

THOMAS BAUER  
UNIVERSITÄT MÜNSTER

## Communication and Emotion: The Case of Ibn Nubātah's *Kindertotenlieder*

### THE SPEECHLESSNESS OF DEATH

Ibn Nubātah said, bewailing the death of his son:

Qālū "fulānun qad jafat afkāruhū / naẓma al-qarīḍi fa-lā yakādu  
yujībuhū"

Hayhāta naẓma al-shi'ri minhū ba'damā / sakana al-turāba walīduhu  
wa-ḥabībuhū

["This man," they say, "has turned away his thoughts from verse, he'll  
barely give an answer."

Composing poetry? Impossible for him whose child / *Walīd*, whose  
dear beloved / *Ḥabīb* has settled in the earth!<sup>1]</sup>

Speechlessness is a natural reaction to the death of one's own child, and it seems as if it was the normal reaction for most Arabic poets, too. Only a small number of elegies on the death of a poet's child has come down to us. Most, however, are remarkable indeed. The Hudhaylian poet Abū Dhu'ayb (d. ca. 28/649) composed an elegy on the death of his sons (*A-min al-manūni wa-raybihā tatawajja'ū*, meter *kāmil*), which is not only Abū Dhu'ayb's unquestioned masterpiece, but also one of the finest and most famous poems of the early Islamic period in general.<sup>2</sup> In the Abbasid period, Ibn al-Rūmī's (d. 283/896) elegies on his relatives stand out, especially his exceedingly long dirge commemorating the death of his mother. But he also composed several shorter poems on the death of two of his sons.<sup>3</sup> Even more famous, however, are two of several cases in which poets were induced by the loss of their children to compose a whole series of dirges. The first case is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibn Nubātah, *Dīwān* (Cairo, 1333/1905), 51 (meter *kāmil*). *Tawriyahs* are noted in my translations in the following way: The primarily intended meaning is underlined, the secondarily suggested meaning written in italics. In reading aloud, the words in italics should be omitted.

<sup>2</sup>Another early poem ascribed to a certain Bint al-Ḥārith is discussed in Gert Borg, *Mit Poesie vertreibe ich den Kummer meines Herzens: Eine Studie zur altarabischen Trauerklage der Frau* (Istanbul-Leiden, 1997), 199–204. Borg considers this poem as "one of the peaks of Arabic literature" (203).

<sup>3</sup>Pieter Smoor, "Elegies and Other Poems on Death by Ibn al-Rūmī," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 27 (1996): 49–85.



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Abū al-Ḥasan al-Tihāmī (d. 416/1025), whose three poems on the death of his son Abū al-Faḍl became the pillar of his fame, especially the ode rhyming in *-ārī* (meter *kāmīl*) to which we will return later. The second case is Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī (d. 768/1366), who doubtlessly was, after Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī, the greatest Arabic poet of the eighth/fourteenth century. His *dīwān*, which was compiled by his pupil al-Bashtakī from several smaller collections published previously by Ibn Nubātah himself, contains seven poems on the death of a child. At least three of these poems commemorate the death of a son named ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, but the others are so similar in tone and content that one may well assume that most of them were composed on the same occasion. Three of them are epigrams comprising two lines (one of them was quoted above), one is a seven liner, probably from Ibn Nubātah’s collection *al-Sab‘ah al-Sayyārah*,<sup>4</sup> and the remaining three poems are long, sophisticated odes comprising 34 (*askanta qalbiya laḥdak*, meter *mujtathth*), 38 (*abkīka li-al-ḥasanayni al-khalqī wa-al-khuluqī*, meter *basīṭ*), and 57 (*Allāhu jāruka inna damī‘ya jāri*, meter *kāmīl*) lines respectively. Here I will focus on the last one.

Al-Tihāmī and Ibn Nubātah are not the only cases in which a poet composed a series of poems on the death of a child. One can name at least three other Arabic poets,<sup>5</sup> but there are also two such collections in German literature. Nearly simultaneously (without knowing of each other’s enterprises) Joseph von Eichendorff wrote a cycle of ten poems (*Auf meines Kindes Tod*) after the death of his daughter in 1832,<sup>6</sup> and Friedrich Rückert reacted to the death of two of his children in 1833–34 with the composition of an ensemble of more than five hundred (!) so-called “*Kindertotenlieder*,”<sup>7</sup> a term that seems suitable to me also for the (albeit much smaller) collections of al-Tihāmī and Ibn Nubātah. Obviously, the death of one or more children may have caused a similar reaction in completely different epochs and cultures. Instead of losing their speech, poets may seek recourse to speech itself, or rather, an artistic transformation of speech. Composing poetry could have complied with the emotional needs after the tremendous experience of losing a child; in other words, it could have had a cathartic effect on the poet.

<sup>4</sup>Umar Mūsā Bāshā assumes that all seven lines in al-Bashtakī’s recension stem from Ibn Nubātah’s collection *Al-Sab‘ah al-Sayyārah*; see ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā, *Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī: Amīr Shu‘arā’ al-Mashriq* (3rd ed., Cairo, 1992), 250–51.

<sup>5</sup>Other poets who composed similar sets were Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940), ‘Umārah al-Yamanī (d. 569/1174), and Usāmah ibn Munqidh (d. 584/1188), but since there is nothing to suggest that Ibn Nubātah’s poems presuppose knowledge of these poems, we will not dwell upon them.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph von Eichendorff, *Werke*, ed. Jost Perfaehl (3rd ed., Düsseldorf-Zürich, 1996), 1:243–48.

<sup>7</sup>Friedrich Rückert, *Kindertotenlieder*, ed. Hans Wollschläger (Nördlingen, 1988); cf. also Eda Sagarra, “Friedrich Rückert’s *Kindertotenlieder*,” in *Representations of Childhood Death*, ed. Gilian Avery and Kimberley Reynolds (New York, 2000), 154–68.



At first sight, this process seems easy to understand. A poet is shaken by overwhelming emotions, whereupon he sets about to express them in a poem. The resulting poem would thus reflect the poet's emotions. But things are not so simple. Yet it is this simplification that made Ibn Nubātah's *Kindertotenlieder* attractive to some literary historians who are accustomed to criticizing Mamluk poetry for its allegedly mannered and unnatural style and are glad to find in Ibn Nubātah's elegies on the death of his son(s) poetry that conveys the immediate, unaffected expression of "genuine feelings."<sup>8</sup> Close inspection will reveal, however, that neither assumption is tenable: Mamluk poetry is not extraordinarily mannered, and Ibn Nubātah's dirges are highly rhetorical. Of course, nobody can seriously doubt the sincerity of Ibn Nubātah's feelings. But to transform emotions into literature means not only to transform them into speech, but also to transform them into an act of communication that conforms both to the rules of everyday communication and, furthermore, to the rules of a far more complex communication system of literature.

This can be shown clearly by the epigram initially quoted. Its two lines follow exactly the pattern of an ideal apologetic epigram. In line one, the problem is identified: in this case, the poet is reproached for his speechlessness. In line two, a justification for the criticized behavior must be given, usually in the form of a point which is often based on linguistic or literary ambiguity. In our sample, the poet justifies his silence by the death of his child. This justification is given a pointed form by the use of a *tawriyah* (double entendre). The words which designate the child, *walīd* "child" and *ḥabīb* "beloved," have a double meaning. They are also the names of the two classical poets al-Walīd al-Buḥturī and Abū Tammām (whose name was Ḥabīb ibn Aws). Together with the child, so we can understand the line, the poet lost his Buḥturī and his Abū Tammām. One can hardly imagine a better expression of the fact that a very individual, personal grief is not easy to communicate by means of a culturally prefigured and historically shaped set of rules. Ibn Nubātah's epigram is an accurate and intelligent (as well as intelligently ambiguous) formulation of this experience. The epigram is remarkable in another respect. Its point is achieved by a *tawriyah*, a form of witty wordplay, which in modern eyes would hardly be considered appropriate to the somber occasion. But, as this poem shows, one has to be very careful about generalizing our own prejudices and applying them to other times and cultures. As is shown by the *Kindertotenlieder* of the Arab poets as well as by those of Rückert and Eichendorff, poetry—including its artistic and playful element—can be helpful in coping with the grief of the loss of one's own beloved, for poets as well as for their public. It

<sup>8</sup>See my review of *Al-Ghazal fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī al-Awwal*, by Majd al-Afandī, *Mamlūk Studies Review* 3 (1999): 214–19.



may help the poet to prove his own abilities to create a work of art, and by way of the act of active creativity he may cope with the experience of loss. He may find relief from the experience of helplessness and passive suffering and prove to himself that he still has a share in life. Even more important may be the fact that a poem (or any other work of art) is a means to break the speechlessness of death, to resume communication and thereby to reassume a social role without having to interrupt the process of mourning.<sup>9</sup> Several such attempts to communicate about the death of one's own child proved to be successful, as the collections of dirges on childhood death in Arabic and German literature show. Obviously, the public was willing to lend these poets an attentive ear.

#### COMMUNICATION WITH THE PAST: IBN NUBĀTAH AND AL-TIHĀMĪ

Arabic poetry is not only a communication with contemporary (and future) audiences, it is always also a communication with the past. From pre-Islamic times onwards, Arabic poetry displays an extraordinary intertextual density. Every line and every concept refers back to many other lines and concepts in a more complex but often direct way than is the case in most Western literatures. Scholars at first had difficulty understanding that a seeming similarity between individual poems and lines was not due to impotence or a lack of originality or the inflexibility of an all-pervading convention, but was rather the result of a closely woven net of intertextual strands that was deliberately cultivated and consciously achieved by the poets. Arabic poems were expected, at all periods, to be original. But the notion of originality was different from that of early modern and modern Europe. After all, there was no hereditary nobility in the Islamic world against which a bourgeoisie had to revolt by setting its own norms of individualism in opposition to the class consciousness of nobility, as was the case in Europe. And since this factor did not exist, there was no need to abolish a poetic tradition that was considered satisfactory and perfectly fulfilled the needs of its participants.

Instead, in premodern Islamic societies an extraordinary importance was given to poetry that can only occasionally be found in European societies. Since the degree of institutionalization was rather low in Islamic societies and social groups were only loosely organized, the most important strategy for the formation of social groups, the integration of their members, and their separation from other groups or social layers, was communication, that is, qualified participation in the group's dominant discourses. The rank of the individual member was established by his excellence in mastering the respective discourses rather than by the posts

<sup>9</sup>Since the psychological aspects of poetry as a reaction to one's relative's death have been dealt with extensively by Th. Emil Homerin, I will touch on this subject only peripherally, see Th. Emil Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night: Elegy and Immortality in Islam," revised ed., *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1991): 247–79.



and positions he (often all too shortly) held. Now even a brief glance into any collection of biographies of the *a'yān* in the Arab world from the later Abbasid period onwards shows that obviously poetry was one of these discourses, and this is small wonder, since communication was the basic mechanism of the constitution of social groups, and poetry was the most privileged and prestigious form of communication. Therefore, the group of the *ulama* was equally characterized by their mastering the principles of Islamic law as well as by their participation in permanent poetic communication between its members, as the countless *ikhwānīyāt*, *muṭārahāt*, *tahānī*', and *ta'āzī*<sup>10</sup> show with sufficient clarity—genres that have been deliberately avoided by the scholars of our days (since for experts in the field of literary studies these genres are not "poetic" enough, whereas experts in the field of social studies customarily skip poetry anyway). And since this mechanism persisted well into the nineteenth—if not even right into the twentieth—century, there was no reason to abolish the communicative potential that arose from the intertextual nature of Arabic poetry for about one and a half millennia. On the contrary, any fundamental break in tradition would have meant the loss of one of the most important social communication systems and therefore would have led to a social disintegration to nobody's benefit—a consequence hardly believable in a society for which literature is at best a useless pastime, as it has become in our own times.

Therefore, it is no wonder that the Arabic-speaking—and rhyming—world tried at one and the same time to maintain a common poetic system as a communicative basis for a broad layer of society, as well as to demand originality as one of the most important qualities of a poem. To be original meant to be able to display a creative handling of tradition that surprised the educated public by its novelty and at the same time confirmed the value of tradition. This system functioned perfectly well until the forced introduction of Western literary norms in the second half of the nineteenth century. The fact that in the Mamluk and even in the Ottoman period many of the norms of early Arabic poetry were still considered valid, so that we find lots of poems that are not terribly different from those written by al-Mutanabbī, was ammunition for the European colonial enterprise in the nineteenth century to disparage contemporary Arabic literature and to construct the idea of a period of cultural stagnation and decadence lasting for many centuries in order to justify colonialist intervention (which could not have been sufficiently justified by economic and technological superiority alone). Western nineteenth-

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<sup>10</sup>Because of the neglect of the Mamluk period and prejudices towards occasional poetry, these genres are so little studied that they even lack entries in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* and the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*.



century standards of originality are still prevalent among contemporary Arabic scholars and lead to many misinterpretations.<sup>11</sup>

A characteristic misunderstanding is M. Muḥammad's treatment of Ibn Nubātah's *rā'īyah*, the intertextual component of which he simply overlooked, though he did note some pre-Islamic lines, the alleged transformation of which by Ibn Nubātah he considered unsuccessful.<sup>12</sup> In general, however, he regarded the poem as sufficiently original, but criticized its seemingly rather unorganized structure (a point which will be discussed extensively later). He could discern neither a well-formed introduction nor several clearly separated text paragraphs. But in this case he was prepared to excuse the poet for these shortcomings (which they doubtlessly are in his eyes), since they gave testimony to the spontaneity, immediacy, and veracity of the poem: "He did not allow himself to contemplate the structure of his poem. . . ."<sup>13</sup> "When Ibn Nubātah started to elegize his son, he did not reflect upon the way in which he would carry out his elegy and relied on his natural disposition that would bring about the elegy in a form inscribed in his imagination. . . ."<sup>14</sup> All these speculations turn out to be futile when we discover that Ibn Nubātah's poem was not a spontaneous, unpremeditated reaction, but a consciously and very carefully elaborated work of art that was the artistic transformation of another poem.

Ibn Nubātah's choice was not spontaneous at all. He took as his model the only poem on the death of a child that had really gained fame, and, at the same time, dealt more extensively with the subject of childhood death itself.<sup>15</sup> It is a poem by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Tihāmī, a poet who was born in the Yemen, but spent most of his life in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, before he died as a prisoner in Fatimid Egypt.<sup>16</sup> During his stay at Ramlah, where he held the office of a preacher, his son Abū al-Faḍl died as a child. Al-Tihāmī reacted by composing three elegies on Abū al-Faḍl's death, a short one of 13 lines (*kāmil*, rhyme  $-3qī$ <sup>17</sup>) that need not

<sup>11</sup>In the case of elegies, the focus on immediacy and originality "ignores the importance of standardized themes and their repetition, which are crucial to successful elegies as poets attempt to place their personal sorrow within more universal contexts." (Th. Emil Homerin, review of *Āfāq al-Shi'r al-'Arabī fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī*, by Yāsīn al-Ayyūbī, *MSR* 3 [1999]: 238).

<sup>12</sup>Maḥmūd Sālim Muḥammad, *Ibn Nubātah, Shā'ir al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Beirut, 1420/1999), 225.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>15</sup>In contrast to Abū Dhu'ayb's *'aynīyah*, which had gained fame enough, but only very superficially deals with the fact that the deceased were children.

<sup>16</sup>On al-Tihāmī see Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden, 1967–), 2:478–79; Wolfhart P. Heinrichs, "Al-Tihāmī," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 10:482; G. J. H. van Gelder, "Al-Tihāmī, 'Alī ibn Muḥammad," *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (London and New York, 1998), 2:772–73.

<sup>17</sup> $-3qī$  means that the poem rhymes in  $-qī$  where  $-qī$  is preceded by one of the three short vowels,



concern us here, and two lengthy sister poems,<sup>18</sup> one of 81 lines (*ṭawīl*, rhyme *-xrī*) that was obviously an intertextual reaction to a poem by Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-‘Utbī (d. 228/842–3) with the same rhyme and meter,<sup>19</sup> and a poem of 90 lines (*kāmil*, rhyme *-ārī*), which was to become al-Tihāmī’s most famous poem, in fact, the pillar of his fame.<sup>20</sup>

The lifetime of al-Tihāmī, the later Buyid period, featuring such poets as al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015), his brother al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), and Miḥyār al-Daylamī (d. 428/1036–37), is the first period that was considered by Western scholars as a period of decadence and stagnation, and were it not for al-Ma‘arrī (d. 449/1058), its literature would have remained more or less unstudied. For Ibn Nubātah, however, who lived almost three and a half centuries later, al-Tihāmī was a classical author. In Ibn Nubātah’s programmatic anthology *Maṭla‘ al-Fawā’id*, this period is represented by three authors (of fifteen altogether): al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, al-Tihāmī, and al-Ma‘arrī (who, contrary to a common prejudice, was never neglected or even suppressed).<sup>21</sup> Al-Tihāmī’s fame rested, as already mentioned, on his elegies for his son, especially on his *kāmil rā’iyah*. His poems in this field were well known to Ibn Nubātah, who quotes four lines from al-Tihāmī’s *kāmil rā’iyah* and six lines from al-Tihāmī’s *ṭawīl rā’iyah* in the chapter on *rithā’* in his *Maṭla‘ al-Fawā’id*.<sup>22</sup> He may have quoted these lines without envisaging that one day he would come back to them after having experienced the same loss as their author.

Al-Tihāmī’s elegy in *-ārī* is quoted in a great number of sources, to mention only al-Ṣafadī’s *Wāfi* and al-Bākhazī’s *Dumyah*.<sup>23</sup> One can assume, therefore,

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*a*, *u*, or *i*, while *-xrī*, the next rhyme scheme mentioned, means that *-rī* is preceded by any consonant.

<sup>18</sup>So called in Yāqūt al-Rūmī, *Mu‘jam al-Buldān*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Leipzig, 1866–70), 2:819 (article “Al-Ramlah”).

<sup>19</sup>The poem is quoted (probably fragmentarily) in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Madīnat al-Salām*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf (Beirut, 1422/2001), 3:564, and in other sources.

<sup>20</sup>Its text is quoted according to the following edition: *Dīwān Abī al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Tihāmī*, ed. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rabī‘ (Riyadh, 1982). The *ṭawīl* poem is found on pp. 338–43, the *kāmil* poem on pp. 308–22. In this poem, line 86 is a combination of two originally separate lines. The text has to be corrected according to al-Bākhazī, *Dumyat al-Qaṣr wa-‘Uṣrat Ahl al-‘Aṣr*, ed. Muḥammad al-Tūnījī (Beirut, 1414/1993), 1:140–49. Note that in my quotations of this poem, from line 86 onwards the number of the line in al-Rabī‘’s edition has to be augmented by one.

<sup>21</sup>Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Nubātah, *Maṭla‘ al-Fawā’id wa-Majma‘ al-Farā’id*, ed. ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā (Damascus, 1392/1972). My study on the Mamluk literary anthology with special reference to Ibn Nubātah’s *Maṭla‘ al-Fawā’id* is in press: “Literarische Anthologien der Mamlukenzeit,” in *Die Mamluken: Studien zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur im Gedenken an Ulrich Haarmann (1942–1999)*, ed. S. Conermann and A. Pistor-Hatam (Hamburg, 2002).

<sup>22</sup>Ibn Nubātah, *Maṭla‘ al-Fawā’id*, 342–43.

<sup>23</sup>Further quotations are listed in al-Tihāmī, *Dīwān*, 320–22.



that the contemporary audience of Ibn Nubātah's poem realized that this poem is a *mu'āraḍah* to al-Tihāmī's famous ode, even upon hearing only its first line. Al-Tihāmī's dirge starts with the following words:

Ḥukmu al-manīyati fī al-barīyati jāri / mā hādhihī al-dunyā bi-dāri  
qarārī  
[Death's judgment makes its rounds among the creatures. This world  
is not a permanent home.]

Ibn Nubātah's introductory line refers to his model with the word *jār(i)*, the most prominent word in al-Tihāmī's text, because it is its first rhyme word. He does not simply quote it, however, but makes it the object of the hearer's reflection, since Ibn Nubātah's *jārī* is a *tawriyah* (the first *tawriyah* in the poem). It can mean "my helper" or "running," and at the same time the less probable meaning "helper" is suggested by the preceding word *jārukā*, which yields a *jinās tāmm* with the rhyme word. One may perhaps also mention the *jinās muḍārī'* between *manīyah* and *barīyah* in al-Tihāmī's verse, which is echoed by another *jinās muḍārī'* in Ibn Nubātah's poem (*awṭān/awṭār*), to which again more prominence is given in this poem, since it includes the second rhyme word:

Allāhu jārukā inna dam'īya jāri / yā mūḥisha al-awṭāni wa-al-awṭārī  
[God be your helper as my tears are flowing / my helpers, oh you  
who have forsaken both my home and hope!]

As we can see, Ibn Nubātah uses rhetorical devices here to direct the hearer's attention to the transformation of his model. But this is not their only function. Al-Tihāmī's line is a very clear, straightforward, even proverbial statement that brings about sadness and comfort at the same time, for it reaffirms that whatever happens is part of an eternal and stable world order.<sup>24</sup> With Ibn Nubātah's line, we enter into a troubled world. The first pronoun (in *jārūka*) does not refer to the hearer, as one might first think, but to the deceased child, but this only becomes clear at the end of the line. As unclear as the pronominal reference is the meaning of the first rhyme word, and the prominent similarity between *awṭān* and *awṭār* adds to the impression of uncertainty and ambiguity that is evoked in the hearer's mind. But this is exactly the main difference between the two dirges. A grave and stately, well-constructed ode by al-Tihāmī is contrasted with a poem that presents a mind that cannot find a way out of a world of despair, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Ibn Nubātah manages to convey this message with his very first line, in which rhetorical devices are obviously far more than embellishments, for they serve not

<sup>24</sup>The most common motif of comfort in Arabic elegies is the statement that everybody must die; cf. Thomas Bauer, "Todesdiskurse im Islam," *Asiatische Studien* 53 (1999): 5–16.



only to refer to the poet's model, but also to transform it into the poet's own perspective.

References to al-Tihāmī's poem permeate the whole of Ibn Nubātah's *rā'īyah*, but it may suffice here to mention only two. The word *miḍmār* "race course," the rhyme word of line 5, sticks out. The comparison of life to a race course may be more familiar to the reader of German baroque poetry<sup>25</sup> than to the reader of Arabic poetry, where it is—if my memory does not fail—not very common. It occurs, however, in al-Tihāmī's poem, again with *miḍmār* as rhyme word (al-Tihāmī, line 27):

La-qad jarayta kamā jaraytu li-ghāyatin / fa-balaghtahā wa-abūka fī  
al-miḍmārī

[Towards a goal you ran like me and reached it, while your father is still on the race course.]

Al-Tihāmī's striking and concise image of the experience of premature death of a beloved person is too good a line to be neglected by Ibn Nubātah. And at first sight his line (line 5) even seems strikingly similar to that of al-Tihāmī:

Layta al-radā idh lam yada'ka ahāba bī / ḥattā nadūma ma'an 'alā  
miḍmārī

[Would that destruction had summoned me as well, when it did not refrain from you, so that we could have pursued the same race course!]

Again al-Tihāmī supplies an interpretation of what happened. Life is a race course that inevitably leads to the same goal. The fact that some runners arrive first even if they had started later is nothing extraordinary; the child's death is therefore again embedded in the cosmic order. In Ibn Nubātah's line, the poet and the child are no more on the same race course. Instead, *radan* "destruction" (a word common in pre-Islamic poetry but not occurring in the Quran), which is personified here, has summoned only the child and left the father on a road of his own. Only destruction, appearing here as a vague promise, could have united them, but even this hope proved to be futile. Hopeless despair has taken the place of al-Tihāmī's trust in the cosmic order.

The experience that the body of the deceased is still present in the grave but cannot communicate anymore is cast into the following words by al-Tihāmī (line 24):

<sup>25</sup>"Abend" in Andreas Gryphius, *Gedichte*, ed. Adalbert Elschenbroich (Stuttgart, 1968), 11: "Diß Leben koemmt mir vor als eine Renne-Bahn."



Aškū bi'ādaka lī wa-anta bi-mawḍi'in / law-lā al-radá la-sami'ta  
fihi sirārī

[How much I complain that you are so far, though you lie in a place  
in which you could hear my most secret talks were it not for destruction's  
work!]

The situation of the father at the grave is transformed into a paradox: although the child is near, it cannot hear nor answer. Ibn Nubātah liked the line and quoted it in his *Maṭla' al-Fawā'id*.<sup>26</sup> But when he reverted to the *ma'ná* in his own poem, it sounds rather different (line 12):

Nā'ī al-liqā wa-ḥimāhu aqrabu maṭraḥan / yā bu'da mujtami'in wa-  
qurba mazārī

Though the rhyme word is different in this case, al-Tihāmī's model is clearly visible. But whereas al-Tihāmī explains the paradox ("if there were not destruction . . ."), it remains unresolved in Ibn Nubātah's line. Further, it is condensed to the first *miṣrā'* of the verse: "A long way 'tis to meet him, though his shelter is the nearest spot." There remains a second *miṣrā'*, but again Ibn Nubātah gives no explanations. Instead, he simply repeats the *ma'ná* in different words in the intensified form of an exclamation: "How far is union, yet how close the place to visit him!" This repetitiveness, this persistence in one and the same thought without suggesting to the hearer that there is a way out which is exemplified in this single line, is one of the main characteristics of the poem as a whole, as we shall see. The two *ḥibāqs* in this line (*nā' in/qarīb; bu'd/qurb*) are again not embellishments, but appear as a logical consequence of the sense the poet wants to convey, just as is the case with his *tawriyāt* and *jināsāt*, as we have already seen.

Several other lines in Ibn Nubātah's poem turn out to be transformations of a line by al-Tihāmī,<sup>27</sup> but these three examples may suffice for the moment to show that Ibn Nubātah's *rā'īyah* was in no way a spontaneous creation, but a well-planned and deliberately-composed intertextual response to another poem. And since the author spared no effort in directing attention to exactly this fact, the poem presupposes a reader/hearer who is equally prepared and willing to invest considerable effort to decipher not only the complex poetic language of the poem itself, but also its many intertextual relations. For many readers, however, these efforts must have been rather satisfying, as the fame of this poem proves.

<sup>26</sup>P. 342.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. the chart below, p. 78.



**THE TOPICS OF COMMUNICATION: PRIVATE SPHERE AND HEROIC AFFAIRS**

As the single lines of the poem are most carefully elaborated, it is hard to believe that the structure of the poem—or rather, the obvious lack of an easily discernible structure—came about by accident. Again a glance at al-Tihāmī’s poem may be helpful.

If Ibn Nubātah’s *rā’īyah* leaves the impression of being more or less unstructured, one can hardly imagine a more clearly structured poem than al-Tihāmī’s *rā’īyah*. The poem starts with an introduction contemplating the transitoriness of human life in general, culminating in a line that is the versification of a famous hadith (line 6):

Fa-al-‘ayshu nawmun wa-al-manīyatu yaqzātun / wa-al-mar’u  
baynahumā khayālun sārī  
[Life is sleep, death is awakening, and man between them is a fleeting  
vision.]

Following this introduction (lines 1–11), al-Tihāmī turns to the *rithā’* proper (lines 12–39), in which he laments the death of Abū al-Faḍl, of which part we have already quoted lines 24 and 27. The third part, however, which stretches from line 40 to 63 and is the central part of the poem, comes somewhat as a surprise, for it is a formidable example of the *fakhr* genre, 33 lines in praise of the poet’s “tribe” (whatever this may have been), introduced by the following lines (40–41):

Law kunta tumna‘u khāḍa dūnaka fityatun / minnā bihāra ‘awāmilin  
wa-shifārī  
Wa-dahaw fuwayqa al-arḍi arḍan min damin / thumma inthanaw  
fa-banaw samā’a ghubārī  
[If a chance were given to defend you, young heroes from us had  
waded into a sea of spear-heads and sword-blades,  
unfolding above the earth a second earth of blood, erecting then,  
when they return, a sky of dust.]

This collective *fakhr* is followed by a fourth part, a sort of personal *fakhr*, that starts with a complaint about old age (64–75), leading into a passage (76–90) devoted to general wisdom (*ḥikmah*), self-glorification, and a complaint about the vileness of the poet’s time and his contemporaries (*dhamm al-zamān*).

Whereas proverbial expressions of the transitoriness of human glory or the complaint about old age seem to be absolutely appropriate themes for elegies, self-glorification and a praise of military prowess can hardly be reconciled with



our image of mourning. We must, however, take into account two basic premises of premodern Arabic poetry, first, its basically and consciously communicative nature, and second, the conception of the *rithā'* genre.

For Arabic literary theory, *rithā'* was considered a subcategory of *madīḥ*, since the essence of an elegy was praise. The only difference from panegyric poetry was that the object of praise is a dead person.<sup>28</sup> If, however, elegies are nothing but eulogies, it is inevitably difficult to compose elegies for people who could not have been the subject of an eulogy. Still in al-Tihāmī's time, a poet who wanted to write panegyric poems on persons other than princes, rulers, governors, or generals had a difficult task. Basically, the *mamdūḥ* should be praised for two qualities: generosity and military prowess. Still al-Mutanabbī, forced in his youth to compose poetry on several *aṣḥāb al-qalam*, rarely and briefly mentions their professional proficiency, but instead tries to find some link to the theme of bravery, even if he has to go back to some real or imagined ancestors of the *mamdūḥ*, who may never have had a sword in their hands. If *quḍāḥ* and *kuttāb* are difficult to praise, it is easy to understand Ibn Rashīq when he stresses that "one of the most difficult tasks for a poet is to elegize children and women, for he cannot say much about them, since their distinguishing qualities are but few" (*li-ḍīq al-kalām 'alayhi fihimā wa-qillat al-ṣifāt*),<sup>29</sup> which is not so much a misogynistic statement as a sober observation that the common poetic themes of *madḥ* are hardly reconcilable with the reality of the life of women and children. Therefore, it is no wonder that earlier poems on childhood death confine themselves mainly to the subjects of death, transitoriness, and mourning, and do not talk much about childhood. Often such poems are more similar to *zuhd* poetry than to *rithā'*. There are basically two ways to bring in the subject of childhood. First, the poet may say that the feelings of a father towards his child are especially intense. This is done by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih and al-Tihāmī several times, but it is a topic that can hardly be extended over more than one or two lines. The second, more important, strategy is the following: since the poetic tradition did not provide a stock of subjects and concepts to talk about what children were, poets instead talked about what the child did not become. If children did not achieve anything worth mentioning in poetry, the poet could nevertheless imagine what the child (in this case, of course, only sons come into question) would have achieved were he not deprived of his opportunities by premature death. By proceeding in this manner the poet was able to bring in all the conventional and indispensable themes of a eulogy and elegy proper and to compose a poem on a subject that was not given a recognized place in literary tradition.

<sup>28</sup>Gregor Schoeler: "Die Einteilung der Dichtung bei den Arabern," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 123 (1973): 9–55.

<sup>29</sup>Ibn Rashīq, *Al-'Umdah fī Ṣinā'at al-Shi'r wa-Naqdihī*, ed. al-Nabawī 'Abd al-Wāḥid Sha'lān (Cairo, 1420/2000), 2:843.



Al-Tihāmī makes use of this device in the most extensive way. In his *ṭawīl rā'īyah* the central part, beginning with line 39, starts with a complaint that the father's grief is doubled by the realization that his son could not take part in heroic military actions. To quote but one example (line 43), he could not prove his prowess:

Bi-ḍarbin yuṭīru al-bīḍu min ḥarri waq'ihī / shu'ā'an ka-mā ṭāra  
al-sharāru min al-jamrī  
[With sword strokes so hot that beams are made to radiate like sparks  
that fly from live coal]

After mentioning other heroic actions that the child could not carry out because of his premature death, al-Tihāmī leads predictably from the subject of military prowess to that of generosity, until he concludes this section in line 54. The only other subject besides military virtues is, in line 51, al-Tihāmī's regret that his son never had the opportunity to bring forth the beauties of prose and poetry, a motif that was taken up by Ibn Nubātah in his lines 17–18. This long, central passage from lines 39–54 in al-Tihāmī's *ṭawīl* poem is the counterpart to the *fakhr* section in the sister poem in *kāmil*. Obviously we will only be able to understand the innovative quality of Ibn Nubātah's poem if we understand the function of these *fakhr* sections in al-Tihāmī's poems and the complete absence of the subject of heroism in Ibn Nubātah's poems.

First of all, we must not fall into the trap of reading these poems as primarily autobiographical. Al-Tihāmī is said to have originated from a family of low birth,<sup>30</sup> for which reason alone one should be admonished not to take the praise of the heroic deeds of his "tribe" too literally. And one would certainly miss the point if the heroic passage in his *ṭawīl* poem were interpreted as reflecting al-Tihāmī's dream that his son would have pursued a military career. In all probability al-Tihāmī did not dream of a son as soldier. Instead, one can conceive of two reasons for the inclusion of the heroic passages.

First, heroism is a good counterweight to the paralysis following the experience of a tremendous loss. Already in pre-Islamic poetry, heroic themes serve to counterbalance the loss of self confidence depicted in the *nasīb*, and the reassurance of one's own value in a social undertaking such as war is again a reasonable way to overcome the isolation, which is a consequence of the bereaved's retreat into his pain and his memories of past bliss.

The second and, I think, more important reason is the fact that a premodern Arabic poem, even if it deals with such an intimate subject as the death of one's own child, still remains primarily an act of communication directed by its author

<sup>30</sup>Heinrichs, "Al-Tihāmī," 482a.



to a specific public. From a communicative point of view, however, poems on childhood death are an extremely problematic genre. First, they have no immediate addressee. The child is already dead, the bereaved person is the poet himself (who is most affected, but cannot address a poem to himself), and since the child did not yet play a public social role, there is nobody other than the father/poet himself who can be consoled for having undergone a loss. In this respect, an elegy on children is different from genres like panegyric poetry or love poetry, in which there is an addressee (ruler, beloved) to whom the poem is (at least nominally) directed. In other genres in which there is no direct addressee, like wine, garden, or hunting poetry, still the recitation of the poems formed a part of special social occasions, whereas there was no special social situation for the performance of a poem on childhood death. Islamic funeral rites leave no room for the recitation of elegies. As a small poem, focussing on the subject of transitoriness, it may be used in the same way as any other *zuhd* poem and recited on occasions in which people used to exchange *zuhdīyāt*. But to make a great affair out of the death of a small child was more difficult. Al-Tihāmī wanted to make a monumental poem to match his monumental grief. Therefore he had to have recourse to the accepted "monumental" subjects like heroism and magnanimity, and he succeeded in composing a really impressive poem that gained wide circulation and indeed impressed its readers for centuries.

Three and a half centuries later many things had changed. Gradually the *kuttāb* had ceased to form a distinct social group with specific skills and knowledge and its own canon of literature. By the Mamluk period, their functions had been taken over completely by the ulama, a group of scholars who had undergone a more or less identical basic training and socialization. Ibn Nubātah and, a century later, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, to mention only two examples, had more or less the same sort of academic training. Both felt especially attracted to the fields of hadith and poetry, and it was by no means inevitable that the first should become a great poet and the other a great *muḥaddith*. And still Ibn Nubātah was the primary transmitter of Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah* in Egypt, and Ibn Ḥajar left a small but fine *dīwān* of excellent poetry. As poets, both of them seized the opportunity to get in contact with the last remaining Arabic-speaking dynasties. Ibn Nubātah found a patron in al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad, the Ayyubid ruler of Ḥamāh, whereas Ibn Ḥajar entered the court of the Rasulids in the Yemen. These patrons gave them plenty of occasions to compose panegyric poems with traditional structure and thematic content, but in the end even for them the poetic relations to their fellow ulama proved to be more important than the favor of princes. Though Ibn Nubātah may have considered his *Mu'ayyadīyāt* as his primary achievement, his *dīwān* contains more poems addressed to the Subkīyūn, the Abnā' Faḍl Allāh and other ulama, and the same is, *mutatis mutandis*, also true for Ibn Ḥajar. Therefore,



in the literary system, the ulama had not only taken over the functions of the *kuttāb*, but also the functions of the princes as patrons, addressees of panegyric poetry, and as models of an ideal personality. Of course, Mamluk poets had no difficulty in praising a qadi, a *muḥaddith*, or a *naḥwī* for his scholarly abilities, and had no need to resort to the subject of military prowess, which had largely lost its former importance in Mamluk literature anyway, since the Mamluks themselves were only peripherally part of the literary system, whereas the civilian elite had (and was supposed to have) little to do with warfare.

The decreasing importance of the military elite in the system of literature did not lead, however, to a decreasing social importance of poetry in general or of the panegyric poem in particular. Just the opposite was the case. The former asymmetric poetic communication between a prince and patron as addressee on the one side and the poet as supplicant on the other had given way to a symmetric communication between ulama who were not only able to judge the literary merits of a poem addressed to them, but also to answer it with a poem of their own. And since the ulama had more or less monopolized poetic discourse, poetry became a means of integration with and delimitation from other social groups.<sup>31</sup> In addition, poetic skill could also serve as a means to distinguish oneself and to acquire social status. Therefore, in the Mamluk period we witness at one and the same time the disappearance of the professional poet as well as an increase in the social importance of poetry.

This new social role of poetry had, of course, consequences for poetry itself. The most obvious consequence is the increasing importance of genres which immediately serve the poetic communication between the ulama, such as congratulation poems (*tahāni'*), poems of condolence (*ta'āzī*), or poetic exchanges (*muṭārahāt*), not to mention the countless exchanges of riddles, epigrams (hence the unprecedented popularity of these forms in the Mamluk period), or rhymed *fatwās* and other, even more occasional, forms of poetry. Poetry in praise of the Prophet is another genre that was particularly successful in Mamluk times since it could satisfy the emotional and religious requirements of the ulama as well as present their values and concerns.

Another consequence of the fact that poetry became more and more a means of communication among the members of a rather closely defined social group is its increasing intimacy. Obviously, ulama started to become interested in each others' family life. While we know virtually nothing about the wife/wives and children of the most outstanding poets and scholars from the early and middle Abbasid period, al-Sakhāwī (to mention only one) provides the readers of his

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Thomas Bauer, "Ibrāhīm al-Mi'mār: Ein dichtender Handwerker aus Ägyptens Mamlukenzeit," *ZDMG* 152 (2002): 63–93.



*Ḍaw' al-Lāmi'* with plenty of gossip about the family life of his contemporaries, and gives a very detailed account of the marital crisis of his venerated teacher Ibn Ḥajar in his biography.<sup>32</sup> Unfavorable as his description might appear at first, it was certainly not malicious, since al-Sakhāwī honored his teacher almost as a saint. Instead, he might have considered the exposition of private details rather as a "human touch" that would add common interest to his biography and understanding for its subject. Ibn Ḥajar, in turn, was not devoid of this new interest in intimate matters. In one of the longest *ghazal* poems ever written, he made love of his wife and yearning for his child during his pilgrimage its main theme.<sup>33</sup> It is inconceivable that al-Buḥturī or even al-Mutanabbī could have composed a love poem about his own wife! A very striking example of this new tendency is also the fact that Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī (d. 745/1344), the greatest grammarian of the Mamluk age, composed a series of nine poems on the death of his daughter Nuḍār, whereas elegies on daughters are hardly found before.<sup>34</sup> One may also mention the poet Ibrāhīm al-Mi'mār (d. 749/1348), a craftsman who was not really accepted as an equal among the ulama, but whose poetry was nonetheless highly esteemed for its striking, witty, and satirical portrayal of the pangs and pleasures of everyday life in Mamluk Cairo.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most striking and moving example of this tendency is Ibn Sūdūn's (d. 868/1464) poem on the death of his mother, "a very personal and intimate picture of the tender loving mother figure who spoils her little boy and cannot let him go, not even when he is married. . . . There is a certain bitter-sweetness in this poem, a melancholy sense of humor, and certainly a very personal touch."<sup>36</sup> So unprecedented was this poem that Ibn Sūdūn could not help but include it in the section of *hazalīyāt*, because he could not find a "serious" traditional genre that would allow for such intimacy.

<sup>32</sup>Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Jawāhir wa-al-Durar fī Tarjamat Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Ḥajar*, ed. Ibrāhīm Bājis 'Abd al-Majīd (Beirut, 1419/1999), 3:1207–27.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas Bauer, "Ibn Ḥajar and the Arabic Ghazal of the Mamluk Age," in *Migration of a Literary Genre: Studies in Ghazal Literature*, ed. Thomas Bauer and Angelika Neuwirth (Beirut, forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup>Th. Emil Homerin, "A Bird Ascends the Night"; idem, "I've Stayed by the Grave': An Elegy/*nasīb* for Nuḍār," in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy*, ed. Mustansir Mir (Princeton, 1993): 107–18; idem, "Reflections on Poetry in the Mamluk Age," *MSR* 1 (1997): 63–85, esp. 80–85. These elegies display also a very private and intimate tone. Since Nuḍār, a very educated woman, was already 28 years old when she died, these poems do not fall into the category of childhood death. Nevertheless it is remarkable that Abū Ḥayyān composed a whole series of poems to commemorate her death, just as the poets who had lost their infant sons did.

<sup>35</sup>Bauer, "Ibrāhīm al-Mi'mār."

<sup>36</sup>Arnoud Vrolijk, *Bringing a Laugh to a Scowling Face: A Study and Critical Edition of the "Nuzhat al-Nufūs wa-Muḍḥik al-'Abūs" by 'Alī Ibn Sūdūn al-Bašbuḡāwī* (Leiden, 1998), 45.



As these examples show, people started not only to become interested in the private life of their fellows, but also came to think that other people's personal fate was relevant for their own life and could provide a model, an encouragement, or a comfort in individual situations. And, as a last step, they considered these topics worthy of being treated in the prestigious medium of poetry. As a consequence, poems on childhood death also acquired a new importance. For now it was no longer more or less unimportant what a person had to say about the death of his child, and one no longer had to have recourse to a topic such as heroism that was publicly accepted as important in order to draw attention to a poem on the death of one's own child. It seems as if this development had taken place even before recurrent epidemics of the plague made the death of children an everyday experience.

If we consider the social, literary, and public-health circumstances of his time, it is little wonder that Ibn Nubātah's poems on the death of his children have a conspicuously different starting point from those of al-Tihāmī. Ibn Nubātah could take public interest in his poems for granted, even if he limited himself to the subject of the death of his own child. Therefore, his poems were never a soliloquy, nor can they be interpreted as the poet's most intimate expression of his own feelings, especially because such feelings met with general appreciation. Instead, these poems were part of a dialogue between the afflicted poet and the literary public of his time; there is no reason to doubt that Ibn Nubātah was aware of this, and one may well assume that for Ibn Nubātah this form of literary conversation added a lot to the comforting effect of the composition of his poems. Of course, these poems were intended for publication. Unfortunately Ibn Nubātah's own collections of his poetry are not yet published and we only have an anthology of Ibn Nubātah's pupil al-Bashtakī at our disposal. Nevertheless, we may assume that more than one of the books Ibn Nubātah published himself contained *Kindertotenlieder*. The response given to his work corroborates our assumption. Already al-Bashtakī had enough material to include seven *Kindertotenlieder* in his recension of Ibn Nubātah's *dīwān*. Ibn Nubātah's elegies were copied out and exist in manuscripts independent of Ibn Nubātah's *dīwān*.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the most important and exhaustive consolation manual for parents who had lost their children was written by Ibn Abī Ḥajalah (725–76/1325–75), a near contemporary of Ibn Nubātah. In this book, entitled *Salwat al-Ḥazīn fī Mawt al-Banīn*, Ibn Abī Ḥajalah quotes first al-Tihāmī's *kāmil rā'iyah*, followed by 26 lines from Ibn Nubātah's *munāẓarah* on this poem.<sup>38</sup> And if Mamluk and Ottoman Arabic literature were better known, one would certainly be able to adduce many more examples of the

<sup>37</sup>To mention only Wilhelm Ahlwardt, *Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin: Verzeichnis der arabischen Handschriften* (Berlin, 1887–99), 7:77, 277.

<sup>38</sup>Ibn Abī Ḥajalah, *Salwat al-Ḥazīn fī Mawt al-Banīn*, ed. Mukhaymar Šāliḥ (Amman, 1994):143–49.



reception of Ibn Nubātah's poems. But the examples mentioned may suffice to show that Ibn Nubātah's poems can only be properly understood when their function in the system of communication of the ulama is taken into account.

#### TALKING ABOUT CHILDREN

Mamluk society lacked the high degree of institutionalization of comparable Western societies. What was achieved here by institutions had to be achieved there by discourse, that is to say, by communication. This was true not only for scholars, but also for military rulers. As Al-Harithy has shown in a recent article, even the Mamluks themselves gave great weight to communication and tried by means of architecture, the most important form of art for them, "to enforce the dialogue between ruler and ruled" and developed the façades of their buildings "into a sophisticated means for addressing the urban environment and its dwellers."<sup>39</sup> It is amazing to see that this increasing importance of communication instead of representation had an effect on architecture that appears strikingly similar to the effect it had on certain forms of literature. Al-Harithy states that "the static symmetrical façades of the Fatimid period were replaced by dynamic façades in the Mamluk city . . . , and the emphasis on axial symmetry gave way to an emphasis on continuity."<sup>40</sup> This comparison with architecture does not, of course, imply that there was a general tendency towards less strictly structured poems in the Mamluk period. Rather, the bipartite *qaṣīdah* was still the prevalent model, which was applied even to the popular genre of praise of the Prophet. But it should demonstrate that it is not only in architecture that the message of works of art "is not literal or direct, but implied as part of the general Mamluk social discourse and practice."<sup>41</sup> In literature, this may mean a less ceremonial and representative attitude (one is even tempted to use the word "bourgeois," would it not imply too many false connotations); a great flexibility to meet the immediate communication purposes; an increasingly feeble delimitation between the official and the unofficial, the high and the low, the public and the private, the serious and the humorous; and a very high density of messages and signals the reader has to decode.

In the case of Ibn Nubātah's *rā'īyah*, the consequences are rather the same as noted by Al-Harithy for architecture. Al-Tihāmī's representative structure—symmetrical, with heroism at its center—gives way to a supple structure that consists of small paragraphs of mostly three lines with a smooth transition between them. There is no clear thematic or structural break in the whole poem.

<sup>39</sup>Howayda Al-Harithy, "The Concept of Space in Mamluk Architecture," *Muqarnas* 18 (2001): 87.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.



The theme of heroism is no longer present (lines 49–52 will be dealt with later). Instead, I know of no other poem in which the theme of childhood is treated so extensively as here.<sup>42</sup> First, it is present linguistically through the repetition of the address *yā / a-bunayya* “my little son!” (lines 4, 20, 24, 25, 33, cf. also *banīya* line 36, *ṭifl* line 30, *al-aṣāghir* line 53) that is scattered over the greater part of the poem. The prevailing notion in dealing with childhood death is its prematureness. In this respect, Ibn Nubātah does not differ from al-Tihāmī. But of course the Mamluk scholar did not complain about heroism manqué. Instead, he focused on a general treatment of premature death. The first line in this series is line 6, which is the transformation of one of the heroic concepts of al-Tihāmī. In his self-praise we learn (line 81):

Wa-al-nāsu mushtabihūna fī īrādihim / wa-tafāḍulu al-aqwāmi fī al-  
iṣḍārī  
[When they are driven to the water-place, all people are alike. Their  
different ranks are only visible when they are driven back.]

In this line, coming into life is compared to the cattle’s coming to a watering place, and death, consequently, is the coming back from it. When Ibn Nubātah transformed this famous line, he compared life to a sojourn at a watering place and left out everything heroic. The son should not have proved his rank; he should have simply been given the opportunity to experience the whole cycle of life. Nevertheless, al-Tihāmī’s model remains visible, and I doubt that Ibn Nubātah’s line can be fully understood if one doesn’t know al-Tihāmī’s. Ibn Nubātah says (line 6):

Layta al-qaḍá al-jārī tamahhala wirdahū / ḥattá ḥasibta ‘awāqiba al-  
iṣḍārī  
[Would that destiny had delayed in its permanent course till you  
could have imagined the end of the route!]

The theme of premature death is carried on with similar images in line 7 (lightning that did not bring rain) and line 13 (a twig that did not bring forth fruit).

<sup>42</sup>I will not discuss here the importance of Ibn Nubātah’s poems for the study of the history of mentalities. There is, of course, no doubt that these poems reflect a far more intimate relation between fathers and their children than is posited by Philippe Ariès for pre-eighteenth-century Europe. But I suppose that this was already the case in the Abbasid period, even if a poet like al-Tihāmī still had difficulties in communicating it without recourse to motifs of heroism. A discernible change in mentalities between the time of al-Tihāmī and the Mamluk period cannot be established on the basis of the present material. On children in Islam see also Avner Giladi, *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society* (London, 1992).



Several lines later, Ibn Nubātah for once expresses more concrete ideas. Again he seems to have followed al-Tihāmī's example. In line 51 of his *ṭawīl* poem, al-Tihāmī mentions a single non-military deed that his son was prevented from performing by his early death. It is the only concession to the fact that he himself is a poet, not a warrior:

Wa-lam tukhjil al-rawḍa al-anīqa bi-rawḍatin / mufawwafati al-arjā'i  
 bi-al-naẓmi wa-al-nathrī  
 [Nor could you shame the graceful garden by a garden, the sides of  
 which are variegated by poetry and prose.]

In al-Tihāmī's line, prose and poetry fit very well in the enumeration of heroic deeds of which they form a part, for they are seen as achievements the child failed to perform, and the child's achievements are obviously something of which to be proud.

In Ibn Nubātah's poem, the father does not complain about his son's unachieved accomplishments, but about the fact that the father never had the pleasure of hearing his son talk to him (line 17), and when Ibn Nubātah states that his son's "feet of intelligence did not wade into the seas/meters of poetry" (line 18), it is again not the disappointment of a father's hopes, but rather the son's missed opportunities that are regretted.<sup>43</sup> There is no connection between the child and the public. The only counterpart to the son is his own father. In this way the more intimate and private nature of Ibn Nubātah's poem as compared to that of al-Tihāmī becomes visible even in the transformation of a single motif.

The motif of premature death undergoes several developments in the course of the poem. In lines 40 and 41 it is connected with the theme of grey hair that had its exposition in line 26. In lines 20 and 33, it is softened by stating that the son's fate is everybody's fate and the disparity between the lifespan of the son and that of the father became but small. In lines 21–22, finally, the motif is inverted altogether. The son's death was not premature at all, since he did not miss anything in this world, and his death came just in time. Al-Tihāmī's versification of the hadith saying that man's life is "but a fleeting vision" (Ibn Nubātah clearly alludes to this line by means of the words *al-khayāli al-sārī*) is here pursued to its final consequence and applied to the son's short life.

Premature death not only means missed opportunities but also avoided guilt. The child's innocence, which is expressed in line 11, is a theme unknown to me from al-Tihāmī or any other author before Ibn Nubātah. As we see, the consequences

<sup>43</sup> Abū Ḥayyān's daughter Nuḍār lived long enough to develop a good command of literary language. Her father does not fail to mention this in a line with extraordinary rhetorical sophistication; see Homerin, "I've Stayed by the Grave," 112.



of an early death are illuminated from all angles in this poem, and the respective lines are scattered all over the poem and run through it like a thread. But premature death is not Ibn Nubātah's only way to mention childhood. He could hardly have done without the old motif saying that the death of a small child must not mean small sorrows. Ibn Nubātah presents this well-known motif, which was common already long before al-Tihāmī, skilfully in the form of a dialogue using very simple expressions (line 10). When the son is mentioned for the first time, it is said that he was a light burden when alive, whereas the grief for his death is heavy to bear (line 4). This is one of the few lines in which bodily features of the child play a role, as well as the father's way of dealing with his child. Paternal care is also mentioned in line 31.

It is striking that religion hardly plays a role in this poem. There are several unspecific references to "fate" that could just as well be pre-Islamic, but only two references to Islamic concepts. The first is the statement of line 3 that the child is in paradise (which is also mentioned in lines 22 and 34). This line is, by the way, another transformation of a line of al-Tihāmī, and I cannot help but imagine that whoever grasped this relation must have found it rather funny, despite the earnest subject of the poem. In the final section of al-Tihāmī's *kāmil* poem, the poet boasts of his insuperable virtues and tells us that he feels pity for those who envy him "for the heat of rancor gathered in their breast" (line 76), and he continues (line 77):

Naẓarū ṣanī'a Allāhi bī fa-'uyūnuhum / fī jannatin wa-qulūbuhum fī  
nārī

[When they perceive how God acted towards me, their eyes dwell in  
heaven, their hearts in hell.]

In Ibn Nubātah's poem, it is the child who is in heaven, and the poet who is in hell. Children, of course, have no difficulties in entering heaven, since there is no concept of an original sin in Islam. As far as parents are concerned, there are several hadiths according to which those who lost several (or even only one) of their children will enter paradise or will at least be granted considerable advantages on the Day of Judgment.<sup>44</sup> These traditions have to be seen in the light of the tendency to grant martyrdom for causes of death that were considered especially cruel (pestilence, disease of the belly, death in childbed, etc.). Parents who lost their child are still alive. Nevertheless their fate was considered sufficiently cruel

<sup>44</sup>These hadiths are the main content of treatises for the comfort of parents who have lost a child to premature death. A bibliographical list is given in Thomas Bauer, "Islamische Totenbücher: Entwicklung einer Textgattung im Schatten al-Gazālīs," to appear in *Akten des 19. Kongresses der Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, Halle 1998*.



to grant them conditions that factually come rather close to martyrdom. This concept is alluded to in line 24, in which the son is asked to serve his father on the Day of Judgment as a recompense for the father's "entreasuring" his son's body in the earth. Since this prerequisite is purely metaphorical, the line acquires a taste of bitterness and cannot be regarded as a straightforward expression of religious feelings. Obviously still in Mamluk times, in which religious poetry became increasingly popular, religious and poetic discourse remained as clearly distinguishable as they were in previous periods,<sup>45</sup> and not necessarily the same answers to a problem were given in poetry as in hadith or law.

These are the main representations of childhood in Ibn Nubātah's poem. Unlike al-Tihāmī's *rā'īyahs*, there is no section devoted to childhood death, but the theme of childhood is present throughout the poem. Due to the ubiquity of the theme in this poem, even motifs that only accidentally have to do with childhood are given a new context in the mind of the audience. So it is conventional to compare the weeping of the bereaved with the cry of the pigeon, but in this poem one is again made aware of the fact that the pigeon weeps over its nestling (line 8). And in countless elegies the clouds are asked to pour rain on the grave of the deceased with a lot of different images. In this poem, however, it cannot be incidental that the image of breastfeeding is chosen in line 56, the penultimate line of the poem.

Taken together, the image of childhood and childhood death is present in this poem in more than forty per cent of its 57 lines, compared to about ten lines out of 90 in al-Tihāmī's *kāmil rā'īyah*.<sup>46</sup> Since the subject of childhood death permeates the whole poem, the audience/reader will connect all other themes and images to this subject as well, and this is what gives this poem an unprecedented intensity, which is enforced by the constant repetition of a small stock of themes and images and the use of rhetorical devices, as we will see in the following.

#### THEME AND DEVELOPMENT

Just as is the case with the theme of childhood, other themes and images recur over and over again. Instead of building separate blocks dedicated to different subjects, the poem is a constant play with a limited stock of themes and images. One is reminded of the musical technique of exposition and development. In fact, most of the concepts are presented in the first six lines of the poem, and developed in the following sections. The main themes besides childhood are: (1) tears, (2)

<sup>45</sup>Bauer, "Todesdiskurse," and idem, "Raffinement und Frömmigkeit," *Asiatische Studien* 50 (1996): 275–95.

<sup>46</sup>His *tawīl rā'īyah* contains more lines on childhood death, but since the whole passage on heroism is formally constructed as a complaint on premature death ("he did not march under the banner . . ."), it is hardly comparable.



journey (and its counterpart: place of sojourn), (3) earth/grave, (4) light/stars (and its opposite: darkness), (5) water/garden. The following examples may show how these themes are developed.

(1) Tears, an indispensable subject of every elegy, are already mentioned in line 1. In line 2 they are equated with theme (5) "river" and contrasted with theme (3) "dust." In line 7, "rain" (again theme 5) is provided by the eyes in the form of tears, but remains an unfulfilled promise of "lightning" (theme 4), to which the short life of the child is compared. Lines 8 and 9 provide explicit elaborations of the theme of "weeping." In line 14, the child is compared to a pearl that is covered (theme 4: light and darkness) by the "sea" (theme 5) of tears (but the *biḥār* of poetry in line 18 have nothing to do with weeping), whereas the tears are pearls themselves in line 19. If the dead son in paradise (theme 5) could know about his father's fate, he would himself weep (line 22). A perfect synthesis is given finally in line 34: the child in paradise will give his father a drink from the stream of paradise (theme 5) as a compensation for the father's watering the son's grave (theme 3) with his tears before. This line is not unproblematic from a religious point of view, since excessive weeping is interdicted in Islam and is by no means a reason for heavenly reward as it might seem from this line. But more important is the literary effect of bringing together the theme of weeping with the son's stay in paradise, thereby concluding a thematic circle that began in lines 2 and 3. Consequently, there is no further mention of weeping in the poem.

(2) The theme of travel is initiated by the unmetaphorical mentioning of night journeys in line 4 and carried on with the image of the race course in line 5 and the comparison of life to a stop at a watering place in line 6. It therefore dominates the whole section from line 4 to 6. Subsequently, it is again modified and confronted with other themes such as "stars" (theme 4) in line 15, "seas" (theme 5) in line 18, and, as a final climax, with the theme of "grave" (theme 3) in line 38. In between, we find it in lines 12 and 21, direct echoes of al-Tihāmī, and in line 33, a direct echo of line 12. Its counterpart, the place of sojourn, is mentioned by words derived from the root *sakan* in lines 2 and 16 (cf. also *awṭān* in the very first line). In line 2, it is the grave where the child sojourns, whereas in the final line of this circle, line 38, the grave is only the mount that shows that the journey has not come to an end. Again we see that a cycle, which had started in line 2, is brought to an end more than thirty lines later. There is no further mention of travelling in the poem after line 38.

(3) In contrast to themes (1) and (2), the theme of earth and grave, which starts in line 2, is carried on right to the end of the poem. In very different contexts it appears in lines 2, 12, 13, 16, 20, 24, 36, 37, 42, 46, 49, 50, 51, and 57. Since elegies conventionally end with the wish for copious rain to moisten the grave, it is not surprising that Ibn Nubātah too ends his poem with this motif.



(4) Stars have already been a recurrent theme in al-Tihāmī's poems. In Ibn Nubātah's poem, the theme of stars/light and darkness starts in line 7 with the image of lightning, is continued in lines 14 and 15, but assumes major importance in the second half (lines 28–30, 36, 41, 44, 45, 51, 52, 56). Since we have already seen how Ibn Nubātah develops his themes by confronting them with different situations and with each other, we need not go into detail here. The same is true with theme (5) "water, garden, plants," which occurs in lines 2, 3, 6, 7, 13, 14, 18, 22, 34, 53, and 57.

Even themes of lesser importance are dealt with in the same way. In line 26, the theme of grey hair is introduced in the form of an antithesis. In this place, it has little more to say than that the pleasures of life are gone. Only in the paragraph comprising lines 41 to 43 do we realize the potential of the theme, since here it is confronted with the theme of premature death, and it turns out that with the help of a *tawriyah* this confrontation results in a quite interesting image. This is Ibn Nubātah's method for the greater part of his *rā'īyah*. He takes a limited stock of themes and tries out what happens if these themes are confronted with each other or with different situations. So the same themes and motifs appear under constantly changing perspectives. On the other hand, the persistence of the same themes reflects a mind whose thoughts constantly dwell on the same matters, thus reflecting despair and hopelessness.

This method is pursued until the beginning of the last passage in about line 40. Until then we have heard about the death of the boy and the father's despair. But an elegy has to address the subject of comfort and self-control. After all, *ṣabr* is one of the main virtues and one of the most important subjects of the Arabic elegy in general, and it is also the main subject of the final part of Ibn Nubātah's *rā'īyah*. It starts with the statement that everybody must die (line 40), which is elaborated in the "grey hair" passage already mentioned (lines 41–43). The fact that everybody must die was obviously considered the most convincing argument for consolation, much more so than the prospect of paradise, which is only rarely mentioned in poetry.<sup>47</sup> In a group of again three lines, Ibn Nubātah continues the elaboration of this theme in lines 44 to 46, leading from the celestial sphere to earthly tombstones. Two lines (47–48) admonish the hearer—and probably the father himself—to think about this fact and consequently to show *ṣabr*. The most common motif to express the fact of the inevitability of death is the *ubi sunt qui ante nos* motif, to which the following six lines are devoted. In an amazing climax, the poet adduces three groups of people, each of them presented in two lines. First, the former kings, the most commonly mentioned group in the *ubi sunt* passages, are all dead (lines 49–50). The second group are the war heroes, and

<sup>47</sup>Bauer, "Todesdiskurse," 12.



these lines are of course Ibn Nubātah's explicit answer to the heroic passages in al-Tihāmī's poems. Even the sparks they let fly in the heat of battle are a reflection of a formulation of al-Tihāmī (cf. line 43 of his *ṭawīl rā'īyah*, quoted above). All that is left from al-Tihāmī's heroism are two lines that state that even heroes are doomed to death. But the most surprising passage is constituted by the following lines, in which a third group joins the princes and heroes: children. "Where have all the babies gone?" is a most extraordinary turn of the *ubi sunt* motif, and it is most remarkable that childhood death could be seen in one and the same line with the death of society's most prominent members.

In the concluding passage of the last three lines, Ibn Nubātah reverts to the notion of *ṣabr* from line 48. But something must have happened in between. Whereas the mood of line 48 is still rather optimistic as far as the achievement of *ṣabr* is concerned, this confidence must have been lost in the course of the following lines. Though it was exactly their aim to strengthen *ṣabr*, something must have gone wrong. Obviously the reference to the children has shattered the hopes of attaining equanimity. If *ṣabr* is shown, it is only pretence or constraint. The poem ends in hopelessness.

Unorganized as the poem might seem at first glance, it turns out to match its emotional development perfectly. Two thirds of the poem are devoted to the father's grief about the loss of his beloved son. Its enormous density is achieved by a technique that may remind the audience of a composition technique utilized often by such composers as Brahms or Reger, who used to base long movements on short and at first inconspicuous motifs, which only gained their significance by the way they were treated and developed in the further course of the movement. In the same way, Ibn Nubātah introduces five themes, which are neither especially conspicuous nor original, in the first six lines of his poem. But in the following thirty-three lines, this material is varied, modified, adapted, arranged in ever-new combinations, brought to reveal unexpected relations and shown to permeate every conceivable aspect. Presenting always new constellations of these themes, but hardly transgressing them, the poet may at the same time convey the impression of the inexhaustibility of paternal pain as well as that of its inescapability. The final part, the poem's last third, should display the harmonization of the conflicts, should present equanimity (*ṣabr*) regained, should bring comfort through the realization that everybody and everything is doomed to end. In order to achieve this, the tightly knotted, condensed structure of the first two thirds gives way to a more linear structure. But *ṣabr* cannot be gained. The sonata has no recapitulation but an open end. This is, to stick to the musical image, the melody. The harmony, which, as we will see, corresponds exactly to this structure and reinforces its emotional effectiveness, is provided by the rhetorical devices, which we will examine in the following.



**RHETORIC AND EMOTION**

Poetry is communication, and a poem is only meaningful if its communicative function is taken into regard. This has already been stated, but it must inevitably be repeated in a chapter dealing with emotions. Many contemporary Arabic scholars assume that it is the main function of a poem to "express feelings," and that the quality of a poem can be determined more or less according to the degree of directness by which a poet "expresses his true feelings." If a poet uses more than only a very limited number of rhetorical devices in his poem, it is considered an indication that the poet's feelings are not sincere and the poem is "a mere play on words" and of no further poetic relevance.<sup>48</sup> This attitude is sometimes considered to be a reflection of European romanticism, but I suppose that two other roots are more important. The importance given to the "sincerity" of emotions, the fact that emotions themselves are the focus of interest rather than their poetic transformation, and the postulate that these emotions should be spoken out in a direct and immediate way point to a Protestant origin of this attitude.<sup>49</sup> One of the entrance gates of such ideas may have been the Protestant mission of the Americans in Beirut, which during the *nahḍah* period played a major role in forming modern Arab attitudes towards literature.

The other root of the enmity towards rhetorics in the modern Arab world is the European, especially French, enlightenment. One of the ideals of this movement was purity of language and clarity of expression, which resulted in a general devaluation of the literature of previous periods, especially of the era of the baroque, but proved rather disadvantageous for the production of poetry (romanticism was a major attempt to overcome the sterility and dullness of enlightenment poetry). When the French set out to colonialize the Arab world, they were faced with the problem that, contrary to sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab world already possessed what was considered civilization by European standards of that time. In this situation, the French made literature and language one of their main weapons. It was acknowledged that the Arab world had developed a great civilization in the "Middle Ages,"<sup>50</sup> but afterwards this civilization was subject to a

<sup>48</sup>Bauer, Review of al-Afandī.

<sup>49</sup>On the Protestant origin of this attitude see Hans-Georg Soeffner, "Luther: Der Weg von der Kollektivität des Glaubens zu einem lutherisch-protestantischen Individualitätstyp," in *Vom Ende des Individuums zur Individualität ohne Ende*, ed. Hanns-Georg Brose and Bruno Hildebrand (Opladen, 1988), 107–49.

<sup>50</sup>The still current application of the term "Middle Ages" and "medieval" to Islamic history is a remnant of the colonialist degradation of Arabic and Islamic culture in that its whole premodern history is limited to the role of a transition period between the two really "valuable" periods, antiquity and modernity. At least, this was the reason for the coinage of this term in Europe. To use this designation for great parts of Arab history means to deprive the Arab world of the right of



process of steady decline and decadence, and this decadence was considered to be especially visible in the case of literature with its "baroque" and over-ornate style.<sup>51</sup> In fact, it was literature which gave the French one of the arguments for the justification of a *mission civilisatrice* in the Arab world. This went hand-in-hand with the propagation of the French language, which was considered an unsurpassable model on account of its *clarté*,<sup>52</sup> and it is small wonder that it set the norm for literary style in Arabic as well. And just as former (and, as we see it now, formidable) periods of European literature had been disparaged for the benefit of the bourgeois taste of enlightenment, now with the same arguments the overwhelming portion of Arabic literature was disparaged for the benefit of colonialism.

Still, more than a century afterwards, a colonized mind is clearly visible in contemporary Arab attitudes towards premodern Arabic poetry. But it is high time now to stop applying criteria to this literature that it can never match. In fact, no premodern Arab poet ever tried to "express true feelings"; he would not even have understood the words 'abbara 'an shu'ūr ṣādiqah, let alone applied them to judge literary texts. Instead, he might have used a formulation like that used by Ibn Rashīq, who, after having stated that it is particularly difficult to compose elegies on women and children, continues: "One of the best and most saddening (*ashjā*) elegies on women, one of those that have the deepest effect on the heart (*ashaddihī ta' thīran fī al-qalb*) and in arousing grief (*wa-ithāratān li-al-ḥuzni*) is the poem by Ibn 'Abd al-Malik on his *umm walad*. . . ."<sup>53</sup> Here, as in countless other statements, the poet is not judged according to the feelings he *expresses*, but according to the feelings he *arouses* in the audience/reader.

This result should motivate us to ask what is meant by the formulation "to express one's feelings." To "express a thought" means to put it into words that match it as exactly as possible and therefore allow it to be communicated to others without causing misunderstanding. To "express a feeling," however, can hardly mean in a poetic context to put a feeling into words in order to inform the hearer as precisely as possible about the physical and psychic effects of it. This would be appropriate in a confession, an examination of one's conscience (I already mentioned the Protestant roots of this concept), or in a psychoanalysis, but not in a poem. Ibn Nubātah very obviously did not want to inform his contemporaries of the fact that

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having a history of its own that is meaningful even if it is not constantly related to European history. Remarkably enough, historians do not speak of medieval Japan or China.

<sup>51</sup>Thomas Bauer, "Die *badī'iyya* des Nāṣīf al-Yāziḡi und das Problem der spätoomanischen arabischen Literatur," in preparation.

<sup>52</sup>Ulrike Freitag, *Geschichtsschreibung in Syrien 1920–1990: Zwischen Wissenschaft und Ideologie* (Hamburg, 1991), 83–89.

<sup>53</sup>Ibn Rashīq, *Umdah*, 2:846.



he suffers insomnia and is forced to weep on account of the death of his son. Had he aspired to do so, he could have set out his emotional state of mind in plain prose and written a letter to the few people who might have been interested in his personal concerns. Instead, he composed a poem that was meant to be published and to be of relevance to many other people who were not the least interested in the "sincere feelings" of a certain Ibn Nubātah. They were, however, interested in their own feelings (and the reflection of their own feelings in somebody else), and therefore it again seems that the old critics who regarded the effect of a poem rather than the sincerity of the poet's feelings were nearer to the reality of the literary communication system than the proponents of the notion of emotional expression.

Nevertheless, the feelings of the poet himself are not completely irrelevant. Even Arabic literary theorists established that to be really in love or really filled with wrath does help a lot in composing good *ghazal* or *hijā'* poetry.<sup>54</sup> But they never use the notion of "expressing" these emotions, and therefore we may well ask where exactly the feelings and emotions are in a poem. The only possible answer is to state that, again, the emotions are nowhere else than in the audience/reader of the poem, and that the poem's function is to evoke these emotions in the recipient. Inevitably, the poet himself is not only the poem's producer, but also its first audience, and his emotional reaction to the poem is at least similar to that of the intended public. Therefore, the poet will test—consciously or not—whether the poem has more or less the same emotional effect on himself which it is supposed to have on its later hearers and readers. The notion of "expressing" a feeling is therefore hardly anything other than a metaphorical expression for arousing a feeling in the hearer that is similar to the feeling in the mind (or wherever feelings may be) of the poet himself. The emotions, therefore, are not somewhere in the poem, which is supposed to express them, but they are induced more or less successfully by the poem in the audience (the poet himself included). This is corroborated by the fact that the means to induce feelings by literary texts can be analyzed fairly well, whereas the question of whether a poem expresses the sincere feelings of its author must always remain pure speculation. In the case of Ibn Nubātah's *Kindertotenlieder*, we have, of course, no reason to doubt the depth and sincerity of their author's feelings. It is beyond any doubt that these feelings helped a lot to create the masterly poem that we have before us. However, this does not help much to understand the poem, but rather leads in a wrong direction, as we have already seen. The poem is not a spontaneous outburst of uncontrolled emotion, but a carefully planned and executed text, as is shown by its structure, which may seem chaotic at first glance but turns out on closer

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 1:194, 198, but compare *ibid.*, 1:329–45.



analysis to be structured in exactly such a way as to be able to induce an effect of helpless emotional tangle.

If Ibn Nubātah's elegy were a spontaneous creation, as M. Muḥammad thinks (but which it is not), and if it is a reflection of sincere feelings, as all previous interpreters think (and which it certainly is),<sup>55</sup> and if spontaneity and veracity are opposed to the use of rhetorical devices, as the adherents of the aforementioned school of "expression-of-sincere-feelings" believe, this poem should contain few rhetorical devices. However, the contrary is true. For those who think that rhetorical sophistication and deep feelings are irreconcilable and like Ibn Nubātah's text, the chart on the following page may come as a surprise. It lists the more conspicuous figures of speech and rhetorical devices of the poem for every line:<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Therefore, Ibn Nubātah's *rā'īyah* is said to "abound with images full of passion and poetic presentations full of heat," as is stated by Yāsīn al-Ayyūbī, *Āfāq al-Shi'r al-'Arabī fī al-'Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Tripoli, Lebanon, 1995), 174. An accurate review of this book is given by Th. Emil Homerin in *MSR* 3 (1999): 237–40.

<sup>56</sup>With the exception of anaphora I limited myself to the traditionally established rhetorical figures, which are at the same time clearly recognizable. Stylistic features like *insijām* (cf. the contribution of G. J. van Gelder in this volume), which would not be considered as foregrounding devices, are not represented in the chart. As a convenient reference and for an English translation of the names of rhetorical figures I use Pierre Cachia, *The Arch Rhetorician or The Schemer's Skimmer: A Handbook of Late Arabic badī' drawn from 'Abd al-Ghanī an-Nābulusī's Nafaḥāt al-Azhār 'alā Nasamāt al-Ashār* (Wiesbaden, 1998) and Wolfhart P. Heinrichs, "Rhetorical Figures," *EAL* 2:656–62. In the last column of the chart I noted the number of the line of al-Tihāmīs *kāmil* poem (in italics) and of his *tawīl* poem (in parentheses) which was the model for the respective line of Ibn Nubātah. I completely disregarded hyperbole, which plays only a minor role in the poem. One may add the rhetorical figure of *qasam* "oath" (Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 139) for line 39; *iqtibās* (ibid., no. 169) for line 40 (it may be considered a vague allusion to Quran 38:3, but is rather a common formula); and *al-madhhab al-kalāmī* "logical argumentation" (Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 127; W.P. Heinrichs, "*al-madhhab al-kalāmī*," *EAL* 2:482) for line 47.



line	anaphora	isti'ārāh, tashbīh	murā'āt al-naẓīr	tibāq	jīnās	tawriyah	other	cf. al-Tihāmī
1								1
2								
3								23
4								
5								27
6								80
7		sh						
8								
9								
10								20
11								
12								24
13								
14		sh						
15								
16		sh						18
17								
18								(53)
19		sh						
20								
21		sh						6
22								2
23								
24								
25								
26								
27								
28		sh						
29								

line	anaphora	isti'ārāh, tashbīh	murā'āt al-naẓīr	tibāq	jīnās	tawriyah	other	cf. al-Tihāmī
30								14
31					?			
32								
33								
34								
35								
36		sh						
37								
38								
39					?			
40					?			
41								
42		sh						
43								
44								
45								
46								
47								18
48								
49					?			
50								
51								(43)
52								
53		sh						
54								
55								
56								
57								



If we include the four lines marked with a question mark in column “*jinās*,” but regardless of whether we regard the column “anaphora” or not (since anaphora was not a well established figure in indigenous Arabic rhetorical theory), we can conclude that every line with the sole exception of the very last contains one or more rhetorical figures. These figures are not distributed evenly in the text; rather their distribution reflects the structure explained above. While the first part is dominated by simile and metaphor, which are often used to form a *murā’āt al-naẓīr*, and the emotional intensity of this part is reinforced by several anaphoras, the final part is dominated by *ṭibāq*. Let us briefly consider the most important figures of speech and rhetorical devices:

(a) Anaphora (like alliteration or the epigram) is one of those devices that were well known and consciously used by Arabic poets, but had no specific technical term and were not considered by literary theory.<sup>57</sup> To start several consecutive lines with the same word(s) is indeed one of the oldest and most characteristic devices of the elegy and can be traced back to the primitive forms of the pre-Islamic *niyāḥah*.<sup>58</sup> This kind of anaphora, reflecting perhaps the repeated desperate cry of the wailer, is the most atavistic device of the *marthiyah* and maybe the most immediate expression of despair. In a highly sophisticated poem like that of Ibn Nubātah it is, of course, no longer immediate to that degree, but in all probability the hearer will still associate it with overwhelming emotionality. This is most probably also its main function in Ibn Nubātah’s poem, where it seems to have been used very consciously. Starting with two relatively inconspicuous anaphoras in lines 5–6 and 8–9, which do not have any structuring function, there follows a *lahfī* passage (lines 13–15) featuring three images of premature death, and, interrupted by a line mentioning the grave and the place of the deceased boy in the father’s memory, an *a’ziz ‘alayya* passage, again mainly about premature death. The more complicated anaphoric words correspond to the more complicated images of premature death in this passage. The other lines marked as anaphoric are those beginning with *a-bunayya*.<sup>59</sup> They are scattered over the first part of the poem to remind the hearer constantly of the fact that the object of the poem is a child. One should mention that Ibn Nubātah makes less use of the anaphora in his other elegies on his son, and in al-Tihāmī’s *kāmil rā’īyah* it is completely absent.

<sup>57</sup>One may subsume it under the rubric *takrār* (cf. Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 53), but rhetoricians do not specify the unit within which the repetition has to take place. In most examples of *takrār*, a word or phrase is repeated within a single line.

<sup>58</sup>See already Ignaz Goldziher, “Bemerkungen zur arabischen Trauerpoesie,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlands* 16 (1902): 307–39.

<sup>59</sup>I did not mark the isolated lines starting with *a-bunayya* (lines 20 and 33) in the above chart. I am not sure if the anaphora was felt as such in these cases.



(b) Simile (*tashbīh*) and metaphor (*isti'ārah*) are the all-prevailing means of foregrounding in this poem. The first half especially is dominated by them. Three quarters of lines 1–39 contain one or more of these figures, whereas less than a third of the remaining lines do so. The following chart gives a list of the *prima* and *secunda comparationis*, arranged alphabetically according to the *primum comparationis*:<sup>60</sup>

babies	blossoms	53
babies	pearls	54
boy	flash of lightning	7
boy	eye	9
boy	twig	13
boy	pearl	14
boy	star	15
boy	apparition	21
boy	treasure	24
boy	intestines	35
child	stars	30
child	moon	36
darkness	trail	28
dawn	curtain	29
dust	clouds	36
earth	clothes	20
face	dinar	32
father	pigeon	8
fortune	ruins	25
grave	garden	2
grave	shelter	12
grave	mount	38

grey hair	dust	42
intestines	earth	16
kings	mountains	50
life	race course	5
life	rest at water place	6
moon	bow	45
pain	fire	3
pain	load	4
pleasures	whiteness	26
poetry	sea	18
stars	nails	28
sun	stars	29
tears	helpers	1
tears	rivers	2
tears	rain	7
tears	gold	9
tears	seas	14
tears	pearls	19
tears	drink	34
tongue	host	17
words	guest	17

<sup>60</sup>I omitted the *isti'ārah* "feet of intelligence" of line 18.



The main function of comparison in this poem is obviously to create and connect the five themes that form the basis of the major part of the poem. The experience of the boy's death is transformed into a world consisting of the elements tears, journeys, earth, stars, and gardens, which permanently interact. Many items occur more than once in one of the columns or in both of them. This world is based largely on comparison, but to attract the audience's attention to the act of comparing would have disturbed the impression. Therefore, the similes and metaphors are less interesting in themselves than in what is achieved by them. It is not surprising thus that the most original simile, the comparison of babies in their cradles with blossoms (line 53), is not found in the five-themes part of the poem but in its final section, in which there are only a few similes and metaphors anyway. Finally, one may note that apparently Ibn Nubātah was keen to avoid monotony and to further conceal the extensive use of comparison by varying the formal means of comparison. Several types and constructions of metaphors and similes alternate, and there are never two consecutive lines that contain a particle of comparison (lines that contain such an *ālat al-tashbīh* are marked with *sh* in the chart above).

(c) The same tendency is reflected in the remarkably high number of lines that form what is called *murā'āt al-naẓīr*, that is, consist of images and/or ideas that pertain to the same semantic sphere.<sup>61</sup> In most cases, the figure is brought about by two (or more) comparisons that lead into the same semantic realm. In this way Ibn Nubātah produces lines that are entirely devoted to images like garden, thunderstorm, twigs, doves, pearls, night and stars (this image is even carried on over the three lines 28–30), etc. All these topics are part of the five themes that form the skeleton of the poem's first part. In these lines, the respective theme appears alone and undisturbed. But it is fascinating to see how Ibn Nubātah repeatedly interrupted the sequences of *murā'āt al-naẓīr* by lines featuring a *ṭibāq* "antithesis." Neither the lines containing *ṭibāq* nor those containing *murā'āt al-naẓīr* exceed thematically the frame of the five themes mentioned previously. The poet thus dwells on the same subjects, but treats them with different stylistic devices. This conveys an image of density and insistence. Consequently, in the latter third of the poem no single instance of *murā'āt al-naẓīr* occurs.

(d) *Ṭibāq* (or *muṭābaqah*) "antithesis,"<sup>62</sup> is another extremely important figure in this poem. Of course, the contrast between life and death lends itself easily to

<sup>61</sup>Heinrichs, "Rhetorical Figures," 658–59; Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 73 (to include cases of phonetic resemblance seems to be a purely theoretical phenomenon in latter *badī'* treatises and can be ignored here).

<sup>62</sup>Heinrichs, "Rhetorical Figures," 659; Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 79. Though Cachia is right to note that *ṭibāq* is wider in reach than antithesis, I cannot persuade myself to translate it as "parallelism." I wonder if "contrast" would be an adequate translation.



the construction of antithetic contrasts, but Ibn Nubātah's *ṭibāqāt* go far beyond that scope. Ambivalence and contrast dominate the father, the son, their destiny (on earth as well as in heaven), their mutual relation, and finally the whole of life and the whole of mankind, as the following chart (in the compilation of which the term *ṭibāq* was used in its most restricted way) shows:

paradise	hell	3	white	black	41
light	heavy	4	shoot	be hit	45
<i>warada</i>	<i>ṣadara</i>	6	rejection	confirmation	46
small	big	10	revelation	secret	47
far	near	12	mountain	dust	50
distant	close	12	darkness	sparks	51
clothed	naked	20	intactness	destruction	52
sleep	sleeplessness	27	bones	flesh	54
highland	lowland	35	pearls	stones	54
souls	bodies	37	patience	grief	55

And again, the rhetorical figure not only corresponds with the structure of the poem but is, in fact, one of the main devices to structure it. While in the first part a few instances of *ṭibāq* are used to contrast a far greater number of *murā'āt al-naẓīr*, the second part of the poem with its more general reflections about life and death is largely dominated by *ṭibāq*. Starting with line 35, we can observe an antithetic *accelerando* culminating in the *ubi sunt* passage (lines 49–54) with its surprising climax kings/heroes/babies. The last *ṭibāq* in the poem is the contrast between *ṣabr* "patience" and *jaza'* "grief," a contrast that is shown in the end as insuperable.

(e) The extensive use of *jinās*, the phonetic or graphic resemblance (or even identity) of two semantically different elements (words or word pairs), is not specific to any special period of Arabic literature. Even the pre- and early-Islamic poet al-A'shā was extremely fond of it (not to speak of al-Ṭirimmāḥ and the Umayyad *rajaz* poets), and Abū Tammām was notorious for his *jinās* excesses. Enthusiasm for *jinās* is neither a sign of decadence nor something particularly characteristic of the Mamluk period. In this time, however, it became the subject of a somewhat tragic dispute. I call it tragic because it seems as if this controversy destroyed the friendship of the two most important *hommes de lettres* of the eighth/fourteenth century, Ibn Nubātah and al-Ṣafadī. The latter had composed a collection of poetry of his own, in which he carried the potential of *jinās* to its



extreme.<sup>63</sup> ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā may be right to assume that the reason he composed the book was his determination to counter Ibn Nubātah’s sophisticated and innovative treatment of the *tawriyah* with the propagation of another rhetorical figure. Al-Şafadī was enormously proud of his achievement, sent his booklet to many fellow ulama, and proudly collected the accolades (*taqrīzāt*) he received.<sup>64</sup> Ibn Nubātah, however, proved himself not to be amused by al-Şafadī’s amassing of *jināsāt*, and “things too long to explain occurred between both on this account.”<sup>65</sup> In the end, it seems as if al-Şafadī fell in with Ibn Nubātah’s stylistic trend in favor of the *tawriyah* and composed a treatise on this subject<sup>66</sup>—only to be accused by Ibn Nubātah of plagiarism (an accusation that was only too justified, if we accept Ibn Ḥijjah’s judgement).<sup>67</sup> What a time, in which friendships broke apart not out of avarice, but out of a quarrel about rhetorical figures!

Ibn Ḥijjah’s position in this respect is quite clear, and it seems by and large to reflect Ibn Nubātah’s attitude.<sup>68</sup> *Jinās* is, he concludes, one of the more primitive rhetorical figures, and too much of it can spoil any poem. In right measure, however, it can add to a poem’s value. According to Ibn Ḥijjah, it is especially effective in the first line of a poem, if the poet fails to produce a *tawriyah*, which would be the more elegant (and more modern) way to start.<sup>69</sup> Needless to say, in our poem Ibn Nubātah succeeds in combining a *jinās* with a *tawriyah*, and at the same time alludes to his model, al-Tihāmī, in his first line. Aside from the introductory line, *jinās* in fact plays a minor role. It marks the climax of the *lahfī* series in line 15, where it is again combined with a *tawriyah*, thus again lending enormous prominence to the verse. Then we find it in a very marked way in line 37, the emotional climax before the concluding part, and again combined with a *tawriyah* in the rather complicated line 43. As a result, we may note, in this poem Ibn Nubātah uses *jinās* only very sparingly and consciously to emphasize lines of special importance for the content and/or the structure of the poem.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Şafadī, *Kitāb Jinān al-Jinās fī ‘Ilm al-Badī’* (Constantinople, A.H. 1299, reprint Beirut, n.d.). The edition by Sāmīr Ḥusayn Ḥalabī (Beirut, 1407/1987) adds a lot of misprints in consequence of which the text acquires a certain dadaistic flavor. See also Bāshā, *Ibn Nubātah*, 445–47.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Şafadī, *A’yān al-‘Aşr wa-A’wān al-Naşr*, ed. ‘Alī Abū Zayd et al. (Damascus, 1987–88), 1:397–98, 3:291, 374–76, 501–2, 5:361–63.

<sup>65</sup> Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, *Khizānat al-Adab wa-Ghāyat al-Arab* (2nd ed., Beirut, 1991), 1: 56.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Şafadī, *Faḍḍ al-Khitām ‘an al-Tawriyah wa-al-Istikhdām*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Ḥinnāwī (Cairo, 1399/1979). See also Bāshā, *Ibn Nubātah*, 456–59.

<sup>67</sup> Ibn Ḥijjah, *Khizānah*, 2:121–29. This is only one of several possible reconstructions of the story between Ibn Nubātah and al-Şafadī. Further research is required. It should include a study of the relation between Ibn Nubātah’s *Al-Saj’ al-Mutawwaq* and al-Şafadī’s *Alḥān al-Sawāji’* (both still unedited).

<sup>68</sup> Ibn Ḥijjah, *Khizānah*, 1:54–55.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.



This is the case as far as real *jinās* is concerned. It is appropriate, however, to address here the problem of the four lines labelled with a question mark in the column *jinās* in the chart. In fact, when I drew up this chart, in the end five lines remained without entry. Apart from the final line, these were lines 31, 39, 40, and 49. But when I compared these lines, I realized that all of them contained the same sort of paronomasia in a very similar way: *ḥudhirtu . . . ḥidhārī* (line 31), *khaṭarin min al-akhṭārī* (line 39), *ayna al-firāru . . . ḥīna al-firārī* (line 40), and *'atharū . . . ayya al-'ithārī* (line 49). Each of them contains a *jinās al-ishtiqāq* with the second word being the rhyme word. But a *jinās al-ishtiqāq* was not considered a *jinās* proper by the rhetoricians, since there is no semantic difference between its two elements. A poem, however, is not a work of theory, and one can hardly doubt that there is some sort of foregrounding in the four *jināsāt al-ishtiqāq* in Ibn Nubātah's poem as well. Therefore, it seems appropriate to label these lines as indeed containing a rhetorical figure with, however, a rather low degree of rhetorical markedness. It seems as if the poet shunned the contrast between rhetorically marked and completely unmarked lines, and as if he wanted to reserve the effect of this contrast to the very last line. Therefore he provided the lines mentioned with at least an etymological *jinās* rather than letting them stick out by having no rhetorical prominence at all.

(f) The *tawriyah* "double entendre" was the rhetorical figure *par excellence* for the Mamluk period, and Ibn Nubātah was indisputably its greatest master.<sup>70</sup> It is hardly accidental that the career of the *tawriyah* coincided with the increasing participation of ulama in the system of literature, because in the *tawriyah* the ulama could create consciously the ambiguity they were used to detecting in the sacred texts during their exegetical activities. Therefore the *tawriyah* is far more than word play. It is—at its best—the reflection of the ambiguity of man's perception of the divine world order and a playful plumbing of the borders of human language—epistemology in the form of a poetical device. Unfortunately, the well-known prejudices have prevented scholars so far from studying the usage of *tawriyāt* in the texts of the Mamluk period. Many such studies would be necessary, however, to ascertain the proper place of this rhetorical figure, its achievements, and the specific usage made of it by different poets in different poems. So far, I can only judge impressionistically that in our sample poem Ibn Nubātah uses the *tawriyah* in a comparatively modest way. In lines 1, 15, and 43 it is used together with a *jinās* to highlight three particularly important lines of the poem. Several times a *tawriyah* is used to connect themes. So in line 15, it connects the themes of travel and star, in line 56 clouds and stars. In line 33 it enables an antithesis.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 2:39–251; Seeger A. Bonebakker, *Some Early Definitions of the Tawriya and Ṣafadī's Faḍḍ al-Xitām 'an at-Tawriya wa-'l-Istixdām* (The Hague-Paris, 1966); Bāshā, *Ibn Nubātah*, 448–64; Thomas Bauer, review of *Ibn Nubātah*, by M. Muḥammad, *MSR* 6 (2002): 219–24.



The theme of grey hair is treated in lines 41–43, where the term *ashhab* is used in several meanings, connecting this subject with the notion of horses in line 41 (alluding to the notion of life as a “race course” of line 5) and connecting it again with the theme of stars in line 43. More independent is the use of the *tawriyah* in lines 32 and 45. A dinar and a moon are ordinary, harmless things, but the *tawriyahs* make the reader suddenly aware that transitoriness lurks behind them. In general, one may say that the great master of the *tawriyah* restrained himself considerably in this poem and assigned a purely subordinate function to this rhetorical figure.<sup>71</sup>

(g) To mention briefly the other more conspicuous rhetorical figures: in line 1 both hemistichs rhyme (*taṣrī‘*). This is not surprising, but nevertheless adds to the rhetorical fireworks of this introductory line. The small paragraph stretching from line 10 to 12 shows a beautiful variety of rhetorical figures. It starts with an antithesis that is cast in the form of a question and answer, a figure that is called *murāja‘ah*.<sup>72</sup> The next line enumerates in logical order all organs with which men are wont to do evil. This is called *tartīb*.<sup>73</sup> Further, I wonder if *lam yusi‘* in this line suggests a non-actualized meaning of “sword” for *māḍin*, in which case we would have another *tawriyah* before us. Finally, the passage concludes with a double *ṭibāq* in line 12. With two rather uncommon figures (together with *ṭibāq*), Ibn Nubātah interrupts two blocks of verses featuring anaphora and *murā‘āt al-naẓīr* and thus saves the poem from monotony. A similar case is lines 22–23, in which a *radd al-‘ajuz ‘alā al-ṣadr* (repeating the rhyme word in the first hemistich)<sup>74</sup> and a *mumāthalah* (metrical isocolon without rhyme)<sup>75</sup> conclude a paragraph of four lines in which the father complains to his son about his miserable life. In line 26, a “fanciful cause” (*ḥusn al-ta‘līl*)<sup>76</sup> is given for the white hair of the father, which is introduced in this line. “Feigned ignorance” (*tajāhul al-‘ārif*)<sup>77</sup> is the way to present the subject of sleeplessness in lines 29–30. Rather prominent is the figure of *istikhdām*<sup>78</sup> in line 44, in which the terms “scorpion” and “lion” must be interpreted as signs of the zodiac, if the genitives *al-falak* and *al-burūj* are considered, but as animals, if the adjectives *lasūb* and *ḍarīn* are considered. Finally, the subject of

<sup>71</sup>One may perhaps add line 17, where *qārin* “host” may also be interpreted as *qāri‘* “reader,” and line 11, where *māḍin* may be conceived as “sword.”

<sup>72</sup>Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 146.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., no. 68.

<sup>74</sup>Heinrichs, “Rhetorical Figures,” 660–61; Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 56.

<sup>75</sup>Heinrichs, “Rhetorical Figures,” 660; Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 7.

<sup>76</sup>Heinrichs, “Rhetorical Figures,” 657; Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 132 (his translation).

<sup>77</sup>Heinrichs, “Rhetorical Figures,” 659 (his translation); Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 135.

<sup>78</sup>Heinrichs, “Rhetorical Figures,” 657, Cachia, *Rhetorician*, no. 107, Bonebakker, *Some Early Definitions*, 18–20.



*ṣabr*, with which the poem shall conclude, is introduced in line 48 by means of another *radd al-‘ajuz ‘alā al-ṣadr*, in which way it can be expressed very directly and clearly without abstaining entirely from rhetorical figures.

Altogether, a great variety of rhetorical figures is applied in this poem, but none of them gains prominence. Nevertheless, the high number of rhetorical figures, the uninterrupted foregrounding, plays an important role in the communicative potential of the poem. At the end of the first section we asked why and how the composition of elegies could be of use for the poet himself. Part of the answer was that poetry enables communication. But this communication only works if there is a recipient. Therefore we have to ask what the use of hearing or reading an elegy on the death of somebody else's child may be.

Of course, a natural group of potential readers of such poems are other people who have lost their children. This is corroborated by the fact that part of Ibn Nubātah's *rā'iyah* is included in Ibn Abī Ḥajalah's manual for the consolation of parents bereft of a child. In times of the Black Death, this group must not have been inconsequential. For them, the consoling effect of the poem is quite obvious; a trouble shared is a trouble halved. But this is only part of the story. After all, Ibn Nubātah's dirges were included in his *dīwān*, and this *dīwān* was also read by people who had not lost a child. Further, the *dīwān* contains other elegies, especially a famous elegy on the death of Ibn Nubātah's patron al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad, and the number of people who grieved the loss of a prince was probably not too great. Nevertheless, they were moved by the poem. This is not difficult to understand if we consider the popularity of modern forms of art with which we are more familiar, for example, the opera. Though most people have never had problems and experiences like those of Rigoletto or Tosca, many are moved to tears by being confronted with them. Film enthusiasts will not have problems adducing similar examples from this medium. In general, it is again one of the prejudices of the school of "immediate expression of true feelings" that the experience of the artist is the most central point of a work of art, which requires that the ideal recipient must have undergone a rather similar experience in order to understand him and to judge the veracity of his expression.

But it is not primarily interest in the experiences of the poet that makes the normal recipient turn to his works. A more important reason for confronting oneself with works about death and suffering is the aspiration of a therapeutic effect through catharsis, as Aristotle has noted. Nowadays a neuropsychological approach can help us understand this effect better. It can be shown that the effect of catharsis does not so much aim to make negative emotions disappear, but rather to put them into a new context, allowing one's emotions to be seen in the context of other emotions and experiences and thereby gaining more consciousness of them. For "the reader of a literary text is able to engage in abstraction, comparison,



and analogy: in particular, the reader can be prompted by the internal logic of the text to place the literal meaning of a given negative feeling within a wider context provided both by other feelings encountered in the text as well as by her sense of prior and anticipated meanings. In this way, negative feelings, and the concerns of the self that may be implicated with them, can be relocated in a wider perspective. . . . In the literary response, negative feelings are contextualized or transformed rather than avoided: in comparison with the usual notions of purging or balance, this is perhaps a more appropriate way of understanding how a cathartic process might operate while reading.<sup>79</sup>

In order to make a text work in this way, i.e., in order to enable communication with an audience interested in the emotional potential of a text and desire a cathartic effect, the text has to arouse emotions. Its capacity to arouse emotions is therefore much more important than the question of whether or not the author himself experienced the emotions he talks about, helpful (and biographically interesting) as his own experience may be. It is consequently irrelevant and useless and even contradicts the nature of the literary communication process to ask if the usage of rhetorical devices in a poem corroborates or contradicts the veracity of the poet's utterances. Rather, one should ask if the rhetorical devices are effective in intensifying in the audience emotions that enable them to recontextualize their own experiences.

As a matter of fact, foregrounding, i.e., the usage of parameters like meter and rhyme, poetic language, figures of speech, and rhetorical devices, does arouse emotions in itself.<sup>80</sup> The way this is achieved and the exact effect of the different factors is dependent on the past experiences and the expectations of the respective public. Since we can no longer conduct neuropsychological experiments on the literary public of the Mamluk period, we can only try to reconstruct their expectations and anticipations by carefully analyzing as many texts as possible and by scrutinizing the abundant theoretical and critical utterance of this time. Such studies have not yet been done. However, it is certainly no daring speculation to assume that the permanency of foregrounding by means of manifold rhetorical devices in Ibn Nubātah's poem had the power to intensify energetically its emotional effect in the audience. This effect seems to be strengthened further by the fact that, despite its closely-woven carpet of foregrounding, no single device stands out to attract special attention. This permanent but rather subdued fuelling of emotions, together with the emotive structure discussed above, may have yielded an extremely emotional text. Its production will not have failed to produce a cathartic effect on

<sup>79</sup>David S. Miall, "Anticipation and Feeling in Literary Response: A Neuropsychological Perspective," *Poetics* 23 (1995): 293–94.

<sup>80</sup>David S. Miall and Don Kuiken, "Foregrounding, Defamiliarization, and Affect: Response to Literary Stories," *Poetics* 22 (1994): 389–407.



the poet himself. To indulge in it may have contributed to emotional relief for many of its audience, whatever their personal sufferings may have been, and the whole group of participants in the Mamluk literary system may have experienced a feeling of solidarity resulting from shared emotions.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī's *rā'īyah* is one of at least seven poems he composed on the death of his son(s). We can discern several functions of the poem on multiple levels: (1) It contributes to the process of mourning of the poet himself. (2) It may serve as consolation for other people who have experienced a similar loss. (3) It allows the poet to overcome his absorption in grief and to resume his public role as *homme de lettres*. (4) As a work of art with its interpretative openness, it is the basis of communication between the poet and his audience in a more general sense. (5) As a highly emotional text it allows its recipients to experience a cathartic process of recontextualization of their own emotions. (6) For the participants in the Mamluk literary system (more or less identical with the ulama) it is considered a text of emotional and artistic relevance to them and in this way helps to stabilize the social group that is defined, in addition to other ways, by participation in the literary discourse. (7) For the members of this social group, who ascribe personal relevance to the text, it helps shape and communicate their attitudes and emotions about childhood death and gives them a language with which to speak about it. (8) All these functions are provided with an additional historical dimension by Ibn Nubātah's transformation of a famous dirge by al-Tihāmī, who had lived three and a half centuries earlier.

We know that two of Ibn Nubātah's three long dirges were written on the death of his son 'Abd al-Raḥīm. His name is mentioned in line 3 of the *qāfīyah* and in the headline of the *dālīyah* (rhyming in *-dak*). I have hardly any doubt that the *rā'īyah* was composed on the same occasion. In all probability, Ibn Nubātah, who greatly admired the poems of al-Tihāmī, wanted to respond to al-Tihāmī's series of three long poems (two *rā'īyahs* and a *qāfīyah*) with a series of his own, comprising three long poems as well. One may try to order Ibn Nubātah's three odes chronologically according to their position in the mourning process of the poet (in which case probably the poem rhyming in *-dak* would come first), but must at the same time avoid overlooking the literary enterprise these poems represent. As a matter of fact, Ibn Nubātah presented three long and ambitious poems, each of them of very different character, to give his time a new corpus of poems on childhood death as an answer to the, by then, classical poems of al-Tihāmī. Thereby, Ibn Nubātah gave a new voice to the experience of childhood death for his own contemporaries, thus confirming the value of the old classics and at the same time remodelling and supplementing (if not superseding) them. Of course, a



further assessment of Ibn Nubātah's *Kindertotenlieder* would have to take into account the whole set of poems.

Literary ambition was probably also a reason why Ibn Nubātah surrounded his three long dirges with several smaller ones. Again, only one of them mentions the name of 'Abd al-Raḥīm in the text, but others may also have been by-products of his composition of the long odes. By means of these small poems, Ibn Nubātah could further transform the tradition to Mamluk conventions, since the epigram was extremely popular in his time. Again, he proved that he could adapt a multitude of literary forms and techniques to his theme, even the *tawriyah*-pointed epigram.

In the preceding, we could ascertain several characteristics of the poem that can be considered typical for the Mamluk period. The fact that the rather homogenous group of the ulama became the bearer of the literary system contributed to a more private nature of literature; the exegetical preoccupations of the ulama favored the use of rhetorical devices of ambiguity such as the *tawriyah*; and their encyclopedic training might have fostered a tendency to combine many aspects in a small space, as a polydisciplinary, kaleidoscopic text like Ibn Muqri's *'Unwān al-Sharaf al-Wāfī*, the multifold art of the *badī'īyah*, or the richness of allusions in many Mamluk poems may show. In our example, the extreme density of the poem in several respects may be a reflection of this tendency. However, our knowledge of Mamluk literature is extremely poor, and we are still far from comprehending its peculiarities or even the special characteristics of even its most important poets.<sup>81</sup> Even the way a rhetorical device like the *tawriyah* functions in its poetic context and the kind of intellectual and emotional reactions it provoked are still difficult to state. I may simply conclude therefore by quoting another *tawriyah*-pointed epigram of Ibn Nubātah. What for the modern reader might appear to be humorous, and therefore irreconcilable with mourning, is applied by Ibn Nubātah to speak about his grief. The *tawriyah*, which forms the point of the epigram, is based on the double meaning of the word *kānūn*, which is the name of two months of winter, in one of which 'Abd al-Raḥīm had died, but also a word designating an oven, a brazier, or a coal pan.<sup>82</sup>

Yā laḥfa qalbī 'alā 'Abdi al-Raḥīmī wa-yā / shawqī ilayhi wa-yā  
shajwī wa-yā dā'ī  
Fī shahri kānūna wāfāhu al-ḥimāmu la-qad / aḥraqta bi-al-nāri yā  
kānūnu aḥshā'ī  
[Oh sorrow in my heart for 'Abd al-Raḥīm, oh yearning for him, oh

<sup>81</sup>Homerin, "Reflections on Arabic Poetry."

<sup>82</sup>Ibn Nubātah, *Dīwān*, 18 (meter *basīṭ*); I translate *kānūn* as December, but it could also be January (*kānūn al-thānī*).



my grief and malady!  
Death overtook him in December, but you, December / *oven*, burnt  
my intestines with fire!]

## TEXT AND TRANSLATION

يا موحشَ الأوطان والأوطار	اللّه جارك إنّ دمعيّ جاري	١
فاضت عليك العينُ بالأنهار	لما سكنتَ من التراب حديقة	٢
غرفِ الجنان ومهجتي في النار	شَتَان ما حالي وحالك أنت في	٣
فسبقتني و ثقلتُ بالأوزار	خفّ النجا بك يا بنيّ الى السرى	٤
حتى ندوم معاً على مضمار	ليت الردى إذ لم يدعك أهاب بي	٥
حتى حسبت عواقب الإصدار	ليت القضا الجاري تمهلّ ورده	٦
ولّى وأغرَى الجفن بالإمطار	ما كنت إلاّ مثل لحمه بارق	٧
وأحنّ ما حنّت إلى الأوكار	أبكيك ما بكت الحمامُ هديلها	٨
تبكي العيون نظيرها بنضار	أبكي بمحمرّ الدموع وإنما	٩
كانت به الحسرات غير صغار	قالوا صغيراً قلتُ إنّ وربما	١٠
بيدٍ ولا لسنٍ ولا إضمار	وأحقّ بالأحزان ماضٍ لم يسيء	١١
يا بعد مجتمع وقرب مزار	نائي اللقا وحماه أقرب مطرحاً	١٢
لو أمهلته التربُّ للإثمار	لهفي لغصن راقني بنباته	١٣
حجبتّها من أدمعي ببحار	لهفي لمجوهرة خفتُ فكأنني	١٤
وا حيرتي بالكوكب السيار	لهفي لسارٍ حارٍ فيه تجلّدي	١٥
من فرط ما شغلت به أفكاري	سكّن الثرى فكأنه سكن الحشا	١٦
لم يحظّ من ذاك اللسان بقاري	أعزز عليّ بأنّ ضيف مسامعي	١٧
أقدام فكرك أبحر الأشعار	أعزز عليّ بأنّ رحلت ولم تخض	١٨
وعليك من دمعي كدرٍ نثار	أعزز عليّ بأن رفقت على الردى	١٩
غايات أجمعنا وليس بعار	أبنيّ إن تكسّ التراب فإنه	٢٠
فاذهب كما ذهب الخيال الساري	ما في زمانك ما يسرّ مؤملاً	٢١
لبكيت في الجنّات من أخباري	لو أن أخباري إليك توصلت	٢٢
ومقام مضيعة و ذلّ جوار	أحزان مدكرٍ ووحشة مفرد	٢٣
فانفع أباك بساعة الإقتار	أبنيّ إنّي قد كنتك في الثرى	٢٤
فوقفن من طلل على آثار	أبنيّ قد وقفت عليّ حوادث	٢٥



لكنها أبقته فوق عذارى	٢٦	و مضى البياض من الحياة و طيبها
سهراً ونامت أعين السُّمَّار	٢٧	نمّ وادعاً فلقد تقرّح ناظري
متشبّثٌ بالنجم في مسمار	٢٨	أرعى الدجى و كأنّ ذيل ظلامه
أم قسّمت شمس النهار دراري	٢٩	خلع الصباح على المجرة سجفه
لا كوكبي فيها ولا أسحاري	٣٠	أم غاب مع طفل أخيرُ دجنتي
فلقد حذرت وما أفاد حذاري	٣١	تبّاً لعادية الزمان على الفتى
صرف الزمان فراح بالدينار	٣٢	وحويت ديناراً لوجهك فانتهى
بيني وبينك مسرعُ التيار	٣٣	أبني إن تبعدُ فإنّ مدى اللقاء
فلقد سقتك مدامعي بغزار	٣٤	إن تسقني في الحشر شربة كوثرٍ
ما بين أنجادٍ إلى أغوار	٣٥	كيف الحياة وقد دفنت جوانحي
كالغيم مرتكناً على أقمار	٣٦	وحوى بني تراب مصر وجلق
وطرت على تلك الجسوم طواري	٣٧	طرقتُ على تلك النفوس طوارق
علماً بأنّهم على أسفار	٣٨	وبدت لدى البيدا مطيِّ قبورهم
إنّا على خطرٍ من الأخطار	٣٩	قسماً بمن جعل الفناء مسافة
أين الفرار ولات حين فرار	٤٠	قل للذين تقدّمت أمثالهم
ركضاً وأدهم للدجى كراّر	٤١	ما بين أشهب للظلام معاود
وعليه من شيبٍ كنعق غبار	٤٢	يطأ الصغير ومن يعمر يلتحق
ولقد تصاب الشهب بالاقدار	٤٣	مالي وعتب الشهب في تقديرها
ينجو ولا أسد البروج الضاري	٤٤	لا عقرب الفلك اللسوب من الردى
ولقد يصاب القوس بالاوتار	٤٥	يرمي الهلال بقوسه أرواحنا
غَنِيَتْ عن الإقرار والإنكار	٤٦	كتب الفناء على الشواهد حجة
فظهره سرّاً من الأسرار	٤٧	فلتظهر الفطن الثواقب عجزها
فقد المنى ومثوية الصبّار	٤٨	وليصطبّر متفجعٍ فلربّما
عشروا إلى الأجداث أيّ عثار	٤٩	أين الملوك الرافلون إلى العلى
بيد الردى حفناات ترب هار	٥٠	كانوا جبلاً لا تُرام فأصبحوا
قدحوا القسيّ وناضلوا بشرار	٥١	أين الكماة إذ العجاجة أظلمت
داجي المنون إلى محلّ بوار	٥٢	سلموا على عطب الوغى ودجى بهم
ضمّت كمامها على أزهار	٥٣	أين الأصاغر في المهود كأنما
حتى تساوى الدرّ بالاحجار	٥٤	خلط الحما عظامهم ولحومهم



ولئن بدا جزعي فعن أعذار	فلئن صبرتُ ففي الأولى متصبرٌ	٥٥
وتكثفتك من النجوم جوار	درت عليك من الغمام مراعٍ	٥٦
لكن أغالط مهجتي وأداري	تسقي ثراك و ليس ذاك بنافعي	٥٧

1. God be your helper as my tears are flowing / *my helpers*,  
oh you who have forsaken both my home and hope!
2. When you settled in a garden of dust,  
my eyes poured forth rivers over thee.
3. Amazingly different is your condition and mine: While you  
dwell  
in the lofty chambers of paradise, my heart is in the fire of  
hell.
4. When we set off on a night journey, you were a light burden,  
my little son,  
but you outstripped me, and I was burdened with a heavy  
load!
5. Would that destruction had summoned me as well, when it did  
not refrain from you,  
so that we could have pursued the same race course!
6. Would that destiny had delayed in its permanent course  
till you could have imagined the end of the route!
7. You were only a flash of lightning from a cloud  
that rainless turned away but made the eyelids shed a copious  
rain.
8. I'll weep over you as long as the doves weep over their  
nestling,  
and I'll yearn for you as long as they yearn for their nests.
9. No wonder that with reddened tears I weep,  
for eyes only weep with gold over their own kind.
10. 'Twas but a child so small, they said. True, I replied,  
but many times my grief for him was anything but small.
11. And is not he who did no wrong with hand or tongue  
nor hid an evil in his heart the worthiest of grief?
12. A long way 'tis to meet him, though his shelter is the nearest  
spot.  
How far is union, yet how close the place to visit him!
13. O sorrow for a twig the growth of which delighted me—  
if only earth had given it the time to bring forth fruit!



14. O sorrow for a pearl once shining.  
It seems as if I'd veiled it now with seas of tears.
15. O sorrow for a nightly traveller whose departure had caused  
my endurance to wane!  
How lost am I with the departed star / planet!
16. He settled in the earth but occupies my thoughts so in excess  
as if he'd settled in my heart.
17. How it distresses me that my ears' guest  
never enjoyed the hospitality of that tongue!
18. How it distresses me that you departed ere the feet of your  
intelligence  
did wade into the seas / meters of poetry!
19. How it distresses me that you behaved so gently with destruction  
while my tears are poured on you like scattered pearls.
20. My little son, that you were clad in earth,  
well, 'tis the end of all of us and tis no shame / no one will  
remain naked.
21. In times like these not much remains to make a man of great  
expectations happy,  
thence vanish like a fleeting apparition!
22. If news about my state would reach you there, you'd weep in  
paradise  
over the news you hear:
23. Sadness of memories, gloom of loneliness,  
an abode of perdition, contemptible protection.
24. My little son, I buried you, my treasure, in the soil.  
Help then your father in the hour of indigence!
25. My little son, misfortune after misfortune has afflicted me,  
and donated a fortune of rubble to ruins,
26. And gone is the whiteness of life and its sweetness,  
though life left its whiteness on my beard.
27. Sleep in peace, while my eyes are wounded by sleeplessness  
when the eyes of the night companions have long been  
closed in sleep,
28. Staring at a night that seems as if the train of its darkness  
was nailed down by the stars.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>83</sup>Probably by *najm* the Pleiades are meant. Cf. a line by Şurr Durr quoted in Paul Kunitzsch and Manfred Ullmann, *Die Plejaden in den Vergleichen der arabischen Dichtung* (Munich, 1992), 83, in which the Pleiades are compared to the nails of a coat of mail. These nails are compared in al-Tihāmī's *kāmil rā'īyah* with water bubbles. This line (49), rhyming in *al-mismārī*, is certainly



29. Has morning yet veiled the Milky Way,  
or the light of day put the stars to flight?<sup>84</sup>
30. Or has an endless darkness, without stars or dawn for me,  
yet left me along with the child?
31. May then perish the vicissitudes of time that befall noble men!  
Indeed, I made provisions, but all provisions are in vain,
32. And I embraced in your face a dinar,  
but time's misfortune / *money changing* approached and  
took the dinar away.
33. My dear son, though you are far from me / *may you not perish*,  
the time of our meeting  
draws quickly near.<sup>85</sup>
34. You will give me a draught of Kawthar's water on the Day of  
Judgment,  
for my tears will have given you to drink abundantly before.
35. How can life be  
after I have buried my intestines between highland and  
lowland,
36. And the dust of Cairo and Damascus encloses my sons  
like clouds heaped up around moons?
37. Calamities have come upon these souls,  
unexpected misfortunes have befallen these bodies.
38. The mounts of their graves appear in the wilderness  
as a sign that they are on a journey.
39. I swear by him who postponed our end:  
We are always at some brink of destruction!
40. Say to those the like of whom approached us asking "Where is  
escape?" :  
"Time is none to escape!"
41. What is the difference between a white horse / *grey-haired*  
galloping with determination  
into darkness, and a black horse / *black-haired* jumping  
into gloom?
42. The small child is trod under foot, whereas he who is granted  
long life will catch up

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alluded to by Ibn Nubātah. His magnificent image was completely misunderstood by M. Muḥammad, *Ibn Nubātah*, 225, who wrongly assumes a connection with a line by Imru' al-Qays.

<sup>84</sup>Thus, if one reads *qussimat*; otherwise: "or had the sun of day distributed glistening stars."

<sup>85</sup>On the original meaning of the formula *lā tab'ad* see Gert Borg, "Ammā ba'du: The Meaning of 'lā tab'ad,'" *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 37 (1999): 13–24.



with grey hair as if he had whirled up a cloud of dust in his race.

43. Why do I blame the stars / *grey-haired* and their assignments?  
The stars / *grey-haired* are struck by fate themselves!
44. Neither the stinging celestial scorpion will escape destruction  
nor the rapacious zodiac lion.
45. With his bow the crescent moon shoots at our souls,  
but the bow is struck by revenge / *the strings* in turn.
46. Perdition inscribed a document on tombstones that is valid  
regardless whether it be rejected or confirmed.
47. Let penetrating minds reveal their ignorance—  
its revelation is a secret great indeed!
48. Let the afflicted bear the pain with calm—  
how often were a dearly loved and endurance's reward all  
lost at once!
49. Where are the kings that strutted towards loftiness?  
They stumbled over their trails right into their graves!
50. Mountains they were, unthinkable to ascend.  
Destruction's hand has turned them into a handful of wavering  
dust.
51. Where are the well-armed heroes who, when the clouds of dusk  
darkened the battle field,  
ignited fire with their bows and shot with flashing sparks?
52. Unharmed they survived disasters of battle  
until dark fate led them to a place of destruction to darken  
their light.
53. Where are the babies who in the cradles lied  
like blossoms enclosed by their calyces?
54. Death has permeated their bones and flesh until the pearls they  
were  
became transformed into mere stones.
55. If I be patient, it is because I force myself to patience in all  
this;  
and if I show my grief, how manifold are my excuses!
56. May nursing clouds bestow their copious stream upon you!  
May servant / *moving* stars from all sides be around you!
57. They all will moisten the earth of your grave, but be of no avail  
for me.  
Instead, I'll try to cheat my heart and to deceive it.

