The question whether it is possible for European scholars to determine the aesthetic value of Arabic poetry has not aroused much interest. Most Arabists working in the field of literature obviously take that possibility for granted, as may be inferred from a great number of studies applying aesthetic criteria. A few negative statements I have found serve merely as an excuse for disregarding the aesthetic aspect, and do not carry much weight. It would seem therefore that the problem could be safely left to silent demonstration. However, there has been a recent discussion of the subject resulting in a negative argument, which in my opinion should not pass undisputed. At the beginning of his article *La littérature arabe en fonction de la communication sociale* Karel Petraček quotes Mahmūd al-‘Aqqād’s criticism of European orientalists who judge Arabic literature without possessing the linguistic preparation of the Arabs. Consequently, western Arabists are advised to confine their efforts to language, and to leave literature to the native speaker. In his subsequent argumentation Petraček on principle accepts this point, but tries to define certain “objective” characteristics of literature that may be dealt with successfully by the orientalist. Referring to modern linguistic, structuralist or mathematical methods of literary analysis, he comes to the conclusion: “Un arabisant peut choisir entre plusieurs méthodes pour l’étude objective de la littérature arabe, tout en laissant aux ‘Fils de la ‘Arabiya’ le champ esthétique que seuls ils peuvent cultiver” (p. 60).

The statement is clearly based on the assumption that only subjective criteria can be applied to the aesthetic domain. If this were true, literary criticism would not belong to the realm of serious research. There can be no doubt that western orientalists will never be able to compete with Arabs in susceptibility, taste or intuition as regards Arabic poetry. But it is equally valid that these subjective methods of approach, useful as they may be in the first appreciation of a poem, are of no interest whatever in literary criticism, if not

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1 I am indebted to Prof. Max Mangold of the University of Saarbrücken for checking the phonological description, and for correcting my English.

supported by objective criteria. Moreover, those modern tools of analysis mentioned by Petraček have been developed and applied, in order to provide literary aesthetics with a more reliable basis for evaluation—among other reasons. Incidentally, Petraček himself has proved this point. In analysing a poem by Imra’alqais, he has shown conclusively that modern structuralistic methods are a suitable means for reaching aesthetic judgements.³

In order to support the argumentation I am going to examine a medieval Arabic poem with the main object of determining whether it is good or bad. I shall first describe the different linguistic levels (phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic), then try to define their structure, and finally I shall point out any relations which may exist between them on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative evidence.⁴ The degree of correlation or harmony existing between the linguistic levels of the poem will be used as the final criterion of judgement.⁵ Throughout this analysis the historical aspect, inclusive of the important problem of convention, will be disregarded, as it would tend to confuse our main issue, i. e. the aesthetic evaluation of a poetic text. It is obvious, however, that the full appreciation of a poem composed many centuries ago is impossible without taking into consideration its historical background. Besides, there is not only the evidence of literary history with regard to the poem, there may also be some evidence in the poem with regard to Arabic literary history. Some of these problems will be treated at the end of this article. By separating the historical aspect from the structural analysis, I moreover hope I shall be able to show how far both methods can be used independently, and how they require to be supplemented by each other.

In choosing a suitable subject for demonstration, I have not followed my own taste. It has seemed to me more interesting to accept the judgement of medieval Arabs, and to find out whether our own methods of criticism will lead to the same conclusion. The popularity

⁵ I have purposely avoided the traditional dichotomy of form and content, thus escaping the necessity of drawing the line between them.