
It is an open secret that Mutanabbi, the most widely revered of ‘Abbasid poets, does not appeal to Western tastes. The only full-scale study of him by a non-Arab, that of Blachère, dates from as long ago as 1935, and betrays more disdain than appreciation. In the past decade or so, a handful of shorter works, including chapters and articles by Hamori, have attempted to reach an objective understanding of the constituents of Mutanabbi’s craftsmanship. The grounds are being laid, but gradually and cautiously, for a thorough reappraisal. Accordingly, the brief Hamori has set himself in this short study is not to interpret, still less to evaluate, but to describe. He identifies a number of rhetorical procedures employed, in a certain phase of Mutanabbi’s poetry, to organise or punctuate the unfolding of a particular type of theme, the battle chronicle, and shows that similar procedures are also used in poems containing a martial panegyric element but no battle narrative. Both kinds of poem, in other words, are organised; they are organised with a view to engaging the listener; and their organisation depends on more than the presence or absence of a narrative line. Some of the procedures described by Hamori are of a kind not analysed extensively in either medieval or modern criticism, and Hamori uses terms of his own to designate their broader aspects. This distances him to some degree from prior literary critical associations; and one of his chief concerns is clearly that this study should be, and be seen to be, rooted not just in specific texts but in specific areas of those texts, and that his findings should be taken as pointers, not as a general scheme, a key to decoding Mutanabbi, or as supporting evidence for a grand theory. Hamori’s bibliography of secondary works is consequently brief, and his sample of twenty-two panegyrics excludes the nasibs: the diagrams appended to the main text are prefaced by the warning that ‘No complete rhetorical analyses are intended’. There is an implicit contrast with the broader aims, coverage and conclusions of some recent works in the field of Arabic poetry, though Hamori eschews discussion of the issues involved in such differences of approach.

The first five chapters examine the following points: (i) the final lines of Hamori’s sample and the formulae that occur in them (e.g. invocations, gnomic statements); these Hamori calls clausulas; (ii) passages leading up to the opening of battle chronicles, some but not all of which embody a ‘summary’ or ‘extended summary’ of the chronicle; (iii) ‘types of utterance used for stops ... to mark the end of a theme [or] to provide a threshold before the next’ or, in some instances, ‘partial conclusions’, called ‘cadences’; (iv) devices occurring between chronicle and clausula in what is termed the ‘coda’, notably ‘hinge-motifs’ and ‘crescendo-motifs’; (v) the use of these devices in poems without a central narrative element. Chapters 6-8 discuss the use of these motifs in an anomalous poem in the sample and briefly examine similar phenomena in material outside the sample.

To start with, Hamori discusses the poems neutrally and with almost exclusive reference to form; these are minute, convincing and very enlightening analyses. At the same time, his use of a terminology, and later of a general critical vocabulary, with strong independent connotations, sometimes suggests a not wholly controlled and verifiable interplay between imaginative and analytical responses to the texts. This is especially noticeable from Chapter Four.
onwards. Though Hamori mixes his terms in a way which might limit the reader's impulse to pursue a running analogy between the poems and any one of the varied fields on which the terminology draws, the invitation to view the poems in the light of implied metaphors is nevertheless there. The following is a sequence of terms used incidentally: p. 19: 'a syntactic attacca: an imperative, an interrogative particle, a vocative, etc.'; p. 47: 're-narrowing of focus'; p. 57: 'hooks of syntactic and semantic echoes between lines'; p. 60: 'frame', 'framing effect'; p. 62: 'reprise'; p. 67: 'focus', 'bringing the hero on stage'; p. 69: 'Text 8 follows the template ... ', 'an interpretation of the weave of vss. 32-35'; p. 71: 'tableaux'; p. 72: 'fanfares and flourishes', 'larger blocks ... architectonic principle'. It seems to me that more is involved in the use of such terms than simply putting 'readerly intuitions ... to the proof of philological common sense' (p. viii). I may have taken this phrase in too narrow a sense; whatever the case, proof is not allowed to rest entirely with demonstration, or rather, what Hamori allows himself to suggest about the poems is often as important as what he is prepared to demonstrate. Particularly when semantic elements are coupled with formal ones, Hamori tends to take short cuts and substitute metaphor for, or at any rate couple it with, analysis (p. 72: 'When the patron is introduced, or when the poet turns to him, a flourish is appropriate. In the sayfiyät the use of such fanfares and flourishes is extended to a wider variety of formal and thematic boundaries ... ') and there can be noticeable gaps between what he elaborates and what he passes over in silence.

To a considerable degree, such omissions can and should be filled in by the reader; they include the ten nasībs that are left out of Hamori's discussion; the metres of the poems and any speculation as to the relation between line length (and other more disputed metrical factors) and the non-prosodic accentual features identified by Hamori; the background to some of the factual allusions in the poems—the references to Canard, Blachère and Yāzījī are not always expanded. These omissions are a useful reminder that this is not a global account of the poems.

Other reticences, however, confront the reader with a problem that is more than that of doing his or her homework. When poetry has to be discussed in terms of its non-musical, referential components as well as of phrasing and dynamics, Hamori's commentary is sometimes so compressed as to obscure the links with earlier chains of reasoning, e.g. when on p. 55 'semes' and a 'morpho-thematic boundary' are introduced, whereas, on p. 27, in similar circumstances, great pains had been taken to avoid discussing semantic factors, and investigation of an unproblematic relationship between nasīb and main theme was renounced because of the lack of a 'distinct seam' (could not a seme have been introduced here?); on p. 63, the conclusion that 'this is a reprise that would in any event not strike us as counter-intuitive' follows obscurely on the statement that 'Here [Text 3 = Yāzījī, II, pp. 34-8, vs. 26: ajri l-jiyāda] is a reprise of [vs. 23, mā zāla tīrufuka yajrī], justified by the grammatical shift from finite statements to optatives and imperatives. The result is a long, cogent movement from [vs. 22] to the clausula'. In other instances, the problem of reasoning from sense, when it is not possible to lay down a simple groundwork comparable to that used for reasoning from form, is sidestepped; readerly intuition and experience are less well buttressed by proof in statements such as 'The last group of lines about the patron is the kind of climbing to a higher vantage point that we often see in the coda' (p. 62) than in earlier statements dealing with primarily formal features.