POETRY has had a place in Islamic preaching; preaching has played its part in poetry. While pre-Islamic Arab poets exhorted their patrons and tribes to valorous deeds, early Muslim preachers recited verse urging their followers to fulfill God’s commands. In both instances, poetry’s emotive energy powered the message. The sudden and forceful impact this verse made upon an audience impressed the mystic and theologian al-Gazzâlî (d. 505/1111). He felt that poetry was especially effective for bringing to mind the world to come and for inciting believers to perform the pilgrimage and to confront the enemies of Islam. But verse, particularly amorous verse, could also arouse illicit emotions and provoke unseemly behavior as al-Gazzâlî was aware when he criticized the frequent recitation of love poetry during sermons:

...Most of the poetry with which the preachers are familiar and which they are accustomed to repeat in their sermons pertains to claims of being in love, the beauty of the beloved, the joys of union with him, and the pains of separation; while the assembly comprises no one but the crude among the common folk whose minds are saturated with lust and their eyes never cease from staring at fair faces.

Their poetry inspires nothing in their hearts except that which their hearts already conceal, and enkindles therein the flame of lust. Consequently they

begin to shriek and make a show of their love. Most of this, if not all, is the result of a certain kind of corruption. Therefore no poetry should be used unless it contains a moral or a wise saying and should only be used either as evidence or for entertainment.

But al-Ġazzālī also observed that the same amatory verse (nasīb) evoked a very positive response from individuals who had been overwhelmed by the love of God. Among this elect group, descriptions of love and the beloved were directly perceived as symbolizing God’s attributes or traces of the mystic way. In such cases, it was permissible to listen to this poetry, even if the poet’s literal intent and language disagreed with these interpretations. Nevertheless, al-Ġazzālī warned those who enjoyed love poetry for more sensual reasons that it would be best left alone so as to avoid temptation⁴. For as an earlier Şūfi had observed, if the eye can fornicate, the ear could too⁵.

Though al-Ġazzālī conditionally accepted the recitation of love poetry and listening to it, he certainly preferred less ambiguous verse which conveyed moral advice and wise counsel. The poetry of which al-Ġazzālī obviously approved includes some verses by Şūfi-s such as Rābi‘ah (d. 185/801) and al-Ġunayd (d. 298/911), whom al-Ġazzālī quoted in his discourses on mystical love and desire⁶. Yet rarely did he mention the popular bādiʾ type of Şūfi poetry. Al-Ġazzālī was probably suspicious of this paradoxical verse, and when he cited the line by the controversial mystic al-Hallāq (d. 309/922), «I am he whom I love/and he whom I love is me,» it was not as an example of poetry but of šaṭḥiyāt or «ecstatic utterances,» which were severely denounced by many religious scholars⁷. Whereas erotic verse might lead astray with its sensuality, bādiʾ mystical verse might be more misleading since it may contain nonsense or, worse, impious declarations⁸. It is probably no coincidence that al-Ġazzālī’s discussions of poetry include or are

⁴ Al-Ġazzālī, Iḥyā“, 2:279-280, and also see 2:285-288. Clearly al-Ġazzālī had the more erotic elements of the nasīb in mind when discussing this poetry.
⁸ For a discussion of bādiʾ Şūfi poetry see my «Tangled Words: Mystical Verse in Early Islam,» forthcoming.