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0521354854 - Mannerism in Arabic Poetry: A Structural Analysis of Selected Texts (3rd Century AH/9th Century AD - 5th Century AH/11th Century AD)

Stefan Sperl

Excerpt

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Introduction

Stimulated by the debate on mannerism in literature which followed the appearance of E. R. Curtius's celebrated work *European Literature and Latin Middle Ages* (1953), this book attempts to identify elements of mannerism and classicism in medieval Arabic poetry.

Mannerism in Arabic has usually been linked with the appearance of an ornate rhetorical style called *badī'* which became characteristic of poetry and prose from the fifth century AH/ninth century AD onwards.¹ This study, however, is not so much concerned with the discussion of rhetorical devices as manifest in selected passages and individual lines of poetry; rather, it seeks to attain its objective through a structuralist analysis of *whole poems*. This makes it necessary to address the much-debated issue of the unity of the individual poem in Arabic.

The inquiry, therefore, begins with the formulation of a hypothesis on the structural coherence of a cardinal form of poetic expression – the polythematic, panegyric ode or *qaṣīda* (see Glossary). In chapters two and three this hypothesis serves as a basis for structuralist analyses of poems by Buḥturī (d. about 284 AH/897 AD) and Miḥyār al-Daylamī (d. 428 AH/1036 AD). Chapters four and five turn to ascetic poetry. Selected works from the *Zuhdiyyāt* of Abū l-'Atāhiya (d. 213 AH/828 AD) and the *Luzūmiyyāt* of Ma'arrī (d. 449 AH/1058 AD) are examined in the light of the same hypothesis. The texts of all works analysed appear with translations and brief commentaries as an appendix to this book. After reviewing the debate on mannerism in Arabic literature, the final chapter proceeds to describe mannerism and classicism as contrasting styles in which the individual poem relates in fundamentally different ways to the literary convention from which it arises and the subject matter it portrays. The texts analysed in chapters two to five are then discussed as manifestations of these styles in medieval Arabic poetry.

While this study is thus concerned with the stylistic range of a poetic tradition, it does not attempt to provide an historical analysis of stylistic development. What is intended is best clarified by reference to the views S. Ḍayf and W. Heinrichs have expressed on the development of style in Arabic poetry. In his work *al-Fann wa-Madhāhibuhu fī al-Shi'r al-'Arabī*, S. Ḍayf

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(1969) traces in the history of Arabic poetry three stylistic methods or schools (*madhāhib*):

- Ṣanʿa*, a style of simple and straightforward diction which springs from the creative endeavour (*jahd fannī*) underlying all art (*ibid.*, pp. 22, 41). The term is closely linked to Ḍayf’s view of poetry as a craft (*ṣināʿa*) with rules, constraints and conventions to which the poet must adhere in his effort at artistic creation.
- Taṣnīʿ*, defined as the *badīʿ* school, a style which adds to the basic properties of the craft a methodical emphasis on rhetorical devices for the sake of elegance and embellishment (*ibid.*, pp. 9, 176). In the works of some poets, particularly Abū Tammām, such devices become the means for poetic expressions of profound insight which mark the crowning achievement of medieval Arabic poetry (*ibid.*, pp. 241f).
- Taṣannuʿ*, a stylistic school marked by excessive constraint, affectation and complexity. It is occasioned by cultural decline and characterized by loss of creative and expressive power (*ibid.*, pp. 9, 277f).

According to Ḍayf, Miḥyār al-Daylamī’s panegyrics and Maʿarrī’s *Luzūmiyyāt* represent the school of *taṣannuʿ* with all its failings. Miḥyār’s poems are pallid and repetitive reformulations of ‘well-worn thoughts and inherited ideas’ (*ibid.*, p. 362), the style of the *Luzūmiyyāt* is ‘feeble, almost devoid of artistic beauty and novelty’ (*ibid.*, p. 396), it abounds in instances of repetition, ‘deficiency and weakness of construction’ (*ibid.*, p. 395). Propelled by his great philological erudition, Maʿarrī is said to have imposed formal constraints on his poetry which aim at a display of skill and learning by means of linguistic complexities and terminological riddles (*ibid.*, p. 402).

While I have used Miḥyār’s panegyrics and Maʿarrī’s *Luzūmiyyāt* as examples of mannerist style, the term ‘mannerism’ as developed here is quite distinct from Ḍayf’s concept of *taṣannuʿ*. *Ṣanʿa*, *taṣnīʿ* and *taṣannuʿ* denote stages of an historical development, whereas my textual analyses aim at the identification of stylistic principles which are not exclusively linked to the historical periods discussed by Ḍayf. Moreover, *taṣannuʿ* is essentially linked with lack of creative power and cultural decline. Contrary to this, the poems of Miḥyār and Maʿarrī, analysed below, do not appear as the result of inferior or misguided attempts, but as expressions of a positive and independent artistic endeavour. According to Adūnīs, one of the tasks of poetry consists in ‘opening paths to that hidden world which lies beyond the world of appearances’ (Adūnīs, 1971, p. 58). These poems do indeed give expression to such a ‘hidden world’; however, it does not lie in any perceptible reality language might mirror, but in the texture of literary language itself.

In his article entitled ‘Literary theory – the problem of its efficiency’ (1973), W. Heinrichs outlines another view on the stylistic development of Arabic poetry. He, too, sees its history marked by three ‘impulses each of which in turn fashioned its own kind of poetry’. The first of these is ‘the start of the Ḥijāzī

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school of love poetry around the year AD 650'. It is characterized in particular by 'the anecdotic description of actions and reactions of persons interspersed and enlivened with direct speech' (*ibid.*, pp. 24f). The second impulse 'may be labelled *badī*' and 'may be described as rhetorical embellishment which is consciously sought after by the poets and thus gradually evolves as a principle of art' (*ibid.*, p. 25). 'The emergence of "phantastic" poetry' is the effect of the third impulse, occasioned by 'a shift of the poet's attention from the level of reality... to the level of imagery'.²

The reason behind the development of both the *badī* and the 'phantastic' style lies in the 'traditionalism of Arabic poetry with regard to its content' which compelled the poets to give exclusive attention to the form of their product. In the case of 'phantastic' poetry, this often leads to an 'elaboration and combination of known *badī* figures' (*ibid.*, pp. 24f). A function of this development is mannerism: 'complicated or intricately constructed figures of speech (and combinations thereof) ... are the outcome, or rather the expression, of the increase of mannerism (the term used in a descriptive sense) in later Abbasid poetry' (*ibid.*, p. 52). In an attempt at demonstrating the medieval critics' incapacity to describe such complex constructs, Heinrichs cites two examples: a line by Ma'mūnī containing a combination of rhetorical figures, and one by Mutanabbī exhibiting an intricate combination of traditional motifs (*ibid.*, pp. 48, 52).

While Heinrichs thus seeks to develop an historical (diachronic) view of mannerist style through tracing motifs and rhetorical techniques as elements of mannerist 'combination', the present study aims at a (synchronic) description of its structural properties as discernible in poems as a whole. The combinations of different rhetorical figures or motifs, observed by Heinrichs in individual lines of poetry, then appear as manifestations of a general 'exploration of combinatory potential' observable on every level of the structure of a poem, or, indeed, in the case of the *Luzūmiyyāt*, of an entire *dīwān* (see Glossary).

My emphasis on the analysis of whole poems necessitates some preliminary remarks on the question of unity in medieval Arabic poetry. As stated by Gelder, 'classical Arabic poems have been described as lacking unity ever since Western critical standards were applied to them' (1982, p. 14). Certain features of the Arabic poetic corpus have given rise to this impression, in particular the relative syntactic independence of the individual line, and the seemingly arbitrary or enigmatic amalgam of themes in the formal ode (*qaṣīda*). Kowalski's theory of 'molecular structure' formulated in 1934³ is the most notable example of such critical views: Arabic poems are seen as an array of self-contained statements in loose, if not random, succession, strung together only by rhyme and metre. Views such as these were, for a long time, widely accepted among scholars.⁴ Since 1970, however, a marked reappraisal has taken place. With the help of methods derived from modern literary criticism, contemporary scholars have begun to show that the constituent units of

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medieval Arabic poems do appear to relate in a meaningful and well-balanced manner. The independence of the individual line was found less strict than had been presumed, and the thematic sequence of the *qaṣīda* was seen to follow familiar ritualistic patterns.

The structuralist analyses presented here have a close bearing on this topic. With the help of a method principally derived from the critical works of R. Jakobson,⁵ it has, I believe, been possible to show that the texts concerned are coherent units that do exhibit quite a number of discernible features. These observations confirm the findings of scholars who have, with different methodologies, engaged in similar studies of classical Arabic poems. Some of the most significant points of agreement are the following:

Repetition and variation: A poem's structure may be marked by the repetition, often in contrasting contexts, of certain linguistic features, whether lexical, phonological, morphological, syntactic or semantic. That this is also valid for medieval Arabic poetry has by now been frequently observed, as can be shown by pointing to comments on, for example, lexical repetitions. The role of such repetitions in the thematic development of Arabic poems has already been noted by R. Jacobi in her study of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* (1971, p. 185). In discussing the *Mu'allaqa* by Imru' al-Qays, Abu Deeb shows how major structural developments within the poem can be illustrated through the contrasting contexts in which certain lexical items recur (1976, pp. 12, 32, 51). In discussing Abū Tammām's famous ode on the conquest of Amorium, Badawi mentions the repetitions of the word *bīd* which elucidate the dichotomies underlying much of the poem's imagery and symbolism (1978, p. 48). Cowell has pointed out in his discussion of a work by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih how the repetition of one lexical item as initial and final rhyme word 'serves to frame the poem'; the changing contexts in which the word appears do indeed illustrate the beginning and end of the poem's thematic development (1974, p. 77). The texts examined in the present study exhibit similar features. Indeed, the tracing of word repetitions has been used as a veritable 'discovery procedure' for structural patterns in the discussion of texts I and III, while, with respect to texts II and V, repetitions of lexical items are there to confirm the structural features examined.

Elements of repetition of significance to the entire work are often introduced in the first two lines of a poem. This applies not only to lexical but also to relevant thematic and conceptual features, as has been shown by K. Abu Deeb in his studies of the *Mu'allaqāt* of Labīd and Imru' al-Qays (1975, 1976). Discussing the *aṭlāl* convention (see Glossary), Abu Deeb remarks on the fact that 'different poets bestow different attributes on the *aṭlāl*'; he proceeds to ask whether these are merely functions of a 'conventional device' imposed by the 'demands of tradition', or whether they relate 'structurally to the other constituent units of the poem and are imposed by the essential vision of reality of which it is an expression'. With respect to the poems he analyses, Abu Deeb conclusively proves the relevance of the latter: 'The properties of the *aṭlāl* . . .

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possess a symbolic value no less essential to the . . . statement of the poem than any other section' (1975, p. 164); indeed, 'the features of the *aṭlāl* section permeate the whole poem'; they introduce all the fundamental 'oppositions and dualities' (1976, p. 12) which inform the development. Similarly, M. M. Badawī has drawn attention to the fact that some of the fundamental antitheses which permeate Abū Tammām's ode on Amorium are, on the levels of concept, imagery and lexicon, introduced in the first two lines; moreover, he finds that the content of the first two lines is resumed in the two final lines to bring the poem to a well-rounded conclusion (1978, pp. 47f). Cowell's analysis of a poem by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih yields similar results: the initial two lines introduce a thematic parallelism which is investigated and elaborated in the remainder of the poem (1975, p. 51). D. Latham, in discussing Mutanabbī's ode on the conquest of al-Ḥadath also shows how the first two lines set the scene for the entire work (1979, pp. 7ff). Every poem analysed in the present study was found to exhibit similar features. The initial sections of the poems contain thematic, lexical, morphological, phonological and syntactic material which is developed and frequently resumed in the remainder of the work. This is illustrated with respect to imagery and conceptual themes in the analysis of poems by Buḥturī and Miḥyār, with respect to morphology and syntax in the analyses of poems by Abū l-'Atāhiya and Ma'arrī.

Sectional parallelism: The development of medieval Arabic poems often proceeds in groups of verses of roughly similar length which may stand in parallel or contrasting relationship to each other. This has been carefully demonstrated by R. Scheindlin who writes on the poetry of al-Mu'tamid b. 'Abbād: 'Just as we find parallelism between members of the single verse, and parallelism between whole verses, we may also find a loose degree of parallelism unifying groups of verses' (1974, p. 139). A similar type of parallelism has also been observed by R. Jacobi in the 'Dayr 'Abdūn' poem by Ibn al-Mu'tazz (1975, pp. 48ff). Abū Tammām's ode on Amorium exhibits similar features: as shown by Badawī, the initial section clearly contrasts with the conclusion 'whereas Section IV, the encomium of Mu'taṣim, contrasts with Section V in which Theophilus is satirized' (1978, p. 47). Abu Deeb has identified a related phenomenon when he speaks of oppositions between units of one poem. He defines the semantic function of such oppositions in the following terms (1975, p. 167):

The units may be related as open, parallel structures, which are fundamentally repetitive – not linguistically, but on the level of the relations they consist of. The open structures, thus, possess the same properties, and the effect is one of intensification and heightening of the vision of the poem, but, more important, is also one of 'universalization' of the essential experience of the poem.

Parallelism between groups of verses – henceforth called sectional parallelism – has been observed also in virtually every poem analysed in the present study. It has been found to be manifest not only as a semantic feature but, as in the

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examples analysed by Scheindlin, can be seen to pervade every aspect of the grammatical structure of the passages concerned (see also Abu Deeb, 1976, pp. 38ff). The poems by Abū l-'Atāhiya and Ma'arrī in particular (texts V and VI) illustrate Abu Deeb's point on the 'intensification and heightening of vision' which can be achieved through the technique of sectional parallelism.

Some poems have, moreover, been found to exhibit a remarkable degree of symmetry in their thematic sub-divisions. As Abu Deeb says, the true significance of this feature can be ascertained only by 'extensive analysis of the corpus of poetry'. Suffice it to remark that Abu Deeb observed the divisibility of the *Mu'allāqa* by Imru' al-Qays into two 'gross constituent units' of nearly equal length (*ibid.*, p. 4); these in turn consist of four 'constituent units' each, which stand in complex but symmetric interrelation. A comparable degree of symmetry, i.e. a division into two halves of nearly, or exactly, equal length, coupled with a contrasting interrelation of discernible subsections, is shown in the analyses of texts II, III, V, and VI (see below pp. 38, 49f, 85, 132).

The points listed above are certainly no comprehensive survey of structural features observed by different critics,⁶ nor do they allow us to reach firm conclusions on the principles of construction underlying medieval Arabic poetry. However, the large measure of agreement between the different studies cited seems to suggest very strongly that such principles do, in fact, exist. In view of these findings, one might conclude that the molecularist notion of the Arabic poem is no longer a valid concept. While it is certainly no longer accepted as originally stated, the case for the unity of the classical poem is not settled yet. In a penetrating and extensive inquiry, Gelder has shown that, despite many theoretical considerations on the subjects of unity and cohesion, medieval Arabic critics devoted their attention principally to the individual line or passage and did not in any detail address the compositional techniques involved in the construction of whole poems. His book concludes with a warning against giving too much attention to the unity or integrity of the individual poem. Indeed, the 'mode of existence' (Gelder, 1982, p. 195) of the Arabic poem is characteristically fragmentary; whether in anthologies, works of criticism, prose, narrative or other works, a poem is normally cited in selected extracts only; rarely is there evidence of any interest in 'the work as a whole'. 'Once the poem had served its initial *gharaḍ* [see Glossary], as a panegyric, a satire, a request or a threat, it was allowed to disintegrate. Poet-critics quoting themselves are no exception' (*ibid.*, p. 203).

Gelder's observations show that 'unity' in medieval Arabic poetry has many facets. Poems may be validly and meaningfully divided up according to many different criteria, and the unity 'of particular fragments singled out for criticism or appreciation' (*ibid.*, p. 202) may be no less significant than the unity of poems as such. However, this does not mean that whole poems must lack coherence or be devoid of a unified message to which all its parts equally

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contribute; nor can the existence of compositional techniques underlying larger structures be cast into doubt because medieval criticism has passed them over in silence. It may be argued that the methods of modern literary criticism were necessary for the description of such techniques, just as the ritualistic symbolism of the pre-Islamic ode could not have been verbalized without the concepts of modern anthropology. This point, addressed in greater detail in chapter 1, will lead us to a hypothesis of fundamental importance for the understanding of all poems here discussed, be they classical or mannerist.

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CHAPTER 1

The Islamic panegyric

Much of the medieval Arabic poetic corpus consists of poems written in praise of rulers and notables of state. Some works of this type have been selected to provide examples of the literary styles with which this study is concerned. Before any stylistic analysis, however, it is advisable to consider in general terms the form and function of the panegyric mode in Arabic.

A remarkable feature of classical Arabic panegyric poems is that they do not only contain eulogy. The topic of praise usually appears last, preceded by a varied sequence of traditional themes which do not appear to relate to it directly. In a much cited passage, the medieval critic, Ibn Qutayba, described such a typical sequence of themes and attempted to explain its constitution.¹ He mentioned *dhikr al-diyār* (henceforth referred to as *aṭlāl*), *nasīb*, *raḥīl* and *madiḥ*. The passage is quoted here again, since it gives perhaps the best – and certainly the most celebrated – introduction to this peculiar and unique poetic form:

I have heard from a man of learning that the composer of Odes began by mentioning the deserted dwelling-places (*aṭlāl*) and the relics and traces of habitation. Then he wept and complained and addressed the desolate encampment, and begged his companion to make a halt, in order that he might have occasion to speak to those who had once lived there and afterwards departed; for the dwellers in tents were different from townsmen or villagers in respect of coming and going, because they moved from one water-spring to another, seeking pasture and searching out the places where rain had fallen. Then to this he linked the erotic prelude (*nasīb*), and bewailed the violence of his love and the anguish of separation from his mistress and the extremity of his passion and desire, so as to win the hearts of his hearers and divert their eyes towards him and invite their ears to listen to him, since the song of love touches men's souls and takes hold of their hearts, God having put it in the constitution of His creatures to love dalliance and the society of women, in such wise that we find very few but are attached thereto by some tie or have some share therein, whether lawful or unpermitted. Now, when the poet had assured himself of an attentive hearing, he followed up his advantage and set forth his claim: thus he went on to complain of fatigue and want of sleep and travelling by night and of the noonday heat, and how his camel had been reduced to leanness. And when, after representing all the discomfort and danger of his journey (*raḥīl*), he knew that he had fully justified his hope and expectation of receiving his due

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meed from the person to whom the poem was addressed, he entered upon the panegyric (*madīh*), and incited him to reward, and kindled his generosity by exalting him above his peers and pronouncing the greatest dignity, in comparison with his, to be little.²

As pointed out by Gelder (1982, p. 44), Ibn Qutayba in this passage may have intended to illustrate the outline of the polythematic ode, the *qaṣīda*, by giving a schematic description of one particular version, namely the panegyric. For, in pre-Islamic times, other forms of the *qaṣīda* were prominent as well, such as those termed by R. Jacobi *Erinnerungsqaṣīde* and *Botschaftsqaṣīde* (1971, p. 204). His choice is not fortuitous, however, since with the rise of Islamic statehood, the panegyric becomes the principal version of the formal ode (Badawi, 1980, p. 7).

In trying to understand this poetic form, one's attention is drawn to the relationship between the parts outlined by Ibn Qutayba – a relationship that is far from obvious. Ibn Qutayba tries to explain it historically and psychologically:³ the *aṭlāl* section is a reflection of the bedouin life-style; the *nasīb* is designed to arouse the listener's feelings through the mention of love, and the poet's tiresome journey, the *raḥīl*, will hopefully invite the compassionate concern of the sovereign, thus paving the way for praise and reward. Modern critical writers on Arabic poetry, however, did not pursue this line of argument. Rather, they were content to see the *qaṣīda* as a loosely connected and purely conventional entity.⁴ The poet, it was thought, devoted his creative attention only to individual lines and there was, in the words of Heinrichs, 'keine bewusste Gestaltung des Gedichtganzen' (1969, p. 31).

In recent years, however, significant critical works have appeared which agree on portraying the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* as 'a coherent complex of conventional acts that, in their relationships, embody the model of an order in the world' (Hamori, 1974, p. 22, n. 25). While I am concerned with the panegyric *qaṣīda* in Islamic times, these studies are relevant to the argument, for the Islamic *qaṣīda* is very much a descendant of its pre-Islamic ancestor. The close relationship between the two has been aptly summarized by Badawi, who terms the former 'secondary' and the latter 'primary' *qaṣīda* (1980, p. 3).

In his book, *The Art of Medieval Arabic Literature*, Hamori describes the pre-Islamic ode as a ritualistic expression of the view of life of the ancient Arabs. His view centres on the 'heroic model', the paradigm of pre-Islamic moral values. The heroic model is of an equilibrium 'produced by the will to be caught up in all encounters, joyful and lethal alike' (1974, p. 12). Two contrasting principles characterize it, *kenosis* ('emptying') and *plerosis* ('filling'). *Kenosis* represents the 'voluntary relinquishment' of extreme generosity, of the abandonment of all property for transitory pleasures; it denotes the act of severing the relationship with the beloved on leaving the campsite and, finally, the valour and recklessness with which the hero faces death in perilous desert journeys and in battle. *Plerosis*, the opposite principle, represents the boundless and sensuous enjoyment of the fruits of life whenever they present themselves: love-making, drinking and reaping the spoils of war. But, in his

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every attempt at exorbitance and extremity, the hero ultimately – and voluntarily – approaches death as the final boundary. ‘Facing death head-on [is] the first task of the *qaṣīda*’ (*ibid.*, p. 8).

Hamori sees the whole of the poetic form in terms of the dualism of *plerosis* and *kenosis* and suggests that it influenced the parallelistic composition of the ancient poetry. His interpretation leads him to a new and significant view of the connection between *nasīb* and *raḥīl* (*ibid.*, p. 19):

Lady and camel – icons of the *nasīb* and of the camel-section – play significant roles, the contrasts between them pointing up the two principles of organization in the *qaṣīda*. First, they illustrate metaphorical re-enactment: the lady is an emblem of involuntary movement towards emptiness through time, the camel of voluntary movement towards emptiness through space. Second, they illustrate the attaining of an equilibrium by the use of contrasting pairs: the lady stands for a life of ease, the camel for stress and exertion; the one is deliciously plump, the other hard and gaunt. *Plerosis* and *kenosis*.

Hamori then draws a number of important conclusions. He sees the ‘extreme conventionality, repetitiousness, and thematic limitation’ (*ibid.*, p. 21) of the *qaṣīda* as occasioned by the ritual function of this form of poetry: ‘these poems, rather than myths or religious rituals, served as the vehicle for the conception that sorted out the emotionally incoherent facts of life and death’ (*ibid.*, p. 22). Hamori also makes some significant comments on the panegyric section of the poem: ‘donor and recipient engage in a ritualistic performance, acting out a segment of the total organization of experience according to the heroic model’ (*ibid.*, pp. 23–4). The author concludes: ‘in a morally capricious universe, the heroic model allowed a view of the totality of experience as balanced and coherent’ (*ibid.*, p. 29).

Abu Deeb subjected the *Mu‘allaqāt* of Labīd and Imru’ al-Qays to a detailed structural analysis with a method derived from Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of myth (1975, 1976). Of particular interest are Abu Deeb’s findings on the work of Labīd which, in its sequence *aṭlāl-nasīb-raḥīl-tribal fakhr* (see Glossary), is more evidently akin to the panegyric than the work of Imru’ al-Qays; moreover it provides, according to Abu Deeb, ‘a vision of reality central to pre-Islamic poetry as a whole’ (1975, p. 150). In the course of his study, he establishes beyond doubt the internal coherence of the work in question and concludes emphatically: ‘The poem must be examined as a total, meaningful structure . . . embodying an individual way of viewing reality’ (*ibid.*, p. 180).

The author’s argument culminates with his discussion of the ‘open structure’ of the poem (*ibid.*, p. 181). The *qaṣīda* does not move from one moment of time to another. All time is present-time because it is a multi-layered re-enactment of one fundamental structure in terms of symbolic experiences and descriptions. The different layers of the poem are marked by its ‘formative units’, i.e. the subsections of the *aṭlāl*, the wild ass, the wild cow, etc. A number of these possess parallel structures ‘or rather, manifestations of what is fundamentally