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The Great Tradition: The Ottoman and the Turkic gazel

Gazels and the World: Some Notes on the ‘Occasional-ness’ of the Ottoman Gazel

Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı

While I was conversing with him near the end of his life, [Zâtî] said: “I’ve newly struck it rich; every two or three days a servant comes and brings either some silver coins or gold along with delicious food or multi-colored *halva* and a letter which says, ‘Write me this kind of a *gazel* or quatrains’ and, at times, even specifies the rhyme and *redif*... I suppose that his master is one of the nobles or a high-born woman, who is incapable of writing poetry and is enamored of a beloved. In any case, I am out nothing of my capital. The *gazel* goes in my divan, and I still keep the silver, the gold, and the *halva*.”¹

Introduction

Distant as we are from the Turkish *gazel* of the 16th century, it is easy for us to separate the *gazel* from its embedding in the day-to-day occasions of peoples’ lives and so we are induced to think of it and talk about it as if it were composed primarily for aesthetic or spiritual purposes. We have often been told that because the *gazel* is not “realistic”, that is, because it does not pretend to represent the world “as it really is”, then it must be purely idealistic and fundamentally estranged from the world in which it was produced.

This impression is strengthened by the nature of our sources. We usually encounter *gazels* in poets’ divans and a divan is intended to be the storehouse of a poet’s spiritual and aesthetic capital. This is to say that when Zâtî puts a *gazel* in his divan, his focus is on preserving for all time the record of his own talent. So *gazels* are seldom identified by the role they might have played in the world of the poet’s day. In his divan Zâtî does not say: this *gazel* is addressed to a lovely shop-boy and was written in exchange for a gold-piece and a plate of *halva*. Nonetheless, many *gazels* surely have double natures in precisely this way. They are produced both and at the same time for idealistic, aesthetic purposes and for the most mundane of goals: to make a living, to attract a patron, to ask for a job, write a letter, to celebrate an occasion, to seduce a beloved... The occasional-ness of some *gazels* is obvious. They are about a *bayram*, or *nevruz*, or autumn, or a snowfall, or party. It is less often obvious which particular occasion they are about unless someone tells us -in part be-

¹ ‘Âşık Çelebî in Meredith-Owens 1971: 279b.

cause the medium in which they are transmitted (the *divan*) seldom does more than preserve the ideal relation of any single *gazel* to a tradition of poems about festivals, new years, parties, seasons, the weather and so on.

It is most likely that we will learn about the occasion of a *gazel* when it was recited to or read by a ruler or powerful patron. Acceptance by the mighty seems to confer on a poem a lasting and transcendent glory that is worth mentioning. For example, a *gazel* by Fevrî with the *maṭlaʿ*:

*Ziyân idüp bu bâzâr içre gerçi itmemişdüm sūd
Yetişdüirdi biḥamdillâh yine ol şâh-ı lutf u cūd*²

*I took a loss, in truth I had made no profit in this bazaar
By the grace of God, to my aid came that lord of favor and generosity*

appears in his *divan* under the heading: *Yanaşduḡda rikkâb-ı Şeh Selîm'e vâkı' olmışdur* (It took place at the stirrup of Sultan Selîm when I approached him). There is any number of *gazels* of this sort: *gazels* which ask for things in what seems like an abstract and ideal way, but which occur on occasions that make it obvious what is being asked for of whom. In fact, many of the stories in the 16th century *tezkires* provide well-known contexts or occasions connected with particular poems: for example, the famous story of Necâtî's *Eşer etmez nidelüm âh-ı şehergâh saña ḡazel* which reached the Sultan by being placed in a chess-companion's turban and resulted, we are told, in a job for the poet.³

We are accustomed to associating worldly or utilitarian motives – begging for things or complaining or celebrating occasions – with the *kaside*, and to associating an abstracted or spiritualized love with the *gazel*. However, in the 16th century such genre distinctions seem to blur. One might even say that seduction begins to overtake praise as an effective and acceptable way of gaining the support of the powerful. Although there were many and varied reasons for such a tendency, in this brief presentation we will sketch in the outlines of an argument suggesting that the “long sixteenth century” (from the late 15th through the early 17th centuries) contains, within temporal limits that we cannot yet define accurately, an “age of beloveds” every bit as distinctive as the early 18th century “age of tulips”. The conditions we intend to highlight by adopting such a perspective are the following:

1. During this period it became unusually fashionable, especially among the economic and intellectual elites (but not limited to them), to become more or less publicly enamored of beautiful young men, certain of whom became quite famous.
2. The *gazel* became the primary medium of communicating to and about these beloveds and this became an important social function of the *gazel*.

² Fevrî: fol. 123a.

³ Tarlan 1962: XVI, 145-146

3. Within this discursive regime, refined, seductive speech took on great power by being directly associated with actual desire at all levels and the reading of *every gazel* was touched in some way by this power and association.

The whole story of the “age of beloveds” certainly remains to be told and it will still remain to be told after this paper. We will only hint at the outlines of a story. It seems clear that the scholarly world has been quite uncomfortable talking about the Ottoman *gazel* as it is implicated in the down-to-earth, bawdy, sexualized, amoral if not immoral aspects of the lives (fantasy lives or real lives) of a small but significant segment of the Ottoman urban population. On one hand, there is a tendency in the present to idealize the 16th century “golden age” of Ottoman culture as a paragon of order, aesthetic sublimity, and the rule of law. On the other hand, non-Turkish scholars are understandably reluctant to be seen as engaging in the orientalist practice of projecting western sexual fantasies on the “East”. As a result, some of the texture of Ottoman life has been lost to us. We get caught up in the illusion that a culture must be either and exclusively moral, sublime, and ordered or immoral, mundane, and chaotic. This binary view prevents us, we believe, from appreciating the ways in which very earthy and very spiritual concerns intersect and the manner in which social phenomena are coherent across a broad range of motifs and behaviors.

The Beloveds:

The major players in the scene of Ottoman cultural drama that interests us here are the “beloveds” (*dilberler*) or “beauties” (*güzeller*) who are, for the most part, attractive young men either from the lower classes or from among the (dissolute) off-spring of the well-to-do, and the “lovers”, or those inclined to passionate attachments, who seem to come mostly, but not exclusively, from the economic elites or power-holding classes. Beloveds can appear almost anywhere. There are “celebis”, young artisans, shop-boys, janissaries, dervishes, “city-boys”, peasants, rascals, and rogues. Some of these are quite famous and are referred to by name in poems and anecdotes. For example, ‘*Âşık Çelebi* mentions about 35 “beloveds” by name [There is some uncertainty about the names because it is not always clear if a Memi and a Tatar Memi are the same person.] In *Zâtî’s* Divan there are about 115 poems that mention a specific beloved either by name or occupation.⁴ According to ‘*Âşık Çelebi* the poet *Nihâlî* retired to the bazaar where he wrote a number of poems on the topic of various apprentices and shop-boys.⁵ *Yahyâ* (the Janissary) mentions about 20 beloveds by name in his Divan.⁶ In many instances where names are mentioned it is impossible to attribute the poem for certain, for example,

⁴ Tarlan 1967, Tarlan 1970, Çavuşoğlu and Tanyeri 1987.

⁵ Meredith-Owens 1971: 142b-145a.

⁶ Çavuşoğlu 1977.

in cases wherein the beloved has the same name as a common character in the poetry – a Ferhat, or Hüsrev, or Yūsuf – as in the following by Yahyā:

Şevkumdan ölürin yüzünü kim görem seniñ

‘Arz-ı cemāl iderseñ efendi kerem seniñ

When I happen to see your face, I die from desire

If you reveal your beauty, sir, you do (me) a favor

Ger biñde birini yazam ey Yūsuf-ı zamān

*Yazmakda vaşf-ı hüsnünü ‘āciz qalam seniñ*⁷

Oh Joseph of the age, if I only wrote about one of them in a thousand

I would still be incapable of writing a description of your beauties

Considering also that “dedicated” poems do not always mention anybody’s name in an unequivocal way, it seems quite likely that there were a large number of such poems. Moreover, the *Şehrengīz*, or poetic catalogue of “beloveds” for a city, which appears and flourishes in the 16th century, provides us with rosters of the names of famous beloveds in major cities in the Empire, names that seem to overlap often with names mentioned in poems and anecdotal sources.⁸ We take the *Şehrengīz* and its popularity at the time to be strong evidence supporting our contention that there was a significant “beloveds” fad or fashion among the 16th century elites and their emulators.

The beloveds themselves are a widely varied group. Some seem to be well-known and, in many ways, “professional” beloveds. For example, the famous “Memi Şāh”, the son of the Derviş Āteşī, who graced the infamous hamam of Deli Birāder (Ġazālī) and attracted a host of customers, is the subject of poems by a number of well-known poets. In one collection of parallel poems there are 51 *na-ẓīres* to a poem in which the *redif* (Kayacığum) memorializes a beloved named “Kaya”.⁹ In his collection of “pleasantries” (*Leṭāyif*) Zātī tells the following story about such a beloved:

At one time there was a beloved called Muḥarrem who was respected among the people, union with whom was valued, a power in the province of beauty, whose lip was sweeter than sugar and whose words were more tasty than honey. I rattled off the following couplet for him,

If you were to ask with those sugar lips how I am doing

I’d respond (to them), I would have to ask/suck on you

When he heard it he said “What a pleasant couplet.” I saw that he enjoyed poetry and said to him, “Muḥarrem Çelebi, how about if I compose a *gazel* for you?” He said, “As long as it’s not a mish-mash of other people’s stuff, it has to be an original conceit, the poems of today’s poets are all a mish-mash (old couplets slightly changed).” I responded, “Come, young sir, how else should we do it, it can’t be

⁷ Çavuşoğlu 1977: 426.

⁸ Levend 1958.

⁹ Mecmūatü’n-nezā’ir, İstanbul Üniversitesi Kütüphanesi, İÜTY 739.

done without mish-mashing. When that rose-bud heard these words, he blushed like a rose while speaking like a nightingale and like a bud became close-mouthed.”¹⁰

This Muḥarrem Çelebi was obviously educated and cultured – certainly enough so to make him a poetry critic – and he was most likely from a more or less elite background. The tanner’s son that Ferāḥī¹¹ fell in love with was clearly not, nor were Nihālī’s shop boys, nor the cruel street urchin that Me’ālī fell for in Mihaliç.¹² Nonetheless, it appears that any of them was susceptible to the lure of a well-written poem. As Mesīḥī said in concluding one of his *gazels*:

Mesīḥī şîr didügi gehi Türki gehi Tâzî
*Murâdî ol ğazâlî avlamağ imiş ğazellerle*¹³
 Mesīḥī writes poems now in Turkish now in Persian
 Apparently he aims to hunt that gazelle with *gazels*

Gazels, Lovers, and Beloveds:

Taken in relation to this very active social world of lovers and beloveds, the 16th century Ottoman *gazel* immediately transforms itself from a purely aesthetic exercise into a lively participant in the society and culture of its day. The poet Nişânî has a much paralleled poem about the *gazel*:

Getürür hâtır-ı dildâra vefâ tâze ğazel
Diyelüm sevķ ile ol serv-i ser-efrâza ğazel
Şu‘arâ resmi durur midḥat-i erbâb-ı cemâl
Eyüsi şâ‘irüñ oldur diye mümtâza ğazel
Güzel oldur ki cefâ itmeye ‘âşıklarına
Hevesi ola kemâle okuya yaza ğazel
Yaraşur mihr ü vefâya ne kadar söylene söz
Dimege dil varıma şîve ile nâza ğazel
Ġün ola mihr ü vefâsı çıkar anı göke sen
*Dime zinhâr Nişânî keremi aza ğazel*¹⁴

The *gazel* reminds the beloved of faithfulness
 So let us write impassioned *gazels* to that tall cypress

It is the custom of poets to praise the people of beauty
 The best of poets is he who writes *gazels* to the select

¹⁰ Çavuşoğlu 1970: 13.

¹¹ Latîfî 138a (not in the Cevdet edition).

¹² Meredith-Owens 1971: 113a-117a. English translation of the story by Walter Andrews in Silay 1996: 138-146.

¹³ Mengi 1995: 265.

¹⁴ Mecmûatü’n-nezâir: fol. 148a.

He is beautiful who does not oppress his lovers,
Whose desire is for perfection, who reads and writes *gazels*

It's fitting that so many words be spoken about love and faithfulness?
The tongue can't bear to recite a *gazel* about flirting and flightiness

Praise him to the skies, when he is loving and true
Beware, Nişānī, write no *gazels* to him whose favors are few

Taking this description and its parallels as our text (and sub-text), we can begin to sketch in the outlines of a picture of the *gazel* as a participant in the love-lives of very real people. According to Nişānī, beyond its “hunting gazelles” function - more or less, intriguing beloveds by panegyrics to their attractiveness- the *gazel* also has a “taming gazelles” function. When the poet says that the *gazel* should remind beloveds of faithfulness, he foregrounds the fact that many of these beloveds were notoriously unfaithful and promiscuous. After all, it is suggested that some lived a high life on the gifts and favors of their admirers. Thus, famous beloveds had numerous suitors – the more the merrier – and rivalries among suitors seem to have been intense. For example, Lāmi'ī, the famed translator of Persian romances, lived a rather secluded and spiritual life until, in his latter years, he was persuaded by friends to give in to contemporary fashion and write a *gazel* to one of the notorious beloveds of the day, a young man named Tatar Memi. This so angered Memi's other lovers that they visited upon poor old Lāmi'ī a barrage of satires and insults that dogged him until the end of his life.¹⁵

One could get in deep trouble because of a beloved. This is why Nişānī urges the poet to write *gazels* only to the “select”, (*mümtāz*) or those who will not (excessively) oppress their lovers, by which we take him to mean more the more cultured and educated beloveds, who know the ways and rules and limits of fashionable love. These, in turn, contrast with the collection of street urchins, shop-boys, apprentices, young dervishes, bath-house boys, wine-shop waiters and other assorted knaves and rascals to whom so many poems are addressed. For example, Zātī has a *gazel* on a *ma'cūncu*, a boy who works making electuary paste (*ma'cūn*). It begins:

Sitting thigh to thigh with a lovely *ma'cūncu*, I lose my mind
My mouth waters at his peach and I lose my mind

Bir güzel ma'cūncunuñ pehlüsünüñ hayrānıyam
Ağzum akar suyu şeftālusunuñ hayrānıyam

I fear not Iskender Shah, mid the dominion of this world,
But his door, worth all the world, makes me lose my mind

Mülk-i 'ālem içre korkum yok Sikender şāhdan
Büsbütün dünyā deger kapusunuñ hayrānıyam

¹⁵ Meredith-Owens 1971: 109b.

I'm an exceeding strange *macun* in the bowl of this world
The kiss of his mouth's vial makes me lose my mind

Turfā ma'cūnam be-ġāyet tās-ı 'ālem içre ben
*Hokka-i la'l-i lebinüñ būsınuñ hayrānıyam*¹⁶

A boy like this could be a danger. Consider the cases of Me'ālī who was deceived and abandoned in a leper colony by a cruel street urchin, or Nālişī who would fall in love with any beautiful boy he saw and make such a nuisance of himself that the boy's neighbors would beat him to a pulp,¹⁷ or Helākī who, in a line of poetry, expressed his attraction to an unwilling beloved and was stabbed to death for his pains.¹⁸

The other danger is that a mature and powerful man could be manipulated or be made to look foolish (as in the case of Me'ālī) by a much younger and less powerful boy often of the lowest classes. In the story of Deli Birāder's *hamam*, 'Āşık suggests that it was not because of the lewd and immoral behavior that went on there that it was razed to the ground one night on the orders of İbrāhīm Paşa. The charge of immorality brought by Birāder's rival hamam-keepers was a pretext. The real reason was the enmity of İbrāhīm Paşa resulting from this couplet by Deli Birāder:

Ne maḥkūm arada belli ne ḥākim
Düġündür ki çalan kim oynayan kim

It's not clear who is in control here and who is controlled
It's a feast, but who plays the tune and who dances?

Those who wished Deli Birāder ill, interpreted the couplet to İbrāhīm telling him that it referred to the Paşa's relations with his then beloved, a young man named Çeşte Bālī. The obvious inference was that the Paşa, the second most powerful figure in the Empire, was so smitten by love that the boy was the calling the tune.¹⁹

The social range of lovers also seems to have been broad. Paşas and sultans were lovers, but Laṭifī points out that even a porter (*ḥammāl*) could have a "poetic nature", which to him meant a susceptibility to falling passionately and uncontrollably in love.²⁰ When 'Āşık describes the visitors to Deli Birāder's *hamam*, he points out that they came from both the *ḥāş* and *'ām*, the noble and common. Lovers, as warm and passionate people, contrast with the ascetics (*zāhid*), who deny themselves in the hope of reward in the next life, and the "cold hearted" (*efsürdedil*) who are simply incapable of passion by nature. These, as well as the lovers and beloveds, are stock characters in the love-drama of the *gazel*.

¹⁶ Tarlan 1970: 507

¹⁷ Laṭifī: fol. 171a-b.

¹⁸ Ahmed Cevdet 1314: 365.

¹⁹ Meredith-Owens 1971: 294b-295a.

²⁰ Laṭifī: fol. 113b.

In the story about Zātī with which we introduced this paper, it is striking that the poet was asked to ghost-write poems not only by male lovers but by “high born women” (*ulu hātūn*), which can only mean that women were active participants in the fashionable “crushes” of the day. If women who were “incapable of writing poetry” were buying poems from Zātī, then it follows that there were capable women writing poetry of their own to beloveds of their own. Certainly the stories about Mihrī Hātūn, a highly regarded poet, indicate that some of her poems were to actual beloveds including a young man named İskender Çelebi and the famous Mü’eyyedzāde.²¹ And this does not appear to have reflected negatively on her honor or reputation, at least in the poetry-writing and consuming community.

Whether or not there were female beloveds is another question. Sultan Süleymān wrote passionate love poems to his wife Hürrem. But today there exists only one *şehrengīz* describing female “beauties or beloveds”, a work by ‘Azīzī (Mısrī) describing women solely of the lower classes.²² This does not mean necessarily that there were not other such works and *gazels* about female beloveds but it does suggest that, for whatever the reasons (and we could guess at several), writing about or writing openly about female beloveds was relatively uncommon. We would point out, however, that the topic of female lovers and beloveds in the 16th century has never been seriously studied by scholars.

Ottoman gazels and the world:

It is not our contention that every Ottoman *gazel* in the 16th century was a feature of the interaction between fashionable lovers and beloveds. What we do contend is simply this: that a significant number of *gazels* were composed for specific occasions and specific people within a certain cultural milieu featuring certain popular interactions, and that the intersection of literary forms and actual desire constitute and give shape to both the literary forms and the desire. This is to say that the literary form, its themes, and topoi take on shape and significance because of their relation to what people are actually doing. Likewise, what people are actually doing – the ways in which they enact their love lives, for example – are to a degree formed and constituted in relation to the literary form. For certain groups, passion is understood and acted out in the shape and manner of a *gazel*.

Any number of things follow from this contention. Few if any of them have been adequately studied and we can only mention them briefly here.

1. It is misleading to aestheticise the 16th century Ottoman *gazel* excessively. We must keep in mind that there were very real lovers and beloveds speaking to each other in the language of *gazels*. Part of the “self fashioning” of cultured people was, in some ways, to live the life suggested by the *gazel*. And this means that, de-

²¹ İsen 1994: 164.

²² Levend 1958: 46-47.

spite the heavy weight of poetic tradition, for these people there were not only real lovers and beloveds but real *zāhids* (censuring ascetics) and *nāṣiḥs* (advice-giving friends) and *raḳībs* (guardians of the beloved) and close companions, real passions and love-sicknesses, real gardens, parties, miseries, and betrayals.

2. There are many indications that the societal dimensions of a “poetic life” are far broader than we tend to think. While it is most likely true that the intellectual and economic elites engaged in the “poetic life” more commonly and to a greater degree than other classes, it also seems true that lovers and beloveds and *gazels* can be found to have seeped out here and there into the general populace. There is certainly evidence that handsome young men from artisans to shop-boys and laborers were hunted using *gazels* as bait and it seems not too far-fetched to assume that they took the bait because they could in some way appreciate its flavor. If there were more popular and parallel forms of the *gazel* or *gazel*-like forms that circulated among the non-elites and fulfilled similar functions, we do not know about them and no one has been looking for them.

3. The “occasional” life of the *gazel* that we have been focussing on, with its relation to overwhelming passion, excitement, and danger on the fringes of the moral order, gives to the form a tremendous psychological power. This is a most difficult point to make clearly. We know, for example, that the *gazel* very often represents the emotional content of a popular (and “poeticized”) mysticism. Our tendency to see things in binary and oppositional terms makes it difficult to consider how the deeply and poignantly felt spirituality of a sincere and devout Muslim can intersect coherently with the love lives and almost theatrical emotionalism of poets, would-be poets, and their youthful beloveds. The two spheres appear to be mutually exclusive. Where persons seem to be both worldly and other-worldly lovers, our tendency is either to claim that they are “really” one or the other, or to accuse them of hypocrisy. However, if we give up the need for making reductions or seeking hypocrisy, we will find ample evidence that Ottomans of the 16th century, like persons of the 20th and 21st centuries, lived lives in which morality *and* libertinism, spirituality *and* sexuality, sobriety *and* intoxication existed together quite comfortably and without contradiction.

The same holds for the *gazel*. In fact we are arguing that the connection of the *gazel* to everyday, real-world occasions – a passionate love affair, a drunken gathering – is in part what grants it the power to represent emotional, charismatic spirituality in a meaningful way. It is precisely in the area of apparent contradiction that the emotional energy is produced which makes the *gazel* and its relatives so important to the cultural life of the Ottoman empire for centuries.

In addition, paying attention to the “occasional-ness” of the 16th century Ottoman *gazel* points up something that our serious scholarly concerns often cause us to forget. The *gazel* was most often meant to be fun, enjoyable, humorous, pleasant, engaging... Sometimes it is just a way to attract and entertain beautiful per-

sons, to amuse them with one's skill, needing no other purpose than what Zātī points out:

*Güzeller şî're hep mâyl musâhib olmaya kâyl
Be hey Zātī bu demlerde niçün hāmûş ola şâ'ir*²³

The beauties all like poetry and want to be close friends
Come on, Zātī, at a time like this why should a poet be silent

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²³ Tarlan 1967: 302.