

RATING *ADAB*: AL-TAWḤĪDĪ ON THE MERITS
OF POETRY AND PROSE.
THE 25TH NIGHT OF THE *KITĀB AL-IMTĀ' WA-L-MU'ĀNASA*,
TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY *

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MONSIEUR JOURDAIN
Non, je ne veux ny Prose, ny Vers.

MAISTRE DE PHILOSOPHIE
Il faut bien que ce soit l'un, ou l'autre.

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN
Pourquoy?

MAISTRE DE PHILOSOPHIE
Par la raison, Monsieur, qu'il n'y a pour s'exprimer, que la Prose ou les Vers.

Molière, Le Bourgeois gentilhomme

The beginnings of Arabic literary prose are usually put at the end of the Umayyad period, with the letters of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib, notwithstanding all their problems of transmission, regarded as the first major examples of this art. ¹ It took, however, another two centuries until literary prose became fully accepted on the literary stage: authors of the 4th/10th century such as the Ṣāhib b. 'Abbād, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābi' or Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamaḍānī were pioneers of a novel prose style, commonly called «ornate prose», and characterised by the systematic use of *saj'* (rhymed prose) and the figures of *badī'*. Their works, in contrast to the ones of their Umayyad and early Abbasid predecessors (with the example of the towering figure of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd), were cited in contemporary and later literary anthologies and in didactic literature as examples of model prose, and their style imitated by their epigones of the later centuries. ²

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¹ Ṣayḥ Mūsā, "Ḥarakat al-ta'rif", 481.

² Described in Hachmeier, "Die Entwicklung".

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It is not astonishing, then, that discussions about the respective qualities and merits of poetry and prose soon ensued. Az-Zu‘bī has compiled a list of references of this *Rangstreit* between poetry and prose, showing that it was practised almost continuously from the end of the 3rd/9th century onwards throughout mediaeval times.³ Three factors may have been responsible for the ongoing popularity of this debate. First, there was a certain predilection for the topos of *tafḍīl* in mediaeval Arabic literature – one only needs to look at the much-admired and immensely influential al-Jāḥiẓ and his numerous works in praise or blame of certain groups, professions, etc.; second, the debate about poetry and prose was a typical expression of the rivalry between poets and the *kuttāb*, the professional scribes, at the royal courts. (The *kuttāb*, it should be added, held almost the monopoly in the field of ornate prose; other genres of ornate prose, such as *maqāmāt* and *ḥuṭab* (sermons) may be called marginal in terms of output when compared to the large body of *inšā’*, the chancery documents.) The third factor is the Greek influence on Arabic literary theory that is evident in al-Sijistānī’s views about poetry and prose in the text; that needs some further comment.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* was first translated into Arabic by Mattā b. Yūnus (d. 329/940) and subsequently treated in al-Fārābī’s (d. 339/950) *Iḥṣā’ al-‘ulūm* as well as his *Kitāb al-ši‘r*. In al-Fārābī’s works, the terms *muḥākāh* (imitation, the Greek μιμησις) and *taḥyīl* (which Heinrichs translated as *Vorstellungsevokation*) appear as being central to poetry, and as its distinguishing feature.⁴ It follows that these concepts were known in the middle of the 4th/10th century and treated in the philosophically-minded circles also frequented by al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023); the great philosopher al-Sijistānī (d. ca. 375/985) builds his argument on the Aristotelian theory of linguistic

³ Al-Zu‘bī, *Das Verhältnis*, chapter I.C. 150-153. The following references must be added: al-Mubarrad’s *Epistle on poetry and prose* has been edited and annotated by Grunebaum; Arazi has edited and treated the *Risāla* of Abū Ishāq al-Sābi‘ (see bibliography for both); Heinrichs has outlined Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī’s contribution to this debate (*Arabische Dichtung*, 99-105); many of the authors are also discussed in van Gelder, *Beyond the Line*.

⁴ On al-Fārābī’s works on poetics, see Heinrichs, *Arabische Dichtung*, 127-155. Al-Fārābī, amongst other things, says that *muḥākāh* and *taḥyīl* can both appear in several degrees: the mirror-image of a statue, for example, is two degrees away from reality. Further, he states that most people consider the imitation (*muḥākāh*) with the most distant thing better than the one with the nearest, i.e., the most obvious.

signs (below [i], [xv]). It is well possible that al-Ṣābi's (d. 384/994) idea of poetic «obscurity» as opposed to the clarity of prose⁵ was inspired by Aristotle, as maybe was al-Sijistānī's proposition to apply the *lafz-ma'nā*-divide to separate between poetry and prose (see [iii] below). In any case, the great contribution of the *Poetics* to Arabic literary theory was that it offered a framework to distinguish between poetry or prose. This Aristotelian-influenced line of literary theory found, some centuries later, its most elaborate expression in the work of the ingenious Ḥāzīm al-Qarṭājannī (d. 684/1285).⁶ Mainstream Arabic literary theory, in contrast, used to treat both genres as equals under such headings as *balāgha* (eloquence) or *ṣan'at al-kalām*: it appears that al-Tawḥīdī finally embraced this line of literary theory when he turned to Qudāma b. Ja'far at the end of the following text. Apart from the *Poetics*, there are several other philosophical references in al-Tawḥīdī's text.

The debate about the merits and virtues of poetry and prose fills the whole 25th night of the *Kitāb al-imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*; it was written at a time when Arabic ornate prose reached a first height at the hands of the great prosaists of the Buyid period, and when foreign texts and ideas were subsumed in Arabic-Islamic culture in what has been termed the «Renaissance of Islam» (A. Mez). Al-Tawḥīdī himself was a great stylist, well-aware of the literary and philosophical topics of his time, and, above all, highly critical.⁷ Although some aspects of the text have been discussed elsewhere,⁸ following al-Tawḥīdī is an enlightening and entertaining experience: the text is, after all, a work of *adab* about *adab*.

⁵ See Arazī, «Une Épître»; az-Zu'bī, *Das Verhältnis*, 89-101.

⁶ Heinrichs, *Arabische Dichtung*; Schoeler, *Einige Grundprobleme*, both *passim*. For more and other Arabic authors that separated between poetry and prose, see al-Zu'bī, *Das Verhältnis*, chapter I.C.

⁷ Cf. his critical statements about the famous epistolographers of his time in night 4 and 5 of his *Kitāb al-imtā'* (the passage on al-Ṣābi' has been translated in Hachmeier, *Die Briefe*, 61-62). Later in the *Kitāb al-imtā'* (1/134), however, al-Tawḥīdī admits that he is not too familiar with poetry and the poets, and shows himself reluctant to comment on poetry. – Al-Tawḥīdī is also the author of a short treatise on «penmanship», a work very much in the tradition of the *adab al-kātib*-literature. (See Rosenthal, «Abū Ḥaiyān» for a translation of the treatise; Hachmeier, «Die Entwicklung», 141-152 on the *adab al-kātib*-literature.)

⁸ Notably in Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 154-59; al-Zu'bī, *Das Verhältnis*, 147-196, esp. 191-196.

I have inserted page numbers as they stand in my edition of the *Kitāb al-imtā'*. Reference is made, above all, to relevant passages in al-Tawḥīdī's *al-Muqābasāt* and to his contemporaries or near-contemporaries (esp. Miskawayh and al-Ṣābi'), in an attempt to present the text in its historical context.

* * *

25th night

[130] One night he [Ibn Sa'dān⁹] – may God make his reign (*dawla*) lasting – said: I would like to hear something about the qualities (*marātib*, lit. «ranks») of prose and poetry; what can they achieve, in what respect are they similar, which of them brings more benefit and gain, and which one is more of an art (*ṣinā'a*) and worthier to be called excellent?

[131] The reply was: Speech about speech is difficult. – He said: Why is that? – I said: It is possible to speak about matters (*umūr*); this speech relies upon forms (*ṣuwar*) and figures (*aṣkāl*) of the matters, which may be divided into intelligible (*ma'qūl*) and sensible matters (*mā yakūnu bi-l-ḥiss*). Here, you have ample scope and manifold ways. Speech about speech, on the other hand, revolves around itself and is intermingled with itself. For this reason, speech about grammar (*naḥw*) and logic that resembles grammar is difficult, and likewise it is with prose and poetry.

[i] The argument put forward here is based on Aristotle's theory of linguistic signs, according to which speech sounds or utterances (Greek φωνη, Arabic *lafẓ*) – which may also be recorded in the form of writing – are symbols of the thought process that takes place in the soul; the thoughts themselves are images of the real concepts (*ma'ānī*, Gr. πρόγματα) (cf. [xv]). The pair *lafẓ-ma'nā* appears in a number of Arabic sciences; in this philosophical context first appeared in Ishāq b. Ḥunayn's (d. 289/910-11) Arabic translation of the *Hermeneutics*, although there had been much earlier usages of the pair, with slightly different meanings, in Arabic grammar and philol-

⁹ For Ibn Sa'dān and his circle, where al-Tawḥīdī recorded his *Kitāb al-imtā'*, see Kraemer, *Humanism*, 191-206.

ogy. It remains unclear as to what extent the *lafz-ma'nā*-distinction in the latter contexts may be attributed to earlier Greek influences. The philosopher would maintain that the only function of speech (*kalām*) was to represent and to make matters (*umūr*) pondered on audible, and as speech (*kalām*) in itself constitutes no matter, speech about speech must necessarily be a futile undertaking.¹⁰

[ii] I have translated *naḥw* as «grammar», although it could also be taken to mean «syntax» here. The distinction between grammar and logic that al-Tawḥīdī alludes to in the last sentence of this paragraph was subject to much controversy at the time. The logicians (and those were the ones with a philosophical education, those who represented the Greek influence) would maintain that the subject of grammar were the speech sounds (*alfāz*), whereas logic had to do with intelligible meanings (*ma'ānī*). Conspicuously, the *lafz-ma'nā* distinction is a central point to this debate: grammar was the science of *lafz*, logic the science of *ma'nā*.¹¹

[On the basis of this,]¹² people have made several statements about these two arts (poetry and prose). They have only digressed from good description, laudable fairness and an acceptable degree of rivalry when partisanship and contentiousness (*maḥk*) were mixed with it. This happens because the one who possesses these two characteristics is not free from some feeling of self-importance (*mukābara*) and the wish to deceive (*muḡālaṭa*).¹³ In the proportion of this, a way will open for him in either clearly stating the argument as is [generally] desired, or in falling short of what is [generally] wished in reaching it. This is a harmful thing that happens in worldly

¹⁰ Endress, *Grammatik und Logik*, 206-211, with further references.

¹¹ The debate and its background has been described in an excellent study by Endress (*Grammatik und Logik*), esp. 194-229. The distinction between grammar and logic along the above-mentioned lines appears first, in a systematical treatment, in the famous debate between Abū Biṣr Mattā and Abū Sa'īd al-Sīrāfī from the year 938. Yahyā b. 'Adī's treatise "About the difference between philosophical logic and Arabic grammar" follows the same line, as does al-Fārābī in his *Iḥṣā' al-'ulūm* and Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī. The debate between Abū Biṣr Mattā and al-Sīrāfī appears in the eighth night of al-Tawḥīdī's *Kitāb al-Imtā' wa-l-Mu'ānasa* as well as his *al-Muqābasāt*; it has been translated and commented upon several times (Endress, *Grammatik und Logik*, 235-270; Abderrahmane, "Discussion"; Margoliouth, "The discussion").

¹² It seems better to put the phrase *wa-'alā dālika* which, in the printed edition, has been attached to the preceding paragraph, at the beginning of this paragraph. The particle *wa* in the following *wa-qad* would then probably have to be elided.

¹³ This is also the word for "sophistry".

and religious matters, and we cannot hope to eliminate it, because it emanates from different natures and bad customs.

I, however, despite of that thorny and troublesome path, will render what I have heard from the masters of this subject, and those who belong to that field of art. And if something occurs to me which is in the same vein, I will attach it here in order to complete the exposition, to exhaust the topic, to reach the utmost and to deal fully with it, even though one cannot hope to get to the end of it and will never reach it. God is the helper.

[132] Our teacher (*šayḥ*) Abū Sulaymān [al-Sijistānī] said: Speech in its first principles¹⁴ comes either as the result of spontaneous extemporizing, of exerting one's reflection (*rawīya*), or of a mixture between the two which combines the strengths of both in greater or lesser proportion (?). The virtue of spontaneous extemporizing is that it [i.e., its speech] is purer, that of exerting one's reflection is that it[s speech] is more satisfactory, and the virtue of a mixture of the two is that it[s speech] is more perfect; the defect of spontaneous extemporizing is that the form (*sūra*) of intellect ('*aql*) in it[s speech] is less evident, the defect of exerting one's reflection is that the form of sense (*ḥiss*) in it[s speech] is less evident, and the defect of the mixture of the two is according to the share the two have in it, [i.e.,] what is stronger and weaker. However, if this mixture [of spontaneous and deliberate speech] is void of the faults of affectation (*takalluf*) and the disfigurements of crudeness (*ta'assuf*), it is eloquent, pleasant, delightful and sweet; the hearts embrace it, the ears grasp it, the convivial gatherings exploit it, and speaker after speaker tries to compete in it. The rivalry for precedence that exists between those who are eloquent in poetry and in prose, however, only pertains to that mixture [of spontaneous and deliberate speech] that may be called literary composition (*ta'līf*) and construction (*raṣf*). It may also happen that the form of intellect is more evident in spontaneous speech, and that the form of sense is more apparent in deliberate speech – that, however, belongs to the strange traces of the soul and the rare impacts of

¹⁴ Cf. the definition of the "first principles" from al-Fārābī's *Kitāb al-burhān* in Alon, *al-Fārābī's Philosophical Lexicon*, 2/689: "The first [principles] without qualification are those which are totally indemonstrable, and the first [principle] syllogistically are those which being employed as first in a given discipline are secondary (lit. later) in another."

human nature; ¹⁵ here, we are turning around a pole that has been described earlier and whose fundamentals stand firmly.

[iii] The argument here must be read and understood in conjunction with two passages from al-Tawḥīdī's *al-Muqābasāt*, nr. 6 (p. 36-37), and nr. 60 (p. 137-38). In the sixth *muqābasa*, the *kātib*-philosopher al-Qūmisī, ¹⁶ a contemporary of Yaḥyā b. 'Adī, states that utterance (*lafz*) addresses the ear and thus the sense (*ḥiss*), whereas the meaning addresses the soul (*nafs*). «The utterances (*alfāz*) are the means [of communication] between the speaker and the listener, – the meanings (*ma'ānī*) are the essences (*jawāhīr*) of the soul», al-Qūmisī concludes. ¹⁷ Sense is subject to nature (*ṭabī'a*), just as the soul and intellect belong together: hence there exists a parallelity between *lafz* – sense on the one hand, and *ma'nā* – intellect on the other hand. Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī carries the argument further in the sixtieth *muqābasa* by establishing a link to poetry and prose: He says that poetry is more indicative of nature (*ṭabī'a*), as it is more complex (*min ḥayyiz al-tarkīb*), and prose is more indicative of intellect ('*aql*), because it is simple (*min ḥayyiz al-basāṭa*). And because man inclines to nature more than he does to intellect, he prefers poetry to prose. The intellect, now, judges speech solely according to the soundness of its *ma'ānī*, as it is completely indifferent to the *lafz*. Nature, in contrast, responds to expression (*lafz*) and concepts (*ma'ānī*) alike. The *lafz*, as said before, reaches nature by way of the sense; but nature's judgement also depends on the soul (*nafs*) and thus also on the meaning (*ma'nā*). Al-Sijistānī, although he has just applied the *lafz-ma'nā* pair to differentiate between poetry and prose, adds that there are always some traces of prose in poetry and vice versa, thereby admitting that poetry cannot excel solely through its *lafz*, or prose through its *ma'nā*. ¹⁸ Miskawayh, on the other hand, does not agree to distinguish poetry and prose along the *lafz-ma'nā*-lines (cf. [xi]).

¹⁵ The paragraph up to this point has also been translated in Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 149.

¹⁶ I failed to identify him, although he appears more than once in *al-Muqābasāt*, e.g. in the 6th *muqābasa* where he (influenced by Plato's *Republic*?) gives a short statement about the roles of the ruler, the soldier, the scholar and the common people ('*amma*) in the state. Here, he is called Abū Bakr al-Qūmisī, «a great philosopher who was attached to Yaḥyā b. 'Adī for some time; he was a scribe to Naṣr al-Dawla...».

¹⁷ Compare this statement to the logic-grammar debate above!

¹⁸ The relevant text from *muqābasa* nr. 60 has been translated by Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 155.

[iv] Furthermore, the argument that literary speech, be it poetry or prose, alternates between spontaneous speech (the result of a sudden idea or intuition) and deliberate speech (resulting from careful formulation) is highly reminiscent of the distinction between the *maṭbū'*—and the *maṣnū'*—poet, the poet who is naturally gifted and the one who excels through the artistic design (*ṣan'a*) of his work.¹⁹ Remarkably, the above-mentioned al-Qūmisī (in *muqābasa* nr. 6, see [iii]) alludes to the *maṭbū'*—and the *maṣnū'*—poet at the end of his philosophical argument: “This [the composition of good poetry] may happen to man by way of relying on his sound disposition, his good nature and his laudable choice, but he may fail to achieve this: then, he has to remedy this by good imitation of those who preceded him with these *ma'ānī*—”²⁰ The distinction between *maṭbū'*— and the *maṣnū'*— poet appears to have been quite commonly known and applied at the time.

[v] Kraemer (*Philosophy*, 148-50) mentions other places in al-Tawḥīdī's work where the pair spontaneity (*badīha*)-deliberation (*rawīya*) appears: In the discussion of the merits of nations, e.g., the Arabs are described as spontaneous but lacking in deliberation. In addition, there is an astounding parallel to this in the Arabic translation of Galen's Περὶ Ἠθῶν where it is stated that “[t]hese [virtuous or vicious] states [of human soul] are divided into two categories; first, there are those that occur to the soul after the exercise of thought, consideration and discrimination, – and, secondly, there are those that occur to the soul without the exercise of thought”.²¹

[vi] Al-Tawḥīdī asks Miskawayh in the latter's *al-Hawāmil wa-l-ṣawāmil* why it is harder to speak eloquently than to write eloquently. Miskawayh replies that written speech is the result of careful reflection (the word *rawīya* appears here, too) and (re-)phrasing, whereas (spontaneous) speech, if its expression (*lafẓ*) and concept (*ma'nā*) do not agree, results in stammering and slurring of speech,

¹⁹ The distinction between the *maṭbū'*—and the *maṣnū'*— poet was probably autochthonous to Arabic literary theory, but (under Aristotelian influence?) modified later by al-Fārābī and al-Qarṭājannī. See Heinrichs, *Arabische Dichtung*, 52-55; Schoeler, *Einige Grundprobleme*, 33-56.

²⁰ Al-Tawḥīdī, *Al-Muqābasāt*, nr. 6, p. 37.

²¹ Mattock, “The Arabic Epitome”, 239. I am grateful to Fritz Zimmermann for this reference. It is highly probable that Miskawayh had this passage in mind when he referred to Galen in his *Tahqīb al-aḥlāq* (page) 32: (line) 16. – Hilāl b. Muḥassin al-Ṣābi' (d. 448/1056), in his preface to his *Ḡurar al-balāḡa*, also plays with the pair (p. 80): “*fa-mā zāla al-insān ḥasan al-zann bi-badīhat nafsihi // wa-qalīl al-tawaqquf 'alā rawīyat faḥsihi*”.

which are equally disliked. The (Aristotelian) intellect-sense dichotomy, on which Abū Sulaymān rests his argument (see [iii]), does not appear here at all.²²

I have heard Abū ‘Ā’id al-Karḥī Ṣāliḥ b. ‘Alī²³ saying: Prose is the trunk (*aṣl*) of speech, verse its branch; the trunk is nobler than the branch, and the branch is more imperfect (*anqaṣ*) than the trunk. But each of the two has beautiful aspects (*zā’ināt*) and blemishes. As for the beautiful aspects of prose, they are evident, as [133] all people, in their first and original speech, turn to prose; they only undertake to [speak in] poetry in the second instance, either [prompted] by an accidental (*‘āriḍ*) motive, a cause that moves them, or a specific matter.

He said: It is also a proof of its [prose’s] eminence that the ancient and the recent books that came down from heaven on the tongues of the prophets with divine support are all, despite of their different languages, in plain prose. They [i.e., the books] vary in their prosody (*wazn*), differ widely in their structures (*binā’*) and dispositions (*taṣrīf*),²⁴ are not subjected to a certain metre and do not employ poetic metres. This is a matter which cannot be refuted, or be opposed with anything that would nullify it.

[vii] The same argument appears in al-Tawḥīdī’s *al-Muqābasāt* (Nr. 65, p. 154). See also below [ix/2] where a connection between divine revelations and the «unity» of prose is established. – The statement that the Koran was in prose leads to the well-known problem of the inimitability (*i’jāz*) of the Koran and the question of whether the Koran should be treated like any other prose work in literary criticism.²⁵

He said: It is also a sign of its [prose’s] eminence that the unity (*waḥda*) in it is more evident, and the trace of it (unity) is more conspicuous. Affectation (*takalluf*) is further from it, and it stands nearer

²² Miskawayh, *Al-Hawāmil*, 320 (nr. 126).

²³ I could not identify this person. The erratum (*Kitāb al-imtā’*, appendix to vol. 2, p. 26) emends ‘Ābid to ‘Ā’id.

²⁴ Or, more specifically, “non-declensional” and “declensional endings”. Cf. E.I.¹, I, 721, entry “*binā’*” (A. Schaade) for the meaning of the word in grammar; E.I.², I, 360, entry “*taṣrīf*”, 360 (M. Morony) for the meaning of the latter.

²⁵ This problem has been described by Neuwirth, “Das islamische Dogma”; about the 10th-century dispute whether the Koran was in *saj’* (rhymed prose), some examples in Hachmeier, “Die Entwicklung”, 145-147.

to purity (*ṣafāʾ*). Whenever unity prevails in a thing, it is always indicative of the beauty of that thing, its lasting value (*baqāʾ*), splendour and clarity.

He said: It also belongs to the virtues of prose that such as it [prose] is divine (*ilāhī*) in regard to the unity (*waḥda*), it is natural in regard to the origin (*ṭabīʿī bi-l-badʾah*). The origin in the natural things is a unity, such as the unity in divine things is an origin. – But this is serious speech.

[viii] This is most certainly taken from metaphysics, and maybe *ilāhī* (divine) should have been translated as «metaphysical» here. Az-Zuʿbī, who refers to an otherwise unspecified philosophical dictionary, remarks that «natural in regard to the origin» (*ṭabīʿī bi-l-badʾah*) means «the nature of any being, as it comes to it from his origin».²⁶

[ix/1] The use of the word *waḥda* (unity) in this context is very interesting, but somewhat problematic; we have thus subdivided this note into three subsections. Van Gelder, in the discussion of this passage, guesses that unity may refer «to the fact that poetry, in its graphical and phonetic realizations, is segmented more clearly than prose» or that (quoting Beeston) «[i]n poetic style – each element in a description has its own emotional impact independently of other elements» – this comes close, if not matches with what Heinrichs, following Kowalski, has called the «molecular structure» of Arabic poetry. Similarly, al-Ṣābiʿ states that in poetry preference should be given to the concept/idea (*maʿnā*) of the single line, whereas prose is «unified speech (*kalām wāḥid*) only divided or broken up into longer segments».²⁷ Van Gelder rejects the idea that unity here might hint to a lack of an overall thematic unity in poetry.²⁸

[ix/2] However, the word *waḥda* appears two more times in a similar context in the *muqābasa* nr. 65. Firstly, it appears in a short exchange between Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābiʿ and al-Sijistānī about poetry and prose: «I [al-Tawḥīdī] said to him: Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābiʿ [sic] has composed a treatise (*risāla*) on the merits (*fī tafḍīl*) of poetry and prose[, or not]? – He said: Some days ago he asked me about that, and

²⁶ In the translation and explanation of this obscure paragraph, I have relied on al-Zuʿbī, *Das Verhältnis*, 195.

²⁷ Arazī, «Une Épitre», 499-500 (Arabic text); al-Zuʿbī, *Das Verhältnis*, 91-92.

²⁸ Van Gelder, *Beyond the Line*, 89-90; Heinrichs, *Arabische Dichtung*, 20-32.

I said: Prose is nobler in regard of its essence, poetry in its accident. He said: How is that? I said: This is because there is greater unity (*waḥda*) in prose, prose is nearer to unity. The rank of poetry is below that of prose, because the unit (? *al-wāḥid*) comes first, and the following (? *al-tābi*’, maybe: the things “derived” from the unit) second». ²⁹ Shortly afterwards al-Sijistānī mentions that the divine revelations were sent down in prose, and that even the prophets were dominated by «that unity (*tilka al-waḥda*)». ³⁰ (See also [vii].)

[ix/3] It follows that the term *waḥda* as used by al-Tawḥīdī here and in *al-Muqābasāt* goes far beyond the mere literary dimension, even extending into the metaphysical ([viii]). Unity is prose, the origin, thus the creator and the first, primaeval creation. Unity even applies to man: Whereas any prophet may be characterized by «unity» of character, it follows that the ordinary human is less united and thus more attracted to poetry! This is indeed al-Sijistānī’s argument in the *muqābasa* nr. 65: «I [al-Tawḥīdī] said to him [al-Sijistānī]: Why does prose not enrapture (*aṭraba*) us as does poetry? – He said: This is because we are concatenated (*muntazimūn*), and what conforms with us delights us. The form of the unit in us is feeble, its relation to us remote; hence when poetry is recited most people reel in ecstasy; though delight, relaxation, intoxication, and ecstasy may also occur in response to a passage of prose». ³¹

He said: Do you not see that man, in his first state, from his childhood onwards and then for a longer time, does only speak in prose that is scattered, in easy and repetitive speech, and that he is only inspired with such [speech] and that only such speech is given to him? This is not the case with verse, because it is artificial. Do you not see that it is locked inside the confines of poetic metre, the prison of prosody, and the shackles of composition (*ta’līf*)? It is always on its guard against breaking apart

²⁹ Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Muqābasāt*, nr. 65, p. 153. See also Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 156. The treatise of al-Šābi’ is of course the one edited and commented upon by Arazi, “Une Épître”; see also al-Zu’bī, *Das Verhältnis*, 89-101. Arazi has taken the text from a ms. of the *Taḍkirat al-Ḥamdūniya* (which has been completely edited in the meantime (1996) by Iḥsān and Abū Bakr ‘Abbās); the *risāla* also appears in at least five manuscripts with parts of al-Šābi’’s letter-collection, so that its authorship cannot be put into question (Hachmeier, *Die Briefe*, 246, 266 (letter nr. 268)). - The argument presented above does not appear in al-Šābi’’s *risāla*.

³⁰ Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Muqābasāt*, nr. 65, p. 154. See also Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 156.

³¹ Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Muqābasāt*, nr. 65, p. 153. I am relying heavily on Kraemer’s translation of this passage (*Philosophy*, 156).

and the possibility of all kinds of *ziḥāf*,³² because damage enters it from all sides once it has been degraded and has tumbled down from that high hill.

[134] He said: If someone says: In poetry, [literary] taste (*dawq*)³³ precedes [and thus determines] the [choice of the] poetic metre, and taste is inborn, the response would be: Taste, even if it is inborn, is still the master of thought, and thought is the key to human arts. Equally, inspiration employs thought, and inspiration is the key to divine [metaphysical?] things.

He said: What makes prose also excellent is that it is free from affectation (*takalluf*) and from constraints; it can dispense with apology and begging (*al-i'tidār wa-l-iftiqār*),³⁴ inversions, ellipsis and repetition, and all the other things that have been written down in the books of rhyme and metre of those authors who have given full and exhaustive account.

‘Īsā the vizier³⁵ said: Prose comes from the direction of intellect (*‘aql*), poetry from the sense (*ḥiss*). And because poetry belongs to the domain of sense, defects enter it and constraints come to dominate it. And in order to avoid the intolerable, the fundament (*aṣl*) – prose – is needed.

Ibn Ṭarrāra,³⁶ who is one of the eloquent of the age in Iraq, said: Prose is like a noble free-born lady, and poetry like a slave-girl. The

³² *Ziḥāf* is a term from Arabic metrical theory (*‘arūd*) and denotes the deviation from the standard foot, either by reducing a long syllable to a short one, or two short syllables to one. Arabic metrical theory distinguishes between *ziḥāf* that is good (*ḥasan*), acceptable (*sāliḥ*) or bad (*qabīḥ*). See E.I.², XI, 508, “*ziḥāf*” (W. Stoetzer).

³³ Cf. Ibn Ṭabātabā, *‘Iyār al-ṣi’r*, 3-4, where *dawq* is listed as one of the prerequisites for composing good poetry (Schoeler, *Einige Grundprobleme*, 38-39).

³⁴ This must refer to certain genres/subgenres of poetry. Although *i’tidār*-poetry is quite frequent, I could not find *iftiqār* as a classification for poems in Schoeler’s “Die Einteilung” or anywhere else. Van Gelder suggested that *iftiqār* could refer in general to the “begging” character of virtually all *madīḥ* poetry.

³⁵ This is probably ‘Īsā b. ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā b. [Dāwūd] al-Jarrāḥ al-Wazīr Abū al-Qāsim (302/915-391/1001), son of the “Good Vizier” ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā (E.I.², I, 386-88, *sub* “‘Alī b. ‘Īsā” (H. Bowen); Kraemer, *Humanism*, 134).

³⁶ Ibn Ṭarrāra can be identified as the judge al-Mu‘āfā b. Zakarīyā’ (d. 999) (Dietrich, “Das *Kitāb al-ḡalīs wa-’l-anīs* des Mu‘āfā”; Kraemer, *Humanism*, 64 note 104, 170 note 170). The *Kitāb al-jalīs wa-’l-anīs* that Dietrich mentions has been edited with a slightly different title (Al-Mu‘āfā b. Zakarīyā’, *Al-jalīs al-sāliḥ al-kāfī wa-l-anīs al-nāsiḥ al-ṣāfi*, Muhammad Mursī al-Ḥūlī (ed.), 3 vols., Beirut 1403/1983). As far as I could see, the *Kitāb al-jalīs* does not contain anything about the present debate, i.e. the merits of poetry and prose.

slave-girl may have a very pretty face, a very soft character and move in the most enticing way; however, the distinction of the status of a free-born lady with her noble descent, her personal freedom and the grace of her modesty cannot be ascribed to her.

He said: God sublime said in a revelation in distinction of prose: {when thou seest them, thou supposest them scattered pearls (*lu'lu'an manṭūran*)}; ³⁷ He did not say: pearls on a string (*lu'lu'an manzūman*)! And the stars of the sky are scattered (*muntaṭir*), even if their scattering could be in an order – however, «order» (*niṣām*) of them (stars) falls into the realm of intellect, and «scattering» (*intiṭār*) into the realm of the sense [...]. ³⁸

[x] In the last paragraph, Ibn Ṭarrāra plays with the roots of *naṭr* (prose) and *naẓm* (poetry) in a humorous attempt to establish the superiority of prose over poetry. The quotation from the Koran comes from a description of paradise, a setting which could not have been more ideal to prove the superiority of prose.

[135] Aḥmad b. Muḥammad, ³⁹ secretary of Rukn al-Dawla, said: Prose speech closely resembles ornamental work on cloth (*waṣy*), poetry the imprinted lines on the hem of a dress; and the ornamental work delights in a way the other does not.

[xi] In *al-Hawāmil wa-l-šawāmil*, Miskawayh – who can most certainly be identified as the Aḥmad b. Muḥammad mentioned here – is asked by al-Tawḥīdī about the difference between poetry and prose. Miskawayh replies that poetry and prose belong to the genus of speech (*kalām*), but that poetry is distinguished from prose by its metre. ⁴⁰ (See also [vi] about Miskawayh as a literary critic.)

³⁷ Koran 76:19.

³⁸ The next line in the printed text (p. 134, last line) does not make sense in this context and may have slipped into the text erroneously. Oddly, the line is put into inverted commas in the edition.

³⁹ This is most probably the famous philosopher and historian Miskawayh. See also the notes following this paragraph.

⁴⁰ Miskawayh, *al-Hawāmil wa-l-šawāmil*, 308-310. A partly translation is given by al-Zu'bi, *Das Verhältnis*, 48; Darabseh, *Die Kritik der Prosa*, 87. See also Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 155.

[xii] There might be a pun implied above, as *naṭra* has the (rare) meaning of a «comfortable, pleasant garment» (*al-dir' al-salisa al-malbas*).⁴¹

And it is said: We were at the scattering (*niṭār*) [of fruits, money etc. on festive occasions] of so-and-so, whereas people don't say: We were at the *nizām* of so-and-so.

[xiii] After a string of quite serious arguments in favour of prose, al-Tawḥīdī has inserted some humorous ones. This mixture of «earnest and jest», the well-known topos of *jidd wa-hazl* in classical Arabic literature, has been skilfully practised by famous authors as al-Jāḥiẓ.⁴²

And Ibn Hindū the secretary⁴³ said: When you look at prose and poetry in all forms and ways they appear, and regard their early and successive forms, you will conceive that there is a certain element of prose in poetry and vice versa. But for this confusion with each other, they would neither agree, nor would they differ in essence.

And Ibn Ka'b al-Anṣārī⁴⁴ said: It is a sign of the eminence of prose that the Prophet – peace and blessing be upon him – used only it [prose] when he was commanding and forbidding, inquiring and advising, guiding and warning, angry and pleased. He was denied the art of versification only because it is inferior in rank to prose, and he was raised above it [poetry] solely because it [poetry] contains defects. If both were of equal standing, he would have spoken in both. Since they differ, the nobler of them was specified for him, the one which was more suitable for all kinds of situations, and the one that that brought about more useful things that may have been sought for.

This is only some of the great bulk of what allows an insight to the seeker in this affair, and to the one who intends to speak about it to anyone.

⁴¹ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, Beirut n.d., vol. 3, 578 (3rd column).

⁴² Cf. the excellent article by van Gelder, "Mixtures of Jest and Earnest", with a long treatment of al-Jāḥiẓ.

⁴³ This is Ibn Hindū, Abū al-Faraj 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Kātib, author of numerous works, and also a good poet (E.I.², entry "Ibn Hindū", III, 800; Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 118 note 128, 126 note 143).

⁴⁴ Abū al-Ḥasan b. Ka'b al-Anṣārī, a courtier in Baghdad in the latter half of the 4th/10th century, took part in a number of convocations and discussions (see indices in Kraemer, *Humanism*, and Kraemer, *Philosophy*).

Now, as to what gives preference to poetry over prose: There are things which we have heard from savants – the sky of their knowledge is full of rain, the sea of their erudition is full of crashing waves, the meadow of their excellence is blooming, the sun of their wisdom is shining brightly, and the fire of their eloquence is burning ablaze –, and I shall quote them [things] as they come to me, attributing them to their authors and give them due credit, so that their rightful claim is maintained, and their mention over the time ensured (lit. kept fresh).

Al-Salāmī⁴⁵ said: It belongs to the virtues of poetry that it has become an art in its own right, that [136] people talk about rhyme, discuss at great length its morphology (*taṣārīf*) and its poetical metres (*a'ārīd*), and engage in its standard metrical patterns (*buhūr*); they explore both the marvels (*'ajā'ib*) of the traces of noble nature and the evidence of truthful power (*al-qudra al-ṣādiqa*) stored in it. This does not apply to prose; it [prose] does not reach that lofty peak and that high summit, and so it has become an everyday pastime (lit. a daily garment, *bidla*) for all speakers alike, for the elite and the masses, for women and children.

He also said: It also belongs to the virtues of poetry that it is not sung and not practised unless it is of high quality, and nothing but it (poetry) qualifies for the sound of the mandoline and provides proper rhythm. This is because the sounds of the plucked instruments and the drumbeats, the sounds and pauses [of music] only fit together when poetry and poetic metre fully comply with it. If that were to be done with prose, it would be defective. Similarly, if that were not to be done with poetry, we would sense it! Singing is known to be a noble thing: it has a wonderful influence and a mighty power, and is clearly beneficial in that it jests with (*mu'ābaṭa*)⁴⁶ the spirit, whispers to intellect, stimulates the soul, brings rapture (*tarab*) and drives away sorrow; it excites and strengthens, it calls up former times, brings help and consolation (*salwa*); and it does other, uncountable things.

[xiv] The connection between music and poetry was well-established from the earliest Islamic times onwards. It should be noted that

⁴⁵ This is probably Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Salāmī (336/948-393/1003), a poet living in Persia and Iraq, whose *dīwān* has survived: Sezgin, *GAS*, 2/594; entry in Meisami/Starkey, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 545 (van Gelder).

⁴⁶ *Mu'ābaṭa* is correct for *mu'āyana* (emendations on page *tā'* in the additions to vol. III of the *Kitāb al-imtā'*).

Arabic-Islamic music at that time was influenced by Greek translations from Aristotle, Aristoxenos, Euclides and others.⁴⁷

And one says: How beautiful would this letter have been, if it had contained a line of poetry! On the contrary, people do not say: How beautiful would that piece of poetry have been, if some prose had been included. This is because you remember poetry, but you do not remember prose (lit.: the form (*ṣūra*) of poetry is remembered, the form of prose lost).

Ibn Nubāta⁴⁸ said: It is one of the merits of poetry that «textual evidence» (*ṣawāhid*)⁴⁹ is only in poetry, and proofs are only taken from it [poetry]. By this I mean that religious scholars, judges, jurists, grammarians and lexicographers state: «the poet says», and «this appears often in poetry», and «this has been quoted in poetry»; accordingly, the poet is the one who gives proof (*hujja*), and poetry itself is the proof.

Al-Ḥālī⁵⁰ said: Poets have contests (*ḥalba*, lit. horserace), whereas those eloquent [in prose] have not. When you trace the prizes [137] that the poets have received from the caliphs crown-princes, emirs and governours in their recorded sessions (*maqāmāt*), their sumptuous convivial gatherings and their famous clubs, you find that it [the prizes] steps out of its limits and are impossible to value. But when you pursue this with the practitioners of prose you will not find any of that. Likewise people say: How perfect would this literary person be, if only he made some verse! They do not say: What an excellent poet would he be, if only he mastered prose! This is because the poet can dispense with the prose writer, but the prose writer is in need of the

⁴⁷ Farmer, *A History of Arabic Music*, esp. 150-53; Hickmann/Stauder, *Orientalische Musik*, 109 ff.

⁴⁸ Probably the poet ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Muḥammad b. Nubāta al-Sa‘dī, who lived in Iraq, Syria and Persia from 327/939–405/1015 (Sezgin, *GAS*, 2/594-95; also al-Tawḥīdī, *Kitāb al-imtā’*, 1/136-37). – He could also be identified as the famous Syrian orator and preacher Ibn Nubāta al-Ḥaṭīb (d. 984-5) whose sermons in which he mainly exhorted to holy war against the Byzantines, were immensely popular. Cf. his entry in Meisami/Starkey, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 357 by J.S. Meisami.

⁴⁹ On what lines of poetry qualify as *ṣawāhid*, see Lane, *Lexicon*, 1611 entry “*ṣāhid*”, where, in contrast to the above argument, it is stated that passages from early Arabic prose and the Koran may also be taken as *ṣawāhid*.

⁵⁰ This is possibly the Baghdad poet Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī al-Ḥālī (al-Ṭa‘ālibī, *Yatīmat al-dahr*, 3/107; also al-Tawḥīdī, *Kitāb al-imtā’*, 1/136). – Also, he could be al-Ḥusayn b. Abī Ja‘far b. Muḥammad al-Ḥālī al-Rāfiqī, a grammarian and poet who flourished in the second half of the 4th/10th century (al-Ṣafādī, *Al-Wāfi*, 12/345).

poet. People have declared Abū ‘Alī al-Baṣīr⁵¹ superior to Abū al-‘Aynā’,⁵² because Abū ‘Alī combined both virtues, fought with the two swords on the two battlefields, and had a major impact (lit. he won the seventh, winning arrow in the *maysir* game) in both fields.

Al-Anṣārī⁵³ told us: I heard Ibn Ṭawāba⁵⁴ the secretary saying: If we examined [the earnings of] writers of prose, those eloquent epistolographers, and those orators⁵⁵ who defend their dynasty and speak of the different events and incidents occurring there night and day, about how what is rent could be patched up, and what is patched up could be rent, how what is corrupt should be set right, how what is scattered could be collected, how what is far could be drawn near and what is near removed, how true things could be affirmed and invalid ones nullified⁵⁶ – then this is certainly superior to the income of all the poets, of all who talk in verse and are devoted to it, who beg for mercy, stand in the position of the accused and leave as if having been denied a thing. How could he who prides himself on his poetry, boasts of it, and vies in extemporizing [poetry] be compared with the caliphal vizier, the head of chancery, or the one standing in direct

⁵¹ Abū ‘Alī al-Faḍl b. Ja‘far b. al-Faḍl al-Anbarī al-Naḥā‘ī al-Basīr al-Darīr, a blind poet and *kātib*, died in Samarra after 252/866 (Sezgin, *GAS*, ii, 536; entry in E.I.², I, 1082 by W. Fück).

⁵² Abū al-‘Aynā’, Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim b. Ḥallād al-Hāsimī, a literary man of Iraq who died around 283/896 (Sezgin, *GAS*, II, 519-20; entry in E.I.², I, 108 by C. Brockelmann).

⁵³ This is the afore-mentioned Abū Ka‘b al-Anṣārī.

⁵⁴ The E.I.² (entry “Ibn Ṭawāba” by S. Boustany, vol. III, 955-6) mentions several members of the Ṭawāba clan who worked as *kuttāb* at the Abbasid court in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries. Al-Zu‘bī, *Das Verhältnis*, 150 (footnote 2) identifies the Ibn Ṭawāba mentioned here as Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad, author of a *Risāla fī-l-kitāba wa-l-ḥaṭṭ*, who died in 273/886. However, as the Ibn Ṭawāba mentioned in the text seems to have been a contemporary of Abū Ka‘b al-Anṣārī, he is more likely to be Abū ‘Abd Allāh Aḥmad, the predecessor of Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābi’ at the head of the joint caliphal-Buyid chancery (*dīwān al-rasā’il*) in Baghdad. This Ibn Ṭawāba died in 349/960 (see, in addition to the references in E.I.²: Yāqūt, *Irṣād al-arīb*, vol. i, 327; Ibn al-Aṭfīr, *al-Kāmil*, sub anno 349; Ibn Ḥallikān, *Wafayāt al-a‘yān*, Bd. I, 52).

⁵⁵ *Ḥuṭabā’*, literally “preachers” or “orators”, here clearly refers to the writers of diplomatic missives which were normally delivered orally (Hachmeier, “Private letters, official correspondence”, 144-151). These *rasā’il* constitute the bulk of literary prose literature of the time, whilst other genres of ornate prose such as “letters between friends” (*iḥwānīyāt*), the *maqāmāt* or sermons (*ḥuṭab*) were much less significant in terms of output.

⁵⁶ The expressions used here, sounding slightly odd in the English, are standard phrases of early Arabic *inṣā’*-literature and refer to the daily political dealings.

contact with his master and the one listening directly to him? When was there ever need for poets as there is need for viziers? When did a vizier stand up to a poet for some service or honouring? And when would a poet sit opposite to a vizier [138] in the hope [of a reward]?⁵⁷ No, you only see the poet standing in front of a caliph, a vizier, or an emir, with an outstretched and extended hand, in an attempt to win favour and to gain compassion. To this can be added: submissiveness and degradation, the fear of failure and exclusion [from the reward], and the risk of being asked about a certain expression (*lafz*), an issue of *i'rāb* (desinential inflection), a metaphor or an allusion (*kināya*). Then he might be loathed and disgraced by what is thought to be lampooning (*hijā'*) which may even bring him close to death. But God, sublime is he, by his primeval beneficence and his immense grace, has spared the eloquent prose writer from all this, and has exempted him from the burden of being impaired or harmed by it.

He said: When Ibn Ṭawāba wandered around in these fields, his summit could not be reached, it was impossible to overtake him (lit.: his dust could not be cleaved), nor could anyone hope to refute him.

He said: He [Ibn Ṭawāba] held long debates about this subject with a group of his contemporaries who contradicted and opposed him, who spoke to him openly and confronted him. He held his ground against them, took his due revenge, and exceeded them; and he did not abandon combatting and fighting them until they had turned on their heels, and had reverted to what was better for them.

Abū Sulaymān [al-Sijistānī] said: The intelligible meanings (*ma'ānī*) lie plainly in the middle of the soul. Nothing hovers around them before thought [touches it], and when thought meets it in the form of a strong mind and a subtle understanding, it [thought] transforms that [meaning] into an expression (*ibāra!*). Expression, then, consists either of a metre (*wazn*) that belongs to poetry, or of a metre belonging to the [prose] speech.⁵⁸ All this goes back to a truthful or false attribution (*nisba?*), [139] a beautiful or repulsive form, an ac-

⁵⁷ The passage refers to the usual practice of the (eulogizing) poet standing before the seated patron while reciting his poem. The extravagant poet al-Mutanabbī claimed for himself the prerogative to sit while reciting his panegyrics to the Hamdanid Sayf al-Dawla, which caused him much envy and grudge (Hamori, "Al-Mutanabbī", 300).

⁵⁸ Cf. E.I.², vol. XI, 200, entry "wazn" (W. Stoetzer): «Whereas *wazn* may refer to any metrical pattern that arises in practice, Arabic theory also recognises fifteen or sixteen ideal patterns called *buhūr*, sing. *baḥr* ...».

ceptable or rejected (*mamjūj*) form, a sweet or bitter taste, a smooth or stony path, a preferred or rejected extemporizing, a convincing or unconvincing argumentation, a shining or dark proof, a distant or near topic (*mutanāwal*), and familiar or unfamiliar speech.

[xv] Al-Sijistānī here presents the Aristotelian theory of linguistic signs in its original and unadulterated form. Conspicuously, al-Sijistānī uses the term *'ibāra* (expression) where one would have expected the use of *lafz*. It seems that al-Sijistānī wants to avoid an overlapping of *lafz* in its philosophical and philological sense. In philosophy, *lafz* is the «expression» of the act of thinking that takes place in the soul, whereas in philology, and especially in Arabic literary theory, *lafz* is the way a «concept» (*ma'nā*) is expressed. Al-Sijistānī's argument, now, runs as follows: The expression of a thought (*'ibāra*, or *lafz* in the philosophical context) can be either in poetry or prose – poetry and prose, however, are different kinds of *alfāz* in the philological sense. By substituting *'ibāra* for the «philosophical» *lafz*, the homonymy of the word *lafz* is avoided. (cf. [i].)

He said: And when the matter has come to this state as we have described it, then prose has its undeniable virtue, and poetry its eminence that cannot be negated or concealed. This is because the virtues of prose are equivalent to those of poetry, and the shortcomings of poetry equivalent to those of prose. Both inevitably demand soundness and accuracy, both must avoid what is abstruse and requires further explanation and refinement.

One of the bedouin Arabs once said: The best speech is that which requires no further speech.⁵⁹

A bedouin Arab once attended the session of al-Aḥfaš⁶⁰ and listened to the speech of the people assembled there about syntax (or: grammar? arab. *naḥw*) and related topics, and became confused and amazed, bowed his head and started to whisper. So al-Aḥfaš said to him: What is it that you hear, bedouin brother? He replied: I see you speaking in our speech about our speech with what is not our speech!

⁵⁹ Also translated in Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 157.

⁶⁰ This is probably the “middle” al-Aḥfaš (al-Aḥfaš al-Awsaṭ, Abū al-Ḥasan Sa'īd b. Mas'ada) who died between 210-221/825-835, because he is in other sources associated with the line of poetry that follows (see next footnote and footnote 63!).

Another bedouin said:

Their dispute about grammar makes me feel a stranger // until [or: to the point that] I heard the speech of the Zanj and the Byzantines.⁶¹

Abū Sulaymān said: The grammar of the Arabs is innate (*fiṭra*), and our grammar is [based upon] intelligence (*fiṭna*). If there were a way to perfection, we would have their innate [knowledge] along with our intelligence, or they would have our intelligence along with their innate [knowledge].⁶²

And he said: When things are distinct in their fundamental aspects, they might share some similarities in their secondary aspects; and when things differ in their nature, they might share some similarities in their arts (*sinā'a*). And [140] since/because things united become split and things split united, God's power – great and mighty is He – has come to prevail over every thing, His wisdom is present in every thing, and His will penetrates every thing.

[xvi] In an argument that could have been taken from mystical literature, al-Sijistānī states that God's omnipotence is the force that holds all things together, however different they are.

One bedouin once recited [poetry] that must be cited in this place, because it corresponds to what we have been mentioning and describing:⁶³

What did I encounter from those «Arabists» (*musta'ribūn*) and their efforts to establish this syntax of theirs, which they invented?

Whenever I recite a line of verse (*qāfiya*) that contains a meaning (*ma'nā*) that differs from what they measure and have put down,

They say: This is a solecism, this letter must be put in the genitive, that needs a *fatha*, and this must not be in the nominative,

And they set 'Abd Allāh against Zayd and expound on this, while long and painful beating (*darb*) took place.⁶⁴

⁶¹ This line of poetry is attributed to a certain Mu'āḍ b. Muslim al-Harrā' Abū Muslim (d. 187/802 or 190/805), teacher of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān. It appears in: Marzubānī, *Nūr al-Qabas*, 58; al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwīyīn*, 136; al-Suyūṭī, *Buḡyat al-wu'āh*, 293; al-Qiftī, *Inbāh al-ruwāh*, 3/292, 4/163.

⁶² This paragraph has been translated by Kraemer, *Philosophy*, 150.

⁶³ This poem was recited by a bedouin called 'Ammār, or, according to another source, 'Amr al-Kalbī in the presence of the "middle" al-Aḥfaš (Ibn al-Jinnī, *al-Ḥaṣā'is*, 1/239-40; Yāqūt, *Iršād al-arīb*; al-Qiftī, *Inbāh al-ruwāh*, 2/42-43).

⁶⁴ Constructions with the verb *daraba* (he beat) belong to the standard exemplary phrases in any book of Arabic grammar up to the present time. While the agents in grammar books are usually Zayd and 'Amr ("Zayd beat 'Amr"), 'Abd Allāh and Zayd have been chosen here probably to fit the metre.

I have grown up in a land where the fire of the Zoroastrians did not burn, nor were churches erected there,

Nor did the ape and the pig wander in its courtyard, but the ostrich (*hayq*), the wolf and the sturdy camel (*ṣada*).⁶⁵

Not all my speech is known to you: take, what you know, but what you do not know, leave it!

How much difference is there between those who contrive their diction, and others, to whom it comes naturally,

And between people who see a thing with their eye, and others who recite some of what they have heard.

But so much for that.

Abū Sulaymān said: Many kinds of rhetoric (*balāḡa*) exist: the rhetoric of poetry, the rhetoric of oration (*ḥaṭāba*) [141] the rhetoric of prose, the rhetoric of proverbs (or: parables? arab. *maṭal*), the rhetoric of intellect (or: scientific discourse? Arab. *ʿaql*), the rhetoric of extemporizing (*badīha*), and the rhetoric of exegesis (of sacred texts, dreams etc.; arab. *taʿwīl*).

He said: As for the rhetoric of poetry: the grammar [of poetry] should be easily understandable (*maqbul*), the meaning (*maʿnā*) plain in every respect, the wording (*lafẓ*) should be free of strange words, allusions (*kināya*) should be subtle, plain speech (*taṣrīḥ*) should be a proof [of excellency?], the words should be brotherly together (*wa-l-muʿāḥāt mawjūda*),⁶⁶ and the tone should be friendly.

As for the rhetoric of oratory: the expression (*lafẓ*) should not be far-fetched, clear allusion (*iṣāra*) should dominate, the text should be held in *sajʿ* (rhymed prose), imagination (*wahm*) should be swimming in its the parallel pairs (*aḍʿāf*) of it [?], its segments should be short, its riding animals should be wandering camels (*ṣawārid al-ibl*).⁶⁷

As for the rhetoric of prose: its expression (*lafẓ*) should be readily understood (*mutanāwal*), its meaning (*maʿnā*) well-known, its text refined, the composition (*taʿlīf*) should be simple, the intent (*murād*)

⁶⁵ Maybe there is a reference to Koran 5:60 (and 2:65; 7:166), where it is stated that some Jews were turned into apes and some others (Christians ?) into pigs.

⁶⁶ The reference to brotherliness (*muʿāḥāt*) may allude to the coherence of the lines of a poem. Van Gelder (*Beyond the Line*, 26-27) cites the following anecdote that appears in several sources: “‘Umar Ibn Laja’ said to a certain poet: ‘I am a better poet than you’. ‘And why is that?’ ‘Because I put a verse next to its brother, and you put a verse next to its cousin’”.

⁶⁷ Cf. *qāfiya ṣarūd*, a “rhyme/verse current through the countries”.

should be sound, it should be shining brightly and of gentle appearance, its blades should be polished, analogies (parables, or examples? arab. *amṭāl*) should be easy to grasp, the «necks» (*al-hawādī*) should be connected, and the «hind quarters» (*al-a'jāz*) set apart [?].⁶⁸

As for the rhetoric of proverbs (parables?): its expression (*lafẓ*) should sound as if spontaneous, ellipsis should be bearable, the form (*sūra*) should be memorable, the aim should be delicate, hinting should not be too explicit, [direct] allusion sufficient, and the mode of expression (*'ibāra*) should be current.

As for the rhetoric of intellect (scientific discourse?): the sense (*mafhūm*) of the speech should reach the soul before the speech itself reaches the ear, and the benefit from the way of [grasping] the meaning (*ma'nā*) should be greater than the one [originating] from the embellishment [142] of the expression (*lafẓ*) and the rhyming of letters, simple style (*basāṭa*) should prevail over artistic style (*tarkīb*), the purport (*maqṣūd*) should be noticeable and be as plain as daylight, and the goal (*marmā*) should be obtained by the imagination (*wahm*) as a result of sound arrangement [of arguments].

As for the rhetoric of extemporizing: the supplanting of one expression (*lafẓ*) by another should be proportional to the supplanting of a meaning (*ma'nā*) by another. In this case, the listener is struck by marvel, because he, with his understanding, rushes on to what he had not thought to obtain, just like somebody who stumbles over his desired goal, inadvertent that he had reason to wish for it. Extemporizing is a divine power within human nature, just as deliberation (*rawīya*) is a human form (*sūra*) within the sphere of the divine.

As for the rhetoric of exegesis (*ta'wīl*): Due to its obscure character, it needs careful treatment and examination, as through these many different and useful sides of the speech heard are revealed, and by this rhetoric you expand into the secret meanings of the worldly and spiritual things. This is the kind of rhetoric that the religious scholars reach by «extraction» (*istinbāṭ*) from the speech of God – high and exalted is He – and the speech of His Prophet – God bless him and grant him salvation – about the forbidden and the allowed, about what

⁶⁸ Cf. van Gelder (*Beyond the Line*, 91) who refers to other usages of the pair *hawādī* - *a'jāz* in the poetic context, also quoting Ibn Ṭabāṭabā who said that the “necks and hind-quarters” of a *qaṣīda* should be made to resemble each other. On the other hand, al-Tawḥīdī here states that the “hind-quarters” of prose should be different.

is prohibited and what not, what is right and wrong, and many other things like that. They contend with each other, dispute and hold rival opinions about that [interpretation], they also take it from dictation with which they occupy themselves. However, that kind of rhetoric has been lost because the spirit (*rūh*) has vanished completely, the «extraction» (*istinbāt*) has fallen into disuse, first and last. Only the wandering of the soul and the of pressing of thought are still [practised] in their [original] manner at the very bottom of this [rhetorical] art [143] – and here it is that the benefits abound, marvels appear in great numbers, ideas come to fertilize one another (*talāqaḥa*), and high ambitions follow close on one another (*talāḥaqa*). And for that [to happen], support is sought from the strong sides (*quwā*) of the afore-mentioned rhetoric arts and their respective qualities; so that they may be a support and a help in the unearthing of the hidden meaning and the elucidation of an intention stored away.

Examples for these [different] kinds [of eloquent speech] can be found in the books, but for this, I would provide examples and form model patterns. But if I did that, I would only repeat what has been done before, and would elaborate on something that has been transmitted in earlier times. However, our abstinence from this has taken from us and from others the burden of delving into it, of devoting attention to and investigating into it, and [the burden] of giving this matter preference over what is more important, namely: to seek the food that can only be obtained through the purchase of true religion (*dīn*), polishing of the virtues (*iḥlāq al-murū'a*), the sweat of the face and the labour of the body, through the suppression of grief, the endurance of misery, the torments of deprivation, and the toleration of ever-changing circumstances. But God is sought for help.

This topic has been controversially discussed at the time when the caliphate stood in its prime, when it was magnificent to represent it, when there was firm belief in true religion (*diyāna*), a craving for the *murū'a*-virtues, when the «best» [opportunities, etc.] were exploited and when truthfulness (*ṣidq*) was given preference, when the humanities had its buyers and clear speech (*bayān*) its market, when the proper thing was sought and knowledge desired. But as for [144] today, [at a time] when the hand is retracted from it, when skirts are tucked up for other things but it (*wa-l-ḍayl dūnahu mušammir*, more generally «to labour hard, to toil»), when the embellishment with its beauty is rejected and when it has become impossible to vaunt of its

eminence, it is not practised [as an art] (*tuṣna*) any more. The matter belongs to God, he attains it.⁶⁹

Ibn Da'b⁷⁰ said: Ibn Mūsā⁷¹ told me: We gathered around 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān, who asked: Which of the humanities is most significant (*aḡlab*) for people? We replied and spoke at length about each kind. 'Abd al-Malik said: There is nothing people need more than to train their tongues, by which they engage in speech, express themselves, exchange pieces of wisdom (*ḥikam*), pull out obscure knowledge from its hiding place, and put together what has [before] lain scattered. Speech gives a verdict amongst opponents, it is a light that brightens up the darkness of complicated issues (*aḡālīṭ*); people need it just as they need provisions and food.

Zuhayr once said:⁷²

One half of a young man (*fatā*) is his tongue, the other his heart // then, nothing remains apart from the form (*ṣūra*) of his flesh and blood.

We said: Zuhayr did not say this, it must have been Ziyād al-A'jam.⁷³ But he ['Abd al-Malik] said: No, the one who said this had a greater experience (*tajriba*) and a more eloquent tongue than he!

Abū al-'Aynā' said: I heard al-'Abbās b. al-Ḥasan al-'Alawī⁷⁴ describing the speech of a man, saying: His speech is gentle and flowing, as if there were a kinship between him and the hearts, and a rope between him and life; [145] it [speech] is like a present brought forward, like medicine for the sick, and like the central pearl of a necklace (*wāsiṭat qilāda*).

⁶⁹ *Wa-li-llāh amr huwa bāliguhu*. Compare Koran 65:3.

⁷⁰ This is 'Isā b. Yazīd b. Da'b al-Layṭī who died in 171/787 (Yāqūt, *Iršād al-Arib*, 6/104-111).

⁷¹ I was unable to identify this person.

⁷² The pre-Islamic poet Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā. The line is in Arazi/Masalha, *Six Early Arab Poets*, 115 (Zuhayr 192:17).

⁷³ Ibn Salmā Abū Umāma Ziyād al-A'jam, Umayyad poet who died around 100/718. A *mawlā* of Persian origin, he spoke Arabic with a strong Persian accent, which brought him the nickname al-A'jam (E.I.², XI, 522-3, entry "Ziyād al-A'jam" by Lidia Bettini; Sezgin, *GAS*, II, 373-74).

⁷⁴ Mentioned in al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dahab*, 4/332 [VII, 79], an eloquent and wealthy man who gave advice to the caliph al-Ma'mūn in Baghdad.

I saw Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābi⁷⁵ marvelling at a passage from a letter that had come to him, which went: Make your heart feel the despair of someone who strays from the path [?] and stops short of the finish.

Ibn Ḍakwān⁷⁶ said: I heard Ibrāhīm b. al-‘Abbās al-Ṣūlī⁷⁷ saying: I never heard speech from the «moderns» (*kalām muḥdaṭ*) more solid while being gentle, more difficult [to imitate] while easy [to understand], and more eloquent while being concise, than the words of al-‘Abbās b. Aḥnaf:⁷⁸

Come, let us renew the old bond between us // we both are to be blamed for the long time of estrangement.

Has she then forgotten what was between us, // and has Ḍalūm cut the bond of friendship?⁷⁹

In short, the best speech is the one that combines subtle expression (*lafẓ*), delicate meaning (*ma‘nā*), and shining beauty, and whose form (*ṣūra*) takes a middle position between poetry that is like prose and prose that is like poetry, where the things said (*maṣhūd*) create a desire to listen, but where, for one’s nature, it is impossible to reach the intention (*maqṣūd*): so that someone who aspires to it, soars, but when he soars, he will fall down. I mean, it is far from the reach of the one who attempts to reach it with brute force, but it is close to someone who tries to attain it with subtlety.

[xvii] The last passages refer to the well-known notion of good (and eloquent) Arabic being *sahl wa-mumtani*, i.e. (like Mozart’s music) easy to grasp or understand while being hard, if not impossible, to imitate.

⁷⁵ Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl al-Ḥarrānī al-Ṣābi’ (or Ṣābi) stood for many years at the head of the joint Buyid-caliphal state chancery in Baghdad; more than 430 of his letters have survived. He died in 384/994. (E.I.², VIII, 674, “Ṣābi” (F.C. de Blois); Sezgin, *GAS*, II, 592, V, 314; Hachmeier, *Die Briefe, passim*.)

⁷⁶ I could not identify this person.

⁷⁷ Ibrāhīm b. al-‘Abbās b. Muḥammad al-Ṣūlī (d. 243/857) worked as secretary under the Abbasid caliphs from al-Ma‘mūn to al-Mutawakkil. A well-known prose writer and poet, he was also the great-uncle of the famous Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Yahyā b. al-‘Abbās al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947), the expert of chess and poetry. (Sezgin, *GAS*, II, 578-80; E.I.², IX, 846-47, “al-Ṣūlī” by S. Leder.) – Ibrāhīm al-Ṣūlī was a nephew of the poet al-‘Abbās b. al-Aḥnaf whom he quotes here!

⁷⁸ Abū al-Faḍl al-‘Abbās b. al-Aḥnaf b. al-Aswad, a poet who lived at the Baghdad court and died between 188-193/804-809. (Sezgin, *GAS*, II, 513-514; entry in E.I.², I, 382 (T.H. Weir).)

⁷⁹ Al-‘Abbās b. al-Aḥnaf, *Dīwān*, 146.

I never saw anyone more proficient in describing prose in all its facets than Qudāma b. Ja‘far in the third chapter (*manzila*) of his book.⁸⁰ ‘Alī b. ‘Isā the vizier told us: Qudāma presented his book to me in the year 320; I studied it and found that he had given full detail of the different kinds of eloquent speech in the third part in a way that was unique and could not be matched by anyone by [146] means of expression and meaning; he showed what was indicative of chosen and selected [speech] and what was reprehensible and should be avoided.

Al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad⁸¹ entered into this subject when he laid down the poetic metres, but I found his expression of low quality and pallid when he described eloquence, so as if he did not know what he described, and as if that he had pointed to was something different. The Arabs (the bedouins? *al-‘arab*) say: Such-and-such shows the right way, he is not shown it, as Ibn al-A‘rābī narrated. Such a thing is only found if you have abundant knowledge, a good imagination, if the appropriate meanings come to you freely (*tawārud al-ma‘nā*) [?], if you critically employ your nature (*naqd al-ṭab*), and make free use of your talent (*taṣarruf al-qarīha*).

He said: Were the matter not as I have mentioned, then he [Qudāma b. Ja‘far?] would have followed that way, would have made this art his own, would have seized that treasure, and would have opted for that way. For he appeared in the best of all places, is adorned with the most delicate speech, walks in the longest skirt, removes the turban from the most beautiful face, rises from the nearest hole (*nafaq*), and flies in the highest sky.

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⁸⁰ The reference is to Qudāma b. Ja‘far’s *Kitāb al-ḥarāj wa-ṣinā‘at al-kitāba*. The third part mentioned here is not extant.

⁸¹ The famous founder of Arabic philology who died in 175/791, 170/786, or 160/776. See, amongst others, his entry in E.I.², IV, 962-964, by R. Sellheim.

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ABSTRACT

Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023) actively contributed to the rich and diverse debate that took place in all fields of *adab* in the middle Abbasid period. In the 25th night of this *Kitāb al-imtā' wal-l-mu'ānasa*, al-Tawḥīdī talks about the respective virtues of poetry and prose. This highly entertaining debate,

where jest and earnest (*jidd wa-hazl*) are skillfully interwoven, also stands under the influence of Aristotelian ideas that were applied to literary theory. The article offers a commented translation with references to other contemporary sources.

RESUMEN

Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (m. 414/1023) contribuyó activamente al rico y variado debate que se produjo en todos los ámbitos del *adab* hacia mediados del período 'abbāsī. En la noche 25 de su *Kitāb al-imtā' wal-l-mu'ānasa*, al-Tawḥīdī habla acerca de los méritos respectivos de la poesía y de la prosa. Este entretenido debate, en el que lo humorístico y lo serio (*ḡidd wa-hazl*) están estrechamente entrelazados, también muestra la influencia de las ideas aristotélicas que fueron aplicadas a la teoría literaria. Este artículo ofrece una traducción comentada con referencias a otras fuentes contemporáneas.