AL-KHAYÁLÁNI—A VARIATION OF THE KHAYÁL MOTIF

The khayāl or tayf is a “vision” of the beloved, appearing by night, a favourite motif of Arabic love poetry from the time of the Jāhiliyya. As I have argued in a paper published in 1990, it was first conceived as an apparition or ghost, confronting the poet in the external world, not always welcome, and sometimes even terrifying him. Later, from the early 7th century onwards, it was referred to as a vision the poet sees in his dream, longed for and fulfilling his secret wishes, granting favours the beloved herself refused. This last aspect is dwelled upon with satisfaction especially in the Umayyad period. Thus far, there seems to be no problem. Dreaming about a person one is in love with is a universal experience, by no means limited to Arabic poets. Also, it presents no difficulties for our understanding as to its cause, nor for that of medieval poets. Some of them realized and said so plainly in their verses that the appearance of the khayāl was the result of wishful thinking.

When analysing later variants of the motif, however, one receives the impression that the khayāl or tayf, as conceived by Arabic poets, does possess more reality, I should even like to say more “substance,” than a figure appearing in a dream. One of the reasons is, I believe, that Islamic poets still identify themselves with poetic tradition and seek to evoke the atmosphere of the original motif. They consciously allude to it, as to other motifs of the nasīb, by using the conventional vocabulary, and they even retain certain elements of the narrative which are hardly relevant within the context of a dream, such as the question how the khayāl was able to cross mountains and deserts in order to reach the poet. What is more, the identity of the khayāl with the beloved, and the exact relation between the two, has always appeared somewhat dubious, and the question as to what the phenomenon really is, although rarely discussed explicitly, seems to have intrigued poets at all times. That is why I prefer to leave the term khayāl (or tayf) untranslated; it is evident that it has not always been conceived as exactly the same thing.

The latent influence of the original narrative may have also contributed to the development of some extraordinary variations of the motif in Islamic times—extraordinary from the aspect of comparative literature, I mean—and one of these variations is the subject of this paper: al-khayalānī, “the two khayāl.” The variation originates in the Umayyad or early Abbasid period,

1 “The Khayāl Motif in Early Arabic Poetry,” Orients 32, 50-64.
as I should like to suggest, although there is one incident, allegedly from
the Ḵāhiliyya, which must be taken into consideration. *Al-khayālānī* signifies
the beloved’s *khayāl* and that of the poet. The context of the verses I am
going to quote leaves no doubt about the reference, but it is obviously pos-
sible that the poet is visited by more than one *khayāl* at the same time or
by the same *khayāl* repeatedly. This latter idea is implied by the plural
*al-khayālāt*, which occurs occasionally in Umayyad and Abbasid poetry, as
for example in a verse by Kuthayyir, who mentions *khayālāt u l-ḥabībī
l-tawāriqu* (“nightly visions of the beloved”). But there is also the possi-
bility that a poet is involved in a love affair with two women, who send
their *khayāl* at the same time. I am not just speculating; there is a poem by
al-‘Ajjāj ibn Ru’ba, where the poet clearly refers to two *khayāl* moving
about simultaneously. I quote only the first couplet:3

\[
\text{Two khayāl moved about and caused affliction,} \\
\text{the khayāl (of a woman) named, and that (of a woman) kept secret.}
\]

This is the only instance of a poet alluding to two women which I have
been able to find, and since al-‘Ajjāj is a famous ṭajīz, and since we know
that ṭajaz poets tend to parody the classical ṣaṣīda, we do not need to take
him quite so seriously. At any rate, the case of two women does not con-
cern us here; I only wanted to get the idea out of the way.

As to the *khayāl* of the beloved meeting the poet’s *khayāl*, I cannot offer
a conclusive analysis of this variation, but only some reflections which must
be reconsidered within a comprehensive study of the *khayāl* motif. Evidently
the diachronistic approach, profitable as it may be from certain aspects, has
its limitations, as we are forced to isolate verses and passages from the con-
text of a complete poem, and from the context of its literary period. The
psychology of the *khayāl* phenomenon, an aspect I am particularly interested
in, can only be studied by taking all its variations into account. However, I
think that there are some intricate questions worthy of attention, even if it
is for the present impossible to provide a definite answer.

The material I am relying upon is a fairly comprehensive collection of
verses referring to the motif up to the Umayyad period. As to the Abbasid
period, my collection is limited to the more important poets among the early
Abbasids, up to al-Buḥṭuri. Moreover, I have concentrated on love poetry,
that is to say on the genres *nasīb* and *ghazal*, although the *khayāl*, as most

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2 *Diwān*, Ed. I. ʿABBAS, Beirut 1970, No. 84, v. 7; see also al-Akhtal, *Diwān*, Ed. A. Sal-