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On the structure of *Yā šī'r*, a key poem
by Abū-l-Qāsim aš-Šābbī (1909–1934)

1. Introduction

Abū-l-Qāsim aš-Šābbī (1909–1934), the Tunisian romantic poet, whose reputation in the Arab world is extremely high — in fact, “more books have been written about him than about any other romantic Arab poet”¹ — died, before he could finish the collection of his poems into his *dīwān*, which came out only 21 years after his death (1955, *Aḡānī al-ḥayāt*, ‘Songs of Life’²) and contains partly unpublished poems, and partly those which had previously appeared in periodicals and newspapers, particularly the famous magazine *Apollo*, which was published by Abū Šādī. In addition to this collection of poetry, Šābbī, on whose life and work, incidentally, quite a number of primary and secondary sources exist³, also published articles in periodicals and one book of literary criticism⁴, which aroused great interest in his native country, especially owing to the severe criticism it expresses on traditional Arab poetry. — The seventeenth poem in (2), pp. 55–63, is a lengthy piece consisting of 49 distichs; the poet called it *Yā šī'r* (*O Poetry!*);

¹ M. M. Badaoui, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 157 ff, with 11 pages on Šābbī.

² Abū-l-Qāsim aš-Šābbī, *Aḡānī al-ḥayāt*, Tunis, 1955; our present paper is based on a later edition (1966) — published by Ad-dār at-tūnisīya li-n-našr — to which are also all the references.

³ Cf. notes 1, 2 and: Abū-l-Qāsim Karrū, *Aš-Šābbī, ḥayātuhū, šī'ruhū*, Beirut 1954 (2. Aufl.), S. Pantůček, *Tunesische Literaturgeschichte*, Wiesbaden 1974; Zīn al-Ābidīn as-Sanūsī, *Aš-Šābbī, ḥayātuhū wa-adabuhū*, Tunis 1956; Muḥammad Hliwī (Hilaywī), *Ma'a aš-Šābbī*, Tunis 1955; Mekki Amri, *Die politische Lyrik des Abū-l-Qāsim aš-Šābbī (1909–1934), ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der modernen tunesischen Literatur*. Dissertation of the Christian-Albrechts-Universität, Kiel, 1976, reproduced from the manuscript; pp. 24–37 also contain a short biographic outline based, among other sources, on private letters.

⁴ Abū-l-Qāsim aš-Šābbī, *Al-ḥayāl aš-šī'rīy 'inda l-'arab*, ‘The Arab Poetic Imagination’, Tunis 1961.

in doing so, he used a root that appears in several of his poem titles (*Qultu li-š-ši`r*, *uġniyat aš-šā`ir*, *aḥlām šā`ir*) as well as the vocative case as in, e.g., *Ayyuhā l-layl*, etc. This poem seems to occupy a key position in all attempts to understand the basic constituents of Šābbī's poetic imagination and is expected to provide one of the most significant contributions to a 'mapping' of his spiritual landscape, which, we hope, in not too distant a future scholars specializing in the study of modern Arabic poetry might be able to carry out.

The poem bears the date of 14. raġab 1350/January 18, 1927, and is, therefore, temporally well localized within the first third of the short period of Šābbī's poetic productivity (the *dīwān* covers the time from 1923 to 1934).

It is the purpose of our paper, after a short formal description (Section 2), a transliteration and translation (Section 3) to show up several structural characteristics of this poem, which, at first glance, might give the impression of being somewhat diffuse or even chaotic, and to demonstrate that, indeed, either deliberately or, perhaps, intuitively, certain principles or, at least, meaningful patterns have been applied by the author (Section 4). A final section with notes on particular verses concludes the article (Section 5).

2. Formal characteristics

As mentioned above, the poem is composed of 49 distichs each of which rhymes in itself, but not with the other distichs. The metre is acatalectic *kāmīl* in the dimeter, in one particular instance *muraffal* (verses 35 and 36). The sequence of rhymes is as follows: -*ib*, -*āt*, -*mū*, -*sah*, -*yah*, -*hū*, -*ib*, -*ūr*, -*i`*, -*ūr*, -*mī*, -*ū`*, -*lī*, -*hā*, -*āh*, -*ūm*, -*hī*, -*ik*, -*yah*, -*yah*, -*in*, -*ūn*, -*bū*, -*ib*, -*im*, -*hāh*, -*ād*, -*hā*, -*ūn*, -*rah*, -*id*, -*ūr*, -*id(-ūd)*, -*ūr*, -*rah*, -*mad(-bad)*, -*hā*, -*ūm*, -*āt*, -*hā*, -*mah*, -*hā*, -*aq(-iq)*, -*hā*, -*āl*, -*dū*, -*rah*, -*tī*, -*rī*.

3. Transliteration and translation

In the following we transliterate the poem *Yā šī`r*:

- (1) *yā šī`ru anta famu š-šu`uri, wa-šarḥatu r-rūḥi l-ka`ib*
- (2) *yā šī`ru anta šadā naḥibi l-qalbi wa-s-šabbi l-ġarīb*
- (3) *yā šī`ru anta madāmi`un `aliqat bi-aḥdābi l-ḥayāt*
- (4) *yā šī`ru anta damun tafaġġara min kulūmi l-kā`ināt*
- (5) *yā šī`ru qalbī miṭlamā tadri šaqiyun muḥlimū*
- (6) *fīhi l-ġirāḥu n-nuġlu yaqṭuru min maġāwirihā d-damū*
- (7) *ġamadat `alā šafatayhi arzā`u l-ḥayāti l-`ābisah*
- (8) *fa-hwa t-ta`isu yuḍibuhū nawḥu l-qulūbi l-bā`isah*
- (9) *abadan yanūḥu bi-ḥarqatin bayna l-amāni l-hāwiyah*
- (10) *ka-l-bulbuli l-ġirridi mā bayna z-zuhūri d-dāwiyah*
- (11) *kam qad našaḥtu lahū bi-an yaslū wa-kam `azzaytuhū*

- (12) *fa-abā wa-mā ašgā ilā qawli fa-mā aḡdaytuhū*
- (13) *kam qultu šabran yā fu'ādu a-lā takuffu 'ani n-naḥīb*
- (14) *fa-idā taḡalladati l-ḥayātu tabaddadat šu'alu l-lahīb*
- (15) *yā qalbu lā taḡza' amāma tašallubi d-dahri l-huṣūr*
- (16) *fa-idā šarahṭa tawaḡḡu'an haza'at bi-sarḥatika d-duhūr*
- (17) *yā qalbu lā taṣḥat 'alā l-āyyāmi fa-z-zahru l-badi'*
- (18) *yušḡi l-daḡḡāti l-'awāšifi qabla anḡāmi r-rabi'*
- (19) *yā qalbu lā taqna' bi-šawki l-ya'si min bayna z-zuhūr*
- (20) *fa-warā'a awḡā'i l-ḥayāti 'udūbatu l-amali l-ḡasūr*
- (21) *yā qalbu lā taskub dumū'aka bi-l-faḏā'i fa-tandamī*
- (22) *fa-'alā btisāmāti l-faḏā'i qasāwatu l-mutahakkimī*
- (23) *lākinna qalbī wa-hwa muḥḏillu l-ḡawānibi bi-d-dumū'*
- (24) *ḡāṣat biḥi l-aḥzānu id taḡaḡat biḥa tilka ṣ-ṣudū'*
- (25) *yabkī 'alā l-ḥulmi l-ba'idi bi-law'atin lā tanḡalī*
- (26) *ḡaradan ka-šaddāḥi l-hawātifi fī l-falā wa-yaqūlu lī*
- (27) *ṭahhir kulūmaka bi-d-dumū' wa-lḥallihā wa-sabilahā*
- (28) *inna l-madāmi'a lā tuḏī'u ḡaḡirahā wa-ḡalilāḥā*
- (29) *fa-mina l-madāmi'i mā tadaffa'a ḡarīfan ḡasaka l-ḡayāḥ*
- (30) *yarmi li-hāwiyati l-wuḡūdi bi-kulli mā yabni t-ṭuḡāḥ*
- (31) *wa-mina l-madāmi'i mā ta'allaqa fī l-ḡayāḥibi ka-n-nuḡūm*
- (32) *wa-mina l-madāmi'i mā arāḡa n-naḡsa min 'ib'i l-humūm*
- (33) *fa-rḡam ta'āsatahū wa-nuḡ ma'ahū 'alā aḡlāmihī*
- (34) *fa-laḡad qaḏā l-ḡulmu l-badi'u 'alā laza' ālāmihī*
- (35) *yā šī'ru yā waḡya l-wuḡūdi l-ḡayya yā luḡata l-malā'ik*
- (36) *ḡarrid fa-āyyāmi anā tabkī 'alā iḡā'i n-nāyik*
- (37) *rāddid 'alā sam'i d-duḡā annāti qalbi l-wāḡiyah*
- (38) *wa-skub bi-aḡfāni z-zuhūri dumū'a qalbi d-dāmiyah*
- (39) *fa-la'alla qalbu llayli arḡamu bi-l-qulūbi l-bākiyah*
- (40) *wa-la'alla ḡafna z-zahri aḡfazu li-d-dumū' l-ḡāriyah*
- (41) *kam ḡarrakat kaffu l-asā awtārā dayyāka l-ḡanīn*
- (42) *fa-tahāmalat aḡzānu qalbī fī aḡārīdi l-anīn*
- (43) *fa-la-kam araqtu madāmi'i ḡattā taqarraḡati l-ḡufūn*
- (44) *tumma ltafattu fa-lam aḡid qalban yuqāsimumi š-šūḡūn*
- (45) *fa-'asā yakūnu l-laylu arḡamu fa-hwa mitli yandubū*
- (46) *wa-'asā yašūnu z-zahru dam'i fa-hwa mitli yaskubū*
- (47) *qaḏ qanna'at kaffu l-masā'i l-mawta bi-š-šamti r-raḡīb*
- (48) *fa-ḡadā ka-a'māqi l-kuḡūfi bilā daḡiḡin aw waḡīb*
- (49) *ya'ti bi-aḡniḡati s-sukūni ka-annahū l-laylu l-baḡīm*
- (50) *lākinna ṭayfa l-mawti qāsin wa-d-duḡā ṭayfun raḡīm*
- (51) *mā li-l-manniyati lā tariqqu 'alā l-ḡayāti n-nā'ihah*
- (52) *siyani af'idatun ta'innu awi l-qulūbu ṣ-ṣādihah*
- (53) *yā šī'ru hal ḡuliqa l-manūnu bilā šu'ūrīn ka-l-ḡamād*
- (54) *lā ri'ṣatun ta'rū yadayhi idā tamallaḡahū l-fu'ād*

- (55) *a-ra'ayta azhāra r-rabī'i wa-qad dawwat awraquhū*
(56) *fa-hawat ilā šadri t-turābi wa-qad qaḍat ašwāquhū*
(57) *a-ra'ayta šuhrūra l-falā mutaranniman bayna l-ğuşūn*
(58) *ğamada n-našidu bi-šadrihī lammā ra'ā tayfa l-manūn*
(59) *fa-qaḍā wa-qad ġaḍat aġāridu l-ḥayāti t-tāhirah*
(60) *wa-hawā mina l-aġšāni mā bayna z-zuhūri l-bāsirah*
(61) *a-ra'ayta umma t-tifli tabkī dāhka t-tifla l-wahid*
(62) *lammā tanāwalahu bi-'unfin sā'idu l-mawti š-šadid*
(63) *a-samī'ta nawḥa l-'āšiqi l-walhāni mā bayna l-qubūr*
(64) *yabkī ḥabibatahū fayā li-mašārī'i l-mawti l-ğasūr*
(65) *tafaḥat bi-a'māqi l-wuġūdi sakīnatu š-šabri l-ğalid*
(66) *lammā ra'ā 'adla l-ḥayāti yaḍummuhū l-laḥdu l-kanūd*
(67) *fa-daḥḥat laḥnan yuraddiduhū 'alā samī d-duhūr*
(68) *šawtu l-ḥayāti bi-dağğatin tas'ā 'alā šafati l-buḥūr*
(69) *yā šī'ru anta našidu amwāği l-ḥidammi s-sāḥirah*
(70) *an-nāšī'āti l-bāsimāti r-rāqišāti t-tāhirah*
(71) *as-sāfirāti s-šādihāti ma'a l-ḥayāti ilā l-abad*
(72) *ka-'arā'isi l-amali d-daḥūki yamisna mā tāla l-amad*
(73) *hā inna azhāra r-rabī'i tabassamat akmāmuhā*
(74) *tarnū ilā š-šafaqi l-ba'idī tağurruhā ahlāmuhā*
(75) *fī šadrihā amalun yuḥaddiqu naḥwa hātika n-nuġūm*
(76) *lākinnahū amalun sa-talḥaduhū ġabābiratu l-wuġūm*
(77) *fa-la-sawfa tuġmiḍu ġafnahā 'an kulli aḍwā'i l-ḥayāt*
(78) *ḥaytu z-żalāmu muḥayyimun fī ġawwi dayyāka s-subāt*
(79) *ha innahā hamasat bi-ādāni l-ḥayāti ġaridahā*
(80) *qatalat 'ašāfiru š-šabāhi šudāḥahā wa-našidahā*
(81) *yā šī'ru anta našidu hātika z-zuhūri l-bāsimah*
(82) *yā laytāni miṭlu z-zuhūri bilā ḥayātin wāġimah*
(83) *inna l-ḥayāta ka'ibatun maġmūratun bi-d-dumū'ihā*
(84) *wa-š-šamsu adğarahā l-asā fī šaḥwihā wa-huġū'ihā*
(85) *fa-tağarra'āt ka'san dihāqan min muša'sa'ati š-šafaq*
(86) *fa-tamāyalat sakrā ilā kahfi l-ḥayāti wa-lam tuḥiq*
(87) *yā šī'ru anta naḥibuhā lammā hawat li-subātihā*
(88) *yā šī'ru anta šudāḥuhā fī mawtihā wa-ḥayātihā*
(89) *unzur ilā šafaqi s-samā'i yaḥiḍu 'an tilka l-ğabāl*
(90) *bi-šu'ā'ihī l-ḥallābi yaġmuruhā bi-basmāti l-ğamāl*
(91) *fa-yuṭīru fī n-nafsi l-ka'ibati 'ašifan lā yarkudū*
(92) *wa-yu'ağğū l-qalba l-mu'addaba šu'latan lā taḥmudū*
(93) *yā šī'ru anta ġamālu aḍwā'i l-ğurūbi s-sāḥirah*
(94) *yā hamsa amwāği l-masā'i l-bāsimāti l-ḥā'irah*
(95) *yā nāya ahlāmi l-ḥabibati yā rafīqa šabābati*
(96) *lawlāka muttu bi-law'ati wa-šaqqwati wa-ka'ābati*

(97) *fika ntawat nafsi wa-fika nafah̄tu kulla maša'iri*

(98) *fa-šdah 'alā qimami l-ḥayāti bi-law'ati yā ṭā'iri*

The following translation tries to combine word-to-word faithfulness to the original with a certain amount of 'poetical legibility':

O Poetry!

- (1) O poetry! You are the mouth of sentiment and the dejected spirit's cry for help;
- (2) O poetry! You are the echo of the heart's and of the wretched lover's wail;
- (3) O poetry! You are the tears suspended in the eyelashes of life;
- (4) O poetry! You are the bloodstream gushing out of the creation's wounds;
- (5) O poetry! My heart is — as you know — in misery and gloom,
- (6) in it are gaping wounds, and blood is dripping from its caves.
- (7) Stern-looking life's calamities are on its lips congealed
- (8) and it is the unhappy one whom desperate hearts' wailing melts;
- (9) forever, in torment, it wails among the swooping-down desires,
- (10) like the nightingale, the warbling one, among the fading flowers...
- (11) How often I advised it to forget, how often I comforted it,
- (12) but it refused and did not hearken to my speech — so I was of no avail to it.
- (13) How often did I say: 'Patience, o heart! Don't you refrain from lamentation?
- (14) Since, when life shows bold endurance, the flames of fire anyway are scattered.
- (15) O heart! Be not afraid of hardness from the smashing fate,
- (16) since if you scream from pain fate will deride your outcry anyway.
- (17) O heart! Do not get angry with the days — since the enchanting flowers
- (18) will have to hark to tempests' noise before the melodies of spring.
- (19) O heart! Do not resign yourself to desperation's thorns stinging from between
the flowers,
- (20) since in the rear of life's torment the sweetness of bold hope is waiting.
- (21) O heart! Don't shed your tears into the empty space for you'll repent it,
- (22) for space's smiling comprehension is overcome by mocker's cruelty...
- (23) But in my heart — whose sides are moistened by the tears —
- (24) the sorrows rage of which then overflow those clefts;
- (25) it weeps about the distant dream in never-ending grief
- (26) while singing like the Caller in the Desert, and it speaks to me:
- (27) Purge by the tears your wounds, release them, give them way,
- (28) for flowing tears neither destroy what's base in them nor what is grand...
- (29) since it is due to flowing tears what gushes forth and drags with it the thorns
- (30) and flings into the deepest hell of life what tyrants build... [of life
- (31) and it is due to tears what flashes in the dark like stars,
- (32) and it is due to tears what frees the soul of sorrows' burden...
- (33) Have mercy on its misery, bewail its dreams with it,
- (34) for the enchanting dream has quelled the blazing of its pains...
- (35) O poetry! O vivid inspiration of the world, o angels' tongue,

- (36) sing, and my days will weep according to the rhythm of your flute...
 (37) let the feeble moanings of my heart then reach the darkness' ear
 (38) and pour the bleeding tears of my heart into the eyelids of the flowers...
 (39) Maybe, night's heart has deeper mercy on the crying hearts,
 (40) and, maybe, flowers' lids can better hold the streaming tears.
 (41) How often stirred the hand of grief the strings of yonder tender sigh,
 (42) but the sadness of my heart remained inert in moaning's tune...
 (43) and how often did I shed my tears until the eyelids festered —
 (44) and then I turned aside because I had not found a heart to share my grief.
 (45) Perhaps the night shows deeper mercy since it moans like me,
 (46) and, perhaps, the flowers can better hold my tears since they are shedding
 [them like me.
- (47) The evening's palm has veiled Death with dreadful silence,
 (48) and He approaches, as (from) the caverns' depths, noiseless and heartbeatless;
 (49) He comes on wings of silence, as if He were the jet-black night:
 (50) but Death's spectre is cruel whereas darkness is a spectre merciful...
 (51) What is the matter then with Fate that, with wailing life, it feels no sympathy?
 (52) Both the same to it are moaning hearts or crying souls...
 (53) O poetry! Was Death created without feeling — like the rock?
 (54) Does not a tremor seize His hands when flatters Him the heart?
 (55) Did you see the flowers of the spring — their leaves are faded —
 (56) and they have sunk down to the breast of dust — and their desires ended?
 (57) And did you see the thrush out in the field as in the twigs it warbled —
 (58) The hymn froze in its breast when it perceived the spectre of Death;
 (59) it died — and pure life's songs had dwindled then away —
 (60) and from the twigs it fell, amongst the flowers premature?
 (61) The mother of the child you saw while she bewailed that only child
 (62) when, with violence, stern Death's forearm had taken hold of it?
 (63) The ardent lover's scream you heard when he amidst the graves
 (64) bemoaned his girl, his beloved? O what perdition through insolent Death!
 (65) The calm of steadfast patience overflowed in the depths of life
 (66) when it saw life's justice in the ungrateful tomb engaged
 (67) and it poured out a song which, under clamor,
 (68) the voice of life will pass on to the ear of times ... walking on the lip of seas...
 (69) O poetry! Are you the hymn of ocean's charming waves,
 (70) the clear and smiling, dancing and pure waves,
 (71) the radiant waves, which sing with life, up to eternity?
 (72) Like brides of laughing hope that stride along as long as time is lasting...
 (73) Look, the flowers of the spring whose calyces are full of smile
 (74) towards evening's twilight far-away they glance, deluded by their dreams:
 (75) their is hope still in their breast and gazes to those stars —
 (76) but it is hope, (no more), and will be buried by the tyrants of this world...
 (77) and they will close their eyelids from all lights of life

- (78) when the darkness pitches, in that slumber's atmosphere, its tent...
 (79) Look, the morning sparrows that had been murmuring their song into the ears
 (80) have killed their warbling and their melody... [of life
 (81) O poetry! You are the hymn of these smiling flowers,
 (82) o were I only like the flowers, away from life's repugnance!
 (83) Life is so sad, and flooded by its tears,
 (84) and misery has vexed the sun in its serenity and in its calm,
 (85) and it has swallowed down a cup filled with the wine of twilight,
 (86) and then it sank, drunken, into the cave of life... and will not rise again.
 (87) O poetry! You are sun's mourning dirge when to its sleep it sinks,
 (88) O poetry, you are its song, both in its death and in its life...
 (89) Look at the twilight of the sky as from those hills it flows,
 (90) in its enchanting gloss that inundates them with the smiles of beauty
 (91) and rouses a never-resting tempest in the miserable soul
 (92) and kindles a fire never to be quenched in the tormented heart...
 (93) O poetry! You are the beauty of the enchanting lights of sunset,
 (94) o you murmur of the evening's waves, the smiling waves in turbulence,
 (95) o flute of my dear dreams, o companion of my love...
 (96) Were it not for you, I'd die in grief, in sadness and distress,
 (97) my soul is wrapped in you, my feelings all I breathed them into you,
 (98) Sing of my torture on the peaks of life, my flying bird!

4. Structural considerations

The first five *abyāt* each start with the invocation *yā šī'ru*, further instances of its use being verses (35), (53), (69), (81), (87), (88), and (93); these vocatives are, as it were, Ariadne's clew bringing the poet back from his diversions to what is the central issue of the poem: the significance of poetry to the author himself. The first four *yā šī'ru*'s are all followed by comparisons, poetry being likened to a mouth, an outcry, an echo, tears and streaming blood, and these metaphors serving as sort of leitmotifs to be taken up in later parts of the poem again (the feelings passing as breath through the mouth in (97); the outcry being alluded to in (16); tears re-appearing in verses (21), (23), (27), (28), (29), (31), (32), (38), (40), (43), (46), (83)-explicitly, as the root *d-m-*, disregarding the action of weeping when expressed in other ways; among these mentions the particular picture of (31) comes very close to that of verse (3) as far as the equation tear = glittering, star-like entity is concerned; the streaming blood giving the key word for a long concern in the sufferings of the heart ending up with the end of the heart's speech, verse (32), and being resumed for a second in verse (38)). The fifth vocative does not have a follow-up metaphor and rather serves as a full stop to these introductory lines. As already mentioned, the concept of the bleeding heart proves to be fruitful for the ensuing development of ideas; the heart whose bleeding is taken up again in verse (6) is,

in a bold image, thought of as being equipped with lips having the world's misery frozen on them — lips re-appear in (68) — but other wailing hearts make it melt (8). After a digression comparing the wailing heart to a nightingale (10) — birds enter again in (57) to (60), (79) and (80) and provide the finale furioso in (98) —, the heart is established as a second soul in the poet's breast with whom the poet's first "I" commences a dialogue in direct speech — verses (13) to (22). Again vocatives (once of *fu'ād*, four times of *qalb*) serve as introductions to the host of admonitions the heart receives from the poet. The heart is advised to suffer silently, the *šū'al* being encountered again in (92); endurance is suggested since public announcement of one's pains provokes mockery of the surrounding world anyway — a thought taken up again in (22); patience is called for since spring music is preceded by noisy tempests (18), the other tempest in the poem being one that rises in the soul rather than in nature (91); resignation vis-à-vis the thorns, *šawk*, of life is dissuaded from (19) — thorns, now *hasak*, pass by again in (29) —, since there is hope behind all troubles ((20), as in (75), where, however, hope is represented as transient and doomed); finally, it is asked not to weep (see above). The heart (which dreams a *ḥulm ba'id* as well as a *ḥulm badī'*, verses (25) and (34), respectively) also answers in direct speech by urging the poet to give free scope to his tears as this purely therapeutic approach does not involve any moral commitment (so our interpretation of verses (27) and (28)). Threefold invocations of the *madāmi'* introduce impressive images associated with appearance and effect of tears, the enclosed verse (30) being an excursion into politics, a field amply covered by many of the poet's poems. (33) and (34) are already outside the heart's speech and figure as a monological comment on the heart's situation. Now, poetry is addressed (35); among other metaphors *nāy* is mentioned (see (95) for a resumption); the phrasing of (37) is reminiscent of that of (67); (37) to (40) forms a particularly self-consistent block and could, indeed, constitute a quatrain in its own right as, on top of the symmetry and coherence of its contents, it is the only example throughout the poem where two immediately subsequent distichs bear the same rhyme — in addition, the double image of more sympathetic night and flowers surfaces again in verses (45) and (46)! We see here a striking example of a region of perfect near-range order in an otherwise wildly streaming flux of associations, very much like cold water which still contains districts where the crystalline order of ice is maintained. Now, death moves into the limelight of attention; he comes silently, similar to the night, but, unlike the latter is a cruel spectre ((50); night's mercy, as we have seen, goes back to verses (45), (39), and (37)). Poetry is called upon as a witness for, and a potential remedy to, death's cruelty which is exemplified by four images; again the device of a (nearly) constant introduction (three times a *ra'ayta*, once a *sami'ta*) is used: fading flowers, going back to (10), appear in (55), (56); the thrush that falls from the twig, (57) to (60), has its feeble echo in (79) and (80); a mother bewails her dead child in (61) and (62); (63) and (64) picture a mourning lover among the graves... and now a subtle and artistic transition obviously leading up to a goal envisaged from far ahead sets in: the particular injustice lying in death's snatching away a small child causes even

the 'godly' calm (*sakīna*, as it were, personified) to boil over and break into a song which the 'voice of life' *bi-duġġatin tas'ā 'alā šafati l-buḥūr* passes on to the 'ear of times', i.e. the roaring sea is thought of as emitting in an amplified way that song of protest ... and now the sea is reached and described with a wealth of qualifying principles whose melodious *sag'* simulates the very movement of the approaching tide; again, verses (69) to (72) form an impressive poetical entity of its own. Now, the spring flowers are taken up again, see (17); unlike (38) and (40), their calyces now serve as receptacles for a smile, a variation of the *ḥulm ba'īd* in (25) is touched upon in (74); hope is crushed in their breast, as mentioned above, darkness takes over, *zalām* this time (78), as opposed to *gayāhib* (31), *duġā* (37), *layl* (39) and (45), *masā'* (47), again *duġā* (50), again *masā'* (94). After the image of the birds killing their song is resumed, (79) and (80), verses (81) and (82) bring the flower leitmotif again, by the way, its sixth occurrence in the poem and following an introduction *yā šī'r anta našīd* as in (69). (84) to (86): the drunken sun, going to sleep, never to rise again, the *kahf al-ḥayāt* in a mysteriously charming way echoing the *a'māq al-kuḥūf* of (48) and the *a'māq al-wuġūd* of (65); but the picture is not yet exhausted: (87) to (93), three times interspersed with *yā šī'r*-vocatives, enlarge on a glowing landscape under the setting sun, the *naḥīb* of verses (2) and (13), the *subāt* of (78), the *mawt* of (47) and (50) re-appear in a different context, so does the passim occurring *ḥayāt*, the *basma*, etc. It is as if all the actors playing in the melodrama appeared on the stage for the final tableau. And on it goes: the waves of (69) have their come-back in (94), they are, on top, smiling like the calyces and the evening beauty of a few verses ago, (95) brings the *nāy* of (36) and the omnipresent dreams; (96) to (98), at last, are the steep path up to an ecstatic climax and, at the same time, conclusively establish the poet's position and attitude towards poetry as his only means of staying alive in a sea of troubles... poetry itself is, in a last metaphor, his flying bird that sings of all his tribulations on the peaks of life...

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We certainly know next to nothing of the intellectual and psychic mechanisms governing Šābīb's actual creative processes — except, of course, what we can surmise from the poems themselves. As far as our poem is concerned we cannot help noticing the existence of several internally coherent and well-structured text portions or 'blocks' — perhaps even pre-formed entities intended for later incorporation into a wider context — separated (or held together) by transitions of a partly spontaneous, associative and partly artistic and rather artificial nature. In particular, the following blocks and transitory passages can be distinguished:

- (1)–(5): invocational introduction, using its last addressee for
- (7)–(10), a rather weak transition to
- (11)–(22): an admonitory speech to the heart, which, after
- (23)–(26), a transition, responds in
- (27)–(32) a rhetorically impressive fashion mainly based on one recurring phrase;

- (33), (34): transition;
 (35)–(46): *šī'r* addressed again, in a passage dominated by two twice appearing images of the merciful night and the tear-preserving flowers;
 (47)–(66): death, in a profusion of figures and metaphors, (37)–(40) forming a particular tightly closed 'sub-unit';
 (67), (68): transition to
 (69)–(72): waves, as simulated by *sağ̃*, well possible as a pre-existing bit in the poet's imagination;
 (73)–(83): a collection of various images partly taking up ideas presented before and leading up to the wonderful picture of sunset in
 (84)–(86), which, in another artistic construction, through
 (87)–(92), prepares the ground for the final hymnic and exalted verses
 (93)–(98), which end up in the metaphor of poetry being a bird on the climaxes of life.

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To conclude this section, we should like to say a few words on the frequency of occurrence of some nouns in the poem. Uncontested winner of the race is *ḥayāt* (17 times) followed by *qalb* (and *qulūb*, 15 times), *dumū'* and *madāmi'* (together, 13 times), *šī'r* (12 times), *zahr* (and *zuhūr*, 11 times), derivations from the roots *ṣ-d-ḥ*, *ḡ-r-d*, *b-s-m* (6 times each), *mawt* and *b-k-y* (5 times), *amal* and *r-ḥ-m* (4 times), etc.

Let us, for a moment, dwell on *ḥayāt* and the contexts of its use. Starting with instances where it is employed in colourful and concrete images, we may quote its being furnished with eyelashes to which tears attach themselves (3); it is stern-looking and its *arṣā'* are congealed on the heart's lips — an image which we certainly dislike and which, characteristically, lies in one of the weaker 'transient' portions mentioned above — (7); in a sententious verse it displays flames (14); it is a stinging thorn-bush (29); can make of its voice (68); it has ears (79); it is something that can weep and cover itself by its tears (83); it is a cave (86) and, finally, a mountainous landscape on whose peaks poetry resides like a bird in an exalted nest (98). Apart from these picturesque situations it also appears in less concrete circumstances: pains of life are adduced in (20), wailing life in (51), its songs in (59); its justice which is indeed rather an injustice is alluded to in (66), its lights from which the flowers close their eyelids* in (77), and its repugnance in (82). The pale end of the spectrum of usages is marked by a rather dull and trivial use of *ḥayāt* as something with which the waves sing (71) and which is, not unexpectedly, put in parallel to death (88).

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A striking feature of *Yā šī'r* is its inhomogeneity in quality: sections which constitute harmonious and charming bits, real jewels in their brilliance and lucidity, alternate with unnatural and overstrained passages, pictures which even the poet

himself might not want to enjoy to the full (as, e.g., that of verses (7) ff.). The more one thinks of it, the more probable becomes the theory of mental pre-fabs, little poems of their own, put together only subsequently and not always to the mark the poet himself has set by his best creations.

5. Additional comments on individual verses

(1) The edition our work is based on has two printing errors in this verse: *fam* is rendered as *q-m*, *ṣarḥa* as *ṣarḥa*, 'flat ground or battlefield', and therefore certainly to be rejected, especially as *a-r-h* is one of Šābbī's favourite roots in the poem; *šī'r* and *šu'ūr* form a *ḡinās al-ištiqāq*; (3) *madāmi* here and in the following for *dumū* rather than real nomen loci; (11) we should, of course, expect *yashuwa* for the verb; (35) and (36) are *muraffal*, 'having a train', see Wright, vol. 2, p. 363, litt. B; (37) *'alā sam'i* to come again in (67), a similar phrase (79); (42) *anānin* in the original, certainly wrong, most probably for *anīn*; (50) *ḡinās at-tāmm*, if we consider classical figures applicable, at all, for this type of poetry; (53) ditto, but *ḡinās al-ištiqāq*; (61) see (50); (67) the initial *fa-* is a violation of metre; (74) misprinted as *yarnū* in the original; (79) and (80) strange word order, but the interpretation offered seems to be the only possible one; (85) *muša'satan* in the text, but obvious misprint.