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THE GENRE OF LOVE POETRY IN THE SONG OF SONGS AND THE PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIAN ODES

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Reading the pre-Islamic Arabian Odes,[1] also known as "Al-Mu'allaqāt",[2] written during the two centuries preceding the rise of Islam, one's thoughts are engrossed by the fact that parts of these Odes—namely, the "Erotic Preludes"—are similar to the Song of Songs.[3] This fact makes one pause and ask why, and how this has happened.

To understand the Song we need to ask two questions: first, what were the origins of the Hebrews, where did they come from, and how did their literature evolve? Second, is the pre-Islamic literature of any help in our understanding of the Song?

Who are the Hebrews?

In response to this first question we must summarise what the Bible says about the Hebrews and their origins. 1) As part of their confession of faith, according to the book of Deuteronomy, after settling in Canaan, the Hebrews were told to say: "My father was a wandering (wild) 'Aramean...',[4] indicating their nomadic origins. 2) The Aramean and North Arabian roots of the Hebrews are also confirmed in the book of Genesis. In Gen 24.4 Abraham commands his servant to go to his country and his own kindred to find a wife for his son Isaac.[5] 3) We find the names of North Arabian tribes among the offspring of Abraham through his son Ishmael (Gen 25.13-15). 4) The names of expensive spices of non-Palestinian, mainly South Arabian, origins found in the Song (4.12-14) might indicate that in the heyday of Judean trade with Yemen the Hebrews were in contact with Arabs.[6] 5) Scholars have confirmed that the Aramean forefathers of the Hebrews came out of the Arabian desert, the habitat of the Arab Bedouin nomads.[7]

Why study the pre-Islamic Arabian Odes?

In most parts of the Near East, Bedouins and peasants lived in happy isolation for thousands of years. In the case of Arab Bedouins this was not only due to their geographic isolation but also to their philosophic attitude toward change.[8] There are clear and fixed attitudes, relationships, responses and value judgements that have not changed for centuries. This isolation lasted until the introduction of modern means of communication after the First World War. In order to understand the Song in its true setting, it is valuable for us to study the love poetry of the

1 In Arabic "Al-Qasida", plural "Al-Qasā'id", henceforth Odes.

2 Singular "Al-Mu'allaqa", literally, "The Hanging Poems", because they were hung on the Qa'aba.

3 Henceforth, Song.

4 Deut 26.5; Morris S. Seale, *The Desert Bible* (London 1974), 2f, says "wild" instead of "wandering".

5 See Gen 25.30; 28.2.

6 Chaim Rubin, "The Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry," *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* (1973) III, 216f; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, in *The Anchor Bible* vol 7C (Garden City 1977) 31f.

7 Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (London 1958) 34ff; Sabatino Moscati, *The Semites in Ancient History* (Cardiff 1959) 28ff; H.H. Rowley, "Israel, History of," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York 1962) II 750ff; Seale 3ff.

8 S. Moscati, 33f; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids 1976) 31; Seale 21.

Bedouin Arabs of the pre-Islamic period. The Arabs, like the Hebrews, were people who originated in the desert, had a tribal socio-economic structure, and shared the same literary and cultural background. It is true that the Odes were written down some seven to eight centuries later than the Song of Songs, but the developed form in which these Odes were recorded indicates that, like the Song, they had a long period of evolution behind them.[1]

In studying the Song a number of questions arise. When was it written and why? Does it have one author or a number of unknown authors? Is it a unified piece of work or is it composite? Is it influenced by the literature of other neighbouring peoples and their love poetry—such as the Egyptian, Assyro/Babylonian, Sumerian, Ugaritic and Arab peoples—or is it original and unique? These questions have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere, and will not concern us here.[2]

The Song is a literary masterpiece that took decades, perhaps even centuries, to come into existence; each period in its evolution has left an imprint on the present form of the work. It is unabashedly erotic and sensuous. Solomonic authorship is debatable, though there could be parts that go back to Solomonic times.[3] The many geographical references in the book (e.g., to Jerusalem and Engedi in Judea; to Damascus, Tirzah, Sharon, Carmel, Lebanon, Amana, Hermon in northern locations; and to Gilead, Heshbon and Qedar[4] in the Transjordan and northern Arabia, indicate the diversity of its geographical background. These geographic allusions, however, do not necessarily indicate the origins of the poems.

There are seven famous pre-Islamic Arabian Tarafa Odes[5] written by seven great literary masters of Arab poetry: Imru u'l-Qays, Zuhayr, Labid, 'Antara, 'Amr ibn Kulthum and al-Harith. These Odes adhere to a strictly set rhyme scheme, sequence of images and subject matter. They vary in length from twenty-five to one hundred couplets. The Odes in their literary form are composed of three parts. Each starts with an "Erotic Prelude," omitted if the genre is a lament or satire. This is followed by a description of life in the desert with its fauna and flora. Finally comes the main body of the Ode, a kind of panegyric of the patron.

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1 Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London 1964) 92f; Seale 63.

2 For literary parallels between the Song of Songs and Ugaritic texts see W.F. Albright, "Archaic Survivals in the Text of Canticles," *Hebrew and Semitic Studies*, Presented to Godfrey R. Driver, ed. D.W. Thomas and W.D. McHardy (Oxford 1963) 1-7; Pope 75f and for the Mesopotamian parallels 69ff, 77ff; for Egyptian parallels see A. Hermann, *Altägyptische Liebesdichtung* (Wiesbaden 1959); John B. White, *A Study of the Language of Love in the Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Poetry*, SBL, Dissertation Series 38 (Missoula 1978) 67f; Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison 198); for modern Arabic parallels see Stephen H. Stephan, "Modern Palestinian Parallels to the Song of Songs," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 2 (1922) 199-227; Pope 56-66.

3 See Rabin 216f; Pope 31f.

4 In 1.5 the word "Shelomoh" is parallel to "Qedar," and is normally rendered by Solomon. I would have preferred to render it as "Shalmah," a Southern Arabian Bedouin tribe (see Pope 320f; Fox 101f), which is contrasted to Qedar, a North Arabian tribe, linked to one of the sons of Ishmael (cf Gen 2.13; Is 21.16; 42.11; Jer 2.10; 49.28). Targum Onkelos in Gen 15.19 identifies the Kenites as being the Shalmaites, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis*, M. Aberbach and B. Grossfeld, Denver 1982, 94f.

5 "Al-Sab'a Al-Tiwī, meaning "The Seven Long Odes;" others think there are Ten Golden Odes "Al-Qasā'id Al-'Ashar." See *An Exposition of the Ten Qasā'id,* by Imām Abī Zakariyā Yahya Ibn 'Alī Al-Tabrīzī (in Arabic), ed. and corrected by 'Abd Al-Salām Al-Hawafī (Beirut 1987); Imru U'l-Qays, *Poetic Selections* (in Arabic), by Fuad Afrām Al-Bustānī, in *Al-Rawā'i* (Beirut 1947) 397.

6 For this poem I, and poems referred to below, see Appendix.

Our main interest lies in the Erotic Preludes of the Odes. These Preludes themselves follow a fixed pattern in five parts,[1] all of which are found in the more developed Odes, though not in all. The best known and most famous of the pre-Islamic poets is Imru u'l-Qays[2] from whose Ode I will quote extensively. His successors all tried to copy his style and imagery. I will also quote relevant verses from the other pre-Islamic Arabian Odes, mainly from their Erotic Preludes.[3]

Imr opens his Ode with a scene at a deserted encampment where he had earlier met and loved 'Onaiza:

> Stop, my two companions, and let us bemoan
> the memory of a beloved and her camp site, at the falling sands around
> the curvature (lit., at Siqt al-Liwa), between al-Dakhūl and Hawmal.[4]

He then describes his beloved 'Onaiza, the circumstances of their meeting and their great love.[5] He goes on to tell of the great danger he faced in meeting Fatima, a member of the tribe which was at war with his own clan;[6] how he furtively took her into the desert; how she covered their footprints in the sand by trailing her garment behind them, and how in the desert they had a night of great pleasure.[7]

Both the Song and the Erotic Prelude of the Ode of Imr originate in a real life situation. Both explore the same subject, namely, sexual love between man and woman. Both speak of the intensity of love, portraying in vivid terms its attractions and affections. Both seem to accept premarital sex without any inhibition. Human sexual love is treated as being beautiful and desirable in itself, pure and simply human, with no cultic or divine drama involved. Both are interested in the present, leaving aside the past and the future. Both speak about their intoxication with the beauty and charms of the beloved, about overcoming natural and social obstacles to be together, about seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting and watching. From the works of both the Song and the Ode, an identical picture of ideal womanhood emerges, with the emphasis on the woman herself and not on any moral values.

Our main concern, therefore, is to study the Erotic Preludes of the Arabian Odes and their great similarities with the Song in terms of their literary genres and "topoi" or stock themes. Genre is about literary relationships; it shows family resemblances but at the same time it points to divergencies. I am not interested in digging out the generic relationships or inter-dependencies of the two. I think that both are the fruits of the same desert soil and fertile nomadic culture.

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1 1) The author stops at a deserted encampment once occupied by the family of his beloved. 2) He recalls the moment of farewell when she and her clan leave the area to go elsewhere to find pasture for their flocks, indicating a typical nomadic life style. 3) The poet describes the beauty of his beloved and her physical charms. 4) He describes the intimate relation he has had with his beloved. 5) Finally, the author is past his youth and mourns the loss of his virility, so that he is no longer able to make love as he used to.

2 Circa AD 540, henceforth Imr. He was a Qahtani from South Arabia, of the Kinda tribe, a descendant of the ancient kings of Yemen.

3 In the translation of Imru u'l-Qays, I am indebted to Mr Samir Fraih, professor of Arabic Language and Literature at Lyee Rene Cassin, in Strasbourg. He was kind to check the accuracy of the rendering.

4 For this poem 1, and poems referred to below, see Appendix.

5 See under section "III. The poem of teasing" or poem 2.

6 See under section "I. The poem of description,...The motif of beauty," and poem 5.

7 See poems 6-7. There are some translations of these Odes: see William Jones, *Works* (London 1799) IV 245-335; Anne and Wilfrid S. Blunt, *The Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia* (London 1903); M. Shashar, "Song of Songs and Bedouin Love Poetry" (Hebrew) *Beth Mikra* 31 (1985-86) 360-370. I am not quite satisfied with some of these translations. Pre-Islamic Arab poetry is so beautiful and so difficult to translate that it is always helpful to attempt a new rendition.

Before embarking on a discussion of similarities and literary genres, we need to recognise that there are some differences between the Song and the pre-Islamic Arabian Odes: 1) The Song is set in an agricultural and sedentary world with its green orchards, vineyards and the blossoming spring landscape,[1] while the Arabian Odes are set in the austere desert with its wide stretches of sand and dunes. 2) The Song speaks of palaces, houses, drinking places, doors, windows, lattice work, streets, city walls and ramparts, while the Arabian Odes speak of tents, encampments and deserted camp sites. 3) In the Song it is the woman rather than the man who is active, and who reveals her feelings more fully than the man. 4) There are repetitions and recapitulations of different themes in the Song which are not found in the Arabian Odes.[2] To a certain degree, however, the Song indicates the pre-sedentary world in which the Hebrews lived before settling in Palestine: see the references to the tents of Kedar (1.5) and to the desert (3.6; 8.5).

Nevertheless, literary analysis of the Song and the Erotic Preludes of the pre-Islamic Arabian Odes reveals great similarities of genre;[3] one also notes similarities in sub-genres, *topoi* and motifs. We see, for example, poems of praise, wish poems, poems of teasing, poems of self-description or the description of the beloved (known by its Arabic name "Wasf"); we also find poems describing an experience, and poems of admiration.

I. The poem of description, including self-description

The motif of beauty (in the eyes of the Semites) Beauty in the eyes of both the Hebrews and the Arabs was to be fair of complexion. In the Song ivory and alabaster (or marble) are often used to describe parts of the lovers' body (5.14; 7.4). These materials are used not because of their hardness but because of their colour and smoothness. In the Song the girl is apologetic about her dark skin: "She is dark but lovely." She would not have felt the need to complain, or to explain her swarthiness if having tanned skin was the preferred complexion. She was forced by her brothers to tend the family vineyard, hence she could not attend to her own appearance, and her own needs as a woman, or protect herself from the scorching sun. A poem of self-description follows:

Dark-hued I am, and comely...
like the tents of Qedar, like the pavilions of Shalmah.
Do not look down on me because I am dark-skinned,
for the sun has scorched me...(1.5-6).

In the Odes the picture is similar: whiteness is the preferred complexion of a woman, because darkness of skin caused by exposure to the harshness of the sun was regarded as a sign of membership of the lower social class. A poor girl was obliged to work in the sun while the wealthy sat in the shade of the tent.

A woman is like an egg in her
whiteness and quintessence,
no one would wish to seclude her.
I savoured her delights at my leisure.[4]

1 Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs* (San Francisto 1990) 139-161.
2 Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, in *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis 1990) 76-80.
3 Literary genres of love poetry were first presented by Friedrich Horst, "Die Formen des althebräischen Liebesliedes," *Orientalistische Studien*, in *Festschrift Enno Littmann zu seinem 60. Geburtstag* (Munich 1935) 43-54.
4 Poem 5.

Her body was lean and white...[1]
The complexion of her body is like the colour of an egg
of an ostrich, it is neither white nor yellow.
She has that hue because she imbibed thirst-quenching
water, despite its meagre quantity.[2]

'Antara ibn Shaddād al-'Absi, another famous pre-Islamic Arab poet, warrior and lover (born circa AD 615), was the son of an Ethiopian slave woman. His father had captured her during a raid, and she bore 'Antara who was dark like his mother. He was also born with a split lower lip. His father did not recognise him. He suffered great humiliation on account of the colour of his skin. The son of a slave woman was a slave unless the father accepted him as his son. When he grew up, he took care of his father's camels. He fell in love with his cousin 'Ablah. According to Arab tradition, cousins have the first claim to a girl's hand, but he was turned down. One day, an enemy tribe attacked their clan, his father Shaddād ordered him to enter the battle against the enemy. He refused saying, "A slave cannot fight; he can only milk the camels and tie their udder." His father then said, "Attack and you are a free man." He went into battle, they were victorious, and he claimed the hand of his darling 'Ablah.[3]

The motif of love-sickness The effect of love on the partners is very strong. This is indicated in introspection, with powerful emotions and feelings expressed toward each other. It is difficult to give a distinctive literary form to such poems. They are usually a monologue, a kind of self-revelation. The girl tries to express the intensity and total influence of the emotion of love in words spoken as though to herself. This intense feeling makes her literally sick:

O daughters of Jerusalem, I adjure you,
if you find my lover, what will you tell him?
Tell him I am sick with love (5.8).

—something which confirms what she had said in 2.5b. Because of her sickness, she is unable to control herself. Figuratively speaking, love kills her:

Love is as strong as death,
its jealousy as fierce as hell (8.6-7).

On the other hand, the boy feels the dangerous and threatening influence of the girl. In his heart both attraction and fear coexist. The theme of fear instilled by the girl is described as follows:

Turn your eyes away from me,
for they disturb me (6.5).

The power of the eyes over the boy has been expressed earlier:

You have ravished my heart
with one glance of your eyes...(4.9).

But no matter how disturbing her eyes, he still wants to be with her.

In the Ode of Imr we see a similar picture. He recognises that the love of the girl has killed him and that he is no more able to control himself but would do whatever she commanded:

1 Poem 9; see also poem 10.
2 Poem 15.
3 *'Antara Ibn Shaddād*, Selected Poems, by Fuad Afrām Al-Bustānī, in *Al-Rawā'i'*, (Beirut 1947) no. 27, 389-391; Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani, *Kitab al-Aghani* (Bulaq 1284) VII 149f; Hitti 96; Seale 59f.

It is beguiling of you to think
that your love has killed me.
It is true that whatever you command,
my heart will fulfil.[1]

Her eyes like arrows have pierced his heart shattering it into pieces:

Your tears are there to land blows
with your eyes like two arrows,
at the heart of my heart, already shattered.[2]

But his blinding passion still forces him to take great risks to be with her, something which the girl recognises and teases him with, because the boy cannot control himself:

Whatever your ruse, your blinding
passion has not left you.[3]

The description of the couch In the Song of Songs the place where lovers are having their most intimate relation is described as being verdant: "Our couch is green" (1.16). The Revised English Bible renders this by "Our couch is shaded with branches," a translation which seems preferable. "'Ars" designates a couch that could be used for feasting (Amos 6.4), sleeping or making love (Prov 7.16). In this verse there is no couch, but metaphorically, the ground on which they lay, or the crevice in which they found themselves, was hidden from inquisitive eyes:

Put me to bed among fruit clusters,
spread me (my bed) among apple trees... (1.16).[4]

In the Ode of Imr we see a similar description. It is when he and his beloved are out of the encampment and hidden in a crevice covered with dunes:

When we crossed safely the yard of the encampment,
turning aside into a dry sand crevice
hidden by intertwined dunes,
I pulled her to me by the hair of her temple,
with her full flank she leaned on me.
She was slender of waist, with a well shaped body.[5]

II. Metaphorical descriptions

There are a number of interesting literary *topoi* in both the Song and the pre-Islamic Arabian Odes. These *topoi* are so close to one another that one is tempted to see some generic relationship. As I said above, there is no evidence for such a generic link, but both are the fruits of the same cultural sub-soil.

The *topos* of the gazelle One of the animals that fascinated the ancient Semites, both Hebrews and Arabs, is the gazelle. In the Song the girl compares her beloved

1 Poem 3.
2 Poem 4.
3 Poems 7 and 6; see below section "Poem of Teasing".
4 Against the rendering of most commentators and the translations, I prefer the rendering of Michael Fox with a slight modification—instead of "apricot" I prefer "apple trees". The young woman is lovesick and needs rest. "Smk" here in the piel comes from "smikah" which is rendered in some MSS by a similar word meaning a rug or a blanket. In this context, as Fox indicates, it could mean "putting to bed" or preparation of a bed (Ps 3.6). "Rpd" basically means "to spread", indicating preparation to go to bed. See Fox 106, 108-109.
5 Poem 8.

to a gazelle. The gazelle is well known for its grace, beauty, sensuality, speed and vulnerability.

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag (2.9).
Turn, my beloved, and be like
a gazelle or a young stag ... (2.17; 8.14).

The Ode of Imr also compares his beloved to a gazelle:

She turned aside, revealing a velvety complexion.
She cast at me a look like that of a gazelle,
casting a protective eye on her young in danger.[1]

In this last poem, a figurative meaning can be discerned. The young gazelle in danger is no one else but Imr, who had defied the many guards and keepers who were guarding his beloved with a vengeful eye, ready to catch him.[2] If they had done so, the guards would have killed him. She is aware of this danger, and therefore looks at him with a protective eye.

Her long neck was like the neck of a white antelope.[3]

Another well known pre-Islamic poet Tarafa (born circa AD 560), says of his beloved:

My beloved has blue eyes and red lips,
a mature gazelle, stretching her long neck
she eats the fruit of the arak tree.[4]

Finally, 'Aus ibn Hajar, a Yemenite (circa AD 610), describes his beloved in the following words:

I loved an elegant white gazelle.

one to make a stern man die with laughter.[5]

The *topos* of the dove Another animal that attracts the Semites is the dove. The qualities of doves are gentleness and bashfulness. Doves are the most enticing of all animals, noted for their affection for their mate and young ones. Doves are associated with love goddesses. The epithet is often used as a term of affection. In the Song it is used as a metaphor. The man addresses the woman three times as "my dove" (2.14, 5.2 and 6.9); twice he compares her eyes to doves (1.15 and 4.1), a metaphor that the woman takes up in 5.12. The metaphorical use of dove for the eyes could function as vehicles of passion:

O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face and hear your voice (2.14).
Open to me, my darling, my love,
my dove, my perfect one (5.2a).
My dove, my perfect one is unique,
the only child of her mother (6.9a).

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1 Poem 9.
2 See under section "II. The poem of yearning: Description of an experience (The guards)" and poems 6-9.
3 Poem 10.
4 Tarafa Wa Labīd, *Al-Mu'allaqān*, by Fuad Afrām Al-Bustānī, *Al-Rawā'i'* (Beirut 1945) no. 24, 218; Seale 60.
5 Seale 60.

Humayed ibn Thawr, another of the pre-Islamic poets, has a beautiful verse where he compares his beloved to a dove:

My longing has been moved by a dove;
it calls and coos, sad and happy.
A ringed turtle-dove whose necklace
owes nothing to the craft of the artisan.[1]

The *topos* of the garden In the Song the girl is described as being a locked garden which the young man wants to enter. The enclosed garden is a metaphor for the woman, where he alone has entry:

A garden enclosed is my sister, my bride,
a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed (4.12).
I have come to my garden, my sister, my bride.
I gather my myrrh with spices (5.1a).

The image of an enclosed garden as a metaphor for the beloved is well expressed in the verse from 'Antara ibn Shaddād:

She is an ungrazed meadow,
no animal dung had spoiled it,
nor have men transited or befouled it.[2]

The *topos* of the eye The power of the eye is a common *topos* in love poems. The eyes in biblical usage and in Arab literature is not a simple physical organ of sight but a means of expressing emotions and inner sentiment. A glance is more than looking. The eyes become vehicles of restlessness, warm feelings and desire (see above under Dove). The eyes of the beloved have a spell that destroys and ravishes the heart. The central role of the heart in love is well attested in all literature.

You have ravished my heart, my darling,
you have ravished my heart,
with a glance of your eyes,
with a turning of your neck.[3]
Turn your eyes away from me,
because they captivate me (6.5).

Compare these words with the verse from Imr quoted above under "The motif of love-sickness", where he speaks of her eyes as being two arrows that have pierced his heart.[4]

The *topos* of perfume One could say that perfumes and fragrances, as much as the eyes and the heart, have a role to play in love poems in all literature. Yet in both the Song and the pre-Islamic Arabian Odes the description of fragrance and their attractions are very similar.

The fragrance of your perfume is sweet,
Your name is perfume which is poured out (1.3; 4.10b).
My beloved is for me a sachet of myrrh
A cluster of henna blossom (1.13a, 14a).
Who is this coming up from the desert, like a column

1 Seale 61.
2 'Antara 431; Seale 59.
3 4.9, "With a turning of your neck" is my translation.
4 Poems 4 and 9.

of smoke from burning of myrrh and frankincense,
with all the fragrant powders of the merchant? (3.6)
The scent of your garments is like
the fragrance of Lebanon (4.12).

Compare the words of the Song (3.6), with the verse from 'Antara ibn Shaddād:

From her mouth effused the fragrance of musk,
like the perfume spreading from the bag
of a merchant of powders.[1]

Writing about his beloved after the night they were together in the crevice, Imr speaks of the perfume of her body:

At daybreak, while she was still asleep,
her resting place effused the aroma of her body,
as though it were sprinkled with musk.[2]

II. The poem of yearning

Description of an experience (The guards) The intensity of the young woman's yearning for her absent lover is best expressed in an experience which she describes in great detail (3.2-4a, 5.4, 6-7). Her love for the young man forces her to go out twice during the night in a dangerous and futile search for her lover. There is an emotional and a physical response. The night is the time of dangers, but she is ready to face them all.

My beloved put his hand through the latch hole,
My heart began to pound because of him ...
For my beloved I rose to open,
But my beloved had turned and gone.
My heart failed me when he spoke.
I looked for him but found him not,
I called him but he answered not.
The sentinels during their round found me.
They beat me, wounded me and stripped off my cloak,
Those sentinels on the walls (5.4, 6-7, cf. 3.2-4).

A similar intense feeling is found in the Ode of Imr. The power of love forces him to face great danger in his desire to be with his beloved Fatima, even though she is being guarded by a great number of watchmen:

When the Pleiades were high in the sky,[3]
like the ornamental belt on the hip of a lady;
I faced the danger of many watchmen on my way to her,
the danger of multitude of sentinels guarding her,
casting their watchful eyes on me.
If they could, they would have killed me.
So I got up and began to walk,
dragging her along with me,
She, in turn, was pulling behind us

1 'Antara 421; Seale 60.
2 Poem 12.
3 That is, around midnight.

her dress decorated with pictures,
to remove the traces of our steps.[1]

III. The Poem of Teasing

One expression of love is teasing. The lovers tease each other in a positive way, expressing their gladness to be with the partner, but at the same time teasing the partner for trying to do so. This is what takes place in Song 1.7-8, where the girl wants to know where the boy would be at noon, where would he be grazing his flocks?

(Girl)
Tell me, my heart's true love,
where do you pasture your flocks?
Where do you rest your sheep at noon?
Why should I be like a woman who veils herself
near the flocks of your companions?
(Boy)
If you do not know, most beautiful of women,
follow the tracks of the flocks,
and graze your kids by the tents of the shepherds.

Compare this with the following verse from the Ode of Imr:

The day I entered the camel's litter,
the litter in which 'Onaiza was seated.
"Woe to you," she said, "why did you enter?
You will force me to march on foot."[2]

This means that the camel will die under their weight, and they will be obliged to go on foot in the sand, a statement which is not true because she is teasing.

I was sleeping but my heart was awake.
Listen! My beloved is knocking:
"Open to me, my darling, my love,
my dove, my perfect one.
My head is wet with dew,
my hair with the mist of the night."
"I have taken off my clothes,
how can I put them on?
I have washed my feet,
how can I soil them again?" (5.2-3)

Compare the girl's teasing found in Song 5.2-3 with the words of Fatima:

When I arrived, she had taken off her clothes to sleep.
The only dress that covered her was the nightgown.
She said, "You will be ensnared, I swear by God,
whatever your ruse,
your blinding passion has not left you."[3]

1 Poems 6 and 8a.
2 Poem 1.
3 Poem 7.

IV. The poem of admiration and praise

In love poetry one of the sub-genres is that of the poem of admiration and praise. In the Song we see admiration and mutual admiration in abundance. Such statements as, "How beautiful you are, my dearest, how beautiful you are" (1.15-16; 2.10, 13b; 4.1, 7; 6.4; 7.6); "Who is this ..." (3.6; 6.10; 8.5); "No wonder the maidens love you" (1.3b); "How right they are to adore you" (1.4b); "I delight to sit in his shade" (2.3b); "Show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face lovely" (2.14); "My beloved is mine and I am his" (2.16); "How delightful is your love" (4.10; 1.2); "You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, majestic as troops with banners" (6.4)—all expressing admiration and praise. One of the best poems of admiration in the Song is the following:

Sixty queens there could be, eighty concubines,
maidens without number; but my dove, my perfect one,
is unique, the only child of her mother...
Who is this that comes forth like the dawn,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,
majestic as the stars in heaven? (6.8-9a, 10)

Note how this compares with the admiration expressed in the Ode by Imr toward his beloved. After passing the whole night with her, Imr describes the age of his beloved by indicating the kind of nightgown she was wearing. He contrasts it with two kinds of nightgowns: a "dir'" which is the nightgown of a mature woman, and a "mijwal", the night chemise of a little girl, implying that she was neither a mature woman to wear a "dir'", nor a young girl to wear a "mijwal", but a woman in her youth, ripe to make love. She was so beautiful that he could have sat and watched her for a long while with great pleasure.[1]

When one sees her elegant shape wearing
neither the long nightshirt (dir') of a mature woman,
nor the short (mijwal) chemise of a young girl;
at an adolescent like her one could look
for a long while, with utmost delight.[2]

V. The *Wasf*

We have already touched on the sub-genre of the Poem of Praise. The lovers often praise one another in dialogue. In the Song both the girl and the boy use the same images and metaphors to describe and praise one another. *Wasfs* are different from such praises. In *Wasf* we see a poem, mostly composed of metaphors, in which one lover describes and praises the partner's body part by part—head, hair, eyes, cheeks, lips, teeth, neck, breast, etc. In three of the four *Wasfs* (4.1-7, 5.10-16 and 6.4-10), the description starts from the head and goes down, while in the fourth case (7.2-10) it moves in the opposite direction. In the first *Wasf* it is the boy who describes and praises parts of the body of his beloved.[3]

How beautiful you are, my darling, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,

1 See also under section "V. The *Wasf*".
2 Poem 14.
3 This *Wasf* is picked up a second time in 6.5b-7.

streaming down mount Gilead.
Your teeth are a flock of shorn sheep...
Your lips are like a scarlet thread,
and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks behind your veil
are like a slice of pomegranate.
Your neck is like the tower of David...
Your two breasts are like two fawns,
the twins of a gazelle...
You are all beautiful, my darling,
there is no blemish in you (4.1-7).

The *Wasf* starts and ends with the words "How beautiful you are..." found in 1.15, forming an *inclusio*. In the second *Wasf* it is the girl who describes her lover. She starts again with the head and goes down describing the parts of the boy's body. Poetic euphemisms and double-entendre are well utilised by both the boy and the girl.

His head is finest gold, his hair
palm fronds, black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves by the water streams
washed in milk, mounted like a jewel.
His cheeks are like beds of spices,
which yield fragrance.
His lips are like lilies
that drip liquid myrrh.
His arms are like rods of gold
adorned with jewels.
His loins are like polished ivory[1]
decorated with sapphires.
His legs are like pillars of marble
set in gold sockets.
His stature is like the (cedar) of Lebanon.
His mouth is most sweet
and he is altogether desirable (5.11-16a).

In the last *Wasf* (7.1-7) it is the boy who describes and praises the physical charms of the girl— parts of her anatomy which clothing would cover—starting from the foot upwards to the thighs, navel, belly, breasts, etc. In this *Wasf* the use of subtle imagery heightens the erotic effect.

How beautiful are your feet in sandals,
O Prince's daughter!
The curves of your thighs (haunches or buttocks?)[2]
are like ornaments,
the work of an artist's craft.

1 The Hebrew word usually refers to internal organs of digestion and procreation, but in this context it cannot mean the same; it should refer to external anatomy of the man, most probably the male genital region. Murphy thinks it refers to the "belly" or more specifically to the "loins". Pope 543; see also Murphy 72 n305.

2 The Hebrew word is a hapax and could mean "curves", see Pope 615; Murphy 182; Fox 158.

Your navel (vulva?) is a round bowl:[1]
may it never lack mixed wine.
Your belly is a heap of wheat,
surrounded with lilies.
Your breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle (7.1-3).

Although the *Wasfs* in the Song are far bolder in their use of metaphors than the Arabian Odes, nevertheless the praise and description in both closely resemble each other in structure and content. Compare the above with the descriptions in the Ode of Imr:

She was slender of waist,
with a well shaped body.[2]
Her body was lean and white,
her belly firm and even,
her breasts were smooth
like shining silver.[3]
Her long neck was like the neck of a white antelope.
When she stretched her neck, it was so elegant,
it did not need any ornament.
Her pitch-dark and luxuriant hair adorned her back,
which were like the intertwined fronds of a palm.[4]
Her haunches (buttocks) are pretty and firm
like the entwined braid of a rope,
her legs are like the trunk of a palm
which has imbibed the water to the full.[5]
She touched with her soft and tender finger-tips,
as though they were the spring
earthworms of the Dhabi valley.[6]

The Ode of Imr tends to be more literal and graphic; for example, long neck, white body, smooth breasts, etc. The profusion of metaphorical comparisons found in the Song are fewer in the Ode; only some images allow scope to the reader's imagination: "... finger tips... spring earthworm," "buttocks, like braided rope...," "legs, like trunks of palm," "dark hair, like intertwined fronds of palm." In these cases, however, they match the extravagant similes and metaphors of the Song.

Appendix

An Exposition of the Ten Qasāi'd by Imām Abī Zakariyā Yahya Ibn 'Ali Al-Tabrīzī, edited and corrected by 'Abd Al-Salām Al-Hawfī (Beirut 1987)

Poem 1

Stop, my two friends, and let us bemoan
the memory of a beloved and her camp site, at the falling

1 The Hebrew word in Ezek 16.2 is used for the umbilical cord, but here I doubt it has the same meaning. It is probably from the Arabic root "sirr" which means "secret", a euphemism for the pudenda. See Pope 617f; Murphy 182.
2 Poem 8d.
3 Poem 9.
4 Poem 10.
5 Poem 12.
6 Poem 13.

sands around the curvature (lit., at Siqt al-Liwa),
between al-Dakhūl and Hawmal.

Poem 2

The day I entered the camel's litter,
the litter in which 'Onaiza was seated,
"Woe to you," she said, "Why did you enter?
You will force me to march on foot."

Poem 3

It is beguiling of you to think
that your love has killed me.
It is true that whatever you command,
my heart will fulfil.

Poem 4

Your tears are there to land blows
with your eyes like two arrows,
at the heart of my heart, already shattered.
[Or literally:]
Indeed what your eyes have shed (that is, your tears),
is there to hit with your two arrows (that is, your eyes),
the innermost part of my heart which is already shattered (that is, dead).

Poem 5

A woman is like an egg in her
whiteness and quintessence,
no one would wish to seclude her.
I savoured of her delights at my leisure.

Poem 6

When the Pleiades were high in the sky (that is, about midnight)
like the ornamental belt on the hips of a lady;
I faced the danger of many watchmen on my way to her,
the danger of a multitude of sentinels guarding her
casting their watchful eyes on me.
If they could they would have killed me.

Poem 7

When I arrived, she had taken off her clothes to sleep,
the only dress that covered her was the nightgown.
She said to me, "You will be ensnared, I swear by God,
whatever your ruse, your blinding passion has not left you."

Poem 8

So I got up and began to walk
dragging her along with me,
she, in turn, was pulling behind us
her dress decorated with pictures,
to remove the traces of our steps.
When we crossed the yard of the encampment,
turning aside into a dry sand crevice
hidden by intertwined dunes,

I pulled her to me by the hair of her temple,
with her full flank she leaned on me.
She was slender of waist, with a well-shaped body.

Poem 9

Her body was lean and white, her belly firm and even,
her breasts were smooth like shining silver (or, like a shining glass).
She turned aside, revealing a velvety complexion.
She cast me a look like that of a gazelle,
casting a protective eye on her young in danger.

Poem 10

Her long neck was like the neck of a white antelope.
When she stretched her neck, it was so elegant,
it did not need any ornament.
Her pitch dark and luxuriant hair adorned her back,
which were like the intertwined fronds of a palm.

Poem 11

Her tresses were thrown up on her head, they were so abundant,
leaving the shorter hair to fall down her temple.

Poem 12

Her haunches are pretty and firm
like the entwined braid of a rope,
her legs are like the trunk of a palm,
which had imbibed the water to the full.
At daybreak, while she was still asleep,
her resting place effused the aroma of her body,
as though it was sprinkled with musk.

Poem 13

She touched with her soft and tender finger tips,
as though they were the spring earthworms of the Dhabi valley
or:
as though they were the soft branches of the Ishil tree.

Poem 14

When one sees her elegant shape wearing
neither the long nightshirt of a mature woman,
nor the short chemise of a young girl;
at an adolescent like her, one could look at
for a long while with utmost delight.

Poem 15

The complexion of her body is like the colour of the egg
of an ostrich, it is neither white nor yellow.
She has that hue because she imbibed the thirst-quenching water,
despite its meagre quantity.