Introduction

The simile (tashbih) is one of the central elements of Arabic poetry, and not surprisingly, most medieval critics devote considerable attention to discussing it. They take particular interest in the issue of evaluation. How, for instance, does one use imagery properly? What constitutes a good or a bad comparison?

I would like to consider below an attempt to establish a sort of "serviceable" precision for the evaluation of the tashbih. This is the section on ahwāl al-tashbih (literally the "circumstances of the simile") in Muḥammad al-Sakkākī's (d. 626/1229) Miftāḥ al-ʿUlūm (The Key to the Disciplines), a thirteenth century work on rhetoric. The section on the ahwāl consists of three

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1 In this paper I will conflate the various associations of the English words, "comparison", "simile" and "imagery", as well as the Arabic terms, "tamthīl" and "isti'ārah" (metaphor) because I believe that al-Sakkākī's discussion of tashbih includes—or at least has relevance to—all of these. The systematic discussion of these terms is found in the rhetoric/poetics literature (ʿilm al-balāghah, literally, "the science of eloquence"), and G.J.H. Van Gelder has included a brief survey of this literature—as well as the secondary literature that describes it—in his Beyond the Line (Leiden, 1982, pp. 1–22). The reader's attention should still, however, be drawn to a number of topics and works. H. Ritter, for instance, has considered ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's (see below and note 3) ideas on imagery in his translation of al-Jurjānī's Aṣrār al-Balāghah (Geheimnisse der Wortkunst, Wiesbaden, 1959; hereafter GW) as well as his ground-breaking work on the Persian poet Nizāmī (Über die Bildersprache des Nizāmī, Berlin, 1927). W. Heinrichs has described the early development of metaphor in his Hand of the Northwind (Wiesbaden, 1977), while Mansour Ajami has considered metaphor and artifice in his Neckveins of Winter (Leiden, 1984). J.C. Bürgel, on the other hand, has looked at metaphor and notions of hyperbole in his "Die Beste Dichtung ist die Lügenreichste", (Oriens, 23/24, 1974, pp. 7–102).

2 Al-Sakkākī is in C. Brockelmann's Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur, Leiden, 1937–1949 (hereafter GAL), G 1, 352; S 2, 515 and in addition in R. Sellheim's Materialien zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte, Wiesbaden–Stuttgart, 1976–1987, 1, 299–317; 2, 119–120. There are two "printings" of the Miftāḥ al-ʿUlūm, listed in GAL. The edition that I have used, is a recent one by Nuʾaym Zarzūr, Beirut, 1984 (hereafter MU). Zarzūr has laid out al-Sakkākī's text beautifully, but he has not produced a critical edition (he seems for the most part to follow the Cairo edition of 1899). Although a number of authors have referred to the Miftāḥ (e.g. Heinrichs, Hand; Van
lists. In the first al-Sakkākī provides seven principles (uşūl) that describe the audience reaction to the simile. In the second he outlines the criteria for considering a simile to be common (qarīb—which is literally “near”) or rare (baʾid, literally “far”). Lastly, al-Sakkākī considers in explicit evaluative terms whether the simile is good or bad by giving four “requirements” for a tashbih to be either acceptable (maqhbūl) or objectionable (mardūd).

Of late, the Miḥtāh has not been highly regarded. This is largely due to the fact that al-Sakkākī takes many of his arguments from the work of an earlier author, namely, ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078). Scholars have long considered al-Jurjānī’s Asrār al-Balāghah (The Secrets of Eloquence) and Da-lāʾīl al-Fījāz (The Proofs for the Inimitability of Koranic Style) to be the high points of the Islamic literary critical tradition. They have held that the Miḥtāh, on the other hand, is derivative, reductive and overly scholastic. I would like to argue, however, that al-Sakkākī makes a significant contribution to the literary-critical discussion. The author’s “presentation by lists” enables him to articulate and define the manner in which striking (baʾid) images are used in poetry. Although his comments in this regard may not include any dramatic new insights on the simile, the Miḥtāh does, I believe, offer a new way of considering “far-fetched” imagery. Inasmuch as evaluation of the baʾid is an important topic in the medieval critical literature, al-Sakkākī’s section on ahwal al-tashbih promises to shed some new light on an old debate.

Perception, the Intellect and the Soul

The chapter on tashbih in the Miḥtāh is divided into four sections (anwāṣ), namely, the subject and object of comparison (mushabbah and mushabbah...