THEME AND VARIATIONS IN UMAYYAD GHAZAL POETRY

The subject of this paper belongs to a complex of questions which may be described, in a general way, as the transformation of the pre-Islamic poetic heritage in medieval Arabic poetry. In other words, it forms part of a study of topos I have been concerned with in recent years. My starting point has been very simple, indeed. It seemed to me that classical Arabic poetry was by no means as conventional and conservative as it appears at a cursory reading, and as we are led to believe by our encyclopaedias and handbooks. This does not sound provocative today. Attitudes towards medieval Arabic literature have changed during the last decades, I am glad to say, but there is still some way to go, until we are able to establish in detail how poets of successive historical periods went about assimilating poetic tradition, and what methods and techniques they applied, in order to adapt it to the intellectual and emotional requirements of their own time. There is another reason why, in my experience, the diachronistic approach is particularly useful and promising. When trying to assess the original, innovative contribution in the verses of an individual poet or a generation of poets, we sometimes find variations of a conventional theme more illuminating than the treatment of a new subject, for the contrast between the topos and its transformation makes us perceive the fundamental change, the essence of innovation, as it were, on the formal level and on the conceptual level as well.

I should like to demonstrate this point by analysing two Umayyad variations of a pre-Islamic topos, the 'traces' (aṭlāl) of a deserted campsite, where the poet stops and remembers his lost beloved. Surely, there is nothing more commonplace and worn-out than this. The motif was used in Arabic poetry throughout the Middle Ages, and even modern poets allude to it. Thus it seems to be conclusive evidence of the conservative spirit attributed to classical Arabic literature. However, when we start comparing different versions of the aṭlāl, we are surprised at the range of variations, and at the ingenious techniques devised by poets to change its function, some of them very subtle and not easily recognized. In saying this, I do not mean the transference of the motif to other genres, as for example to the marthiya or the khamriyya. It is sufficient to remain within the scope of love-poetry, and to consider its transference from nasīb to ghazal, in order to find rich evidence of variation, particularly in the Umayyad period.

The reasons are obvious, I believe. During the Umayyad period the transition from bedouin tribal life to Islamic urban society was gradually
taking place. This means, as far as poetry is concerned, that a living oral tradition was slowly growing into a literate stage, where texts are produced and transmitted in writing. The consequences of this process, especially with regard to poetic technique, still remain to be investigated. It further implies that Umayyad poets were free to experiment, or rather forced to experiment, since the norms of tribal society had ceased to be absolutely valid, and it was no longer possible to accept intuitively the system of oral poetry, as jāhilī poets had done. That is why poets of the first Islamic century were bound to come into conflict with the demands of their profession. On the one hand, they were still trained in the pre-Islamic tradition and expected by their audience to follow familiar patterns. On the other hand, they were expected to offer new models for identification, and to express the aims and emotions of the rising urban class. In this they were left to their own devices, for there existed no clearly defined poetic standards, as they were later set up by 'Abbasid literary theory.

Let us return to the atlāl and consider its transference from nasīb to ghazal with regard to poetic technique. As part of the nasīb, the poet's weeping at the deserted campsite has a definite function within the structure of the polythematic ode. The 'traces' evoke memories of a happy past, now forever lost. The poet expresses violent grief, but then he sobers up, exclaims 'leave this!' (da' dhā), and seeks consolation in his camel, or proceeds with whatever he has to do. This is a convincing close to the story, in agreement with the heroic attitude tribal society demands. At the same time, it provides a transition to the next part of the qasīda. Islamic poets, however, were not expected to sober up, and to forget their beloved. On the contrary, they should persevere, either in hopeless sorrow, or in hoping to bring their love affair to a happy conclusion. The ghazal is a monothematic poem, moreover, entirely devoted to the erotic theme. Consequently, if a poet decides to employ the atlāl motif, he must invent a new ending to the story, or connect it with other subjects of his poem. There is no convention to rely upon. He is forced to find an individual solution to the problem.

I am going to demonstrate how this could be done by analysing two texts which present a marked contrast, my mind, although on the face of it they are very much alike. Their respective authors are 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘a and al-Walīd ibn Yazīd, who are both renowned for their ghazal poetry. They are more than one generation apart. 'Umar died in 712 or 721, well advanced in years (b. 644), whereas Walīd was murdered after one year of his caliphate in 744, aged about 36. They have something in common, however, which may have influenced their poetry. 'Umar belonged to the Meccan aristocracy and Walīd was a
member of the ruling family, which means that they were independent and did not need to conform to the taste of a patron. They were also both interested in music. This last aspect is particularly important in the case of Walid, who was himself an accomplished musician and composer.¹ We shall return to this point when discussing his ghazal.

Before analysing the 'variations', we must have the 'theme'. As text for reference from jāhili poetry I select the first lines from the Muʿallaqa of Imruʿ al-Qays, perhaps the most famous, and, at the same time, the most characteristic rendering of the ʿalāl. As we are not going to discuss the verses in detail, I only quote the English translation:²

Halt, friends both! Let us weep, recalling a love and a lodging by the rim of the twisted sands between Ed-Dakhool and Haumal,
Toodih and El-Mikrat, whose trace is not yet effaced for all the spinning of the south winds and the northern blasts;

there, all about its yards, and away in the dry hollows you may see the dung of antelopes spattered like peppercorns...

There my companions halted their beasts awhile over me saying: 'Don't perish of sorrow; restrain yourself decently!'

Yet the true and only cure of my grief is tears outpoured: what is there left to lean on where the trace is obliterated?

As appears from the text, the ʿalāl motif is a short narrative with some deviations of a descriptive nature. There are also a few stylistic devices intended to heighten the emotional appeal, such as the imperative at the beginning, the famous qifā nabki, and the rhetorical question in the last verse. We also observe direct speech, approaching dialogue, when the friends admonish the poet to regain a sober frame of mind. What I am trying to point out is the potential for variation inherent in the passage. There are narrative, descriptive, lyrical and even dramatic elements, which poets may choose and elaborate upon, according to their individual tastes and tempers.

The first text is a ghazal by Ĕumar ibn Abī Rabīʿa consisting of twelve verses. In his diwān, the ʿalāl motif never forms the basis of a complete poem, but usually serves as an introduction to one of his lively stories, or to a description of the beloved. It is sufficient for our present purpose.

to study the first six verses. The second part refers to the poet’s memories and will be discussed briefly at the end of the paper. The metre is sari'.

1. A ẓujā nihayyī l-ṭalāla l-muḥwilā
   B wa-l-rab‘a min Asmā‘a wa-l-manzilā
2. A wa-majlisat l-niswati ba‘da l-karā
   B aminna fihī l-ḥabāa l-ashālā
3. A bi-jānīhī l-bawbātī lam ya‘dūhū
   B taqādumu l-‘ahdī bi-an yu‘halā
4. A iyyayya lā iyyākumā hayyaja l-
   B manzilu lī-l-ḥawiqi fa-lāi ta‘ Jalā
5. A in kuntumā khilwayni min ājahatī l-
   B yawma fa-inna l-haqqa an tukmilā
6. A dhakkaranī l-manzilu mā gḥibtuma
   B ‘anhu fa-ẓujā sā‘atan wa-s‘alā
7. A in yuṣbihi l-manzilu min ahlīhī
   B wāḥshan maqānhī rasmihī mumhīlā
8. A fa-qad arāhu wa-bihī rabrabun
   B mithlu l-mahā yagū l-malā l-muqbilā
9. A ayyāma Asmā‘u bihi šādinun
   B khawdun turāqī rashā‘an akhālā
10. A qālat li-tirbayni lahā ʿindahā
    B hal taqāfānī l-rajula l-muqbilā
11. A qālat fa-lätun ʿindahā muʿṣirun
    B tudīru haqrawayni lam takhdhulā
12. A ḥādāh Abū l-Khaṭṭābī qālat nā‘am
    B qad jā‘a man nahuwā wa-mā aghfalā

1. Make a halt, both, and let us greet deserted traces many years old, and the campsite of Asmā’ and her abode,
2. and the meeting-place of women after sleep, where they feel safe, on soft and even ground,
3. near the desert; the passing of time did not spare it — (let us greet it and ask) whether it is inhabited.
4. It’s me, not you, whose passion the campsite inspires anew, so don’t be in a hurry!
5. If you are free today from the desire I feel, then it is only right that you should be kind to me.
6. The place reminds me of something you don’t know. Then halt for a while and call out to it!
7. If the abode is now deserted of people and has become a lonely place, stricken by drought,
8. I once saw it alive with a troop (of women), resembling antelopes heading for rich pasture in the desert,
9. in the days when Asmā’ was there, a young, tender gazelle, grazing together with a black-eyed companion.
10. She said to two of her friends beside her: “Do you recognize the man who is approaching?”

3 Dīwān ʿUmar ibn Abī Rabi‘a, Bayrūt 1961/1380, p. 310.
11. A girl, already mature, gazing around with beautiful eyes, which did not fail her, said:
12. “It’s Abū l-Khaṭṭāb” — She said: “Yes, there comes the man we love; he hasn’t neglected us”.

The first three lines of the poem form one sentence and should be discussed together. Both the commentator of the Kitāb al-Aghānī⁴ and the Lisān⁵ connect bi-an yu’halā (3B) with nuḥayyi (1A), omitting however line 2, which makes the connection more plausible. The enjambement is unusual, but not without precedent in jāhili poetry. As evidenced by ʿUmar’s diwān, he often takes up a conventional stylistic device for structuring passages, and applies it in an unexpected manner. Except for this rather striking enjambement, lines 1-3 appear conventional enough, since they contain the well-known components of the narrative: the two friends, the effaced traces, the woman’s name, the calling out to the campsite, and the notion that everything happened a long time ago. Even the address at the beginning (ʿujā) corresponds exactly to the qifā in the text of reference. What then is new? For one thing, there is a pleonastic effect about the first verse, for the terms talal, rab⁶, manzil, to which majlis in line 2 could be added, are almost synonyms within the context of the motif. In this, ʿUmar deviates perceptibly from pre-Islamic poetry, where each word adds information, as a rule. It seems that he employs these terms as a mere ritualistic allusion to poetic tradition, for the ‘campsite of Asmā’ is no bedouin campsite at all, and we are not in the middle of the desert, but only near to it, bi-jānibi l-bauhātī (3A), that is to say, the ‘traces’ are situated in the neighbourhood of a settlement, where women feel safe to enjoy themselves in their leisurely ways. Thus there is a remarkable shift from the scenery of the desert towards urban settlement. Lines 4-6 are syntactically independent, but they are closely connected on the semantic level and must also be treated together. The passage presents an original amplification of the story. ʿUmar selects one of its components, the two friends, and reflects upon their relation to the campsite and to himself, an aspect which has always been taken for granted in the jāhili nasīb. Yet the situation has its points of interest. There are three men travelling on their camels through the desert. Suddenly, one of them asks the others to stop for mere sentimental reasons. A natural reaction would be to say: why should we stop? the place means nothing to us. The poet evidently feels that some justification is called for, and provides an answer to their silent objection. They should humour him, he argues, because they are happy, at least for the time.

⁴ Ed. Cairo 1383/1963, I 121.
being, *al-yawma* (5B), whereas he is in distress. They should be kind to him, his argument implies, for a similar misfortune may befall them, and then they will be grateful for his forbearance. It is characteristic of 'Umar that he selects the human aspect for variation. His interest in human relationship is perhaps the most striking feature of his *diwan*.

When comparing the six lines with the passage from the *Mu'allaq*, we at once note the total lack of descriptive detail in 'Umar's text. There is no image, no comparison visualizing the effaced traces, nor any attempt to evoke the desolation of the place. A second point regards the mode of speech. All six verses constitute an address to the poet's companions. The conventional elements of the motif are retained, but its narrative and descriptive character is abandoned and changed into discourse. This, again, seems typical of 'Umar. It is one of his favourite means of poetic expression, which suggests to me, incidentally, that he must have been a rather chatty person. My third point regards the structure of the text, which also shows a marked contrast to the technique of Imru' al-Qays, especially with regard to repetition. The lines are connected by linguistic means in several ways, besides the enjambement already referred to. The imperative *'ujā* in the first line is repeated at the end of line 6, thus linking the whole passage together, and there are other imperatives, *lā ta'jalā* (4B) and *as'alā* (6B), emphasizing the poet's request. Further examples of morphological repetition are *manzil* in lines 1, 4 and 6, to which *majlis* in line 2 may be added. As has been established in recent research, 'Umar's texts are closely structured by means not to observed in pre-Islamic poetry. The last and most important point concerns the semantic level. Variation in 'Umar's *ghazal* means primarily an individual addition to the story. Here, it is the reflection upon the human aspect, the attitude of the two friends, and there is also the shift from desert scenery to urban settlement, which provides the motif with a realistic touch. The transition from the *atāl* to the second part of the *ghazal* and its function within the poem will be discussed after we have analysed the *ghazal* of Walid.

Incidentally, the poem No. 44 from Walid's *diwān* has been attributed to 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'a as well, according to the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, but Abū l-Faraj al-İsfahānī denies that attribution. He is right, of course, for the *ghazal* is quite unlike 'Umar's poetry, as will be seen presently. It has

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7 F. Gabrieli, 'Al-Walid ibn Yazid', *RSO XV*, 46.

8 Loc. cit., III 366.
already been mentioned above that Walīd was a musician and composer, who set some of his own verses to music. It is not unlikely, therefore, that his poetic technique was influenced by the art of the composer. His preference of certain lively metres is well established (wāṣīr, ramāl majdharī, khafīf), but I think one can say more than that. It is my contention that the following text is structured like a piece of music, the principal tune—the leitmotif—being stated in the opening line and then repeated with variations and a few additions up to the last verse. In spite of its repetitive character, which is the dominant trait of the poem, not a single line could be omitted, for each verse is essential to the full development of the melody. The metre is also sarī.

1. A ājā khalilayya ālā l-mahdārī
   B wa-l-rabī'ī min Salāma l-muqīrī
2. A ājā bihi fa-stantsqahu fa-qad
   B dhakkarānī mā kuntu lam adhūrī
3. A dhakkarānī Salmā wa-ayyīmahā
   B idh jāwaratnā bi-liwā ʿAsjarī
4. A bi-l-rabī'ī min Waddāna mabdan lānā
   B wa-mihwārān nāʾika min mihwārī
5. A fi mahdārin kunnā bihi naltaqī
   B yā habbadhā ḏalīka l-mahdārī
6. A idh nāḥnu wa-l-hayyu bihi jiratun
   B fi mā maḏā min sāfi l-aʿṣurī

1. Make a halt, my two friends, at the place of settlement, the deserted campsite of Salāma!
2. Make a halt there and ask it to speak to us!
   For it reminds me of something I could not remember.
3. It reminds me of Salmā and the days with her,
   when she was our neighbour at the sanddune of ʿAsjar.
4. At the campsite of Waddān, the place from where we used to set out, and to which we returned. There is no better place to return to!
5. At the place of settlement, where we used to meet.
   How excellent it was as a meeting place!
6. When we and her tribe were neighbours,
   in times that are now forever past.

The opening verse is almost identical with ʿUmar's text and contains the conventional elements: the poet's addressing his two companions, the deserted place, the beloved's name. Before going over the poem line by line, I should like to draw attention to the fact that each of the following lines, excepting line 6, contains one, and only one word of the first verse.

The imperative ājā is repeated at the beginning of line 2. In line 3 the name Salāma is repeated with a slight variation: Salmā. At the beginning of line 4 we observe the term rabī'ī (cf 1A), and in the 5th line mahdār actually occurs twice, at the beginning and at the end. If we regard these words
as segments of a tune, we realize that Walīd, in each of these verses, repeats a sequence of sound from line 1. There are other instances of repetition throughout the ghazal, not only on the phonological and morphological level. Repetition, in particular with regard to the poet’s message, is the key-note of the text.

The second verse, as already pointed out, is linked to the first by anaphora. The imperative ʿujā is supported by another request, to perform the ritualistic address to the deserted place (fa-stantiqahu). The second hemistich begins and ends with tajnīs (dhakkarani/adhkuri) and is slightly pleonastic, thereby emphasizing the flow of memories, and introducing the reference to the poet’s happy past. The flow of memories is once more emphasized at the beginning of line 3 (dhakkarani), thus creating an anaphora to 2B. From this point up to the end of the ghazal Walīd refers to the past, but we do not obtain any further information, in addition to what we already know, the fact that he once used to meet Salmā at a certain place. The second hemistich (3B) is repeated, slightly rephrased, in the closing line and connected with it by tajnīs (jāwaratnā/ṣiratun).

Lines 4 and 5 are almost identical as to structure and content. Both begin with an adverbial expression alluding to the campsite (bi-l-rabʾi/ṯi mahdarin) and end with an exclamation intended to enhance the emotional impact of the ghazal (nāhika/yā habbadhā). There is evidently no new information offered in these two verses. They constitute an elaboration of what has been said before, excepting the name Waddān, and are semantically redundant. They are indispensable, however, for completing the musical structure of the text, and for intensifying its emotional appeal. Morphological repetition is striking, as the terms mabdan, mīhwār and mahdar, of which the last two occur twice, belong to the same pattern. They are almost synonyms, moreover, for whereas mabdan and mīhwār, in a different context, might be regarded as forming an opposition, they are used here so as to emphasize the poet’s recurrent action, his constantly returning to the same place.

The last verse, as already pointed out, is closely related to line 3. In fact, the first hemistich—idh nāhnu wa-l-ḥayyu bihi ṣiratun—is nothing more than an elaboration of idh jāwaratnā in 3B. The second hemistich stands out in the text, because it is the only one without striking morphological repetition. On the phonological level, however, it is linked up with the preceding lines in several ways. The sequence fi mā madā echoes fi mahdarin in 5A, and there is also a slight assonance between min mīhwāri (4B), min mahdarī (5B) and min sālīfi (6B). The rhyme word aʿṣuri is closely connected, like the first hemistich, to the rhyme of line 3 (ʿAsjari). But these are rather unobtrusive instances of repetition, compared to
what is to be observed in the preceding part of the ghazal. Thus the last hemistich carries special weight. We cannot doubt that it is the closing verse, although with regard to the poet’s message, nothing is added. In emphasizing that everything happened long, long ago, Walid gives a final melancholy touch to his ghazal.

When comparing the poem with the passage from Imra\(^2\) al-Qays\(^2\) Mu‘allaqa and with ‘Umar’s text, we perceive a remarkable contrast, in spite of the fact that all the conventional elements of the atlāl are present. Walid’s ghazal is devoid of descriptive detail, and it cannot be regarded as narrative, since he obviously does not intend to tell a story. It is also no discourse, for he neither argues, nor reflects. The text proceeds like a song, repeating and rephrasing what has been said before. Whereas ‘Umar selects the human aspect for variation, and develops the dramatic potential of the atlāl, Walid prefers to develop its lyrical potential, its melancholy mood, and succeeds in transforming the topos into pure lyricism.

As appears from the analysis, Walid’s ghazal is structured on the linguistic level to an extent unknown in Arabic poetry before. It is true that ‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘a surpassed jāhili poets in this respect and thus paved the way for Walid, who may be influenced by him. But there is no equivalence in ‘Umar’s diwan to the close structure of this text, as far as I can see. It is also characteristic of Walid that his ghazal does not just stop, but ends with a ‘cadence’. One can never mistake the finality of his closing lines, and I suggest that in this, too, he is influenced by the composition of songs.\(^9\) As a final point of comparison, we should note that Walid, in contrast to ‘Umar, retains the bedouin setting of the atlāl. Both poets are far removed from tribal life, but there, again, they react differently. ‘Umar adds to his version of the atlāl a touch of realism, whereas Walid keeps up a romantic illusion, which has nothing in common with the life he leads.

In conclusion, I am going to discuss what seems to me the most important point in connection with the study of topoi, the question whether the atlāl motif retains its original function. The essential meaning of the atlāl is remembrance, the evocation of memories. From this aspect, the ‘theme’ remains identical. But remembrance may vary considerably as to its emotional impact, and once it has taken place, different attitudes are possible. It certainly makes a difference, whether we are reminded of something we ought to forget, or of something we should not forget. We must find out, therefore, how the emotional tension of the atlāl is

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\(^9\) I have offered some additional evidence in the article ‘Zur Gazalpoesie des Walid ibn Yazid’ (to be published in the Festschrift for Ewald Wagner).
dissolved or compensated, if at all, in ʿUmar’s and Walīd’s texts respectively. As for the pre-Islamic nasīb, there is a well-known solution to the problem, as a rule. After the cathartic effect of remembrance, the poet resolves to forget his beloved and, in a sober frame of mind, continues his journey.

In the Umayyad period, as already pointed out, the pre-Islamic answer to the question, the heroic attitude, is no longer valid. As a consequence, the traditional function of the ʿatlāl had to change. Since there is no collective solution, poets must solve the problem individually, both from an aesthetic and a moral point of view. In ʿUmar’s ghazal, the ʿatlāl section is linked up by a careful transition in lines 7 and 8 to the poet’s memories of a former meeting with his beloved Asmāʾ, which presents a contrast to his present situation. In this he is still within the conventional frame of the pre-Islamic nasīb, but the end of the story is different. Lines 8-12 contain one of his lively recollections which suggest not so much his passion for the lady, as her infatuation with him. When he is approaching the group of women assembled in the place, Asmāʾ perceives his figure form afar. She asks two of her companions, the counterpart of the poet’s friends, whether they recognize the man, and in the closing line receives an answer:

12. ‘It’s Abū l-Khaṭṭāb’.—She said: ‘Yes, there comes the man we love, he hasn’t neglected us’.

This is a welcome most gratifying to ʿUmar’s vanity. We cannot but smile at his implied boast, and it is to be assumed that his audience, at the time, smiled as well. The melancholy mood of the ʿatlāl is dispersed and compensated by a delightful story. The habitual gloom of the ʿatlāl has been lightened before by the poet’s diction, moreover. The word al-yawma (5B) points to a temporary distress, and the request to halt for a while, sāʾatan (6B), indicates that the three men are soon to continue their journey. Clearly, the topos has been adapted to the poet’s individuality. Its function in this ghazal, as in many other poems of ʿUmar’s dīwān, is to introduce a pleasant recollection. As to the closing verse, it is fully in agreement with his poetry, for he usually ends on a gay note. Even if there is no happy end in the proper sense, there is at least a happy thought as a conclusion. ʿUmar certainly must have been a charming person.

As to Walīd, for all we know from his biography, he can hardly be called charming. He was a fine artist, but a spoiled, wilful autocrat, given to outbursts of passion and cruelty, and to violent raptures about music and poetry. He was immoderate in love as also in hate; some of his verses are in very bad taste, indeed. Walīd has nothing in common with the
bedouin hero, nor with the harmless, light-hearted womanizer ʿUmar ibn Abī Rabīʿa. What, then, is the function of the atlāl, the evocation of memories, in this ghazal? There is no compensation at the end. On the contrary, the final line intensifies the gloom of the preceding verses, and we may be sure that the music composed to accompany his poem was intended to enhance its emotional appeal. We can easily imagine a session at Walīd’s court, the ghazal being performed by a famous singer. At the end, to be sure, Walīd would burst into tears of rapture, enjoying the luxuries of sentimentality, which so often goes with a cruel character. And after that, there would be no sobering up, but more drinking.

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