

Senses and sensuality

Synesthetic imagery in the Siculo-Arabic *ghazal* poems

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Numerous examples of *ghazal* poems include metaphorical images describing the altered body of the lover. The yearning for love, passion, disappointment, languish: each stage of the love affair can change the lover appearance. Even more, the alteration can affect also his perception of the beloved body: due to the intensity of the love experience, his sensory perception could end to intertwine, by blending or intermingling his different sense modalities. The verbal transposition of such a visionary state often requires the poet to employ widely rhetorical devices, and particularly synesthesia, in order to enhance the multiple perception of his audience. This paper will focus on the use of this figure in the love poems from the Siculo-Arabic poetic repertoire (10th-12th centuries). In fact, these authors frequently combine the figurative use of words with synesthetic effects, thus involving the reader in a vivid experience: a multilayered text articulating a multisensory perception.

Keywords: *ghazal*, Siculo-Arab poetry, sensorial perception, synesthesia.

1. Introduction

The way we depict the world around us - both through images and words - always discloses a variety of choices. It is a subjective balance of lights and shadows that reflects our specific perspective on the surroundings, and corresponds to the way we feel and comprehend ourselves and our environment. Moreover, figurative and verbal representations of reality are never spontaneous. They always mediate between the domain of the sensorial experience and the intention of the author, firstly about how and how much to share with his audience, and besides, about the way to comply or not with the representational conventions of the selected genre (Balaban 2012; Isomaa *et al.* 2012: x).

This is even more true when the issue concerns the love experience.¹ Love could be chaste, melancholic, nostalgic, obscene as well as hedonistic: a complex perceptual phenomenology that reverberates in the social cognition and behavior (Bürgel 1979; Obiedat 2018). Moreover, the representation of love involves a wide range of sensations, thus engendering multifaceted forms of relations, firstly between the lover and the beloved, and secondly between them and their society. Both in literary as in other artistic representation, the author could enhance the communicative potential of his message by involving, at different levels, a codified system of symbolic referents. It allows him to condense, albeit in a synthetic depiction, specific traits and emotions that connote the different stages of falling in love and disaffection.

By reason of their cryptic and concise character, poetic texts often widely involve metaphorical images and symbolic references, in order to better express sensations and feelings related to the love affair. So, among the *ghazal* poems, numerous examples describe the altered body of the lover upset by the yearning for love, passion, disappointment or languish. As well as change the lover's appearance, at the same time, this alteration can also affect his cognition of the beloved body:² due to the intensity of the love experience, his sensory perception could end to intertwine, by blending or intermingling his different sense modalities. The research I am about to present concerns precisely this characteristic of love poems, focusing on several examples from the Siculo-Arabic repertoire, composed between the 10th and 12th centuries A.D.³

2. The authors and their environment

The poetic corpus of Siculo-Arab poets has been transmitted mainly thanks to several compendia of the famous anthology of Ibn al-Qaṭṭā' al-Ṣiqillī (d. 1121), *al-Durra al-khaṭīra fī shu'arā' al-Ġazīra* (The precious pearl on the poets of the Island). In fact, the well known *Qism shu'arā' al-Maghrib wa-al-Andalus* of the *Kharīdat al-qaṣr wa-ġarīdat al-'aṣr* (The Pearl of the Palace and the Annals of the Age) by 'Imād al-

¹ The preliminary outcomes of this study have been exposed during the 30th Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants (UEAI) ("Body, identity and society in Islam," Utrecht University, the Netherlands, 7-9 July 2022) within a thematic panel entitled "Senses and Words: Verbal Expression of Sensory Experience" (Organizers: O. Capezio and I. Licitra). The research forms part of a wider research project ("Eros 2020: Medioevo romanzo e orientale. Manifestazioni, forme e lessico dell'eros dal Medioevo al Moderno," PI: prof. Gaetano Lalomia) of the Department of Humanities (DISUM), University of Catania. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of my manuscript; I really appreciated their insightful comments and suggestions, which helped me in improving the quality of this paper.

² On the erotic representation of the beloved's body in the Arabic poetic tradition see Myrne (2018) and Serrano (2018).

³ An updated overview of recent studies on Islamic Sicily is provided in Cassarino (2015a, 2019).

Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1201) incorporates a huge selection from that anthology, as well as the chapter that Ibn Saʿīd al-Maghribī (d. 1286) dedicated to Sicilian authors in his *al-Mughrib fī ḥulā al-Maghrib* (The wondrous work, on gems of the West). Moreover, there are also a selection by Ibn al-Ṣayrafī (d. 1147) entitled *al-Durra al-khaṭīra fī shuʿarāʾ al-Ġazīra mā shamilahu ikhtiyār al-Ṣayrafī min al-shuʿarāʾ al-Ṣiqilliyyīn* and the *Mukhtaṣar min al-kitāb al-muntakha min al-Durra al-khaṭīra fī shuʿarāʾ al-Ġazīra*, which is an undated abridgement by Abū al-Qāsim ʿAlī b. Ġaʿfar b. ʿAlī al-Tamīmī al-Saʿdī from the selection made by Abū Ishāq Ibn Aghlab.⁴

Both during the Arab domination of the island (827-1031) and in the Norman period (1031-1198) (Nef 2011), the cultural epicenter was the capital, Palermo, which welcomed scholars and poets from each part of Sicily and from the other countries of the Islamic world (Cassarino 2013). Meanwhile, as the literary sources document, the verses of Siculo-Arab poets widely circulated among their contemporaries in the other regions of the Arabic Mediterranean, thus participating in a vast intertextual network (Miller 2019, 2020).⁵

The four authors I am dealing with are all natives from Sicily and their literary experiences fall within the chronological arc between the 10th and 12th centuries. Two of them, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṭūbī and his brother ʿAlī, were working at the Kalbid court of Palermo (X-XI centuries),⁶

⁴ For a complete bibliography see Licitra (2021a: 2-5).

⁵ Miller examines the interconnection between Sicilian poetry and the literary production of al-Andalus, North Africa and Egypt; he also attempts to investigate the uses and the interests of readers by analysing the main anthological collection including Siculo-Arab authors. A similar approach shows Brigitte Foulon (2015) in her research on the transmission of Ibn Ḥamdīs' repertoire, where she compares the reception of his poems in a contemporary source, *al-Dhakhīra fī mahāsīn ahl al-Jazīra* (The treasure on the merits of the people of the Peninsula) by Ibn Bassām al-Shantarīnī (d. 1147), and in a later collection, *Naḥl al-ṭīb min ghuṣn al-Andalus al-raṭīb* (The Breath of Perfume from the flourishing branch of al-Andalus) by al-Maqqarī (d. 1632). As the scholar points out, both anthologists paid little attention to the poet's Sicilian background and, instead, emphasized his full integration into the Andalusian literary scene. As regards al-Ballanūbī, we can assume that his literary experience has to be entirely based in Egypt (Licitra 2021a: 6-18; 125-133), where the poet was highly appreciated by his contemporaries. Indeed, his reputation as a master in descriptive poetry (*waṣf*) spreads widely, as testifies *al-Risāla al-miṣriyya* (The Epistle about Egypt) by the andalusian Abū al-Ṣalt Umayya (d. 1134) (Miller 2019: 187-188; Licitra 2021a:13, 185). Most of the anecdotes about these poets mainly concern descriptive verses and encomiastic odes, while not as well documented is the reception of their love poems. A rare and valuable evidence is provided by the epistolary exchange between the Sicilian Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh (XI c.) and his Andalusian friend and man of letter, Abū Ḥafṣ al-Qaʿīnī (Cassarino 2015b). Their letters cover various topics and also include verses and parts in rhymed prose. Some of them, firstly translated into Italian and studied by Mirella Cassarino (2021) concern the issue of yearning for love, also addressed in a parodic way.

⁶ The biographical information about these two poets is scarce, as well as about another poet from the same family, the father Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Ṭūbī. We can assume that all three of them were in Sicily between the end of the X and the beginning of the XI centuries, linked with the governative *elites* of the island during the Kalbid period (see Rizzitano 1955: 72-73; Rizzitano 1958: 353, fn. 1, 365-366, fn. 4, 373-374, fn. 2).

while the other two, al-Ballanūbī (Licitra 2021a: 1-18; Licitra 2021b: 128-129) and Ibn Ḥamdīs (Granara 2000; Foulon 2015), migrated far from the Island during the *fitna* or at the beginning of the Norman period, the first one went to Egypt, the latter one to al-Andalus and North-Africa.

According to the authoritative models of *ghazal* poems then circulating in the courts of Baghdad, Egypt and al-Andalus (Jacobi 1985), their love poems are mostly based on a “relational triangle,” defined by fixed and non-interchangeable roles. In the dialogic system that often structures these compositions, the poet plays exclusively the part of the *muḥibb* (the lover) while the male or female beloved (*maḥbūb*) is almost always relegated to the intrinsic passivity of its role in the sexual act and, therefore, he or she usually has no voice. Instead, a third figure, no less important than the other two, intervenes to speak with the lover, namely the Censor. It is the voice of the public, a fundamental element of this non-deformable relational triangle, guaranteeing the boundaries that keep the parts distinct (Rowson 1991: 65; Rosenthal 1997; Tolino 2021: 34-35). The following verses comply with these principles and depict the different phases of the love affair from two main perspective: the sensory interference could distort the perception of the beloved’s body or, even, alter his self-perception.⁷

3. Sensory interference distorting the perception of the beloved’s body

According to a recent contemporary sex research, conducted at the University of Amsterdam by Myra Bosman, Rachel Spronk and Giseline Kuipers (2019), ‘embodied experiences are strongly felt, but hard to communicate or verbalize,’ due to a “perceptual loop” between embodied sensations, body-sensorial knowledge, and social meanings’ (Bosman *et al.* 2019: 411, 413-416).⁸ Therefore, in an attempt to bridge the gap between perception and verbal expression, human beings tend to transpose embodied experiences into words by ‘using multi-interpretable sensory wordings; drawing comparisons between different sexual sensations; and referring to other sensory sensations.’ In literary discourses, especially in poetic texts, the rhetorical device that corresponds to and better interprets this natural tendency is synesthesia.⁹ This concept is here intended as the mutual reinforcement

⁷ An updated bibliography on this issue is provided in the “Introduction” of the recent study Jokha Alharthi dedicated on the literary representation of the body in the ‘*udhri*’ love poetry during the seventh and eighth centuries (Alharthi 2021: 1-31). Moreover, the author analyses “The Representation of the Beloved’s Body” and “The Representation of the Lover’s Body in the ‘Udhri Tradition,” focusing both on physically and allegorically representation (Alharthi 2021: 85-126, 189-225).

⁸ On the concept of “perceptual loop,” see also Spronk (2014: 7-9).

⁹ For the purpose of my research, I will refer to the concept of synesthesia in literary and artistic terms, as the mutual reinforcement of the senses in the sensory experience, that result bigger than the mere sum of its parts, not in the narrow neurological meaning of one sense stimulating unintentionally another sense (Campen 2007: 101-102).

between two or more perceptive spheres, mostly through metaphors involving imagery and semantic fields pertinent to different senses, thus originating sensory interferences.

In most of the selected example, the sensory overlap involves vision and olfaction or vision and gustation. The scheme is generally the following: firstly, the author offers his audience the vision of a trait of the beloved body; then, he promptly intersects visual details with smelling or tasting stimuli, in order to anchor the sharing images to olfactory or gustatory memories, as we can observe in these two similar short poems, both by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṭūbī:

له خلعتُ عذاري	1 لما رأيتُ عذارًا
فما أخافُ اشتهاري	2 وبان للناس عُذري
خُطتُ على جُنار	3 كأنه لأمٌ مسك
د خضرةً في احمرار	4 أو البنفسج في الور

1. When I saw one of his sideburns I lost all my restraints
2. and my self-defense was so clear to the people, that I am not afraid for my reputation
3. as if it were a *lām* of musk drawn on a pomegranate flower
4. or a violet blossom on a rose, green on a reddish.¹⁰

And

خُطَّه كاتِبٌ على جُنار	1 وعذارٍ كأنه لأمٌ مسكٍ
طاب في ذا العذار خَلْعُ العذار	2 عجبَ العاذلون منه وقالوا
نابئًا في صحيفة من نضار	3 ما رأينا بنفسجًا قبل هذا

1. His sideburn is like a *lām* of musk that a scribe drawn on a pomegranate flower.
2. The censors were amazed and said: «What a pleasure to lust after a sideburn guy, free from all restraints!
3. We have never seen before a violet blossom blooming on a silver face».¹¹

These poems belong to a specific subgenre of *ghazal mudhakkar* that Thomas Bauer has studied extensively. He has called them “beard epigrams,” considering the centrality of the sideburns motive

¹⁰Arabic text: ‘Abbās (1994: 196); Italian translation: Licitra (2022: 181). All the translations from Arabic into English are mine if not stated otherwise.

¹¹ Arabic text: ‘Abbās (1994: 196); Italian translation: Licitra (2022: 181).

in their thematic structure, based on the semantic field of the word *‘idhār* (sideburn) (Bauer 2014; Bauer 2019).

As I have mentioned elsewhere (Licitra 2022), from the songbooks of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṭūbī and of his brother *‘Alī*, unfortunately lost, the choices of the anthologists have transmitted numerous fragments and epigrams dedicated to love themes. Among them, there are also several examples focused on the sideburn motif. According to the convention of the genre, both brothers represent the subject always through the perspective of the lover who, sometimes, sublimates the love experience through abstract or floral metaphors and similes; other times, instead, he provides a vivid account of his sensory enjoyment and indulges his own desire free from all repentance.

These two examples are particularly interesting because they display a complete summary of the aforementioned instances. The effectiveness of the synthesis rests mainly on the synesthetic relationships intertwining between the poetic images proposed by the author: the experience starts from the objective vision of the facial feature at issue, then the somatic trait of the young beloved undergoes a rapid transformation, thus turning into something abstract as an alphabet letter; simultaneously the author involves in the description smells and flavours recalling olfactory and tasting memories in order to amplify the sensory involvement of his audience; finally the perceptive loop closes, turning back to the visual sphere but, as a result of all the process, the vision has changed and the beloved face passes through a complete metamorphose, transfigured into flowers. At the end, just colours and perfumes matching one each other, exalting the perceptive aspects of the love affair rather than the intellective ones.

I think that such a complex transition results more authentic when the verbal transposition of the perceptive experience suggests a progressive increase of the physical proximity between the observer (the lover and, through his voice, the audience) and the observed (the beloved). It happens when the poetic text proceeds, step by step, according to a precise hierarchy of the five senses, determined by the distance specifically required for a stimulus to be sensed by his receptor: moving from the distal senses (sight and hearing) up to the proximal senses (taste and, sometimes, touch), passing through the intermediate position of the olfaction (Majid and Levinson 2011).

Therefore, in the lover’s account the description of the scent the beloved exhales turns into a key element, as a kind of necessary step toward the sublimation of the love experience. Indeed, also among the Sicilian “beard epigrams,” we can find many other examples employing this scheme, as in these verses by al-Ballanūbī:

فَوْقَ وَرْدِ الْوَجْنَةِ الْمَشْتَعِلِ
حَلَّ بِكَ مِنْكَ عَدُوِّي رَقًّا لِي

3 فَوْرِيحَانَ الْعِذَارِ الْخَضِيلِ
4 يَا حَبِيبَ النَّفْسِ لَوْ أَبْصَرَ مَا

3. [I swear] on the pot-herbs of [your] sideburn, sweaty over the red burning cheek,
4. o beloved of my soul, even my enemy would have felt compassion for me, looking at what I suffered because of you!¹²

Or, again, in this couplet by ‘Alī b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṭūbī:

وَالْغِصْنُ فِي زَنْرِهِ
رُ عَلَى مَخَطِّ عِذَارِهِ

1 البدرُ في أزراره
2 وكأنما فُتَّ العبيب¹³

1. Full moon in his buttons, a tender sprout in his belt,
2. and like crumbled saffron the line of his sideburn.¹⁴

Also in the poems of *ghazal mu’annath* the involvement of the olfactory sphere activates synesthetic relationships that increase the eroticism of the description of female beauty. In particular, Ibn Ḥamdīs turns this composite strategy into a stylistic feature, as we can observe in this interesting example from his songbook, that inverts the order of senses: the sensory perception starts with the scent of the beloved that confuses the lover; then he comprehends that what at first seems to him an aromatic plant, is actually a graceful maiden:

لَهَا نَفْسٌ يُحْيِي بِنَفْخَتِهِ النَّفْسَا
وَمَشِيَّتُهَا بِالشَّمْسِ تَسْتَوْقِفُ الشَّمْسَا
عَلَى الصَّبِّ أَضْحَى وَهُوَ مِنْ حَجَرٍ أَقْسَا
سَقَيْتَ حَدِيدًا فِيهِ زَادَ بِهِ يُبْسَا

1 وَرِيحَانِيَّةٍ فِي النَّفْسِ مَنِيْبَةٌ عُصْنِيهَا
2 إِذَا أَقْتَلْتُ كَانَتْ بِتَقْوِيمِ خَلْقِهَا
3 قَتَاةٌ إِذَا اسْتَعْطَفْتَ بِاللَّيْنِ قَلْبَهَا
4 وَلَا تَشْكُ أَنْ الْمَاءَ رَطْبٌ وَكَلَّمَا

1. Here is a basil plant, whose twig sprouts in the soul, and the exhaling scent enlivens it.
2. When it comes forward with the elegance of its shape and its gait, it makes the sun stop with the sun.
3. She is a girl whose heart you cannot bend towards her lover, not even with gentleness, because she is harder than stone.

¹² Arabic text: ‘Abbās (1994: 114); Italian translation: Licitra (2021a: 252-253).

¹³ In the edition I used, this word is cut between the first and the second hemistich of the verse.

¹⁴ Arabic text: ‘Abbās (1994: 94); Italian translation: Licitra (2022: 179).

4. No one doubts that the water is moist, but the more you make the iron drink it, the harder it becomes.

With regard to the tactile sphere, it is more rarely involved, due to the full proximity required by this sensory perception. When it is represented, it usually concerns just the evocation of tactile sensations suggested by sensory stimuli pertinent to other perceptive areas, as in this example by al-Ballanūbī:

5 قد قدَّ قلبي سيفُ أَلحَاطِهِ
6 وليس فوق السحر من بابلِ
واختضبتُ من دمه وَجنتاهُ
إلا الذي قالته لي مقلتاهُ

5. The sword of his glances had already chopped my heart, whose red blood had dyed his cheeks.

6. Nothing can overcome the Babel's curse, except the language of its pupils.¹⁵

Or still in this short poem by Ibn Ḥamdīs, that highlights the impracticability of a real contact with the beloved, thus confirming that the tactile stimulation (a gentle caress on her cheek) is just a reverie, not a memory:

1 وناهدة تَرَبَّتْ كَفُّها
2 تصونُ على القَطْفِ رُمَانَةً
3 لها وَجَنَةٌ صَوَّلَتْ بِاللَّعِيمِ
ترائِبها بِسَحيقِ العَبيرِ
مِنَ النَّهْدِ في عُصْنِ باني نَضيرِ
وناظرةٌ كُجِلَتْ بِالفَتورِ

1. Here is a bosomy beauty, whose full breasts are sprinkled with 'abīr powder.

2. She is well aware that no one picks her pomes from the tender moringa branch.

3. Her cheek is of voluptuous velvet, and she has a sweet, languid eye.¹⁶

Sight, smell and touch in the first three verses and, again, in the next three ones:

4 وَتَبَسِيمٌ عَن أَفْحوانِ ثُرَيكِ
5 كَأَنَّ عَدائِرها المُرسلاتِ
6 قَبِيْتُ الأَطفُ أَلحَاطِها
على نُورِهِ الشَّمسُ إِشراقَ نورِ
أَساوِدُ سابِحةً في عَدِيرِ
كما رُمْتُ تَأنيسَ ظَبِي نَفورِ

¹⁵ Arabic text: 'Abbās (1994: 121-122); Italian translation: Licitra (2021a: 147, 149).

¹⁶ Arabic text: Ibn Ḥamdīs ed. (1898: 152); Italian translation: Ibn Ḥamdīs ed. (1998: 187), Borruso (1994: 78).

4. She smiles and discloses chamomile flowers, which even the brightness of the sun pales beside their splendor.
5. Her loose braids look like black snakes swimming in a pond.
6. I went ahead softening her temper, as if I would tame a wild gazelle.

However, in this second section, the transition from one sensory sphere to another is more immediate, thanks to the use of rhetorical devices that intervene simultaneously at a phonetic and a semantic level. In fact, in v. 5, the visual illusion conveyed by the similitude of the braids and the snakes is remarked by an acoustic resemblance, engendered by the words *ghadā'ir* 'braids' and *ghadīr* 'pond.' The author also enhances the vividness of the image, by combining the paronomasia (*tajnīs*) with a chromatic note: the elliptical presence of the black colour, evoked by the plural 'asāwīd (snakes) that recalls the root S-W-D and all its semantic field.

A similar strategy occurs in the following verse: although the poet involves the wide semantic spectrum of the verb *lāṭafa*, that brings again to the audience's mind the idea of the caress, actually, the association with the plural noun 'akhlāq (sing. *khulq*), 'temper, manners,' redirects towards the sense of 'flatter, sweeten, soften.' Therefore, as in the first three verses, the tactile sensations are here confined to a distal approach between the lover and the beloved.

In the absence of a real contact, the sense of taste intervenes in the verses 7 and 8 - tightly bounded together by an *enjambement* - thus marking the point of maximal proximity: the conventional metaphor of the wine cup blends together tactile, gustative, olfactory and visual sensations:

بِمِسْكِ ذَكِيٍّ وَشَهْدِ مَشُورٍ إِذَا بَرَدَ الدُّرُّ فَوْقَ النُّحُورِ	7 وَمَا قَهْوَةٌ صَفَّقَتْ لِلصَّبُوحِ 8 بِأَطْيَبِ مِنْ فَمِهَا رِيْقَةً
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7. Never was poured a wine for the morning drinking, with intense musk and pure fresh honey,
8. more delicious than the saliva of her mouth, when cool pearls rest on her breasts.

Sometimes, however, the contact is not just a reverie but rather an unforgettable memory that leaves on the lover a lasting impression. The mere recollection of the tactile sensations, verbalized throughout vivid images and synesthetic metaphors, renews the perception of the beloved body and revives the desire, as in this epigram by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṭūbī, that even evokes the friction generated by the lover's silver beard over the tender sideburn of the young beloved:

1 قام عذري بعذار¹⁷ ه فما أَعْظَمَ كربي
2 قانتُ لما أن تبدَّى نبئُهُ سبحانَ ربي
3 أحرقتُ فضةً خدي¹⁸ لكِ لكي يُحرقَ قلبي

1. My sideburn rested on his one, thus my torment increased.
2. I said: “Why did his sprout appear? May God be praised!
3. The silver rubbed against your cheeks so that my heart would inflame.”¹⁹

Despite the brevity of the text, the embodied sensations of this passionate love encounter are verbalized through a synesthetic account, by passing from the visual sphere of the colours up to the evocation of the movement and the repeated contact, with details that make tangible, physical, the corporeality of the involved subjects.

4. Sensory interference altering the self-perception of the lover's body

As we have observed, synesthesia interprets different perceptual stimuli interfering one another; therefore, the verbal transposition of this process necessarily involves mental images which simultaneously appeal to the different sensory areas. Along with the distorted perception of the beloved's body, an almost immediate side effect is the altered self-perception of the lover. His body, seat of the sensory receptors that register all the perceptual stimuli, is at the same time involved in the love encounter as a perceived object.

Obviously, the more intense the sensation experienced becomes, the more the verbal report of the poet tends towards an altered representation of his own corporeality. In fact, both when the lover is in the throes of passion, and when he is devastated by the sufferings of abandonment, his self-portrait takes shape by means of deep recovered sensations, mostly tactile, which depicts the intensity of his feelings. For example, these verses by al-Ballanūbī display a range of physical sensations in order to describe the pain of lost love:

3 تَوَقَّدُ نيرانَ الجوى بين أضلعي إذا لاح من بَرَقِ العشاءِ وميض
4 ولم تَبَقَ لي إلا جُفونَ قَرِيحَةٍ وعَظَمَ بَراهُ الشَّقوقِ فهو مَهِيض

¹⁷ In the edition I used, this word is cut between the first and the second hemistich of the verse.

¹⁸ In the edition I used, this word is cut between the first and the second hemistich of the verse.

¹⁹ Arabic text: ‘Abbās (1994: 186); Italian translation: Licitra (2022: 180).

3. The flames of passion flare up between my ribs when, in the night, the lightning flashes.
4. Nothing else remains for me but wounded eyelids and bones, eroded and broken by the torment.²⁰

Or in this other verse by the same author:

عُصْنٌ مَرُوحٍ مِنَ الطَّرْفَاءِ مَهْضُوبٌ 4 كَأَنَّ أَجْفَانَ عَيْنِي مِنْ تَذَكُّرِهِ

4. As if the lids of my eyes, when I remember him, turn into branches of a tamarisk, trembling in the wind, dripping with rain.²¹

In both cases, al-Ballanūbī proposes complex synesthetic metaphors based on the comparison between inner and outer events. The first one exploits the similarity between two destructive forces - the fire and the thunderbolt - thus comparing the pain of the lover with a violent storm. The second example provides an interesting combination of rhetorical figures, since it involves different sense modalities in the anthropomorphization of the natural event, a transformation that takes place through a complex analogy (*tamthīl*) that makes use of a harmonious choice of images (*murā'āt al-naẓīr*).

Indeed, the comparison between the passionate love and a blazing fire often recurs among the tactile sensations involved in the poetic account of the sexual intercourse. According to this tradition, Ibn Ḥamdīs develops an elegant synesthetic metaphor. As a result of the burning passion, the arms of the lovers melt together, thus creating a precious necklace, as we can observe in these verses from two similar short poems:

كَأَنَّ لَنَا رُوحَيْنِ فِي جَسَدٍ فَرْدٍ 3 خَلَعْنَا عَلَى الْأَجْيَادِ أَطْوَاقَ أَنْزَعِ
بَرِيحٍ وَنَارٍ مِنْ زَفِيرِي وَمِنْ وَجْدِي 4 كَأَنَّ عُنَاقَ الْوَصْلِ لَأَحْمَ بَيْنَنَا

2. we made necklaces with our arms, as if we had two souls in the same body,
3. as if the intercourse welded us, by means of my burning love sighs.²²

²⁰ Arabic text: ‘Abbās (1994: 110); Italian translation: Licitra (2021a: 219-220).

²¹ Arabic text: ‘Abbās (1994: 101-102); Italian translation: Licitra (2021a: 191-192).

²² Arabic text: Ibn Ḥamdīs, ed. (1898: 110); Italian translation: Ibn Ḥamdīs ed. (1998: 155); Borruso (1994: 80-81).

and again

عَتِي قِلَادَةَ سَاعِدِ غَيْلِ 7 نَزَعْتُ كَنْزَ عِ الْرُوحِ مِنْ جَسَدِي
شَرِقَ الْفَضَاءُ بِكَثْرَةِ السَّيْلِ 8 فَهَضْتُ أَشْرَقُ بِالْذَّمُوعِ كَمَا

7. she tore from me - and I felt my soul being torn out - the necklace of a plump hug,
8. and I went away, drenched in tears, flowing like streams in the plain.²³

This refined metaphor, based on a metonymy, implies a chronological progression and depicts the flow of time through the current effects of a past event, the love encounter, and the harbinger of the future, the farewell.

The idea of time is also involved in the gradual transition from one sense to another, as we can observe in the following short poem by Ibn Ḥamdīs:

وَمَنْ وَاصلُهُ جَنَّةُ الْمُتَنَعِمِ 1 وَطَيِّبَةِ الْأَنْفَاسِ تَحْسِبُ وَصلَهَا
وَنَوَّرَ فِيهِ أَفْحُونَ التَّبَسُّمِ 2 تَفْتَحَ وَرْدُ الْخَدِّ فِي غُصْنِ قَدِّهَا
بِلَذَّةِ رَاحٍ وَاقْتِرَاحِ تَرْتُّمِ 3 كَأَنَّ اسْتِمَاعَ اللَّفْظِ مِنْهَا تَعْلُلُ
فَيَسْمَعُ نَجْوَى السِّرِّ مِنْ قَمِيهَا قَمِي 4 تُحَدِّثُنِي بِالسِّرِّ فِي ثَنِي سَاعِدِي
لَهَا فِي يَدِ الْإِصْبَاحِ بَاقَةُ أَنْجَمِ 5 إِذَا مَا التُّرَيَّا رَحَلَ اللَّيْلُ شَمُّهُ
تُعَلُّ بِمِسْكِ فِي رَحِيقِ مُحْتَمِ 6 وَجَدْتُ ثَنَايَا الْعَذَابِ كَأَنَّهَا

1. What a fragrant breath! You believe the intercourse with her, and her joining you, are a Paradise of beatitude.
2. The rose of the cheek opens on her person's branch, and there blooms the chamomile of the smile.
3. Listening to her word is a pleasant amusement, like the wine's delight or of an improvised singing.
4. As I hold her close to me, she tells me her secrets and my mouth collects her intimate confidences.
5. When the Pleiades adorn the higher part of the night sky, [offering] a bunch of stars in the dawn's hands,
6. I find that her are teeth sweet as if they were infused with old wine blended with musk.²⁴

²³ Arabic text: Ibn Ḥamdīs, ed. (1898: 319); Italian translation: Ibn Ḥamdīs ed. (1998: 305); Borruso (1994: 79-80).

²⁴ Arabic text: Ibn Ḥamdīs, ed. (1898: 359); Italian translation: Ibn Ḥamdīs ed. 1998: 335); Borruso (1994: 81-82).

The use of synesthetic metaphors in this ode is paramount, as a strategic tool to gradually pass through the five sensory spheres: the transition starts at v. 1 with the scent of the beloved breath (smell) that turns into the image of blooming flowers in the v. 2 (sight and smell); sounds and flavours enrich the sensorial experience in the v. 3 (hearing and taste) shortening the distances between the two lovers, until reaching the embrace proximity and the share of whispered secrets in the v.4 (touch and hearing). The v. 5 determines a pause, as a temporal interlude that recounts the passing of time, without interfering with the lovers' intimacy, thus preparing the audience for the sensorial climax occurring in the v. 6 that resumes, in the depiction of a passionate kiss, a multi-sensorial weaving (touch, taste and smell).

5. Conclusions

As we have observed in all the aforementioned examples, synesthesia tells us how the interference among different sensory perceptions occurs in the love experience. These texts—narrating the yearning for love, the passion or the languish of the lover—reflect the sensory theories of the authors' times, strongly grounded on the Aristotelian doctrine *On Sense and What Is Sensed* (St. Thomas Aquinas, ed. 2005). Tracing the cultural history of senses in the Islamic world, Christian Lange recently pointed out that, in the classical period, both theologians and philosophers have pondered over the role of the 'inner senses' (*al-ḥawāss al-bāṭina*) of the soul in the sensorial perception (Lange 2022a: 2). For instance, the *Rasā'il al-Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (*Treatises of the Brethren of Purity*) analyses the process of perception of the *sensibilia* (*maḥsūsāt*), distinguishing between *al-ḥiss*, 'the change produced in the temperament of the senses by their contact with the *sensibilia*,' and *al-iḥsās*, 'the consciousness of the sensory faculties of these changes in the quality of the temperaments of the senses' (Mattock 1986).²⁵

Also al-Ġāḥiẓ (m. 869) focuses on the five senses and takes into account the concept of sensory cooperation as a specific feature of the way human beings perceive the world. Precisely, he speaks of *ta'āwun*, that means 'combining of forces and efforts.' In fact, according to his thought,

perception tends to be based on the combined activity of the sensory organs, rather than resulting from a single sense [...] Furthermore, he stresses that sensory perception, regardless of the number of senses that are involved, is an integrated, unified experience [...] As al-Jāḥiẓ explains in the Book of the Living, "the senses cannot convey anything to

²⁵ On the *Treatises of the Brethren of Purity* see also Baffioni (1998, 2008).

the soul in the way of sound, sight, taste, smell or touch, unless the intellect moves it to either accept or reject it” (al-Jāhīz 1938-45, vol. 3, 288; 10-289. 2) (Lange 2022b: 29).

Therefore, if the basis of sensory learning is the interaction between each sense organ and its relevant external stimuli, the active involvement of the soul is ultimately responsible for the process’ ability to convey complex sensations. As a result, it is the external world that induces a change in the perceiving subject, a transformation that starts in a specific receptor organ but may impact both his body and mind as a whole. As regards the love poetry, the matter becomes even more specific, since the object of perception coincides with the figure of the beloved. Passing through the doors of senses, the perception of the beloved’s body induces great transformations in the lover, also affecting his capability to perceive the external world and, even, himself. In the poetic account, it is often expressed in a specular portrayal that puts together the beloved’s body - fragmented in a series of sensorial stimuli - and the lover - depicted by means of the effects produced by such a sensorial experience. Hence, synesthesia often intervenes in these texts as a compositional strategy that allows the poets to convey, through their words, sensations and emotions weaving each other and gathering around the love experience.

The verses examined from the Siculo-Arabic repertoire seem to comply with this principle, since the verbal transposition of the love experience blends perceptions and reaction suggested by the different sensory stimuli. In fact, all the *ghazal* poems presented, provide a wide range of situations and text types from different authors and moments, all sharing this way to depict both the beloved and the lover appearance through synesthetic metaphors. In this respect, the extensive use of rhetorical devices acquires an additional function. Indeed, along with the figures of speech affecting the semantic level of the text, there are also assonances and rhymes, phonetic repetitions and rhythmic patterns that intervene in each act of reading and declaim. Therefore, the audience is attracted into a multi-sensorial experience:²⁶ reveries and memories recalled by a multi-layered text that entails symbolic references and interlaces the figurative use of words with sound effects, suggests sensation and, actually, turns the verbal transposition of the love encounter into a vivid experience.

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²⁶ For a theoretical framework on cognitive constructs and the reader’s perception of a poetic text see Semino (1997).

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