ABŪ TAMMĀM’S CONTRIBUTION TO ʿABBĀSID ǦAZAL POETRY

When Abū Tammām is mentioned, three things come to mind: the collection of the Ḥamāṣa, the badiʿ-style and the madiḥ-poems, because it was this genre to which Abū Tammām devoted most of his verses. Therefore, western scholars label Abū Tammām as a “neo-classical” poet along with al-Buḥturi and al-Mutanabbi because, unlike Abū Nuwās, Abū Tammām did not contribute to the “modern” genres, such as, e.g., wine and love poetry.

While this is quite true in the case of wine poetry, it is not true at all in the case of the ǧazal genre. Of course, the number of lines of Abū Tammām’s ǧazal poems is much smaller than the number of lines devoted to madiḥ poems. But this is simply due to the fact that ǧazal poems are much shorter than madiḥ poems. If we take the number of poems, the proportion of madiḥ to ǧazal turns out to be rather surprising: the diwān1 contains 132 ǧazal poems compared to 175 madiḥ poems, so the difference is not so great. In fact, as far as we know, there is no poet between Abū Nuwās and Ḥālid al-Kātib who has left behind a comparable amount of ǧazal verse. This comparatively high number of ǧazal verse in the diwān of Abū Tammām corresponds to the importance this poet is given in the later anthologies of love poetry. Let us take as an example the first part of the Kitāb az-Zahra of Ibn Dāwūd al-Īsfahānī.2 In this book, the most often quoted poets are al-Buḥturi and Abū Tammām. But we have to take into account that Abū Tammām treated the theme “love” in two different genres: first, in the nasib of his madiḥ poems, and second, in his ǧazal poems. It is therefore not surprising that a great part of the Abū Tammām quotations stems from his nasib, not from his ǧazal, but this is much more the case with al-Buḥturi, who did not contribute so much to the ǧazal. While the al-Buḥturi quotations are taken almost exclusively from the nasib- and madiḥ-sections of his panegyrical odes, more than one third of the Abū Tammām quotations are taken from his ǧazal, all in all 18 passages. Now compare this number to the quotations from Abū Nuwās (13), al-ʿAbbās b. al-Āḥnaf (11), Muslim b. al-Walid and Baṣṣār (12 each), and you get the impression that Abū Tammām was in fact regarded as one of the most important ǧazal poets. This impression is very well corroborated by other anthologies as e.g. the section about love poetry in the Nihāyat al-ʿAdab of an-Nuwayri and others.


© E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1996 Journal of Arabic Literature, XXVII
As there can be no doubt about the general importance of Abū Tam-mām’s love poetry, we have to ask a more important question: Is Abū Tam-mām’s contribution to love poetry only of quantitative importance, or does he contribute more essentially to the development of the genre? This question is not so easy to answer, because our knowledge about post-Abū Nuwāsian Arabic love poetry is extremely poor.

The first thing we will do in order to answer this question is to try to work out a classification of different subgenres of gazal poetry. The most promising way to get there is to start with formal, i.e. linguistic, criteria. Having done this, by applying semantic criteria in a second step we can establish five categories of love poems.

In the first step, we will sort the poems according to the dramatis personae. The main difference here is whether the poet speaks to somebody or about somebody or something. If he speaks to somebody, the poem will be focused on the second person. If he speaks about somebody or something, we can again distinguish two cases: If he speaks about himself (or better: the “lyrical I”), the poem is focused on the first person. If he speaks about somebody else (namely about his beloved) or about events etc., the poem will be focused on the third person. So, our first criterion of classification will be if a poem is focused on the first, second, or third person. This is not only a universal criterion by which every act of speech can be classified, but also turns out to be a fruitful classification of gazal poems, because the structuring of a poem as focused on the first, second, or third person involves a number of consequences with respect to content, so that this in turn facilitates a further classification on semantic lines.

We will start with poems where there is an addressee in the second person. This addressee is, of course, the beloved. The lover usually presents himself in the first person singular, very rarely in the third person, speaking about himself e.g. as “a slave, he who feels this and that.” A typical example is diwān no. 333:

1 riqqa laḥū ’in kunta mawlāḥū
   wa-rḥam fa-qad ’ašmatta ’a’dāḥū
2 waylun laḥū ’in dāma ḥāḍa ābihi
   min ḥuraqin tuqliqu ’āḥšāḥū
3 yā ḡuṣna bānin nā’imin qaddūhu
   fawqa naqan yahtazzu ’a’lāḥū
4 mana’ta ’aynayya lāḍiḍa l-kārā
   ’ahṣin kamā ḥassanaka l-lāḥū

1 Have compassion for him, if you are his patron, and show mercy to him, because you have already made his enemies feel malicious joy.
2 Woe to him, if this state lasts in him, because of the burnings that trouble his viscera!