to mind

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jacobi 1971: 13-49; cf. also Jacobi 1993.

pre-Islamic models. Then follows the description of rainfall that has erased the campside, also a very traditional motif in the “deserted campside” theme. To strengthen the impression of antiquarianism, Ibn al-Mu’tazz uses rather strange and bewildering (if not altogether incomprehensible, cf. line 3) comparisons. This also holds true for the short description of the beloved in line 7, where the way to express her slenderness was certainly not the *dernier cri* in the time of Ibn al-Mu’tazz.

It seems, therefore, that it makes sense not to call these lines *ghazal*, but to make use of the term *nasīb* to make clear that they do not represent the normal case of the independent love poem in this period. We can reach this conclusion (1) through a formal criterion (the lines are only part of a polythematic *qaṣīda*), (2) through a thematic criterion (they feature the theme of the “deserted campside”), but what seems most important for me is what I would like to call the (3) “intertextual” criterion, i.e. that Ibn al-Mu’tazz refers back to a certain tradition, which we can conveniently call *nasīb* and which can be described by the aforementioned both formal and thematic criteria. “Referring back” to a tradition does not, of course, mean slavish imitation of it, but rather creative play with it. And this is precisely what Ibn al-Mu’tazz does. An attentive reader will notice immediately that this *nasīb* is not a pre-Islamic one. First, Nahr al-Karkh is not at all in the desert, but is a quarter of Baghdad instead, and second, the metaphor of the winds shaking hands above the campside (line 2) is a prototype of the “modern” and much disputed metaphor in defence of which Ibn al-Mu’tazz has written his “book on the modern style”, his *Kitāb al-Badī*.

But what then does the normal “modern” *ghazal* of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century look like? The independent Arabic love poem obviously had its origin in the pre-Islamic *nasīb* as well, but soon passed through several decisive developments. Let me only mention the ‘Udhrite tradition with its celebration of the chaste devotion to the unattainable beloved, the Ḥijāzī tradition with its protagonist ‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘a and his descriptions of flirtations and amorous encounters, and finally the realistic and stylistically advanced *ghazal* of Abū Nuwās, the key-figure for the Arabic *ghazal* of the centuries to come. After a short while, the themes and motifs of this new form of love poetry differed considerably from those of the *nasīb*. By examining a huge corpus of *ghazal* of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, I found that nearly all its themes and motifs can be subsumed under five different thematic categories: 1) *praise* of the beloved’s beauty; 2) *complaint* of the lover, who has been unable to or can no more attain union with the beloved; 3) *declaration* of the passionate, unsuperrable and unavoidable love of the lover; 4) *reproach* towards the beloved who does not fulfill the duties that arise from the unselfish love of the lover, and finally 5) the *portrayal*, i.e. the description of successful or not so successfull encounters with the beloved or the depiction of individual traits of the beloved such as his or her religion, race, eye colour, or social position, or his downy beard (cf. Bauer 1998).

The first of my two examples of 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century mainstream *ghazal* features the themes “praise” and “complaint”.

Sample no. 2: *Ghazal* (Ibn al-Mu'tazz, no. 377: Khaffif/-*ālī*):

1	أَيُّ وَرْدٍ فِي خَدَّ ذَاكَ الْفَرَّارِ	أَيُّ وَرْدٍ فِي قَدَّهُ وَاعِدَّالِ
2	أَيُّ دُرٍّ إِذَا تَبَسَّمَ يُبَدِّي	هُوَ سَحْرٌ فِي طَرْفَهُ وَدَلَالِ
3	فَهُهُذَا جَرَّتْ دُمُوعَ جُهْنُونِي	وَلِهَذَا طَالَتْ عَلَيَّ الْلَّيْلَيِّ

- 1 What a rose on the cheek of this gazelle! What a bending, what a straightness in his stature!
- 2 What kind of pearls does he uncover when he smiles! What a magic, what a coquetry is in his glance!
- 3 These make the tears flow from my eyelids, those make the nights for me pass all too slow!

Its rather epigrammatic length of three lines shows that the length of a poem cannot be made a criterion for the Arabic *ghazal*. The *ghazal* of Ibn al-Mu'tazz ranges between two and 33 lines with an average of about 3 1/2 lines. This is, admittedly, rather short. Other poets sometimes composed *ghazals* of more than fifty lines. Most popular in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, however, was the four-liner (cf. Bauer 1996), closely followed by the two-line epigram that became very popular in Ayyubid and Mamluk times. Some poets, however, seemed rather taken with the three-liner. Especially so al-Wa'wā' ad-Dimashqī and our sample poet Ibn al-Mu'tazz. The poem displays a thematic development that is rather common for the *ghazal* of this period. Two lines are dedicated to the description of the beloved's beauty. The beloved is mentioned in the masculine gender and has to be imagined almost certainly as a male youth; this is an important distinction from the traditional *nasīb*, where the beloved is always a girl. In the *ghazal* the beloved may be male as well as female. This is, as far as I can see, a very characteristic trait of the Arabic *ghazal*. Whereas the beloved in the Persian and Ottoman *ghazal* is mostly male, the Arabs never stopped composing *ghazals* on women, though with most poets the number of *mudhakkarāt* (love poems on young men) clearly surpasses that of the number of *mu'annathāt* (poems on women). This points, as I would interpret it, to one of the main differences between the Arabic *ghazal* on the one hand and the Persian and the Ottoman *ghazal* on the other, namely its greater realism, its preoccupation with potentially real love affairs which used to happen, as things were, with young men and with girls all alike.

Back to Ibn al-Mu'tazz. The images used by Ibn al-Mu'tazz to depict the beauty of the beloved are quite conventional (rose/cheek, pearls/front teeth, magic of the glance). These images are also familiar to every reader of Persian and Ottoman poetry. The last line, in which the poet complains about his tears and his sleeplessness

is rather conventional as well. However, the intention of the *ghazal* poets was not so much to find new and original expressions and similes, but rather to evoke emotions and to contextualize them. The poem works in the form of what can be called an “emotional score”: the audience of a poem will recognize familiar expressions and tropes, by the adequate formulation of which they will be able to identify with the feelings expressed in them. Then, as the poet moves from theme to theme, the listeners follow him and will discover how certain emotions transform into different ones. Thereby they can restructure their own experiences (which may be quite different from those depicted by the poet) and feel some sort of catharsis.<sup>5</sup> In our case, the concluding emotion of despair is shown as being the result of fascination.

Our next sample poem is equally short and of an epigrammatic nature.

Sample no. 3: *Ghazal* (Ibn al-Mu'tazz, no. 177<sup>6</sup>, Khafif/-ādahā):

1	وَاقْعُ عَيْنِي سُهَادَهَا	هَبْ لِعَيْنِي رُقادَهَا
2	كُنْتَ فِيهَا سُوادَهَا	وَارِحَمْ الْمُلْقَةَ الَّتِي
3	كُنْتَ دَهْرًا فَسَادَهَا	كُنْ صَلَاحًا لَهَا كَمَا

- 1 Render to my eye its sleep, remove its sleeplessness from me!
- 2 Have mercy on my eye, in which you have always been the eyeball!
- 3 Bring it salvation, as you have always brought it ruin!

Three different themes can be discerned: *complaint*, *declaration* and *reproach*. The poet complains about his sleeplessness, declares his love to his beloved (by saying that the beloved is his eyeball) and asks him to “have mercy”, that means to grant the union. Finally, the last hemistich contains a moment of reproach: the obstinate beloved is blamed for having caused all the lover’s pains. These topics are not so much forming a clear thematic sequence as was the case in the aforementioned poem but are rather closely interlocked, thus providing a dense expression of the complex feelings of a single moment. Above all, the unity of the poem is brought about quite naturally by the theme of the “eye” upon which all motifs are centered. Nevertheless, the poem has a clear internal development. Even if it does not show a clear thematic sequence, it is characterized by a subtle stylistic progression. It starts with a semantically rather neutral parallelism that leads over to the rather complex idea of the central line, and it is concluded by an antithesis that provides for a well-formed ending of the short but nice poem.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of the emotional score (“Affektpartitur”) is dealt with in greater detail in Bauer 1998: 200-207.

<sup>6</sup> Also quoted, with additional references, in al-Sarī al-Raffā’ 1985-86, vol. 2: 75 (no. 128). In line 2 and 3 my text follows the reading of al-Sarī.

So far, we have had examples for four out of five thematic categories. Still missing is the *portrayal*, for which sample no. 4 provides an example.

Sample no. 4: *Ghazal* in place of *nasīb* (Ibn al-Mu'tazz, beginning of poem no. 523: Ramal/-ūdī):

1	فُوقَ أَغْصَانِ الْقُدُودِ	لَا وَرْمَانِ التَّهْوِدِ
2	وَوْرَدٌ مِنْ خَدْوَدِ	وَعَنَاقِيدَ مِنْ أَصْدَاعِ
3	طَالِعَاتٌ سُعُودِ	وَوْجُوهٌ مِنْ بُدُورِ
4	دِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الْوَعِيدِ	وَرَسُولٌ جَاءَ بِالْمِيعَا
5	فِي قَفَّا طُولِ صُدُودِ	وَغَيْمٌ مِنْ وَصَالِ
6	زَارَيَ فِي يَوْمِ عَيْدِ	مَا رَأَتْ عَيْنِي كَظَبِّيِّ
7	بُونِ مِنْ لَبْسِ الْحَدِيدِ	فِي قَبَاءٍ فَالْحَتِّيِّ اللَّهِ
8	يِّ سِيفٍ، أَوْ عَمُودٍ	كُلُّمَا قَاتَلَ جُندِ
9	نِ وَخَدَنِ وَجِيدٍ	قَاتَلَ النَّاسَ بَعْيَيْهِ
10	فِيهِ عَلَى رَغْمِ الْحَسُودِ	قُدْ سَقَانِي الْرَّاحَ مِنْ
11	وَهُوَ فِي عَقْدِ شَدِيدِ	وَتَعَلَّقَنَا كَأَيِّ
12	طَيْبٌ عَنْدَ الْوَرُودِ	تَرْغُبُ الْشَّغَرَ بِشَغَرِ
13	قَطْرٌ مُنْزِنٌ بِحُمُودِ	مِثْلَ مَا عَاجَلَ بَرَدِ
14	حِيْ كَجَّارَ عَيْدِ	وَمَضَى بَخَطْرٍ فِي الْمَشَّ
15	تَرْجَعَ أَرْوَاحُ الرُّؤُودِ	سَحْرًا مِنْ قَبْلَ أَنِّ

- No, by the pomegranates of swelling breasts on top of twigs of trunks,
- by the bunches of earlocks and the roses of cheeks,
- by faces of full moons that rise with lucky stars,
- and by a messenger who announces that what had been a vague promise turned out to be a fixed appointment now,
- and by the bliss of union that follows upon a long period of rejection:
- never has my eye seen anything like a gazelle that came to visit me on a holiday,
- clad in a bluish-iridescent mantle, a garment woven of iron.
- Whenever another soldier fights with his sword or his mace,
- he fights with two eyes, two cheeks and a neck.
- In spite of the envier's rancour, he gave me wine to drink from his mouth,
- and we embraced each other and it seemed as if we were bound by a tightly tied knot,
- while teeth hit sweet teeth as our mouths went to drink at each other.
- It seemed as if coolness (of the saliva) hastened to make a cloud's raindrops freeze.

- 14 When he left, he swang to and fro in his gait like a “froward tyrant”,<sup>7</sup>  
 15 early in the morning, before the spirits of the sleepers have returned.

The poem falls into a category of poems which portray a nightly encounter with the beloved. Ibn al-Mu'tazz composed quite a lot of these visit poems<sup>8</sup> (mostly again in form of short epigrams). This may reflect his personal experience because one might conceive that he as a prince may have been more accustomed to experiences of fulfilment than to experiences of deprivation. However the case may be, these poems reflect the tradition of the *Hijāzī ghazal* of 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'a, which was continued and developed by Abū Nuwās and again stylistically refined by Ibn al-Mu'tazz.

Our sample is quite long with its 15 lines, but the lines in the meter *ramal* are very short. The poem consists of two sections: a vow that conjures up memories of different elements of beauty and fulfilment serves as an introduction and anticipates the mood of the lines that follow. The main body from line 6 to 15 depicts the visit of the beloved, his beauty (8-9: praise), describes a kiss and an embracement (10-13), and it ends with the romantic scene of the beloved's departure in the morning following the night of love. It is quite remarkable that the elements of beauty mentioned in the introduction are obviously those of a woman ("pomegranates" in line 1), whereas the nightly visitor is a soldier, as we can derive from lines 7 and 8. From Ibn al-Mu'tazz' time onwards, soldiers (especially Turkish soldiers) became one of the most desired objects of love.

For the sake of brevity I will not go into further details of interpretation but will just limit myself to point to the *iqtibās* of line 14 and to the nice play with metaphors in line 13, where the coolness of the saliva, which is conventionally compared to the pure water of a rain cloud, threatens to let it freeze, in which case the water of the raincloud would become hailstones, and hailstones, in turn, are one of the most conventional similes for the front teeth that are mentioned in line 12, so that saliva and teeth are connected in a slightly fantastical manner.

This poem is a very typical representative of the *ghazal* genre, and nobody would have ever doubted that in fact it is a *ghazal* were it not the first part of a polythematic ode in praise of the caliph al-Muktafi. According to the current theory, the Arabic panegyric ode should start with a *nasīb*, not with a *ghazal*. But this usage of the terms *nasīb* and *ghazal* that is based on purely formal criteria does not lead to a satisfactory classification. This can be clearly seen by a comparison between sample 1 and 4, both of them introductory passages of polythematic *qasīdas*, but each reflecting a clearly different tradition. Therefore, I would be inclined not to call sample 4 a *nasīb*, since this passage obviously forms part of a strand of tradition which cannot be called otherwise than *ghazal*. If we will nevertheless main-

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Qur'ān 11/59, 14/15 (translation Arberry).

<sup>8</sup> In Bauer 1998: 510-512, I called such poems "Besuchsgedichte", because many of them start with the word *zāra* or *zārat* "he/she came to visit me".

tain a formal distinction between *ghazal* and *nasīb*, insisting that only introductory parts of a *qaṣīda* can be called *nasīb*, we can take refuge in the formulation that no. 4 is a *ghazal* that takes the place of a *nasīb*. This formulation is not so absurd as it may seem at first glance since from Abbasid times onwards we find numerous *qaṣīdas* that start with a wine scene or a garden description. In this case, we say that a wine song or a garden description replaces the *nasīb*. In analogy, we can say that in no. 4 a *ghazal* replaces the *nasīb*.

As one might have expected, difficulties do not end here, as sample no. 5 shows: *Ghazal* in the style of *nasīb* (Ibn al-Mu'tazz, no. 317: *Tawīl/-ūquhā*):

1	وَرَمَتْ لِبِينِ شَاحِنِ الدَّارِ نُوقَهَا	أَلْرَحْلَتْ سَلَمِيْ وَبَنَ فَرَقَهَا
2	مُنِيَ النَّفْسَ مَسْدُودًا عَلَيَّ طَرِيقَهَا	وَأَقْبَلَ وَجْهُ الْيَأسِ مِنْهَا وَأَصْبَحَتْ
3	وَدَمْعَةُ عَيْنٍ كُلَّ وَقْتٍ تُرْيَقَهَا	فَهَلْ لَكَ إِلَّا زَرْفَةٌ عِنْدَ ذِكْرِهَا
4	سَقَتْكَ النَّوْيَ كَأسًا فَكَيْفَ تَذَوْقُهَا	أَلَا إِنَّهَا الْقَلْبُ الَّذِي طَالَ وَجْهَهَا

- 1 Salmā has departed indeed, her party has left, and her camels have been bridled for departure, for an abode that is far away.
- 2 Instead, despair has turned its face towards me, and the way to the fulfilment of my soul's desires has been barred.
- 3 Can you summon up anything else than sighs when you remember her and tears that an eye sheds every moment?
- 4 Oh my heart, the passion of which has lasted long: separation has given you a cup to drink, but how will you bear its taste?

The four lines in the solemn *tawīl* metre that start with the words *a-lā rahalat Salmā*: one can hardly imagine an expression that sounds more antiquarian and old fashioned than this! The formulation of the first line is clearly reminiscent of several famous pre-Islamic poems, and one could very easily ascribe this line to Imra' alqays or Zuhayr, and this holds also true for the other lines of the poem. As in sample no. 1, we have again a lady called Salmā, we find keywords like *rahalat*, *bāna*, *bayn* and *dār*, we have camels that are not at all appropriate animals for the *ghazal* of middle and late Abbasid times, and, most important, the whole piece has as its theme the “morning of separation” which is, as we have said, one of the three main themes of the pre- and early Islamic *nasīb*. However, these lines do not form part of a polythematic *qaṣīda*, and this is certainly the reason why aş-Şūlī included them into the chapter titled *ghazal*. Besides that, we can detect a “modern” trait in these lines, as old fashioned as they may be from the thematic point of view. These four lines represent a type of the four-liner, developed by such poets as al-'Abbās ibn al-Āhnaf, Abū Nuwās, Abū Tammām and Khālid ibn Yazīd, a type which I call the “frame structure”, in which the general theme of the poem is set by the first line. It is developed in lines 2 and 3, and the last line gives a résumé or a sort of

conclusion and often shows some parallels to line 1, together with which it forms sort of a frame (cf. Bauer 1996: 20). In our poem, line 4 is a resignative, emotionally stirring résumé of the poem, forming the terminus of a route that leads from the outer world in line 1 through the outer features of the lover's pain in lines 2–3 to the inner world of the lover's psyche in line 4, which is in turn paralleled to line 1 by its identic beginning. So it is the structure that makes this poem a "modern" poem in the time of its poet – so to say, old wine in a new wine skin. And since we have decided not to use the term *nasīb* unless the specific lines do not only refer to the *nasīb* tradition in their thematic material but also in their function of introducing a polythematic poem, we will not call these lines a *nasīb*, but will apply to it together with al-Šūlī the term *ghazal*. But we must add that it is a *ghazal* in the style of *nasīb*.

To sum up: we have learned that none of those definitions that confine themselves to either formal or thematic criteria can do justice to the literary phenomenon that can be called the classical Arabic *ghazal*. I even doubt if it makes much sense at all to look for a definition of this kind. Rather, it seems to me that the nature of this literature can be understood better if we try to discern the strands of intertextual relations, to find out the textual traditions to which the poems of a certain time and of a specific type refer, and to trace back the set of themes, motifs, and stylistic features that were considered constitutive of the *ghazal* in a certain moment of literary history. Since every work of art is just one specific point where several intertextual strands of reference intersect, we will be able by following all these different strands to learn more about the history of the *ghazal* and finally discern the unity that lies behind all the different manifestations of the *ghazal* over its one-and-a-half-thousand-year history.

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