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# Hadith as Oral Literature through Early Islamic Literary Criticism

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## Résumé

Bien que l'étude du ḥadīth ait progressé de manière significative au cours des dernières décennies, plusieurs de ses aspects littéraires restent inexplorés dans la recherche euro-américaine. Le statut épistémologique du ḥadīth au sein de la *balāghah*, la théorie islamique prémoderne de l'analyse littéraire, a reçu peu d'attention de la part des chercheurs. En m'appuyant sur le *Livre de l'inimitabilité et de la concision* (*Kitāb al-I'jāz wa al-Ījāz*), écrit par le critique littéraire Abū Manṣūr al-Tha'ālibī (d. 1038 CE), je montre comment, pendant les étapes orales de son développement, le ḥadīth était une tradition vivante qui était très flexible en termes de formulation et de contenu. J'explore empiriquement l'interface et les interactions entre les supports oraux et écrits dans l'emploi de ḥadīths individuels en tant que textes littéraires, en montrant comment une exploration approfondie de la nature orale du ḥadīth éclaire les approches de la critique littéraire moderne pour apprécier les textes littéraires d'origine orale. En conclusion, je suggère que le discours arabe ancien de la critique littéraire offre une perspective émique (spécifique à la culture) qui favorise la reconnaissance de la réception littéraire du ḥadīth et son intégration profonde dans la culture littéraire islamique.

## Mots-clés

Ḥadīth et littérature islamique – poétique arabe prémoderne – théorie littéraire arabe – littérature islamique comparée

## Abstract

Although the study of ḥadīth (the Prophet's speech) has advanced significantly in recent decades, several of its literary aspects remain unexplored within Euro-American scholarship. The epistemological status of ḥadīth within balāghah, the premodern Islamic theory of literary analysis, has received little scholarly attention. Drawing on *Inimitability and Conciseness* (*Kitāb al-Ijāz wa al-Ījāz*), written by the literary critic, Abū Maṣṣūr al-Thaʿālibī (d. 1038 CE), I show how during the oral stages of its development, ḥadīth was a living tradition that was highly flexible in terms of its wording and content. I empirically explore the interface and interactions between oral and written media in the employment of individual ḥadīths as literary texts, showing how an in-depth exploration of the oral nature of ḥadīth illuminates the approaches of modern literary criticism to appreciate literary texts of oral origin. In conclusion, I suggest that the early Arabic discourse of literary criticism offers an emic (culture-specific) perspective that fosters recognition of the literary reception of ḥadīth and its profound integration into the Islamic literary culture.

## Keywords

Ḥadīth and Islamic literature – premodern Arabic poetics – Arabic literary theory – Islamic comparative literature

### 1 Modern Narrative Literary Criticism and Ḥadīth<sup>1</sup>

In the Islamic world(s), the Qurʾān and ḥadīth are regarded as the two fundamental texts of the Islamic religion. The first represents God's revelation, whereas the second represents sayings extracted from episodes of the Prophet's daily life that were originally transmitted orally by his companions.

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In contrast to the Qur'ānic text, Euro-American scholarship has produced little literary criticism related to ḥadīth. In his comprehensive study of the issue, Stefan Sperl investigated the analogous features of the Arabic concept of adab and the literariness of ḥadīth, considering them as different branches of one literary pursuit sharing the same overarching Islamic metanarrative, a similar conception of the edifying power of speech, and a similar drive to select the best (Sperl 2007: 466). He argues that one of the main structural similarities between adab and ḥadīth is related to “the fact that the compilers of ḥadīth and adab find themselves in an analogous position with respect to their material. Both are confronted with an overwhelming multiplicity of ‘little narratives’ of akhbār which they feel called upon to collect, sift, select and arrange according to particular headings” (Sperl 2007: 464).

Sperl's analysis is based on a profound investigation of the lexical and cultural contexts of each studied ḥadīth to reveal its narrative structure and coherence. By focusing on context, Sperl draws attention to the narrative structures of ḥadīth in comparison to the Western traditions of epic (represented in Homer's Iliad), where the author of the epic considers the past to be both “absolute” and the “single source and beginning of everything good for all later times.” Sperl argues that this aligns with the objectives of ḥadīth narratives, where “the past it depicts is deemed sacred and absolute to such an extent that it came to provide the legal and behavioral standards for all later times” (Sperl 2007: 478). This comparison reveals that the narrative nature of ḥadīth is mostly based on strategies of condensing narratives, which often deliberately expand the narrative.

Sperl considers isnād to be the main narrative device of ḥadīth rather than the body text (*matn*), because isnād allows the text to avoid the gap between the “time of narration” and “narrated time” by allowing readers to have a “direct, authentic and virtually unmediated access to the past.” In contrast, the manifestation of the narrative structure of the epics is mostly related to the aesthetic experience of catapulting the reader into the absolute past (Sperl 2007: 480).

In a broader survey, Sahair El-Calamawy (1983) expressed skepticism about discovering the narrative features that can specify the literary identity of each transmitter based on stylistic analysis. El-Calamawy rationalizes that each ḥadīth should reflect a different phase of the Prophet's life and was surprised by the lack of “any clearly distinguishable differences in narrative content.” She associates this style of single-tone narrative with the absence of any local features to differentiate between the ḥadīths that were produced in Mecca and those that were produced in Medina (El-Calamawy 1983: 310). Daniel Beaumont's (1996) contribution to this genre draws attention to the brevity and function of the narrative form (*khbar*). Applying oral narratology to delve

into the general structure of ḥadīth texts, he notes that the chain of transmission (*isnād*) attached to each ḥadīth account provides a narrative bridge that was carefully constructed to frame the written version of the text in such a way as to raise its authority and preserve the enunciation of its narrative.<sup>2</sup> Marston Speight (2000) has categorized the structure of the text in individual ḥadīth traditions according to the dramatic action conveyed as “action” or “reaction” narratives. Identifying several types, including responses to questions and complaints, or observations, he argues that such narrative forms significantly aid the reconstruction of the reality of historical events and the framing of voices from the past “in their total living context.”<sup>3</sup>

Sebastian Günther (1998) has categorized ḥadīth literature according to its “mode of statement” (as a record or as a narrative) and its “character of portrayal” (a non-fiction or fictional narrative), regardless of whether the content is classified as truth or fiction.<sup>4</sup> His analysis focuses on the fictional function of the narrative, which is determined by the extent of the author’s freedom in employing the element of fictionality within certain textual arrangements. This approach reflects Günther’s reservations about the role of the original narrator (*muhaddith*) versus the ḥadīth transmitter when selecting certain fictional tropes for recounting events. He concludes that each ḥadīth is a literary text because of the existence of three structural elements: (1) its transmission

2 Daniel Beaumont, “Hard-Boiled: Narrative Discourse in Early Muslim Traditions,” *Studia Islamica*, 83 (1996), p. 28.

3 Marston Speight, “Narrative Structure in Ḥadīth,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 59/4 (2000), p. 271.

4 The term “fictional” refers to something that is not true or factual, but somewhat imaginary or invented. In the context of the ḥadīth canon, the term “fictional” can refer to the presence of stories or events that are not based on historical fact but instead on imagination or speculation. These stories may have been created or embellished over time by individuals seeking to promote their own agendas or beliefs. For example, a ḥadīth may be set in a particular place or time that is not historically accurate, or it may include fictional characters or events that are not supported by historical evidence. Typically, there is no universally accepted or well-defined explanation of what qualifies as fiction that scholars can follow, and each scholar may establish their own criteria. To explore further the various fictional elements in Islamicate literature, see N. İpek Hüner Cora, Sam Lasman and Rachel Schine, “Approaching Islamicate fictionalities.” *Postmedieval* 13, (2022), pp. 295-312. To learn more about the concepts of ḥaqīqah/majāz and their application in conveying intricate ideas and emotions through symbolic language, see Wolfhart Heinrichs, “On the Genesis of the Ḥaqīqa-Majāz Dichotomy.” *Studia Islamica*, 59 (1984), pp. 111-40. It’s important to mention that some scholars have rejected the use of any fictional framework to analyze ḥadīth narratives, as exemplified by Fatma Çamur’s approach, who viewed each ḥadīth as a product of historical narratives or what Çamur called “real experience”. Fatma Çamur “Rethinking Ḥadīth (Prophetic Traditions) as ‘Natural’ Narrative: In the Framework of Fludernik’s ‘Natural’ Narratology.” *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 60 (2019), p. 283.

via narration, (2) the method of fictionalized narration, and (3) the process of fictionalization that stimulated the receiver's imagination.<sup>5</sup>

The general thrust of narrative theory has invigorated contemporary analyses of ḥadīth literature, providing a fresh understanding of its thematic functions and literary structures. However, most of these studies have overlooked the importance of establishing a fruitful dialogue with the Arabo-Islamic tradition of literary criticism. This shortcoming has played a role in limiting scholars' access to and appreciation of perceptions of ḥadīth in Islamic literature. Within Euro-American studies, literary criticism is associated with the use of a particular literary theory. Even when non-European literatures are studied, the theories used to understand them remain rooted in Euro-American modernity.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 The Theory of Premodern Arabic Literary Criticism

Moving beyond the theoretical perspectives of Euro-American modernity, I argue that medieval Islamic literary criticism provides a better analytical framework for understanding the literary reception of ḥadīth in the Islamic world and for acknowledging the various internal forces at work in the literary reproduction of ḥadīth texts. Familiarity with such literary interactions is crucial for developing a well-rounded understanding of Islamic literature. In the Islamic world, the discourse of literary analysis has mostly been shaped by the concept of *balāghah* (eloquence). During the 'Abbāsid Caliphate (c.750-1258 CE), *balāghah* developed into a science that was ranked among "the native sciences" in the Arabic Islamic curriculum, along with grammar, lexicography, literature, Qur'ānic studies, and Islamic law.<sup>7</sup>

Facilitated by a tradition of literary and philosophical interpretations of the Qur'ān as well as by more textual traditions of Islamic teachings, such as law and linguistics, *balāghah* functioned as a form of premodern literary theory throughout the Islamic world. *Balāghah* evolved from among scholars outside

5 Sebastian Günther, "Fictional Narration and Imagination within an Authoritative Framework: Towards a New Understanding of Ḥadīth", in *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, ed. Stefan Leder, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1998, p. 471.

6 On Eurocentric misrepresentations of Arabic literary terms and their concepts, see Hany Rashwan, "Arabic *Jinās* is not Pun, *Wortspiel, Calembour* or *Paronomasia*: A Post-Eurocentric Comparative Approach to the Conceptual Untranslatability of Literary Terms in Arabic and Ancient Egyptian Cultures", *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 38/4 (2020), p. 347.

7 R.A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* 2nd ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1930, p. 347.

the Arabian Peninsula to appreciate the literary characteristics of the Qur'ānic text. As a field of study, *balāghah* received considerable attention as a result of linguistic and philological efforts to account for the notion of the Qur'ān's linguistic inimitability (*iġāz*) at the sentence level. Modern Eurocentric theories generally disregard and undervalue non-European philosophical and literary criticism and ignore the historical and cultural contexts of production of premodern materials. Contemporary scholars tend to emphasize aspects of the literature that differ from those that occupied medieval writers. In her review of Wen-Chin Ouyang's *Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture* (1997), Hilary Kilpatrick highlights how scholars who attempt to make non-European literary criticism conform to the standards of Euro-American readers can easily misrepresent the culture under study:

When Ouyang looks for medieval literary critical activities, she directs her sights at what the sources designate [as] *naqd*, the modern term for criticism, and *'ilm al-shi'r*. In other words, she pays no attention to other critical activities, such as the study of rhetoric, *balāghah*, and the inimitability of Qur'ānic discourse, *iġāz al-Qur'ān*. It is legitimate to put criticism of poetry at the centre of an enquiry, as she does, but should one therefore amputate the tradition of some subjects of critical concern to it because they are not covered by the term which nowadays means 'literary criticism'?<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary scholars must therefore look through a medieval reader's lens to examine the validity of modern theoretical frames. In the context of premodern Arabic literary culture, Geert Jan Van Gelder points out that the modern term, "literary criticism", and its Arabic equivalent, *al-naqd al-adabī*, are used to denote a "heterogenous collection of works on poetics, rhetoric and stylistics (*'ilm al-balāghah*) and practical critiques of poetry (*naqd al-shi'r*)."<sup>9</sup> Premodern Arabic writers were obliged by their readers to employ many shared literary devices effectively within their literary discourse to affect judgments, thereby influencing their readers' assessments of the eloquence of their writing. The modernistic perception of *balāghah* as merely being a category of rhetoric rather than an Arabic literary theory overlooks the fact that it has been

8 Hilary Kilpatrick, "Review of 'Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture: The Making of a Tradition' by Wen-Chin Ouyang", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 26/1 (1999), p. 154.

9 Geert Jan Van Gelder, "Literary Criticism as Literature", in *The Weaving of Words: Approaches to Classical Arabic Prose*, eds. Lale Behzadi and Vahid Behmardi, Beirut, Orient-Institute Beirut, 2009, p. 55.

taught for more than 1,000 years across the Islamic world, and that it meets modern standards for what constitutes literary theory, as it offers premodern literary critics “categories, conceptions and frameworks through which literature is read, analyzed, and understood.”<sup>10</sup> Despite *balāghah*'s important place in the history of Islamic literature, no single volume provides a comprehensive intellectual history of *balāghah* as it has evolved across Arabic, Persian, Ottoman, and South Asian cultures or offers a rigorous analysis of its analytical approach in relation to various literary devices.

In their study of Greek, Roman, Syriac, and Arabic cultures, scholars are in agreement that rhetoric as a field of persuasion oscillates between two key channels. The first channel is philosophical, wherein the emphasis is on the relationship between the power of knowledge and argumentation. The second channel is literary, emphasizing literary styles and their verbal embellishment.<sup>11</sup> These channels correspond to two rhetorical systems that also existed within the medieval Arabic tradition. The first was known as the science of *khiṭābah*, which literally means “public oral speech”<sup>12</sup> and methodologies of argumentation. Whereas *khiṭābah* was initially influenced by Greek concepts of rhetoric, especially via Aristotle, Muslim philosophers and rhetoricians swiftly developed *khiṭābah* into what has been termed the “science of speech” or “dialectic” (*ilm al-kalām*), in which various “rational explication[s] of theological doctrines” were discussed and challenged.<sup>13</sup>

The second rhetorical system was the science of *balāghah*, which focused instead on the various forms of literary devices and their persuasive functions within different contexts and genres. The term *balāghah* became fluid and interchangeable, with some premodern literary critics using the terms *balāghah* (eloquence), *faṣāḥah* (clarity), and *bayān* (elucidation) interchangeably as synonyms for “eloquence”, without clearly distinguishing them. Ibn Wahb al-Kātib (d. 813 CE) confirmed that the definition of *balāghah* is closely related to what has been described as “clarity of the tongue” (*faṣāḥat al-lisān*), even arguing that a non-Arab person could not be called *balīgh* (eloquent) if he retained a foreign accent when speaking Arabic:

10 Chen Bar-Itzhak, “Intellectual Captivity: Literary Theory, World Literature, and the Ethics of Interpretation”, *Journal of World Literature* (2020), p. 3n.

11 Frédérique Woerther, ed., *Literary and Philosophical Rhetoric in the Greek, Roman, Syriac, and Arabic Worlds*, New York, Hildesheim, 2009.

12 On the persuasive and rhetorical strategies of oral public speech in the premodern Arabic culture, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function*, Leiden, Brill, 2019.

13 Mustafa Shah “Trajectories in the Development of Islamic Theological Thought: The Synthesis of *Kalam*”, *Religion Compass*, 1/4 (2007), p. 430.

القول المحيط بالمعنى المقصود، مع إختيار الكلام وحسن النظام، وفصاحة اللسان، وإنما أضيف إلى الإحاطة بالمعنى إختيار الكلام، لأن العايم قد يُحيط قوله بمعناه الذي يريده، إلا انه بكلام مرذول من كلام أمثاله، فلا يكون موصوفاً بالبلاغة، وزدنا فصاحة اللسان لأن الأعجمي واللحان قد يبلغان مرادهما بقولهما فلا يكونان موصوفين بالبلاغة، وزدنا حسن النظام لأنه قد يتكلم الفصيح بالكلام الحسن الآتي على المعنى، ولا يحسن ترتيب الفاظه، ويصير كل واحد مع ما يشاكله، ولا يقع ذلك في موقعه.

[*Balāghah* is] the saying that encompasses the intended meaning, in combination with selecting the speech, good word-order and the clarity of tongue (*faṣāḥat al-lisān*). The reason why I combined both, selecting the speech and encompassing the meaning is that the saying of any layman can encompass the meaning he wanted, but his speech is still part of inferior speech like that of his peers, and thus we cannot label it *balāghah*. We add the clarity of tongue because the non-Arab (*aʿjamī*) and the one who makes grammatical mistakes can attain his needs through speech, but it still cannot be labeled *balāghah*. We add the good word-order [*sic*] because the fluent person (*al-faṣīḥ*) can speak using good speech that brings forth the meaning, but he is not good at in arranging his words, to make each word harmonize with its pattern and fall into its right position.<sup>14</sup>

Wolfhart Heinrichs points out that framing *balāghah* as a simple mistranslation of the term “rhetoric” overlooks the particular concept of this discipline in the context of Arabo-Islamic traditions. Heinrichs argues that such a framing must be taken with a grain of salt, opting instead for an alternative translation of the term as either “eloquence” or “poetics.”<sup>15</sup> However, the term *balāghah* is still widely mistranslated in English as “rhetoric.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as Philip

14 Abū al-Hussein ʿIṣḥāq Ibn Wahb al-Kātib, *al-Burhān fī wajūh al-bayān*, eds. Aḥmad Maṭlūb and Khadija Al-Ḥudaythī, Baghdad, University of Baghdad, 1967, p. 163.

15 Wolfhart Heinrichs, “Rhetoric and Poetics”, in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, vol. 2, eds Julie Meisami and Paul Starky, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 651.

16 Throughout history, the word ‘rhetoric’ in Euro-American cultures has often been linked to negative attributes such as deceit, wordiness, meaninglessness, and intentional distortion (similar to the English term ‘pun’). Hence, it’s essential to recognize the disparities between the literary and philosophical terminologies of Euro-American and Islamic cultures to prevent certain misconceptions that are not applicable to Islamic culture under



Haldén explains, the term *khiṭābah* has also been used to represent the ancient Greek concept of rhetoric within numerous medieval Arabic commentaries on Aristotle authored by Muslim philosophers, including Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950 CE), Abū ‘Alī Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037 CE), and Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE).<sup>17</sup> In his *Book of the Collection* (*Kitāb al-Majmū‘*), Ibn Sīnā refers to this term using a transcription of the Greek term, rendered into Arabic as *riṭūrīqā* (رِيطورِيْقَا). These philosophers adopted the Greek term, as they were aware of the conceptual differences between the fields of *balāghah* and *khiṭābah*. Following the Aristotelian tradition, they viewed rhetoric, considered as *khiṭābah*, to be the counterpart of dialectic as an art of argumentation. Following Earl Miner’s warning to scholars of non-European literary criticism that “the search for innocent terms is not [a] brief odyssey,”<sup>18</sup> I prefer to use the Arabic or Arabic-derived terms *balāghah*, *balāghī*, and practitioner of *balāghah* instead of “rhetoric,” “rhetorical,” and “rhetorician” to avoid any misunderstanding or misrepresentation.

It was inevitable that the two systems of *balāghah* – the eloquent poetics of literary devices with their Qur’anic inimitability – and *khiṭābah* – persuasion via oral public speech, with its dialectical approaches – would confront each other. This confrontation occurred mainly because of their differing methodologies for approaching the philosophical dimensions of many Qur’anic concepts and verses. In his investigation of the long-lasting conflict between literary criticism and Qur’anic exegesis in twentieth-century Egypt, Mohamed Salama has called attention to the struggles between two groups of scholars who analyzed the Qur’an’s metaphysical verses both literally and using a rationalist hermeneutic.<sup>19</sup> Livnat Holtzman has investigated contrasting reactions to Qur’anic verses and ḥadīths that describe the nature of God through anthropomorphic metaphors (*āyāt/aḥādīth al-ṣifāt*), further considering how

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the guise of universality. See Hany Rashwan, “Comparative balāghah : Arabic and ancient Egyptian literary rhetoric through the lens of post-Eurocentric poetics.” *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative World Rhetorics: Studies in the History, Application, and Teaching of Rhetoric Beyond Traditional Greco-Roman Contexts*. New York : Routledge, 2020, p. 392.

- 17 Philip Haldén, “What is Arab Islamic Rhetoric? Rethinking the History of Muslim Oratory Art and Homiletics”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 37/1 (2005), p. 21.
- 18 Earl Miner, “An Allegory on the Banks of the Nile and Other Hazards of Intercultural Literary Comparison”, in *Comparative Poetics: Non-Western Traditions of Literary Theory*, ed. Patrick Colm Hogan, West Chester, West Chester University, 1996, p. 82.
- 19 Mohammad Salama, *The Qur’an and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism: From Ṭāhā to Naṣr*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 77.

their literary language became a hotly debated subject.<sup>20</sup> This discrepancy partly explains why the Andalusian historian, Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Ḥumaydī (d. 1095 CE), in his book titled *Facilitating the Way to Learn Epistolography* (*Kitāb Tashīl al-sabīl ilā ta‘allum al-tarsīl*), divided the literary system of *balāghah* into four types according to their general purpose. These types are orational (*khiṭābiyyah*), compositional (*ta’līfiyyah*), epistolary (*rasā’iliyyah*), and the declarations of soothsayers (*al-kuhhān*).<sup>21</sup>

The Arabic understanding of *balāghah* as literariness functions at two levels.<sup>22</sup> At the first level, both ordinary language and literary language are differentiated through the literary devices deployed in the sentence (*jumlah*), which surprise readers and arouse their interest. The implicit assumption is that these elevated literary devices play a role in providing the audience with aesthetic satisfaction and that they succeed in producing the writer’s desired objective, which is to deliver the intended meaning in the best way possible and to prompt the reader to compare the literary language with commonly used language. This approach is in harmony with an understanding of *balāghah* as the technique applied when choosing the best literary means for conveying the intended meaning to the heart of the receiver. The 10th-century Tunisian scholar, known for his contributions to the field of ḥadīth studies, Abū ‘Alī Ḥasan Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 1063 CE), provided one definition of *balāghah* that foregrounds the reader’s expectations and urges the writer to proceed carefully, choosing the most appropriate words or vocal forms to convey meaning. This definition portrays *balāghah* as the writer’s gift to the reader’s heart:

البلاغة إهداء المعنى إلى القلب في أحسن صورة من اللفظ.

*Balāghah* is gifting meaning to the heart in the most beautiful form of the vocal form.<sup>23</sup>

20 Livnat Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam: The Challenge of Traditionalism* (700-1350), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p. 26.

21 Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Ḥumaydī, *Tashīl al-sabīl ilā ta‘allum al-tarsīl*, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Shu‘ayb and Ahmed Mujāhid eds Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa al-Wathā’iq al-Qawmiyya, 2014, p. 7.

22 In Arabo-Islamic cultures, the term “*balāghah*” is consistently connected to the idea of “*adab*,” which includes a range of genres that might not be conventionally classified as “*literature*” in the age of print.

23 Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *al-‘Umda fī maḥāsīn al-shi‘r wa-adābih*, Muḥammed Muḥyī al-Dīn, ed. Beirut, Dār al-Jil, 1972, p. 246.

This phrase refers to the ability of writers to not only convey meaning through their words but also to evoke emotions and connect with the hearts of their readers. In other words, a skilled writer is able to craft literary devices and imagery that not only informs but also resonates deeply with the reader on an emotional level, eliciting a response that goes beyond just intellectual understanding. This ability to touch the heart of the reader is considered a gift or a talent that certain writers possess, and it is a highly valued aspect of *adab* in the Islamic tradition. Medieval writers often sought to master this art of conveying meaning in a beautiful and moving way, using various *balāghī* devices and techniques to create a sense of intimacy and connection with the reader. Overall, the concept of “writer’s gift to the heart” highlights the idea that Islamic *adab* is not just about conveying information but also about creating a powerful and lasting impact on the reader, one that can resonate with them long after they have finished reading.

The second level of *balāghah* is concerned more with evaluating the degree of literariness by comparing different forms of literary devices and new and strange ways of reintroducing the same literary device to readers to serve different functions within individual texts. Georges Bohas made the following observation:

Arabic culture evolved interesting approaches to the analysis of language and texts in four other fields of research: literary criticism (*naqd*), rhetoric in the Greek sense (*xatabah*), the foundation of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*), and rhetoric in the Arabo-Islamic sense (*balāghah*). The common denominator of these four fields of research is that they are all concerned, though for different reasons, with the study of texts, whether literary, religious, or legal.<sup>24</sup>

The literary evaluation of the text – or what provokes strong reactions in the reader – is related to both the vocal form and the poetic content of each literary device as well as to their originality. The modern analytical distinction between poetry and literary prose entails a misleading evaluation of the medieval reading practice, which incorporates different cultural ideas about what constitutes beautiful writing. As far back as 1952, Gustave Von Grunebaum made the following observation:

Arabic follows ancient theory in conceiving of poetry and prose not as separate forms of expression but merely as two species of ‘discourse,’

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<sup>24</sup> Georges Bohas, *The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 100.

kalam. Thus, the distinction between prose and poetry is seen only in the fact that poetry is speech bound by meter (and rhyme).<sup>25</sup>

As a result, Arabic literary culture devoted more attention to the definition of literariness, conceived as the use of poetic language within diverse literary genres that are not limited to poetry itself. The literariness of a text could thus be analyzed by examining the presence of literary devices and the degree to which writers used them to serve different functions relating to the delivery of their intended message. Practitioners of *balāghah* focused on the aesthetic effect of beautiful words, combining their knowledge of linguistics and stylistics to explain how words could be used creatively to investigate the different purposes of persuasion deployed within poetic language. As Ramzi Baalbaki explains, linguistics and poetics in Arabic *balāghah* go hand in hand in explorations of the degree of literariness in the studied texts.<sup>26</sup> This approach accords with Roman Jakobson's insistence on the importance of scholars having different linguistic backgrounds to develop a better understanding of the poetic nature of the language under study:

Indeed, as Hollander stated, 'there seems to be no reason for trying to separate the literary from the overall linguistic.' If there are some critics who still doubt the competence of linguistics to embrace the field of poetics, I believe that the poetic incompetence of some bigoted linguists has been mistaken for an inadequacy of the linguistic science itself. All of us here, however, definitely realize that a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unacquainted with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms.<sup>27</sup>

Arabic *balāghah* is mainly concerned with the use of words primarily to derive pleasure and secondarily to derive spiritual satisfaction. Pleasure mainly stems from the use of effective literary devices, with the poetic creativity of both the vocal form and eloquent content being foregrounded. The study of vocal form and content is thus essential to attain a better understanding of the intended message, that is, the linguistic structures of the poetic language.

25 Gustave Von Grunebaum, "The Aesthetic Foundation of Arabic Literature", in *Comparative Literature* 4/4 (1952), p. 336.

26 Ramzi Baalbaki, "The Relation Between Naḥw and Balāḡa: A Comparative Study of the Methods of Sābawayhi and Ġurġānī", *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik*, 11 (1983), pp. 7-8.

27 Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics", in *Style in Language*, ed. T. Sebeok, Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1960, p. 377.

The reconceptualization of poetic persuasion can advance understanding of the literary function of these *balāghī* devices, as the listener or reader needs to be convinced of the appositeness, beauty, or religious truth of what is being conveyed in an elevated poetic form. Aesthetic investigation and evaluation are thus central aspects of Arabic *balāghah*, and an integral part of literary and poetic criticism. As Von Grunebaum observed, the creative interaction between the imagination, the poetic vocal form, and eloquent content constitutes the defining essence of Arabic *balāghah*:

The basic concepts which Muslim civilization formed (but never completely articulated) of the nature of literary creation and of its own literary creativeness, and which directed and confined Arabic literary endeavor in the Middle Ages, can be most conveniently described in the form of two hypotheses; the one concerned with the role of imagination, the other with the relation of content and form.<sup>28</sup>

In the Arabic *balāghah*, the vocal form and its meaning are not considered separable in the production of eloquent meaning; the latter is always conveyed through innovative literary devices. The discipline of *balāghah* allows Arabic writers to differentiate literal constructions from figurative usage by observing the stylistic features that are related to the production of meaning in Arabic poetics.<sup>29</sup> In his influential book, *The Proofs for Qurʾānic Inimitability (Kitāb Dalāʾil al-ʾijāz)*, the Persian philologist ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1087 CE) discussed the conditions of both vocal form and meaning.<sup>30</sup> Al-Jurjānī records a statement that clarifies two points. The first is that the aesthetic notion of literary beauty in Arabic poetics is based on the concealed harmony between two elements, *lafz* (vocal form) and *maʾnā* (meaning). The second is that previous literary critics gave these elements equal weight in the production of eloquent speech:

لا يكون الكلام يستحقُّ اسم البلاغة حتى يسابق معناه لفظه، ولفظه معناه، فلا يكون لفظه إلى سمعك أسبق من معناه إلى قلبك.

28 Von Grunebaum, "The Aesthetic Foundation of Arabic Literature", p. 323.

29 William Smyth, "Rhetoric and ʾilm al-Balagha: Christianity and Islam", *The Muslim World*, 82 (1992), p. 251.

30 Lara Harb, "Form, Content, and the Inimitability of the Qurʾān in ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's Works", *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 18/3 (2015), p. 301.

The speech (kalām) cannot deserve the recognition of *balāghah* unless [the beauty of] its meaning (ma'nā) precedes its vocal form (lafz), and [the beauty of] its vocal form [precedes] its meaning. The vocal form of the speech should not precede to your hearing before the meaning [reaches] to your heart.<sup>31</sup>

Stylistic features play a significant role in the dissemination of Arabic aesthetics and enable its rules to be easily memorized. The assessments of native readers should be based on an understanding, acquired through a process of acculturation, of what is considered beautiful and eloquent compared with their ordinary language. Such literary devices put the reader in a position to assess whether the text is perceived to be enjoyable and informative.<sup>32</sup> Unstated meanings are concealed in the internal structure of the text through the use of various literary devices, which maximize the clarity of meaning. In one of the earliest analytical discussions of *balāghah*, Abdullāh Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 908 CE) defined the literariness of eloquent speech on the basis of the discovery of various types of literary devices subsumed under the term *badī'* (innovation).<sup>33</sup> This methodology became important for many later treatments of *balāghah*. Ibn al-Mu'tazz listed eighteen literary devices, which include concepts such as *isti'ārah* (metaphor), *tajnīs* (wordplay), *muṭābaqah* (antitheses), *tashbih* (simile), *iltifāt* (apostrophe), and *tawriyah* (antonomasia). He asserted that these *badī'* features have been known to Arab writers commencing from the pre-Islamic period. Thus, he disagreed with the prevalent literary theories of the time, according to which the literary "fathers" of *badī'* were the famous poets Bashār ibn Burd (d. 784 CE), Muslim Ibn al-Walīd (d. 823 CE), and Abū Nuwās al-Ḥakamī (d. 814 CE). Ibn al-Mu'tazz defined these literary devices using a collection of examples extracted from ḥadīth literature and from other literary genres:

قَدْ قَدَّمْنَا فِي أَبْوَابِ كِتَابِنَا هَذَا بَعْضَ مَا وَجَدْنَا فِي الْقُرْآنِ وَاللُّغَةِ وَأَحَادِيثِ رَسُولِ  
اللَّهِ وَكَلَامِ الصَّحَابَةِ وَالْأَعْرَابِ وَغَيْرِهِمْ وَأَشْعَارِ الْمُتَقَدِّمِينَ مِنَ الْكَلَامِ الَّذِي  
سَمَّاهُ الْمُحَدِّثُونَ الْبَدِيعَ، لِيُعْلَمَ أَنَّ بَشَارًا وَمُسْلِمًا وَأَبَا نُوَّاسٍ وَمَنْ تَقْبَلَهُمْ وَسَلَّكَ

31 'Abd al-Qāhir Al-Jurjānī, *Dalā'il al-Tjāz*, ed. Maḥmūd Shakir, Cairo, Maktabat al-Khānjī, 2004, p. 267.

32 Philip Halldén, "What Is Arab Islamic Rhetoric? Rethinking the History of Muslim Oratory Art and Homiletics", p. 21.

33 Seger A. Bonebakker, "Ibn Al-Mu'tazz and Kitāb Al-Badī'", in *Abbasid Belles Lettres*, eds. Julia Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, and R.B. Serjeant, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 392.

سَبِيلَهُمْ لَمْ يَسْبُقُوا إِلَى هَذَا الْقَنْ وَلَكِنَّهُ كَثُرَ فِي أَشْعَارِهِمْ فَعُرِفَ فِي زَمَانِهِمْ حَتَّى  
سُمِّيَ بِهَذَا الْاسْمِ فَأَعْرَبَ عَنْهُ وَدَلَّ عَلَيْهِ.

In the chapters of our book, we introduced part of what we found in the Qur'an, the [uncommon] language (*lughā*), the ḥadīths of God's Messenger, the speech[es] of the Prophet's companions, the desert dwellers, and others. [We also used] the poetry of the ones who came before [us] and was named by the current people (*muḥdathūn*): the innovation (*al-badī*). So that we can make it known that Bashār, Muslim, and Abū Nuwās and those who retell their poetry and follow their path, were not the first to attain this art (*fann*); rather, *badī* was extensively used in their poetry. Thus, it had already been defined in their time and named with this name, in order to adduce and explicate it [with respect to other texts].<sup>34</sup>

In general, understanding the relationship between the vocal form (*lafẓ*) and its meaning (*ma'nā*) is crucial for understanding the production of Arabic literary language. As Kamal Abu Deeb observes, "the amount of material devoted to the study of this duality even so early as al-Jahīz, is rather astonishing; the whole notion of *balāghah* (rhetoric) was defined in terms of it."<sup>35</sup> In *The Book of the Two Crafts* (*Kitāb al-Sanā'atayn*), Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī (d. 1005 CE) recorded a statement attributed to the 'Abbāsīd poet, Kulthūm ibn 'Amr al-'Attābī (d. 835 CE), which describes the relationship between the poetic vocal form and its eloquent content as the two main elements of a single cohesive body, with literary rules that could not be changed once a sentence was written:

قال العتايي: الألفاظ أجساد، والمعاني أرواح؛ وإنما تراها بعيون القلوب، فإذا  
قدّمت منها مؤخرًا، أو أخرت منها مقدّمًا أفسدت الصورة وغيّرت المعنى؛ كما  
لو حوّل رأس إلى موضع يد، أو يد إلى موضع رجل، لتحوّلت الحليّة، وتغيّرت  
الحليّة.

Al-'Attābī said: "vocal forms are bodies, and meanings are souls; you can only see them with the eyes of hearts If you bring forward a word that should be postponed, or you postpone a word that should be brought

34 'Abdullah Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Kitāb al-Badī*, ed. 'Irfān Maṭarjī, Beirut, Mū'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 2012, p. 9.

35 Kamal Abu Deeb, "Literary Criticism", in *Abbasid Belles Lettres*, eds Ashtiany et. al., p. 353.

forward, you spoil the depiction and change the meaning; just as if someone were to move the head [of a person] to the position of the hand or the hand to the position of the leg. Then the structure [of the body] would be denatured and [the beauty of] its ornaments would be changed [to ugliness].<sup>36</sup>

### 3 The Islamic Literary Reception of Ḥadīth

Some scholars view the sayings of the Prophet as the secondary source of spiritual guidance, following the Qurʾān, which serves as the foundation for Islamic law (al-Sharīʿa). For example, the Andalusian polymath, Abū Muḥammad ʿAlī Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064 CE), justified this understanding in his book *The Attainment of Accuracy in the Principles of Judgment (Kitāb Al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām)*. Ibn Ḥazm conceived of ḥadīth as being equal to the Qurʾān in terms of its status as a revelation of God.<sup>37</sup> However, he noted that the main difference between the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth lay in the literary inimitability of the Qurʾānic text and the contextual harmony between its verses that serve the recitation process:

لما بينا أن القرآن هو الأصل المرجوع إليه في الشرائع نظرنا فيه فوجدنا فيه إيجاب طاعة ما أمرنا به الرسول، ووجدنا الله يقول فيه واصفا لرسوله: وما ينطق عن الهوى إن هو إلا وحي يوحى. فصح لنا بذلك أن الوحي ينقسم من الله إلى رسوله على قسمين: أحدهما وحي متلو مؤلف تأليفا معجز النظام وهو القرآن، والثاني وحي مروى منقول غير مؤلف ولا معجز النظام ولا متلو لكنه مقروء؛ وهو الخبر الوارد عن رسول الله.

Because of what we have manifested, the Qurʾān is the primary source that should be consulted in terms of formulating Islamic laws. When we reviewed its text, we found verses that oblige obedience of whatever the

36 Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī, *Kitāb al-Ṣanāʿatayn al-kitāba wa al-shiʿr*, eds Alī al-Bijawī and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, Cairo, Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1952, p. 161.

37 Ibn Ḥazm's approach to ḥadīth is often described by scholars as emphasizing the literal meaning of texts and rejecting interpretations beyond the obvious meaning. This approach is consistent with the Zāhirī school, which prioritized the textual and literal aspects of religious texts. According to Adam Sabra, Ibn Ḥazm believed that one must follow the "manifest" or "literal" (Zāhir) meaning of sacred texts, and unless another text clearly indicates otherwise, one must accept texts at face value. Adam Sabra, "Ibn Ḥazm's Literalism: A Critique of Islamic Legal Theory (1)". *Al-Qanṭara*, 28(1), (2007), p. 16.



Messenger ordered, as an obligation to God. We found God describing his Messenger by saying ‘He does not speak out of his own desire. [The Qurʾān] is not but a revelation that has been revealed.’ (Q:53, 3-4). Thus, it is proven to us that God’s revelation is divided into two segments: one is a recited revelation with a unique harmony that is made up of an inimitable structure, and this is the Qurʾān. The second [text] is a narrated, transmitted revelation, but it is not of a harmonious nature nor of an inimitable structure; it is readable and not recitable, and this is what has been narrated after the report (*khābar*) of God’s Messenger.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, in his well-known encyclopedic work, *The Attainment of Proficiency in the Qurʾānic Sciences (Kitāb al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qurʾān)*, the famous theologian of the Mamluk period, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE), justified the importance of ḥadīth in interpreting the Qurʾānic text. He cited three texts that supported the sacredness of ḥadīth literature:

The first was a statement ascribed to Imām Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820 CE), one of the earliest theorists of Islamic jurisprudence:<sup>39</sup>

كل ما حكم به رسول الله فهو مما فهمه من القرآن

Every judgment that God’s Messenger provides is derived from what he understood from the Qurʾān.

The second was a Qurʾānic verse that he interpreted as being a divine order from God to employ ḥadīth in establishing Islamic laws:

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ لِتَحْكُمَ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ بِمَا أَرَاكَ اللَّهُ

We sent down to you the book with truth so that you may judge among people with what God has shown to you. (Q: 4.105).

38 Abū Muḥammad ‘Alī Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-aḥkām*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir, Beirut, Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1983, pp. 96-97.

39 It’s crucial for modern readers to acknowledge the importance of al-tafsīr bi-l-riwāyah (exegesis through narration), which refers to the approach of using narrations to provide insight and explanation for the meanings of Quranic verses, as well as its close connection to asbāb al-nuzūl (occasions of revelation), which refers to the literal events or circumstances that led to the revelation of specific Quranic verses. The Prophet Muhammad’s biography was regarded as essential for interpreting the Quranic text. See Johanna Pink, “Tradition, Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunnī Tafsīr: Towards a Typology of Qur’an Commentaries from the Arab World, Indonesia and Turkey”, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 12 (2010), pp. 56-82.

The third text was a particular ḥadīth presenting the position of the Qurʾān and Prophetic *Sunna* as being of equal status in conveying God's revelation:

«ألا إني أوتيت القرآن ومثله معه.» يعني السُّنة.

“Verily, I have been given the Qurʾān, and it is alike with it.” [al-Suyūṭī adds] which means *sunnah*.<sup>40</sup>

As literary works, the Qurʾān and ḥadīth share two features in common. First, they are both primarily oral texts that were only later codified in writing. The second common feature is that they have piqued the curiosity of Muslim literary critics as texts. In the introduction to his famous book, *Insights and Resources (Kitāb al-Baṣāʾir wa-l-dhakhāʾir)*, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023 CE) declared that the compilations of ḥadīth are one of the four “mother sources” of wisdom (*ummahāt al-ḥikma*) that he used to compose his literary anthology. These sources of wisdom are as follows: (1) the Qurʾān, (2) the ḥadīth, (3) sayings and adages of a rational nature (*ḥujjat al-ʿaql*), and (4) philosophical sayings that summarize the wise lessons of other nations (*raʾī al-ʿayn*). Tawḥīdī rationalizes his reliance on each of these resources using poetic explanations. Moreover, in his view, the rich wisdom of the Prophet's sayings in the ḥadīth justifies their inclusion in his literary compilation:

والثاني سُنَّةُ الرسول (صلعم)؛ فإنها السبيلُ الواضح، والنجمُ اللامع، والقائدُ الناصح،  
والعلمُ المنصوب، والأممُ المقصود، والغايةُ في البيان، والتهامةُ في البرهان، والفرعُ  
عند الخِصام، والقدوةُ لجميع الأنام.

The second resource is the Prophet's *sunnah*. Indeed, the *sunnah* is the clear path, the shining star, the sincerely-advising leader, the stationed flag, the temperate destination for nations, the utmost limit in clarity of expression, the ultimate limit of the evident proof, the resort to resolve any dispute, the designed model for the whole [of] humankind.<sup>41</sup>

Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr al-Jāḥiẓ, the “father of Arabic prose,” confirmed the tremendous literary value of ḥadīth in his description of the different qualities of its literary structure and impact:

40 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muṣṭafā Shaykh Muṣṭafā, Beirut, Mūʾassasat al-Risāla Nāshirūn, 2008, p. 763.

41 Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣāʾir wa-l-dhakhāʾir*, ed. Wadād al-Qāḍī, Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1988, 6.

لم يسمع الناس بكلام قط أعم نفعاً، ولا أقصد لفظاً، ولا أعدل وزناً، ولا أجمل مذهباً، ولا أكرم مطلباً، ولا احسن موقعاً، ولا أسهل مخرجاً، ولا أفصح معنى، ولا أبين في فحوى، من كلام الرسول كثيراً.

People have scarcely ever heard any speech that is more comprehensive in its benefits, nor more concise in its words, nor fairer in its weight, nor more beautiful in its approach, nor more honourable in its request, nor better in its position, nor more comfortable in its articulation, nor more fluent in its meaning, nor more manifest in its content, than much of the speech of the Messenger.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, in his book *The Healing Through Knowing the Rights of the Chosen Prophet* (*Kitāb al-Shifā' bi-ta'rīf huqūq al-Muṣṭafā*), the Andalusian judge and Maliki scholar, Abū al-Faḍl 'Iyāḍ ibn Mūsā (d. 1149 CE), expressed his great devotion to the Prophet's sayings for their unmatched literary characteristics:

وأما كلامه المعتاد، وفصاحته المعلومة، وجوامع كليمه، وحكمه الماثورة فقد ألف الناس فيها الدواوين وجمعت في الفاظها ومعانيها الكتب، ومنها ما لا يوارى فصاحةً، ولا يُبارى بلاغةً.

Regarding his everyday speech, his well-known fluency, his pithiness of speech, and his transmitted wise sayings, the people authored many poetical compilations about them. Many books have been compiled to explain his words and their meanings. Some of his sayings have no parallel for their fluency (*faṣāḥah*) and no competition in their eloquence (*balāghah*).<sup>43</sup>

#### 4 Premodern Arabic Balāghah and Ḥadīth

As can be seen from the above examples, ḥadīth literature was a significant source for the literary critics of the premodern Islamic world. There is no text referring to Arabic *balāghah* that does not include examples of ḥadīth

42 Abū 'Uthmān Amr al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, vol. 2, ed. Abd al-Salām Hārūn, Cairo, Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1998, pp. 17-18.

43 Abū al-Faḍl 'Iyāḍ ibn Mūsā, *Al-Shifā' bi-ta'rīf huqūq al-Muṣṭafā*, ed. Abduh 'Alī Kūshak, Dubai, Silsilat Dirāsāt al-Sīra al-Nabawīyya, 2013, p. 120.

in its investigation of the various forms of literary expression. In *Summary of Eloquence in the Metaphors of Ḥadīth* (*Kitāb Talkhīṣ al-bayān fī mujāzāt al-ḥadīth*), the renowned poet, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 1015 CE), analyzed the role of symbolic speech in his interpretations of various examples of ḥadīth.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in his encyclopedic commentary titled *Reliance of the Reader in the Commentary on the Collection of Bukhārī* (*Kitāb ‘Umdat al-qārī fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*),<sup>45</sup> the Ḥanafī scholar, Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī (d. 1453 CE), dedicated many sections to the ḥadīths that he discussed in order to explore the various elements of *balāghah*. These sections explored the semantic functions of literary devices, such as *tashbūh* (simile), *isti‘ārah* (metaphor), and *kināyah* (metonymy).

In attempting to address the question of how the literary reception of the ḥadīth aimed to retain specific characteristics of orality for poetic purposes, it is useful to look at *Inimitability and Conciseness* (*Kitāb al-Ijāz wa-l-ījāz*), written by Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha‘ālibī’s (d. 1038 CE), to see how the orally received tradition of ḥadīth literature was retained and preserved with all its complexities. During his lifetime, Tha‘ālibī was given the title, “The Jāḥiẓ of Nishāpūr” because of his skill at prose writing.<sup>46</sup> In his book, he compiled concise but eloquent speech extracts under ten categories. These categories were: (1) excerpts from the Qur’ān; (2) ḥadīth; (3) excerpted sayings from the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the Prophet’s Companions; (4) quotes of pre-Islamic kings; (5) marvelous sayings of Islamic kings and rulers; (6) subtleties (*laṭā’if*) of the speeches of ministers and sovereigns; (7) wonderful sayings (*badā’ir*) of writers and eloquent individuals; (8) amusing sayings (*ṭarā’if*) of philosophers, wise men, and ascetics; (9) witty sayings (*malīḥ*); and (10) well-chosen extracts by famous poets (*wasā’it qalā’id al-shu‘arā*), which means “the middle jewels of poets’ necklaces”.

In the section of the text devoted to ḥadīth, Tha‘ālibī does not record the chains of transmission (*asānīd*) found in the canonical ḥadīth compilations, in which each chain functions as an authenticating device for determining the veracity of its corresponding text (*matn*). Unlike the text of the Qur’ān, which had a standard ‘Uthmānic text that was rarely disputed in any substantial way,<sup>47</sup>

44 Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, *al-Majāzāt al-nabawīyya*, ed. Ṭāha Muḥammad al-Zaynī, Cairo, Mu’assasat al-Ḥalabī, 1937.

45 Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī, *‘Umdat al-qārī fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Abdullāh Maḥmūd ‘Umar, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2001.

46 Bilal Orfali, “The Works of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha‘ālibī (350-429/961-1039)”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 40 (2009), p. 274.

47 John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur’ān*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 171.

the different textual versions of ḥadīth literature were hotly debated topics because of their originally oral transmission. Sunni scholars did not doubt the attribution of the Qurʾān to a divine source, whereas scholars of ḥadīth had to examine each tradition in order to determine its veracity. Consequently, many ḥadīths were disregarded because of their broken chains of transmission, although they were rarely subjected to criticism of their content.<sup>48</sup>

Al-Thaʿālibī also does not mention the “mother” sources from which he extracted his examples of concise speech; a common omission in his works.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is not clear whether he intentionally modified his examples of ḥadīths to fit the general theme of the work or whether he had actually read or heard the ḥadīths that he included in the forms in which he recorded them. He was primarily concerned with extracting short excerpts from the body of the texts for the sake of being concise and direct and with ensuring that irrelevant information did not distract the reader. The most significant portion of the book contains the Prophet’s sayings, which Thaʿālibī subdivided into five sections according to the literary device used in each section.

The literariness of the ḥadīth is, therefore, best approached from a contextual-comparative perspective. A contextual perspective caters to the various internal elements that contributed to this text’s literary formation. At the same time, the comparativeness of its literariness becomes apparent when we consider the different versions of the ḥadīth, with the aim of discovering the internal and external influences that motivated the written development of the ḥadīth as a literary text. Therefore, when explaining the textual formation of each ḥadīth, I will compare al-Thaʿālibī’s examples within the five subdivisions that he delineated with their counterparts that were recorded in other canonical sources of the ḥadīth to highlight differences between versions of each ḥadīth.

## 5 *Tashbihāt – Tamthilāt (Similes and Analogies)*

In this section, Thaʿālibī records various examples of ḥadīths, making comparisons that demonstrate relationships between two things. The following examples of the Prophet Muḥammad’s sayings serve as illustrations:

48 Jonathan A.C. Brown, “The Rules of *Matn* Criticism: There Are No Rules”, *Islamic Law and Society* 19/4 (2012), p. 366.

49 Abū Maṣʿūd al-Thaʿālibī, *Kitāb Khāṣṣ al-khāṣṣ fī-l-amthāl*, eds Ramzi Baalbaki and Bilal Orfali, Beirut, Orient-Institute Beirut, 2020, p. 31.

\*أمّتي كالْمَطْرِ لَا يُدْرَى أَوَّلُهُ خَيْرٌ أَمْ آخِرُهُ أَيْنَا وَقَعَ نَفْعُهُ

My *ummah* is like the rain; no one knows if its beginning is the best or its end; wherever it falls, it is of benefit.<sup>50</sup>

Another version of this ḥadīth appears in the collection of Abū ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī (d. 892 CE), which reads:

مَثَلُ أُمَّتِي مَثَلُ الْمَطْرِ لَا يُدْرَى أَوَّلُهُ خَيْرٌ أَمْ آخِرُهُ

The **likeness** of my *ummah* is like that of the rain; no one knows if its beginning is the best or its end. (al-Tirmidhī 2869)<sup>51</sup>

A comparison of these two versions strikingly reveals that Tha‘ālibī’s version omits the two likening particles (*mathl*) and replaces them with the shorter Arabic particle *ka*, while also adding a short phrase that does not exist in al-Tirmidhī’s version.

\*المؤمنون كالْبِنْيَانِ يَشُدُّ بَعْضُهُمْ بَعْضًا

The **believers** are like an erected building; each of its parts fasten the other.<sup>52</sup>

The three authoritative Sunni sources that include this ḥadīth – *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, and *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* – all use the singular form and repeat the word “believer” (*al-mu’min*) in the first part of the sentence:

المؤمنُ للمؤمنِ كالْبِنْيَانِ يَشُدُّ بَعْضُهُ بَعْضًا

50 Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha‘ālibī, *al-Ijāz wa-l-ijāz*, ed. Iskandar Aṣṣāf, Cairo, al-Maṭba‘a al-Umūmiyya, 1897, p. 17.

51 The Sunni scholar Abū al-Faḍl al-Maqḍisī (d. 1113 CE) considered this ḥadīth to be forged because of its similarity to another ḥadīth. However, most ḥadīth scholars have confirmed its reliability without any objection. See Brown, “The Rules of Matn Criticism”, p. 382. This instance is consistent with Wael Hallaq’s criticisms of the traditionalist approach to ḥadīth, which prioritizes the authenticity of ḥadīth as the primary criterion for assessing their legitimacy. See Wael Hallaq, “The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth: A Pseudo-Problem.” *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999), p. 88. This approach fails to consider the diverse literary, linguistic, and cultural aspects of ḥadīth.

52 Tha‘ālibī, *al-Ijāz wa-l-ijāz*, p. 17.

The **believer** to a **believer** is like an erected building whose parts fasten each other (al-Bukhari 2446, Muslim 2585, al-Tirmidhi 1928).

## 6 *Isti'ārāt* (Metaphors)

Al-Tha'ālibī also recorded ḥadīths containing metaphors, as illustrated by the following ḥadīth:

\*الحمى رائد الموت وسجن الله في الأرض\*

Fever is death's guide and God's prison on Earth.<sup>53</sup>

A more extended version of this ḥadīth can be found in the book titled *Disease and Atonements* (*Kitāb al-Maraḍ wa al-kaffārāt*), in which numerous prophetic traditions that discuss disease as a divine affliction were compiled by the ascetic, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 894 CE):

الحمى رائد الموت وهي سجن الله في الأرض يجبس عبده إذا شاء، ثم يرسله  
إذا شاء، ففتروها بالماء.

Fever is death's guide, and it is God's prison on Earth. He [God] jails His slave if He wants and then frees him if He wants, so weakens it [the fever] with water.<sup>54</sup>

Another example involves a ḥadīth concerning the virtues of charity:

\*صدقة السر تطفى غضب الرب\*

Secret charity extinguishes God's anger.<sup>55</sup>

An extended version of this ḥadīth appears in *The Greater Collection* (*Kitāb al-Mu'jam al-kabīr*) of the Syrian ḥadīth scholar, Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān al-Ṭabarānī (d. 971 CE):

53 Tha'ālibī, *al-Ijāz wa-l-ijāz*, p. 19.

54 Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *al-Maraḍ wa al-kaffārāt*, ed. Abd al-Wakil al-Nadwī, Mumbai, al-Dār al-Salafiyya, 1991, p. 88.

55 Tha'ālibī, *al-Ijāz wa-l-ijāz*, p. 19.

صنائع المعروف تقي مصارع السوء، وصدقة السر تطفئ غضب الرب، وصلة  
الرحم تزيد في العمر

The actions of sympathy guard against the shutters of badness; secret charity extinguishes the Lord's anger; the strengthening of family (lit. womb) relationship increases the time [of life]. (al-Ṭabarānī 8014)

Another *ḥadīth* of interest in this category reads:

\*من كوز البر كتمان الصدقة والمرض والمصيبة

Among the treasures of righteousness is to conceal charity, sickness, and calamity.<sup>56</sup>

This particular *ḥadīth* does not feature in the six canonical sources of *ḥadīth* literature, but Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066 CE) mentions a version that is close to Tha'ālibī's, entailing repetition of the verbal noun "concealment" (*kitmān*):

ثلاث من كوز البر: كتمان الصدقة، وكتمان المصيبة، وكتمان المرض.

Three [things] are part of righteousness: concealing charity, concealing calamity, and concealing sickness.<sup>57</sup>

Al-Tha'ālibī's version of this *ḥadīth* also exists in a compilation put together by the Shī'ī scholar, Mīrẓā al-Nūrī (d. 1902), who added another *ḥadīth* delineating four items of paradise's treasures:

أربع من كوز الجنة: كتمان الفاقة، وكتمان الصدقة، وكتمان المصيبة، وكتمان الوجع.

Four [things] are from the treasures of paradise: concealing privation, concealing charity, concealing calamity and concealing torment.<sup>58</sup>

In *The Faked Pearls of Fabricated Ḥadīths (Kitāb al-La'ālī' al-maṣnū'a fī-l-aḥādīth al-mawḍū'a)*, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī criticized a more elaborate version of this

56 Tha'ālibī, *al-Ijāz wa-l-ijāz*, p. 19.

57 Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, vol. 12, ed. Muḥammad 'Aṭā, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003, p. 378.

58 Mīrẓā al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasā'il wa mustanbaṭ al-masā'il*, vol. 2, Qom: Mu'assasat Āl al-Bayt li-lḥyā' al-Turāth, 1991, p. 68.



ḥadīth, in which additional sentences were falsely attributed to God, perhaps as a way of explaining the shorter version:

ثلاثة من كوز البر إخفاء الصدقة وكمّان المصيبة وكمّان الشكوى. يقول الله تعالى  
إذا ابتليت عبدي فصبر ولم يشكني إلى عواده أبدلته لحماً خيراً من لحمه ودماً  
خيراً من دمه فإن أبرأته أبرأته ولا ذنب له وإن توفيته فألى رحمتي.

Three [things] are from the treasures of righteousness: hiding charity, concealing calamity, and concealing complaint. God Almighty says: 'If I afflict my slave with suffering and he is patient and does not complain about Me to his visitor, I will change his flesh with better flesh and change his blood with better blood. If I heal him, then I will heal him without any sin that will be left to be forgiven of him, and if I take his life, he goes to My Mercy.'<sup>59</sup>

However, in another work, *The Small Collection (Kitāb al-Jāmi' al-ṣaghūr)*, al-Suyūṭī commended another version of this ḥadīth as follows:

أربعة من كوز الجنة: إخفاء الصدقة، وكمّان المصيبة وصلة الرحم، وقول لا حول  
ولا قوة إلا بالله

Four [things] are from the treasures of paradise: hiding charity, concealing calamity, kinship connections, and the saying: 'There is no power or strength but through God.'<sup>60</sup>

## 7 *Muṭābaqāt* (Antitheses)

The third category of ḥadīth included in Al-Tha'ālibī's *Inimitability and Conciseness* involves traditions composed around a series of antitheses (*muṭābaqāt*), as illustrated by the following example:

\*حفت الجنة بالمكاره والنار بالشهوات

59 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-La'āl' al-maṣnū'a fī-l-aḥādīth al-mawḍū'a*, vol. 2, Beirut, Dār al-Ma'rifa li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1975, p. 395.

60 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaghūr fī aḥādīth al-Bashīr al-Nadhūr*, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2012, p. 63.

Paradise has been edged with abominations, and hellfire with concupiscence.<sup>61</sup>

In their respective versions of this ḥadīth, Muslim and al-Tirmidhi repeat the passive verb at the beginning of each hemistich:

حُقَّتِ الْجَنَّةُ بِالْمَكَارِهِ وَحُقَّتِ النَّارُ بِالشَّهَوَاتِ

Paradise has been edged with abominations, and the hellfire has been edged with concupiscence (Muslim 2822; at-Tirmidhi 2559).

Another ḥadīth recorded in al-Thaʿālibī's work reads as follows:

\*أَنْظُرُوا إِلَى مَنْ تَحْتَكُمْ وَلَا تَنْظُرُوا إِلَى مَنْ فَوْقَكُمْ

Look at ones who are below you and do not look at ones who are above you.<sup>62</sup>

The version in Muslim's compilation of ḥadīths is slightly different because it contains a final hemistich that does not appear in al-Thaʿālibī's version:

انظُرُوا إِلَى مَنْ أَسْفَلَ مِنْكُمْ، وَلَا تَنْظُرُوا إِلَى مَنْ هُوَ فَوْقَكُمْ، فَهُوَ أَجْدَرُ أَنْ لَا تَزْدَرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ

Look at ones who are at a lower [level] than you and don't look at ones who are above you; for this, for it is more appropriate that you do not belittle the favor of God. (Muslim 2963)

This structure is similar to that of another ḥadīth included in a different compilation by al-Thaʿālibī, which appears in a longer form as follows:

\*احذروا من لا يرجى خيره ولا يؤمن شره

Be aware of one whose goodness is unexpected, and the one from whose evil you are not safe.<sup>63</sup>

61 Thaʿālibī, *al-ʿIjāz wa al-ijāz*, p. 21.

62 Thaʿālibī, *al-ʿIjāz wa al-ijāz*, p. 21.

63 Thaʿālibī, *al-ʿIjāz wa al-ijāz*, p. 21.

Al-Tirmidhi records a more elaborate version that consists of two parts that contrast each other to highlight the differences:

خَيْرُكُمْ مَنْ يُرْجَى خَيْرُهُ وَيُؤْمَنُ شَرُّهُ، وَشَرُّكُمْ مَنْ لَا يُرْجَى خَيْرُهُ وَلَا يُؤْمَنُ شَرُّهُ

The best of you is one whose goodness is expected and from whose evil one feels secure, and the worst of you is one whose goodness is not expected; nor does one feel secure from his evil. (at-Tirmidhi 2263)

Finally, al-Tha‘alibī includes a ḥadīth that does not appear in the six canonical Sunni sources of ḥadīth literature:

\*جَبَلَتِ الْقُلُوبَ عَلَى حُبِّ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ إِلَيْهَا وَبُغْضِ مَنْ أَسَاءَ إِلَيْهَا

The hearts have been formed to love whoever does good to them and to detest whoever does bad to them.<sup>64</sup>

The same version as that used by al-Tha‘alibī was used by the Shī‘ī ḥadīth compiler, Ibn Shu‘ba al-Ḥarrānī (tenth century CE), in *The Fruits of Intellects Concerning the Prophet’s Family* (*Kitāb Tuḥaf al-‘uqūl ‘an Āl al-Rasūl*),<sup>65</sup> although it did not appear in major Sunni compilations. In addition, the Qur’anic scholar al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108 CE) records the same version in his book *The Lectures of Literary Figures and the Statements of Poets and Eloquent People* (*Kitāb Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā’ wa-muḥāḍarāt al-shu‘arā’ wa-l-bulaghā’*). He mentions Tha‘alibī’s version under the section with poetic descriptions of ardent love and affection written in both poetic and prose forms.<sup>66</sup>

## 8 Tajnīs (Wordplay)

Al-Tha‘alibī also includes a section of ḥadīths that make use of creative wordplay (*tajnīs*). One of these ḥadīths also appears in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*:

64 Tha‘alibī, *al-‘Ijāz wa al-‘ijāz*, p. 21.

65 Abū Muḥammed al-Ḥasan Ibn Shu‘ba al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf al-‘uqūl ‘an Āl al-Rasūl*, ed. Ḥusayn al-‘Alamī, Beirut, Mu‘assasat al-‘Alā li-l-Maṭbū‘āt, 2002, p. 32.

66 Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā’ wa muḥāḍarāt al-shu‘arā’ wa-l-bulaghā’*, ed. ‘Umar al-Ṭabbā‘, Beirut, Dār al-Arqam, 1999, p. 44.

\*الظلم ظلمات يوم القيامة\*

Injustice is [multiplied] darkness on the Day of Resurrection.<sup>67</sup>

The same version exists in *ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 2447 and in *ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* 2579.

Another such ḥadīth is as follows:

\*ان ذا الوجهين لا يكون وجيها عند الله\*

Verily, the two-faced one [*i.e.* the hypocrite] will not be eminent before God.<sup>68</sup>

This ḥadīth is only recorded – without an *isnād* – by Qāḍī ‘Iyād ibn Mūsā in *The Book of Healing (Kitāb al-Shifā’)*. Here, the order of the last three words is switched:

ذو الوجهين لا يكون عند الله وجيها

The two-faced one [*i.e.* hypocrite], before God he will not be eminent.<sup>69</sup>

However, while this ḥadīth appears only as an isolated example in the collections of al-Tha‘ālibī and Qāḍī ‘Iyād, it appears as part of a short story that condemns hypocrisy in the well-known literary text, *The Complete Book of Language and Literature (Kitāb al-Kāmil fī-l-lughā wa-l-adab)* by Muḥammad ibn Yazīd al-Mubbarrad (d. 899 CE). The story concerns the response of al-Aḥnaf Ibn Qays (d. 687 CE) to a man who praised the Umayyad Caliph Mu‘āwīyah ibn Abī Sufyān (d. 680 CE) and his son Yazīd (d. 683 CE) in their presence in order to gain their trust and money but insulted them in their absence. According to this account, al-Aḥnaf sat beside Mu‘āwīyah and Yazīd when they were receiving delegates to celebrate the latter’s designation as heir to his father. One of the delegates praised the decision to appoint Yazīd, claiming that the choice was wise and crucial for ensuring the prosperity of the Empire. Mu‘āwīyah then asked al-Aḥnaf if he wanted to offer his opinion on the decision. Al-Aḥnaf refused, saying “I fear God if I were to lie and I fear you if I were to be honest.”

67 Tha‘ālibī, *al-‘Ijāz wa al-ijāz*, p. 21.

68 Tha‘ālibī, *al-‘Ijāz wa al-ijāz*, p. 21.

69 Qāḍī ‘Iyād ibn Mūsā, *al-Shifā’*, p. 122.

Mu‘āwiyah was pleased with this diplomatic answer and rewarded al-Aḥnaf for his tact. When he departed, al-Aḥnaf met the man who had previously exaggerated his praise of Mu‘āwiyah and Yazīd. The man harshly criticized them as the worst representations of God’s creation. To al-Aḥnaf he justified his dishonest praise as the only way to gain access to their wealth. To this, al-Aḥnaf angrily replied:

يا هذا أمسك، فإن ذا الوجهين خليق الا يكون عند الله وجهياً

Hey you, hold your tongue, for the two-faced one will not become eminent before God.<sup>70</sup>

Similar versions of this statement with the expression “two-faced” are ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad by Bukhārī and by Muslim on the authority of Abū Hurayra:

إِنَّ شَرَّ النَّاسِ ذُو الْوَجْهِينِ الَّذِي يَأْتِي هُوْلَاءَ بَوَجْهِ وَهُوْلَاءَ بِوَجْهِ

Among the worst of people is the two-faced one, who comes to some people with one face and to others with another. (al-Bukhārī 7179)

إِنَّ مِنْ شَرِّ النَّاسِ ذَا الْوَجْهِينِ الَّذِي يَأْتِي هُوْلَاءَ بِوَجْهِ وَهُوْلَاءَ بِوَجْهِ

The worst among people [*Inna min sharr al-nās*] is the two-faced one (*dhā al-wajhayn*), who comes to some people with one face and to others with another face. (Muslim 2526)

*Abū Dāwūd* offers a more elaborate version of this ḥadīth, in which the Prophet declares the status of hypocrites on the Day of Resurrection:

مَنْ كَانَ لَهُ وَجْهَانِ فِي الدُّنْيَا كَانَ لَهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ لِسَانَانِ مِنْ نَارٍ

Whoever had two faces in the lower world, on the Day of Resurrection he will have two tongues of fire. (Abū Dāwūd 4873)

<sup>70</sup> Muḥammad ibn Yazīd al-Mubarrad, *al-Kāmil fi-l-lughā wa-l-adab*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Hindāwī, Riyadh, Wizārat al-Awqāf al-Sa‘ūdīyya, 1998, p. 98.

9 *Raūā'ī' Aqūālih (The Prophet's Wondrous Sayings)*

In the last section, al-Tha'ālibī gathered together pithy sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad that were turned into wise proverbs. According to al-Tha'ālibī, these wisdom teachings bring together the benefits of both earthly life and religion (*tajma' fawā'id al-dīn wa-l-dunyā*). One such ḥadīth is provided below:

## \*الموت راحة

Death is a comfort.<sup>71</sup>

This short phrase does not appear in this isolated form in other compilations of ḥadīths; rather, it appears as part of a longer prayer:

اللَّهُمَّ أَصْلِحْ لِي دِينِي الَّذِي هُوَ عِصْمَةٌ أَمْرِي وَأَصْلِحْ لِي دُنْيَايَ الَّتِي فِيهَا  
مَعَاشِي وَأَصْلِحْ لِي آخِرَتِي الَّتِي فِيهَا مَعَادِي وَاجْعَلِ الْحَيَاةَ زِيَادَةً لِي فِي كُلِّ خَيْرٍ  
وَاجْعَلِ الْمَوْتَ رَاحَةً لِي مِنْ كُلِّ شَرٍّ

Oh God, set right for me my religion, which is the safeguard of my affairs. And set right for me the affairs of my earthy world, wherein is my living. And set right for me my afterlife, to which is my return. And make my lower-world for me [a source] of abundance for every good and make my **death a comfort** for me which protects against every evil. (Muslim 2720)

A similar ḥadīth features in al-Tha'ālibī's compilation:

## \*الندم توبة

Regret is [a form of] repentance.<sup>72</sup>

This expression also appears in other texts as part of a larger narrative. It is part of a ḥadīth on a dialogue between a father with his son and one of the Prophet's Companions, in which the key phrase is repeated twice as confirmation:

<sup>71</sup> Tha'ālibī, *al-Ijāz wa al-ijāz*, p. 23.

<sup>72</sup> Tha'ālibī, *al-Ijāz wa al-ijāz*, p. 23.

دَخَلْتُ مَعَ أَبِي عَلَى عَبْدِ اللَّهِ فَسَمِعْتُهُ يَقُولُ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ: "التَّدْمُ تَوْبَةٌ".  
فَقَالَ لَهُ أَبِي: أَنْتَ سَمِعْتَ النَّبِيَّ - صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ - يَقُولُ: "التَّدْمُ تَوْبَةٌ"  
. قَالَ: نَعَمْ.

I entered with my father upon ‘Abdullāh, and I heard him say; the Messenger of God said: ‘Regret is a form of repentance.’ Then my father said to him: ‘Did you hear the Prophet say: Regret is [a form of] repentance?’ He said: ‘Yes.’ (Ibn Mājah 4250)

A third example of the tendency to isolate specific portions of longer narratives is as follows:

### \*حدث عن البحر ولا حرج

Speak about the [generosity of the] sea without being constricted.<sup>73</sup>

This tradition has not been recorded in any major ḥadīth anthology. Instead, Abū al-Qāsim al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144 CE) recorded it as part of a longer proverb in *The Spring of the Righteous and the Texts of Reports* (*Kitāb Rabīʿ al-abrār wa nuṣūṣ al-akhbār*). In this work, it is used to describe al-Faḍl ibn Yaḥyā (d. 808 CE), who was the governor of Khurasān and Egypt under the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd (786-809 CE). In Zamakhsharī’s text, the version reads:

كان يقال للفضل بن يحيى حاتم الإسلام وخاتم الإجماع. وكان يقال: حدث  
عن البحر ولا حرج وعن الفضل ولا حرج.

It has been said about al-Faḍl ibn Yaḥyā that he was assertive about Islam and was the last of incredibly generous people. Thus, it has been said: ‘Speak about the [generosity of the] sea without being constricted and [speak] about al-Faḍl without being constricted.’<sup>74</sup>

However, the Sufi writer, Abū ‘Alī ‘Alī al-Ḥassan al-Yūsī (d. 1691 CE), included the exact version of al-Tha‘ālibī’s ḥadīth in *The Flowery Highland Concerning the Proverbs and Wise Sayings* (*Kitāb Zahr al-‘Akam fī al-Amthāl wa -al-Ḥikam*).

73 Tha‘ālibī, *al-Ijāz wa al-ijāz*, p. 23.

74 Abū al-Qāsim al-Zamakhsharī, *Rabīʿ al-abrār wa nuṣūṣ al-akhbār*, vol. 4, ed. ‘Abd al-Amīr Muḥannā, Beirut, Mu’assasat al-‘Alā li-l-Maṭbū‘āt, 1992, p. 365.

In it, al-Yūsī mentions that this version of the proverb was extracted from the Prophet's sayings, but his version appears to be in a plural form:

حدثوا عن البحر ولا حرج.

Speak (*hadathū*, plural.) about the [generosity of the] sea without being constricted.<sup>75</sup>

The preceding analysis of al-Tha'ālibī's literary treatment of ḥadīth shows how these oral sayings underwent many changes as they were put down in writing. In some cases, different versions of each ḥadīth were circulated by ḥadīth scholars. However, al-Tha'ālibī only used the concise or short versions of such reports, which corresponded to *ījāz* (conciseness), which was the general topic of his book. At times, he even added extra parts or used ḥadīths that were not included in the six canonical books of ḥadīth literature. The textual variations of each ḥadīth within the main compilations may have been the driving force behind the freedom that al-Tha'ālibī displayed in adapting the examples of ḥadīths that he used in his anthology of concise speech, which could be justified on the grounds of his book's literary focus.

By contrast, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 1071 CE) justified the various versions existing for each ḥadīth by categorizing written oral reports into three types. These types were: (1) transmissions that focused on the precise wording of oral speech (*al-rivāya bi-l-lafẓ*), (2) transmissions that focused on the meaning regardless of the vocal form (*al-rivāya bi-l-ma'nā*), and (3) transmissions that combined both strategies. In the section of his book on vocal forms, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī discussed the issue of divergence of vocal forms (*mukhālafat al-'alfāz*), wherein writers change the poetic structure of a ḥadīth using various techniques, such as changing the word order (*taqdīm*), interpolation (*ziyāda*), deletion (*nuqṣān*), and abbreviation (*ikhtisār*).<sup>76</sup>

Unlike the standard 'Uthmānic text of the Qur'ān, which was rarely disputed in any substantial way,<sup>77</sup> the different textual versions of ḥadīth literature were among the hotly debated subjects because of their unfixed oral dimensions. In his well-known book titled, *The Exegesis of the Different Ḥadīths and Strange Hadīths (Kitāb Tā'wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth and wa Gharīb al-Ḥadīth)*, Abū Muḥammad Abdullāh Ibn Qutaybah (d. 889 CE) defended the

75 Al-Yūsī, Abū 'Alī al-Ḥassan. *zahr al-'akam fi al-amthāl wa-al-ḥikam*, vol. 2, eds Muḥammad Ḥijī and Muḥammad al-'Akhḍar, Casablanca, 1981, p. 103.

76 Mustafa A. Shah, "Language of Ḥadīth," in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, eds Lutz Edzard and Rudolf de Jong, Brill Reference Online, 2012, p. 7.

77 John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'ān*, p. 171.



reinforcement of the oral ḥadīth tradition in light of these debates. The book rebuts against the Mu‘tazilah rationalists who argued for the inauthenticity of its traditions on the basis of their unknown or uncertain chains of transmission and the contradictions between some ḥadīths and Qur’ānic verses. Ibn Qutaybah devoted a section in this book to what he named “Ḥadīths that I heard scholars of language mention, but I do not know their holders.” The book’s primary purpose was to bolster ḥadīth literature as a valid and authentic source within the Islamic milieu.

As mentioned earlier, unlike the text of the Qur’ān, which was rarely disputed in any substantial way, the various textual versions of ḥadīth literature, with their unfixed oral dimensions, were vigorously debated, leading scholars to write extended defenses of ḥadīth, even in cases where individual accounts had questionable or missing chains of transmission. The issue of written and oral transmission of ḥadīth literature may have prompted early Muslim literary critics to recognize the differences between oral and written media as modalities for the codification of knowledge. This tendency was emphasized early on by al-Jāhīz, who recorded a statement by the Mu‘tazilī scholar, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Kaysān (d. 892 CE), who differentiated between the oral and written spheres.<sup>78</sup> This statement describes how the oral nature of speech could be altered according to the writing process and the literary skills of writers, who transmitted the oral version at different times and in different places. It explores how oral communication tends to be more spontaneous, with speakers often improvising as they speak; while written communication, on the other hand, is usually more carefully planned and edited. Ibn Kaysān confirmed that a writer could always modify, improve, clarify, or correct his ideas and statements, whereas a speaker could not do so in his speech; in other words, the statement highlights the fact that written communication is usually more permanent than oral communication, as it can be stored and revisited at a later time:

استعمال القلم أجدراً أن يحضّر الذهن على تصحيح الكتاب، من استعمال اللسان على تصحيح الكلام. وقالوا: اللسان مقصورٌ على القريب الحاضر، والقلم مطلقٌ في الشاهد والغائب، وهو للغابر الحائن، مثله للقائم الراهن. والكتاب يُقرأ بكلِّ مكان، ويُدرّس في كلِّ زمان؛ واللسان لا يَعُدُّ وسامِعَهُ، ولا يتجاوزُهُ إلى غيره.

78 On early Mu‘tazilī theories of ḥadīth criticism, see Christopher Melchert, “The Theory and Practice of Ḥadīth Criticism in the Mid-Ninth Century”, in *Studies in Memory of G.H.A. Juybnoll*, eds Petra M. Sijpesteijn and Camilla Adang, Leiden, Brill, 2020, pp. 82-85.

The pen usage is more capable of inducing the senses of the mind to correct what is written than is the use of the tongue to correct what has been said. They said the reach of the tongue is restricted to the person who is attending and near [enough to hear the spoken words], while the pen is limitless and reaches both the one who witnesses the writing and the absent person. The pen's reach connects the past to the present as it connects those in the recent past to present-day people. Written materials can be read everywhere and can be taught in every time, while the tongue does not go beyond its listener nor reach over to someone else.<sup>79</sup>

Al-Jāhīz's statement is in line with the "Writerly Culture" concept proposed by Shawkat Toorawa. This notion highlights the literary and intellectual traditions of medieval Islamic societies, underscoring the significance of written texts and their role in shaping Islamic empires' cultural, religious, and intellectual evolution.<sup>80</sup> Euro-American linguists too have produced several insightful studies that explore human consciousness as related to the oral and written media of language. In writing, the writer has time to give full concentration to moulding a succession of related ideas into a more complex, coherent, and integrated unity. Whereas the oral conversation could be more fragmented in nature, it still establishes its own internal cohesion, albeit differently. Unlike writing, vocal communication may rely on non-verbal communication tools, such as modulations of the voice, body, and facial gestures and the direct reactions of the audience. Cohesion in writing is generally attributed to the practical ways in which the authors use their linguistic backgrounds, mainly the lexical and syntactic, to convey the intended message to the reader. As observed by Gisela Redeker:

Typical spoken discourse tends to be unplanned, informal and directed to a limited number of listeners who are generally known to and interacting with the speaker, often providing immediate (verbal and/or nonverbal) feedback. Written texts, on the other hand, tend to be well-planned. Writers can polish their productions to meet communicative, esthetic and formal standards. The potential readers are generally not present during the time the text is being composed, and may not even be known to the

79 Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, vol. 1, p. 80.

80 Toorawa also discusses how the act of writing was closely linked to the dissemination of religious, philosophical, and political ideas, and how written texts were used to convey authority, legitimacy, and identity. Shawkat Toorawa, "Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr and Arabic Writerly Culture: A Ninth-Century Bookman in Baghdad." London: Routledge, 2010, p. 43.

writer. As a consequence of the social situation and function, speaking is more likely to be about personal experiences while writing typically conveys more general descriptive and explanatory information.<sup>81</sup>

## 10 Conclusion

In this article, I have traced the interface between oral and written media in the employment of ḥadīth as a literary text. It is evident that Abū Maṣṣūr al-Thaʿālibī cared more about transmitting the meaning of ḥadīth texts than about preserving their exact wording. These changes can be interpreted as al-Thaʿālibī's participation in the authorial process through his reproduction and assessment of these texts. However, given a lack of information about the resources that he used for selecting the ḥadīths that he chose to write about,<sup>82</sup> this interpretation can only be a hypothesis. Nevertheless, his examples advance our understanding of how the written and oral forms of ḥadīth can differ, reflecting the diverse backgrounds and scholarly approaches of different authors. The flexible and expandable nature of ḥadīth allows individual ḥadīths to be told, retold, recited, and reworded.

In comparison with the Qurʾānic text, ḥadīth enjoyed much more flexibility, reflecting the verbal creativity of each anthologist and their reliance on personal memory. The oral traditions of ḥadīth exhibit greater flexibility and adaptability over time. Al-Thaʿālibī's literary treatment of ḥadīth highlighted the literary devices that were woven into each ḥadīth to enhance the aesthetics and impact of their oral performances. These literary devices reflected the values, beliefs, and aesthetic sensibilities of Islamic balāghah. The different vocal forms of each ḥadīth may suggest that their recording relied primarily on spoken versions, rather than extracting them from written texts.

Although some ḥadīth scholars considered modifications or omissions to be reprehensible (*munkar*), other figures, such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728 CE), considered such variations of individual ḥadīths to be evidence of literary skill, given that the speaker could creatively change the wording of a ḥadīth while still preserving its meaning.<sup>83</sup> The incorporation of ḥadīth literature into

81 Gisela Redeker, "On Differences between Spoken and Written Language", *Discourse Process*, 7/1 (1984), p. 44.

82 For a survey of the oral and written sources that Thaʿālibī employed in composing *Yatīmat al-dahr fī shuʿarāhl al-ʿaṣr*, see Bilal Orfali, "The Sources of al-Thaʿālibī in *Yatīmat al-Dahr* and *Tatimmat al-Yatīma*", *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 16/1 (2013), pp. 13-42.

83 See, for example, Geert Jan Van Gelder, "Ḥadīth as Adab: Ibn Qutayba's Chapter on Ḥadīth in His *ʿUyūn al-Akhhbār*", in *Studies in Memory of G.H.A. Juynboll*, (2020), p. 288.

classical literary anthologies by al-Tha‘ālibī and others reveals the writerly culture of ḥadīth crafted by a community of skilful writers.

The comparison of the various literary treatments of ḥadīth within different anthologies sheds new light on how different writers addressed ḥadīth in its transition to the written form as well as the ways in which literary skill was demonstrated through a variety of techniques entailed in the written recording of oral ḥadīths. These techniques include the use of interpolation, omission, and augmentation in the original oral form, which served to demonstrate the writer’s skill and to elaborate an immediate understanding of the oral account. Such studies can provide the groundwork for a more in-depth analysis of the literary role played by ḥadīth within the Islamic tradition as well as the role of its oral past in framing the medieval Arabic literary critical method of *balāghah*.

The transformation of ḥadīth from an oral into a written culture, as demonstrated above, highlights the diverse social and cultural functions of orality in preprint cultures. Consequently, modern literary criticism must make a more significant effort to understand the oral nature of ḥadīth, through the versions of each ḥadīth, in order to acknowledge its intrinsic difference from contemporary methods of literary analysis that are based on a final published version of a text attributed to a specific author in our print era. Scholars need to develop interpretive theories that enable our modern literary sensibilities to grasp better the specific contribution of ḥadīth to Islamic literary culture. This can be achieved by combining two different methodological approaches: (1) attending to narrative theory, which facilitates an understanding of the structure and thematic functions of the text as a whole, and (2) attending to Islamic *balāghah* theory, which is based on the discovery of the creative relationship between the vocal form (*lafẓ*) and eloquent meaning (*ma‘nā*), with full consideration of the literary devices used to convey the intended meaning. Pre-modern literary analyses, such as those of al-Tha‘ālibī, merit serious discussion and deliberation, as they challenge the modern presumption that pre-modern approaches to literary criticism lack coherence due to an assumed lack of logical, analytical frameworks.