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Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī’s *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…* (1973): Between Reassessing and Subverting Traditional Cultural and Literary Values

Abstract

The present paper’s aim is to contribute to a number of topics concerning the Tunisian author Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī’s book *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…* (1973), some of which have already been tackled by critics inside and outside the Arab world, namely the literary genre to which this book can be ascribed and the writing techniques that Al-Mas‘adī resorts to, his complex interactions with the Arabic literary heritage, which involve reviving what is known as *ḥadīṯ*/*ḫabar*, a genre cultivated in close connection with Islam and premodern historiography in the Arab world and, at the same time, subjecting key elements of the Arabic poetic tradition to a kind of treatment that is consonant with a genre labeled by Alexander Knysh, following Mikhail Bakhtin, Menippean satire; we will also be looking into the profile of Abū Hurayra as a character (more precisely, the extent to which a link can be established with his historical namesake).

Keywords: Literary Genre, *Ḥadīṯ*, *Isnād*, Embedded Narrative, Menippean Satire, Lyric, Epic, Maḥmūd al-Masʿadī, Tunisian Literature

The Tunisian writer Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī (1911–2004), while not necessarily known for his prolific output, is a remarkable presence on the Arab, and especially Tunisian, literary scene thanks to his exquisite and refined style. In the case of *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, a text that was, for the most part, written in the 1930s, he paired a classically polished discourse in its formal aspects with a content meant to

acquaint the reader with new, modern ideas about the broadest philosophical and spiritual inquiries, concerning life, human interactions, morality, desire. The title of the text is, according to the author’s own confession, inspired by the imam conducting the Friday prayers that he attended in his youth, who would repeatedly use the typical introductory formula *ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, “Abū Hurayra reported, saying…” whenever he would cite a *ḥadīṯ* ascribed to Abū Hurayra,[1] a companion of the Prophet and one of the reputedly most prolific and, hence, famous *ḥadīṯ* transmitters.[2] The text itself is formulated as a collection of *ḥadīṯ*s, but, in what can be described as a remarkable case of recursion or mise en abyme, the well-known transmitter becomes himself the main character of the *ḥadīṯ*s, the one upon whom their narratives are focused, whether he is the one supposed to also be the transmitter or not. The debates that have been going on around the book are mainly centered on a few topics: its interpretation, often in correlation with the author’s ideological leanings, the literary genre to which the book can be ascribed and its style, the profile of Abū Hurayra as a character being, thanks to his centrality, inextricably linked to any inquiry into the text.

In relation to the first topic, there are attempts at providing Al-Mas‘adī’s work with a socially and intellectually contextualizing background: in the introductory study he penned for the book in 1978, the literary critic Tawfīq Bakkār states that Mecca, the setting of the events narrated therein, is supposed to stand for the Islamic society in the stagnant stage of its evolution (the behavior of Abū Hurayra himself, his conformism and the perfunctory manner in which he follows established traditions, with no self-reflection, prior to his conversion at the hands of a mysterious figure that is reminiscent of the preachers of secretive sects, is a reflection of that same stagnation).[3] The book is also seen by Bakkār as an echo of the reformist trends that were sweeping Tunisian society in the interwar period, and Abū Hurayra – as a symbol of Tunisian intellectuals embracing modernity in the first half of the twentieth century.[4] The philosophical tenets embraced by Al-Mas‘adī, and closely reflected by this work, are mostly inspired by Nietzsche’s existentialism, and this is

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[1] Mohamed Salah Omri, ‘Interview with Mahmud al-Mas‘adi’, *Comparative Critical Studies* 4/3 (2007), p. 436.

[2] Abū Hurayra was a remarkably prolific transmitter of *ḥadīṯ*s according to the written sources, such as *ḥadīṯ* collections, on which Islamic jurisprudence has come to rely (hence the repetitiveness, during Friday sermons, of the formula that ended up as the title of Al-Mas‘adī’s book after it had stuck in his memory); it is this very prolificity that raised some doubts about whether all the *ḥadīṯ*s ascribed to him are authentically his (for a presentation of how this issue was dealt with in Islamic sources and circles, cf. G.H.A. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth*, Leiden–Boston 2007, pp. 45–47).

[3] Tawfīq Bakkār, ‘Awǧā‘ al-ifāqa ‘alā at-tārīḫ al-‘āṣif’, in: *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī, Tūnus 1997, p. 18.

[4] Ibidem, p. 20.

reflected in Al-Mas‘adī’s distrust in, or disdain for, the masses, irrespective of the actual role they did play in the evolution of Tunisian society during the writer’s life. Abū Hurayra is portrayed as a quite typical Nietzschean hero, one that asserts his own individuality and willpower in defiance of pre-established rules and conventions, and also with an air of contempt towards those who do not share his sense of self.[5] The references to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), and specifically to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885), also appear in Al-Mas‘adī’s own remarks, who acknowledges that there is a relationship between his text and the German philosopher’s work, insisting, however, that “the expression ‘*haddatha Abu Hurayra qal*’ is rooted in Islam, and that is its reference.”[6] Alexander Knysh, an Arabist and Professor of Islamic Studies, seeks to further clarify what stage in the evolution of existentialism had exerted its influence on Al-Mas‘adī, excluding the idea that he may have been influenced by French existentialism, on the grounds that it only flourished in the 1940s and 1950s, whereas Al-Mas‘adī had already finished writing the bulk of his book by the end of the 1930s.[7] This means that the existentialism that

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[5] Ibidem, pp. 30–32.

[6] Mohamed Salah Omri, ‘Interview with Mahmud al-Mas‘adi’, p. 438. We are aware that the commonalities with Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* could go beyond content, philosophical background, the two books’ respective titles and their protagonists, whose shared characteristics as self-willed, nonconformist spiritual leaders are unmistakable. By reading what some critics have to say about Nietzsche’s work, one could see a path for extending the parallels towards matters of style and formal features: the German-born French writer Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt states that Nietzsche was keenly preoccupied with, and highly critical of, the style of German philosophical writings: “…à plusieurs reprises Nietzsche parle dans ses fragments de la ‘misérable grisaille’ de Hegel ou du ‘Kanzleideutsch’, de l’allemand de bureaucrate de Kant […]; [o]r, plus l’intensité de pensée est grande, plus Nietzsche tente d’y répondre par l’adéquation du style, ce style qui, au fil des années, devient sa préoccupation majeure” (Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, ‘Préface’, in: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, Paris 2023 p. 8). Goldschmidt also points to Nietzsche’s penchant for resorting to an archaizing register of the language, one that is, inter alia, heavily reliant on Luther’s translation of the Bible: “[i]l n’est pas un chapitre de *Zarathoustra* qui ne soit en effet plein de citations, sinon de versets entiers de telle ou telle partie de la Bible de Luther” (Ibidem, p. 12). This is, however, a path of inquiry that goes well beyond our means and the scope of the present paper and will, thus, not be pursued.

[7] In fact, the Arab cultural press offers us a testimony about the tortuous trajectory of the book’s manuscript, which was strongly impacted by the events of the Second World War. It appears that the manuscript had been written by the end of 1939, after Al-Mas‘adī’s return in 1936 from Paris, where he had been studying at the Sorbonne, and it was entrusted, either in Tunisia or during a short stay in Paris, to a friend and colleague of his, the Tunisian Al-Ḥabīb Farḥāt, in the hope that he would have it published in Lebanon, so that the text was, most certainly, in the hands of Farḥāt in 1940. After the German troops invaded France, the French authorities offered the North African Arab residents, with the agreement of the German occupation forces, the option of being evacuated by sea; Farḥāt and another Tunisian friend were among those who took up that offer. However, before leaving, they made the acquaintance of the Lebanese intellectual Ḫalīl al-Ǧurr (1913–1987), who would become the first president of the Lebanese University

left its mark on this work could only have been the one that had already taken shape in the 19th century and had been fashioned by the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Nietzsche.[8]

As for the issue of literary genre and form, the most salient feature of the text in this regard is, quite understandably, the choice of writing it as a collection of *ḥadīṯ*s.[9] The revivalist or indigenist orientation reflected by the use of this particular literary form is easy to detect, and it is consonant with the author’s apparent goal of creating, in terms of content, through literature, an indigenous Arabic mythology, one that may act as a counterpart for the Graeco-Latin mythology that had provided Western literature with powerful and philosophically meaningful symbols.[10] The connection with the Arabic literary tradition goes beyond reviving a pre-modern literary genre, because the very act of “imitating/emulating” (*mu‘āraḍa*) previous literary accomplishments was, in itself, a well-established practice by means of which one author would prove his worth by taking on the formal constraints of the work of another, especially in the realm of poetry, “often with the dual purpose of honoring the model and trying to surpass it.”[11] To be sure, the concept of *mu‘āraḍa* has been pointed to in approaching Al-Mas‘adī’s style, specifically and mainly in relation to the passages that are inspired and stylistically marked by the Qur’an; some of these are described by the Tunisian philologist Muḥammad al-Ya‘lāwī (1929–2015) as

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(1951–1953), and, fearing that the manuscript might get lost if anything happened to the boat he was supposed to board, Farḥāt left the manuscript with Al-Ǧurr, who stayed in France until 1946, when he returned to Lebanon and took the manuscript with him. The text was taken back by a Tunisian researcher in 1962 to its author, who by then had become Tunisia’s minister for national education, and Al-Mas‘adī finally published it in 1973, not before adding to it one more ‘*ḥadīṯ*’, titled ‘Ḥadīṯ al-ǧamā‘a wa-al-waḥša’, inserted as the fourteenth *ḥadīṯ* of the book (Naǧm ad-Dīn Ḫalaf Allāh, ‘*Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*’, as-sīra al-‘aǧība li-maḫṭūṭ Al-Mas‘adī’, *Al-‘Arabī al-Ǧadīd*, 6 December 2019, Viewed 29 August 2023, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/"حدَّث أبو هريرة قال" السيرة العجيبة لمخطوط المسعدي>.

[8] Alexander Knysh, ‘*Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla* – kitāb ḫāriǧ at-taṣnīf’, *Ad-Dawḥa* 66 (2013), p. 81.

[9] “As a general literary category, a *ḥadīth* is a short narrative focused upon a single incident in which a particular saying or deed of a well-known figure holds the central place” (B. Weiss, ‘*ḥadīth*’, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, eds. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, London–New York 1998, p. 261). The terms *ḫabar*, “information”, “report”, and *aṯar*, “tradition”, “report”, are used, in the literary terminology, as quasi-synonyms for *ḥadīth*, especially when the literary texts they designate are not of a religious nature or when the sayings they convey are not ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad (Bakrī Šayḫ Amīn, *Adab al-ḥadīṯ an-nabawī*, Bayrūt-Al-Qāhira 1975, pp. 11–12).

[10] Bakkār sees in the Qur’anically inspired character of Pharaoh, appearing in the eleventh *ḥadīṯ* (Al-Mas‘adī, *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, pp. 133–134), a Prometheus-like figure, a “symbol of human defiance” (*ramz al-‘iṣyān al-insānī*), and takes the pair of the pre-Islamic deities Isāf and Nā’ila (ibidem, pp. 63, 77–80) as counterparts of Bacchus, the god of wine and licentious celebrations, and Venus, the goddess of love (Tawfīq Bakkār, ‘Awǧā‘ al-ifāqa ‘alā at-tārīḫ al-‘āṣif’, pp. 27–28).

[11] Geert J.H. Van Gelder, ‘*mu‘āraḍa*’, in: *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, p. 534.

“stylistic exercises” (*tamārīn uslūbiyya*) that he explicitly likens to those used by poets to engage in when imitating famous poems.[12] But we can also widen the perspective and, if we take into account the often inherently subversive dimension of this practice, pursued not only with the aim of showcasing one’s prowess but also, in many cases, with a polemical intention and the objective of conveying a message running counter to the one promoted by the original work, and especially if we remember that the attempts to “emulate” the Qur’an were, in and of themselves, interpretable as irreverent acts, susceptible of challenging the dogma of its inimitability,[13] it is possible for us to take the whole text as a big *mu‘āraḍa*-like tour de force, one by which the *ḥadīṯ*, a genre associated, in the targeted public’s psyche, with a major type of canonical Islamic texts, is masterfully used as a vehicle for a philosophical message that is meant to shake pre-established rules, conventions, social and cultural values. At the same time, even if Al-Mas‘adī’s close connection, on multiple levels, with the Arabic literary heritage is readily apparent, his openness to modernity, proved even as he uses this very genre, is not lost on commentators, who emphasize the convergence of the *ḥadīṯ* with modern narrating techniques. Bakkār argues that the presence of the *isnād* (lit. “propping”, “ascription”), the introductory formula containing the transmitter(s) of the *ḥadīṯ*, is very propitious for multiplying narrating voices and, hence, perspectives, as the presence of different “transmitters” makes it possible to shed different lights on the same events; the same feature has the effect of creating two temporal planes (the plane of the events being narrated and the plane of the narration itself) that do not always run alongside each other in neatly parallel lines.[14] A similar stance is taken by Widād Ibn ‘Āfiya, for whom the use of the *ḥadīṯ* as a genre has enabled Al-Mas‘adī to establish a connection with modernity by creating a text characterized by the “multiplicity of transmitters/narrators” (*ta‘addud ar-ruwāt*) and the “breaking of temporal linearity” (*kasr ḫaṭṭiyyat az-zaman*).[15] Then, Bakkār (and also Ibn ‘Āfiya, who quotes him at this point) goes on to claim that the presence of the *isnād*s sets the premise for the interpretation of the text as an embedded narrative, or as stories within stories, wherein the *isnād*s are supposed to function as the outer frames within which the stories, narrated in the form of *ḥadīṯ*s, are encased.[16] If it were formulated in absolute

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[12] Muḥammad al-Ya‘lāwī, ‘Aš-šakl fī *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…* li-Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī’, *Ḥawliyyāt al-Ǧāmi‘a at-Tūnusiyya* 12 (1975), pp. 90–91.

[13] Van Gelder, ‘*mu‘āraḍa*’, p. 534.

[14] Bakkār, ‘Awǧā‘ al-ifāqa ‘alā at-tārīḫ al-‘āṣif’, pp. 38–39.

[15] Ibn ‘Āfiya, ‘Tawẓīf at-turāṯ fī riwāyat *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…* li-Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī’, *Maǧallat al-Aṯar* 27 (2016), pp. 155–156.

[16] Bakkār, ‘Awǧā‘ al-ifāqa ‘alā at-tārīḫ al-‘āṣif’, pp. 39; Bin ‘Āfiya, ‘Tawẓīf at-turāṯ fī riwāyat *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*’, p. 156.

terms, this claim would be something of a stretch to say the least, because the *isnād*s are minimally and sketchily developed, having, in most of the cases, only one transmitter mentioned therein, and containing a limited variety of technical terms that can usually be found in a *isnād* and that enable readers to identify which type the respective *ḥadīṯ* belongs to.[17] Bakkār seems to be aware that he is not on very solid ground when making this claim, given that he lays great emphasis on the virtuality of such a scenario – which could only be actualized with the active and substantial participation of the reader in imagining the “story of the conditions of the account’s reporting” (*qiṣṣat ẓurūf riwāyat al-ḫabar*) –, using formulas like “untold story” (*ḥikāya maskūt ‘anhā*) and “concealed story” (*qiṣṣa muḍmara*).[18]

Knysh offers a valuable insight into the classification of the text as to its literary genre by associating it with the Menippean satire,[19] which is named after Menippos, a Greek satirist of the 3rd century BC. As a reference, he cites the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and his placing this type of satire within the

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[17] Out of the twenty-two *ḥadīṯ*s that make up the book, eighteen are headed by *isnād*s containing the formula *ḥaddaṯa fulānun qāla*, “so-and-so reported, saying”, with only one transmitter being mentioned in each one of them. As for the remaining four *isnād*s, two of them have two transmitters each, and it is in three of these four *isnād*s that we find some meaningful terminological variation: in the sixth *ḥadīṯ* the *isnād* is *ruwiya ‘an abī sa‘din qāla: ḥaddaṯat rayḥānatu qālat*, “it was reported on the authority of Abū Sa‘d, who said: Rayḥāna reported, saying”. A *ḥadīṯ* with such an *isnād* would be known as *mu‘allaq*, primary meaning: “suspended”, i.e. a *ḥadīṯ* in whose *isnād* the beginning of the chain of transmitters is omitted, and the verb in the passive voice used at the beginning would specifically mark it as one whose validity needs to be further investigated, based on other, external sources – Muṣṭafā al-Baġā, *Buḥūṯ fī ‘ulūm al-ḥadīṯ wa-nuṣūṣih*, Dimašq 1989–1990, pp. 150–152. The *isnād* of the eleventh *ḥadīṯ* is *‘an abī hurayrata annahu qāla* “[it was reported] about Abū Hurayra that he said” – such a formula would qualify a *ḥadīṯ* as *mu’annan*, i.e. one in whose *isnād* the conjunction *an*, “that”, is used. This type of *ḥadīṯ* is, in its turn, assimilated in its evaluation as to the degree of its validity and reliability to the one known as *mu‘an‘an*, i.e. the one in whose *isnād* the preposition *‘an*, “from”, “on the authority of”, is used. The preposition *‘an*, used alone, with no verb, signals an ambiguity concerning whether the *ḥadīṯ* was directly heard from the person whose name is governed by the preposition, which would be the safest and soundest way of transmission, or if it was received by other means (ibidem, pp. 149–150). The *isnād* of the seventeenth *ḥadīṯ* is *ḥaddaṯa makīnu ibnu qaymata as-sa‘diyyu qāla: ḥaddaṯanī hišāmun ibnu abī ṣufrata al-huḏaliyyu qāla*, “Makīn b. Qayma as-Sa‘dī reported, saying: Hišām b. Abī Ṣufra al-Huḏalī reported to me, saying”; the use of a formula like *ḥaddaṯanī fulānun*, “so-and-so reported to me”, where the verb *ḥaddaṯa*, or one of its synonyms, is followed by an affixed pronoun in the first person, would explicitly signal a strong connection between two links in the chain of transmitters, represented by a direct, oral transmission (Bakrī Šayḫ Amīn, *Adab al-ḥadīṯ an-nabawī*, pp. 75–76). All the transmitters in the book are fictitious (none of their names, besides the one of Abū Hurayra himself, can be found in Gualtherüs H.A. Juynboll’s *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth*, Leiden–Boston 2007), some of them are also involved as characters in the book’s plot.

[18] Bakkār, ‘Awǧā‘ al-ifāqa ‘alā at-tārīḫ al-‘āṣif’, pp. 39.

[19] Knysh, ‘*Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla* – kitāb ḫāriǧ at-taṣnīf’, p. 84.

frame of serio-comical genres, which are, in their diversity, "united by their deep bond with carnivalistic folklore"[20] and "saturated with a specific carnival sense of the world"[21]. Among the features of Menippean satire pointed to by Bakhtin that seem to be most relevant for interpreting key elements of *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…* are "the organic combination within it of the free fantastic, the symbolic, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme and […] crude slum naturalism,"[22] the presence of "scandal scenes, eccentric behavior, inappropriate speeches and performances."[23] This genre is one of "ultimate questions", in which "ultimate philosophical positions are put to the test;"[24] its heroes are often "historical and legendary figures"[25], but, at the same time, it is preoccupied with "current and topical issues […], echoing the ideological issues of the day".[26] Knysh develops his argument in favor of *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…* being a Menippean satire in a list of ten points,[27] and this categorization does, indeed, have the merit of offering a unitary explanation for a lot of the text's most important and salient features. Not only that, but we think that the scope of the parody and carnivalization that are at the core of this genre can be expanded by including, as objects of such treatment, some key motifs of the classicized Arabic *qaṣīda,* and poetry in general, as a central element of Arabic literary culture.

The first instance of this type of parodying can be found in the first *ḥadīṯ*, where the unnamed friend that initiates Abū Hurayra into the journey that would lead him to the discovery of earthly pleasures recounts how, when looking for a lost camel, he met a mysterious pair that had embraced the "call of the world" (*da'wat ad-dunyā*), and how the camel was sacrificed and eaten, but at their initiative and not his.[28] This can be described as a subversion of the motif of the poet generously sacrificing his own riding animal as a reflection of gallantry or of the ethical code of the ideal Bedouin, a motif famously present in the *mu'allaqa* of Imru' al-Qays.[29] The *nasīb* of the same *mu'allaqa* offers the key for interpreting some of the main elements of the background story of Rayḥāna, the morally loose woman whom Abū Hurayra took on as a lover after his awakening to worldly pleasures and pursuits. In the second *ḥadīṯ*,

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[20] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Minneapolis–London 1999, p. 107.

[21] Ibidem.

[22] Ibidem, p. 115.

[23] Ibidem, p. 117.

[24] Ibidem, p. 115.

[25] Ibidem, p. 114.

[26] Ibidem, p. 118.

[27] Knysh, '*Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla* – kitāb ḫāriğ at-taṣnīf', pp. 84–85.

[28] Al-Mas'adī, *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, pp. 55–57.

[29] Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥusayn Ibn Aḥmad az-Zawzanī, *Šarḥ al-mu'allaqāt as-sab'*, Al-Qāhira 1959, p. 10.

it is said that Rayḥāna had been captured by a certain Labīd, who fell in love with her and set her free; she, however, was cavorting with numerous men and left him as soon as he emancipated her. This, ultimately, made him lose his mind: “Labīd went mad, and to this day he stays with his folks in the Ḥarrān valley, going every day to an acacia tree over there, sitting and reciting poetry about Rayḥāna that cannot be understood or retained” (*fa-ǧunna labīdun, fa-huwa ilā al-yawmi fī ahlihi bi-wādī ḥarrāna, yaḫruǧu kulla yawmin ilā samuratin hunāka, fa-yaǧlisu fa-yaqūlu fī rayḥānata min aš-ši‘ri mā lā yufhamu wa-lā yuḥfaẓu*).[30] The literary allusion in this case is quite transparent, as Imru’ al Qays himself also takes refuge, weeping profusely, “by the acacia trees of the tribe” (*ladā samurāti al-ḥayyi*), on the day of separation from his loved one.[31] A similarly oriented reference can be detected, in the same *ḥadīṯ*, in a hemistich recited by those who had met Rayḥāna that is a clear emulation of the first verse of the same *mu‘allaqa*, *qifā našku min rayḥānati al-‘ayni wa-al-ḥašā* (“halt, ye two, so that we may complain about Rayḥāna, [the one inhabiting] the eye and the entrails”); yet, it is equally significant that the transmitter makes a point of mentioning that he does not remember the verse’s other hemistich: “I forgot the [other] hemistich of the verse” (*wa-qad ḏahaba ‘annī šaṭru al-bayti*).[32] Finally, in the sixth *ḥadīṯ*, Abū Hurayra recounts how he met a girl in his youth while he was circumambulating Al-Kaʿba – the girl approached him and, as a result, the circumambulation and the black stone became like a mirage for him. However, the girl turned out to be extremely ugly and also mute and deaf, which deterred him from ever using poetry again, after he had proudly recited his first poetry once he sensed her arrival at their meeting place.[33] This story is almost the exact opposite of a type of amorous encounters for which the early Islamic poet ‘Umar Ibn Abī Rabī‘a (644–712) was notorious, as he was in the habit of going to Mecca during the pilgrimage season in the hope of meeting beautiful women and seducing them with his poetry.[34] In this case, the parody faithfully follows the structure of the original account point by point: instead of the (would-be) poet, it is the girl that initiates the meeting; instead of being beautiful, she is ugly, and, on top of that, her deafness prevents her from even hearing whatever he was about to recite. Subjecting a figure

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[30] Al-Mas‘adī, *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, pp. 61–62.

[31] Az-Zawzanī, *Šarḥ al-mu‘allaqāt as-sab‘*, p. 7.

[32] Al-Mas‘adī, *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*’, pp. 64; Al-Ya‘lāwī detects here a blending between Imru’ al-Qays’s hemistich, *qifā nabki min ḏikrā ḥabībin wa-manzilī* (“halt, ye too, so that we may weep in remembrance of a loved one and a lodging”) and another one, taken from an elegy dedicated by the poet Ibn ar-Rūmī (836–896) to his deceased son: *a-rayḥānata al-‘aynayni wa-al-’anfi wa-al-ḥašā*, “oh, basil of [my] eye, nose and entrails” (Muḥammad al-Ya‘lāwī, ‘Aš-šakl fī *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*’, p. 91).

[33] Al-Mas‘adī, *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, pp. 100–101.

[34] Ḥannā al-Fāḫūrī, *Tārīḫ al-adab al-‘arabī*, Bayrūt 1987, p. 255.

like ʻUmar Ibn Abī Rabīʻa, who is already known for his licentiousness and proneness for disregarding commonly accepted mores, to parody and derision would be perplexing in this context, if it were not for the fact that the object of parody and subversive treatment is, in this instance as in the previous ones, not one particular poet, but poetry itself. In all these cases, poetry is associated, through insanity, physical handicap or sheer forgetfulness, with failure in fulfilling its basic mission – conveying the poet's message and, thus, perpetuating the memory of the people and events it is meant to celebrate.

A broader perspective on the book's genre can be acquired by revisiting the lyric-epic dichotomy that is often addressed when discussing pre-modern, and especially pre-Islamic Arabic literature, given that pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, the prevailing literary form cultivated in that era, was predominantly lyrical, with the absolute priority being granted to the poet's inner feelings and reactions to specific conditions and developments (longing for one's lover, grievances, aspirations, meditations about life, the human condition, nature etc.).[35] Conversely, the type of literary discourse that can be described as epic, including the short narrative units that were to be cultivated, among others, in the form of *ḥadīṯ*s in the Islamic era, was generally confined to the realm of prose. In fact, there was a certain degree of complementarity between poetry and old narrative cycles that recorded events pertaining to pre-Islamic history (especially battles, inter-tribal confrontations and rivalries) and were committed to writing at the beginning of the Abbasid era, a complementarity reflected in the use of these cycles by poetry commentators as sources of information for elucidating references in the poems they were working on that would otherwise remain obscure.[36] Based on these premises, it can be said that the remarkable achievement of Al-Masʻadī consists in bridging the divide between these two types of literary expression, by taking the *ḥadīṯ*, a genre associated with narration, and imbuing it with a degree of lyricism that takes it very close to poetry. This "lyricization" of the *ḥadīṯ*

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[35] The Egyptian philologist and literary critic Šawqī Ḍayf (1910–2005), taking the traditional division of ancient Greek poetry into four types (epic, didactic, lyric and dramatic) as a starting point, argues that pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is predominantly lyrical (*ġināʼī*), being centered on the poet's subjectivity. However, he also makes a connection with the primary meaning of the term *ġināʼī*, "musical", contending that there are literary testimonies suggesting that poetry might have been, at least in some cases, performed in the form of songs and accompanied by musical instruments (Šawqī Ḍayf, *Tārīḫ al-adab al-ʻarabī – al-ʻaṣr al-ǧāhilī*, Al-Qāhira 1960, pp. 189–194). This perspective did not go unchallenged, as there are voices that try to argue in favor of pre-Islamic and classical Arabic poetry having an inherent narrative dimension (cf. Maḥmūd al-ʻAšīrī, *Aš-šiʻr sardan – dirāsa fī naṣṣ al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, Bayrūt 2014, passim).

[36] Šawqī Ḍayf, *Tārīḫ al-adab al-ʻarabī – al-ʻaṣr al-ǧāhilī*, pp. 399–400; on the other hand, Maḥmūd al-ʻAšīrī argues at length that the narratives, formulated as *ḫabar*s, that were used as sources for interpreting poetry were not independent external sources, but were, instead, mere narrative expansions that grew out of the poetic texts (Maḥmūd al-ʻAšīrī, *Aš-šiʻr sardan*, pp. 161–191).

is not, however, always an overt and explicit one, except perhaps when Abū Hurayra expresses his views and reactions in his dialogues, through direct speech, because on the surface Al-Mas‘adī's *ḥadīṯ*s do preserve their outwardly narrative nature. Moreover, they do so in a manner that keeps them close to the hallmarks of the genre, being, in general, relatively short units, with no overcomplicated plots, and recording, in some cases, no more than a saying of Abū Hurayra, a short memory or a mere impression about him.[37] This is why the lyrical nature of the text is detectable, in quite a number of instances, at an underlying level, one that relies on interpretation, since a lot, if not all, of the non-verbal acts of Abū Hurayra are full of symbolism and can thus be interpreted as implicit speech acts, as actions through which the hero shares his values and worldview with his entourage. Among the examples that can be cited in support of this idea, and also, based on the previously mentioned criteria, in support of treating the text as a Menippean satire, one can mention the following: in the fourth *ḥadīṯ*, Abū Hurayra exhibits an apparently transgressive, baffling behavior, quite typical for a mystical figure and spiritual leader in his interactions with potential disciples, as he buys candles from his companion Abū al-Madā'in without reimbursing him. Only later does it turn out that these candles were used in the ceremony of a "community of brethren that seek darkness" (*ǧamā‘atun min al-iḫwāni yas'alūna aẓ-ẓalāma*), to which Abū al-Madā'in was invited.[38] In the sixth *ḥadīṯ*, it is said that "whenever he would get ready to eat, he would purify himself as if he were about to enter the state of ritual consecration for pilgrimage" (*wa-kāna iḏā arāda aṭ-ṭa‘āma taṭahhara lahu ka-taṭahhurihi li-al-iḥrāmi*);[39] in the eighteenth *ḥadīṯ*, he appears to be laughing at a funeral;[40] in the twenty-second *ḥadīṯ* he recalls how he once played a prank on his companions by having them believe that they were listening to a Byzantine "slave-singer" (*qayna*) performing ravishing songs behind a curtain, when in fact they were listening to a parrot.[41]

Finally, the character of Abū Hurayra himself deserves a closer look aimed at detecting whether the text offers us any clues about what his relationship with his historical namesake might be. In a footnote attached to the introduction of his book (a device that mimics scholarly discourse, used in an apparent attempt to create the illusion of there being external historical resources that he had used in his research for the book), Al-Mas‘adī states that "one account says that there are three Abū Hurayra: the first one is the Prophet's companion, may God be pleased with him, the second is the grammarian and the third is this one" (*fī riwāyatin anna abā hurayrata ṯalāṯatun:*

[37] Al-Mas‘adī, *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, pp. 197, 217–218.
[38] Ibidem, pp. 75–80.
[39] Ibidem, p. 96.
[40] Ibidem, p. 193.
[41] Ibidem, pp. 225–229.

awwaluhum aṣ-ṣaḥābiyyu raḍiya llāhu ʿanhu wa-ṯānīhim an-naḥwiyyu wa-ṯāliṯuhum hāḏā).[42] The note is formulated in a way that is arguably meant to dilute the connection with the historical, well-known figure of Abū Hurayra the *ḥadīṯ* transmitter as much as possible, given that it mentions not two, but three figures bearing the same name, and that the noun designating the second one, the "grammarian," is marked with a definite article, so as to create the illusion of notoriety and, hence, of an alternative reality, in which all these individuals were equally known and existed independently of each other. Despite this clear effort on the author's part to build, at the onset, a stand-alone character, we think that a careful reading of the text leaves us wondering to what degree Al-Masʿadī's Abū Hurayra, the inquisitive, rebellious and spiritually restless eccentric, is truly independent and totally disconnected from his historical counterpart. It is true that the connections between the two are, for the most part, far from obvious and amount to mere terminological hints, but they do deserve careful consideration. It might not be an exaggeration to go so far as to deem them deliberately vague, given that ambiguity and contradictions are integral to the makeup of Abū Hurayra the character, so it would not be much of a surprise if these same features were present in his relationship, or lack thereof, with Abū Hurayra the historical figure. A first element that may, in our view, raise questions in this regard appears in the third *ḥadīṯ*, where Rayḥāna remembers her first encounter with Abū Hurayra in a tavern: "I rose and saw the men of the tribe gathered with a man I did not know as he was talking to them and laughing a lot, so I thought he was drunk, and he really was" (*fa-qumtu fa-raʾaytu riǧāla al-ḥayyi wa-qad iǧtamaʿū ilā raǧulin lam akun aʿrifuhu, wa-huwa yuḥaddiṯuhum wa-yaḍḥaku ḍaḥikan kaṯīran, fa-raʾaytuhu sakrāna wa-kāna kaḏālika*).[43] The admittedly faint hint at a possible connection with Abū Hurayra the *ḥadīṯ* transmitter in this passage is the verb *ḥaddaṯa*, which might very well be interpreted as meaning simply "to talk to;" however, its interpretation as a specialized term, connected with the specialized meaning of the noun *ḥadīṯ*, is not to be totally ruled out either. Although the setting and the general disposition are far from compatible with such an interpretation, even in this merry atmosphere, hardly suitable for pious preoccupations, Abū Hurayra still appears to hold a position of authority, one that draws people towards him and enables him to take centerstage in their gatherings. Besides, if this second interpretation is considered, it becomes possible to envision the possibility that there existed, indeed, a lore that Abū Hurayra used to impart to his usual or occasional companions, maybe in the form of *ḥadīṯ*s/*ḫabar*s, but a lore of a different kind, one that was stemming from the outlook and worldview

[42] Ibidem, p. 13.
[43] Ibidem, p. 70.

he had acquired following his spiritual quests. A somewhat stronger hint towards this possibility can be found in the fourth *ḥadīṯ*, where he exhorts his wife to “talk to him” (*hāti* (sic!, prb. *hātī*), *ḥaddiṯīnī*, “come on, talk to me”), adding: “what I liked about her was that she used to tell me back some of that which I had imparted to her for years” (*wa-qad a‘ǧabanī minhā an raddat ilayya ba‘ḍa mā aḥmaltuhā sinīna*).[44] The terminological allusion in these utterances, if we admit that there is one, is, besides the verb *ḥaddaṯa* that also occurred in the previous passage, the verb *aḥmala* (primary meaning: “to help (someone) carry (something)”), by virtue of its belonging to the same lexical family as *taḥammala* (primary meaning: “to carry”), which is the verb used by traditionists to designate the action ascribed to those who receive and commit the *ḥadīṯ*s to memory.[45] The third and final clue is not terminological, but lies, instead, in a quite explicit reference to Abū Hurayra’s sometimes questionable reliability as a *ḥadīṯ*/*ḫabar* transmitter (cf. Note 2). There, one of the transmitters mentioned in the eleventh *ḥadīṯ* expresses his doubts about the veracity of one of his accounts: “or maybe he just made up the account, with no congruence [with the actual truth]; Abū Hurayra was not wrong about any matter in whose regard he acted misleadingly; [on the contrary,] he would get it right and still act misleadingly in its regard, as if he had been reluctant to disclose what he held secretly in his mind or to let anyone know him, so that people became confused about him” (*aw la‘allahu anša’a al-ḫabara inšā’an dūna muṭābaqatin. la-qad kāna abū hurayrata lā yuḫṭi’u amran mimmā yuġāliṭu fīhi, yuṣībuhu fa-yuġāliṭu bihi, ka-’annamā yakrahu an yabūḥa bi-bāṭini sirrihi aw ya‘lamahu aḥadun, ḥattā štabaha amruhu ‘alā an-nāsi*).[46] Abū Hurayra’s doubtful reliability thus becomes, together with other disconcerting actions and features, an integral part of his complex and elusive personality.

Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla… is a work whose interpretation is challenging and, at the same time, rewarding. Its multifaceted and intriguing content provides, together with its enticing style, a constant source of enchantment for lovers of Arabic literature, both modern and classical. It also offers its readers a window into the complex intellectual universe of one of the outstanding Arab men of letters of the twentieth century.

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[44] Ibidem, p. 85.

[45] Al-Baġā, *Buḥūṯ fī ‘ulūm al-ḥadīṯ wa-nuṣūṣih*, pp. 32–33.

[46] Al-Mas‘adī, *Ḥaddaṯa Abū Hurayra qāla…*, p. 131.

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