SENSIBILITY AND SYNAESTHESIA:
IBN AL-RÚMÎ’S SINGING SLAVE-GIRL

This essay will explore the function of wasf (description) by dealing with the relation between verbal art and the musical art of gesture and singing in a medieval Arabic qasîdah or ode from the ninth century A.D., which describes a singing slave-girl. Re-examining why and how the ode has entranced the listener or the reader, I shall make use of modern Western modes of interarts studies, while not neglecting conventional Arabic literary components and the medieval Arabic social, artistic milieu of singing-girls. As theoretical tools, I will use the concept of the “gestural” developed by Lawrence Kramer. As to the social ambience, an essay on singing slave-girls by al-Jâhîz (A.D. 776-869), one of the most prominent classical Arab litterateurs, will be our source. I will also rely on George Sawa’s study of the theory and practice of musical performance in the classical Middle East. For the purpose of re-discovering the quintessence of the qasîdah, I hope that innovative and untried methods will provide us with wider and new perspectives on the poetic tradition.

Wasf (description) occupies a central role in the Arabic qasîdah tradition and is commonly held to be characteristic of the genre. Description is one of the literary strategies used by the poet to reflect an aspect of “reality,” either actual or fictional. The qasîdah was evaluated negatively by tradi-

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3 The poem I will investigate is often introduced as an excellent model of wasf in works on Ibn al-Rúmî and other poetry studies. For instance, in the preface of Diwân of Ibn al-Rúmî, the editor Ahmad Hasan Basaj introduces the poem under the categorization of wasf. Diwân of Ibn al-Rúmî, ed. with notes, Ahmad Hasan Basaj, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1994), 1: 12-13.
tional Orientalists for what was thought to be its objective descriptiveness; they thought it lacked the expression of emotion. Gustave von Grunebaum, for instance, states in reference to the *qasidah*:

The poet is wholly dedicated to the task of adequately describing his theme down to its most intimate and, at the same time, most typical peculiarities. There is no doubt that here the Arabs contributed a number of masterpieces to descriptive art... Whatever the subject, it is presented for its inherent interest, never for any emotion it may have touched off in the observer or listener.... Whatever his [the *qasidah* poet’s] subject, he will reproduce it as it is, or perhaps rather as tradition has taught him to see it, refraining carefully from personalized comment or from putting his feelings unduly to the fore. If we disregard the perfection of form and language, the beauty of his presentation derives entirely from the fidelity of his observation, not from his reaction to the impressions that actually inspired his song.... The poet’s organ of perception is the eye.

Grunebaum’s conception of the objective descriptiveness of Arabic poetry sees the poet’s faithful, minute description as based on mimesis (imitation), which is intended to portray a visual/pictorial image. Rejecting this view, I have tried in previous studies to demonstrate the function and the meaning of description/wasf in the *qasidah* by investigating the psychological (emotional and affective), emblematic, metaphorical, and metaphysical levels of the poems’ ekphrastic descriptions of visual arts and architecture. Pursuing this train of thought, I will argue in this paper that Ibn al-Rūmī’s

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6 In addition to the issue of descriptiveness, his remarks indicate that he has failed to heed or reconsider how significant for the *qasidah* poet are the conventional regulations contained in form, which are associated with the stereotypedness of classical Arabic poetry.