

A Grammarian's Life in his own Voice Autobiographical Fragments in Arabic Biographical Literature

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INTRODUCTION: AKHBĀR OF THA'LAB

F1. [I have read]² in the handwriting of Ibn al-Kūfī:³ [his full name is] Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Zayd b. Sayyār Abū l-'Abbās Tha'lab.

F2. And in the handwriting of Abū 'Abdallāh b. Muqla:⁴ Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā said: I saw al-Ma'mūn when he arrived from Khurāsān in 204[/819]; he came out from Bāb al-Ḥadīd heading for the palace of al-Ruṣāfa, and the people were lined up in two rows as far as al-Muṣallā.⁵ My father was carrying me, and when al-Ma'mūn passed he lifted me up and said: "This is al-Ma'mūn, and this is the year [20]4." I have kept this in memory until now. I was then four years old.

F3. Abū l-'Abbās said: I began studying language, poetry and lexicography in 216[/831]; I became proficient in the Arabic language and memorised the books of al-Farrā',⁶ all of them until the last letter. I was [by] then 25, and I wanted to practise grammar more than I wanted to do anything else. However, once I had mastered [grammar], I applied myself to poetry, meaning of words and rare expressions.⁷ I was attached to Abū 'Abdallāh Ibn al-A'rābī⁸ for more than ten years.

¹ My warmest thanks go to Francesco Grande for his helpful comments and suggestions.

² Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist* I/1, 225–227 (ed. Sayyid); 80–81 (ed. Tajaddud).

³ Abū l-Ḥasan Ibn al-Kūfī (d. 348/960), the famous calligrapher often mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm. See *Fihrist*, I/1, 241–242 (ed. Sayyid), 87 (ed. Tajaddud). See also Lippert, Ibn al-Kūfī.

⁴ Abū 'Abdallāh al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Muqla (d. 338/949), brother of the famous vizier and fellow-calligrapher Abū 'Alī (d. 328/940).

⁵ Bāb al-Ḥadīd, the Iron Gate, was on the West of Baghdad. Entering Baghdad from that side, al-Ma'mūn would have to traverse the city and cross the Tigris to get to the palace of Ruṣāfa. A *muṣallā* is general term indicating a prayer hall or ground which was also used as assembly ground for troops. Dodge identifies the location of the particular *muṣallā* mentioned here (Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*, 162, footnote 74).

⁶ The Kufan grammarian, d. 207/822. See R. Blachère, al-Farrā'.

⁷ *al-Ma'ānī wa-l-gharīb*. For the meaning of these terms, used mainly in the context of Qur'anic studies, in the third/ninth century, see Bencheikh, Ma'nā.

⁸ The main teacher of Tha'lab, d. 231/845. See Pellat, Ibn al-A'rābī.

F4 Abū l-ʿAbbās said: I remember one day Aḥmad b. Saʿīd [b. Salm]⁹ went to see [Ibn al-Aʿrābī]. I was there, together with other people amongst whom al-Sadwī¹⁰ and Abū l-ʿĀliya.¹¹ [Aḥmad b. Saʿīd] remained with [Ibn al-Aʿrābī]; we talked about the poetry of al-Shammākh,¹² and they began discussing its meanings and the questions connected to it. I took to replying and would not stop, while Ibn al-Aʿrābī listened on, until we covered most of his poetry. Aḥmad b. Saʿīd turned to him, surprised about me.

F5. Abū l-ʿAbbās died in 291[/904] and was buried in the vicinity of his house near Bāb al-Shām. Among his books are: *al-Maṣūn fī l-naḥw*, which he arranged in classes (*ḥudūd*); *Ikhtilāf al-naḥwiyyīn*; *Maʿānī l-Qurʿān*; *al-Muwaffaqī*, a digest of grammar; *Mā talḥan fī-hi l-ʿamma*; *al-Qirāʾāt*; *Maʿānī l-shiʿr*; *al-Taṣghīr*; *Mā yaṣarif wa-mā lā yaṣarif*; *Mā yujrā wa-mā lā yujrā*; *al-Shawādhḥ*; *al-Amthāl [al-sāʿira]*; *al-Aymān wa-l-dawāhī*; *al-Waqf wa-l-ibtidāʾ*; *Istikhrāj al-alfāz min al-akḥbār*; *al-Hijāʾ*; *al-Awṣaṭ*, which I saw; *Gharāʾib al-qirāʾāt*, a fine book; *al-Masāʾil*; *Ḥadd al-naḥw*; *Tafsīr kalām Ibnat al-Khuss*; *[al-Faṣīḥ]*.¹³ Abū l-ʿAbbās also held assemblies (*mujālasāt*)¹⁴ which he dictated to his companions [and are collected] in his *Majālis*.¹⁵ They treat some grammar, lexicography, *akḥbār*, explanations of the Qurʿān, and poetry, which he had heard [from a master] and of which he had spoken [himself]. This [book of *Majālis*] was related on his authority by several people, among whom Abū Bakr Ibn al-Anbārī,¹⁶ Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Yazīdī,¹⁷ Abū ʿUmar al-Zāhid,¹⁸ Ibn Durustawayh¹⁹ and Ibn Muqsim.²⁰ Abū l-ʿAbbās also edited part of the poetry of the classical poets²¹ and others, among whom al-Aʿshā, the two al-Nābigha, Ṭufayl, al-Ṭirimmāh and others.

⁹ This may be Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Saʿīd b. Salm b. ʿAwn, d. after 271/884–5 who, according to al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (*Tarīkh Baghdād*, iv, 169–170), moved to Ramla from Baghdad. In a *khbar* reported by al-Zubaydī, Thaʿlab mentions Aḥmad b. Saʿīd b. Salm as one of his patrons (see below), and the same person appears later in the biography of al-Aṣmaʿī and it is said that he had been appointed governor of the Yamāma, Baḥrayn, and the road to Mecca (al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 173).

¹⁰ The word is garbled in the manuscript. Dodge reads it as al-Sukkarī, the Basran grammarian Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥusayn, d. 275/888 (Sezgin, *GAS*, viii, 97). However, al-Zajjājī has a more detailed account of the same debate (al-Zajjājī, *Majālis*, 100, *majlis* 45), where the name is spelled “al-Sidrī.” Yāqūt (see *Appendix*, Y9) also has “al-Sidrī.”

¹¹ Al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī al-Shāmī, d. 240/854. See *GAS*, ii, 526. Like the other grammarians who witness Thaʿlab’s skills, he was a Basran. Thus Thaʿlab implies that he was admired by Basrans and Kufans alike.

¹² A poet contemporary with the Prophet, d. ca. 30/650. See Arazi, al-Shammākh.

¹³ For a list of extant works, only some of which have been published, see Bernards, Thaʿlab, and *GAS*, viii, 141–147 and ix, 140–142.

¹⁴ *Mujālasāt*. According to S.M. Ali, the use of the third form indicates an assembly amongst peers, not presided by a patron or monarch (Ali, *Literary Salons*, 13–19). However, these *mujālasāt* were collected in a book of *majālis*; the two words seem to be used as synonymous here.

¹⁵ Thaʿlab, *Majālis*.

¹⁶ D. 328/940. See al-Zubaydī 153–154; *Fihrist* I/1, 229–230 (ed. Sayyid); 82 (ed. Tajaddud); al-Khaṭīb, iii, 181–6; Yāqūt b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam*, 2614–18; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, iv, 341–3.

¹⁷ D. 310/922. Al-Khaṭīb, iii, 113 and Ibn Khallikān, iv, 337–9.

¹⁸ D. 345/957. *Fihrist* I/1, 230–233 (ed. Sayyid), 82–83 (ed. Tajaddud); al-Zubaydī 209; al-Khaṭīb, ii, 356–9; Yāqūt, 2556–60; Ibn Khallikān, iv, 329–33.

¹⁹ D. 347/958. Al-Zubaydī, 166; *Fihrist* I/1, 185–187 (ed. Sayyid); 68 (ed. Tajaddud); al-Khaṭīb, ix, 428–9; Yāqūt, 1511–13; Ibn Khallikān, iii, 44–5.

²⁰ D. 354/965. *Fihrist*, I/1, 86–87 (ed. Sayyid); 35 (ed. Tajaddud); al-Khaṭīb, ii, 212–3.

²¹ *Al-fuḥūl*, the “stallions” the classical age.

The above passage is one of the earliest extant accounts of the life and works of Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Tha‘lab (d. 291/904), one of the most important grammarians and lexicographers of the ‘Abbāsīd period. It is structured as a standard entry in a biographical dictionary,²² providing information on full name, date of birth, education and teachers, date of death, works composed, and students; it also contains an account illustrating the biographees’s scholarly qualities. What is remarkable for the purpose of this article is that two thirds of the entry consist of a continuous series of accounts in the first person: after providing his full name, which could be considered a subtitle to the entry, Ibn al-Nadīm uses Tha‘lab’s own voice in order to add the details of Tha‘lab’s life, adding only the information which Tha‘lab could not have added himself, i.e. his date of death and a definitive list of his books, in what the modern reader could visualise as back-cover information. To be sure, it is Ibn al-Nadīm who carries out the selection of which first-person accounts will go in the entry, not Tha‘lab himself. But the final result — which is, after all, what the modern student is able to analyse — is that the material resembles an autobiographical account. In other words, the above is an illustration of how biography and autobiography may coexist and be compiled into a coherent narrative.

As Reynolds et alii’s seminal work on Arabic autobiography points out, it is an anachronism to speak of autobiography as we know it today within the context of classical Arabic literature. However, classical Arabic literature does provide material that “present[s] itself as a description or summation of the author’s life, or a major portion thereof, as viewed retrospectively from a particular point in time.”²³ And although, as Reynolds et al. also point out, it would be wrong to expect that a medieval Arabic autobiography fulfil modern ideas, revealing the ‘inner self’ of its author, they do identify within the tradition an “autobiographical subgenre” in the form of the *tarjamat al-nafs* (‘self-tarjama’, ‘self-entry’), of himself and/or of someone else, which the author of a biographical collection may include in his work.²⁴ Tha‘lab’s entry in the *Fihrist*, however, is more complicated than a self-tarjama, as it contains both biographical and autobiographical material. To make sense of it, an additional framework is needed.

Earlier than Reynolds, Hilary Kilpatrick, had introduced the notion of ‘fragments of autobiography’ within large classical Arabic literary works, suggesting a way to “add a missing piece to the puzzle of Arabic autobiography:” to look at *akhbār* narrated in the first person by one individual within large compilations, biographical or otherwise.²⁵ As Kilpatrick explains, even within the restriction of *akhbār* in the first person, a selection has to be made: one should distinguish between *akhbār* where the narrator’s voice does

²² While the *Kitāb al-fihrist* may not be considered a biographical dictionary in the strictest sense, it uses the same format as one for its biographies and is certainly used as one by later compilers and modern scholars alike.

²³ Reynolds et al., *Interpreting the Self*, 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44–45.

²⁵ Kilpatrick, *Autobiography*. Footnote 8 provides a bibliography of previous works on autobiography in classical Arabic literature. Such studies are concerned primarily with freestanding works such as the *Kitāb al-i’tibār* by Usāma b. Munqidh. Reynolds et al. mention Kilpatrick’s article only once in a footnote. See also, with a more marked emphasis on modern autobiography, Enderwitz, *Gibt es eine arabische Autobiographie?*

nothing but introduce a question to someone else or recounts an event of which the narrator is only a witness, and *akhbār* in which the narrator is part of the action himself. This latter case is where fragments of autobiography may be identified.

Different kinds of compilation may be of use for this purpose, depending on the profession and social standing of the individual concerned. In general, however, biographical collections are the natural source for such an investigation as the present one: as in the example taken from the *Fihrist*, compilers of biographical dictionaries all but operate Kilpatrick's selection for us, choosing, usually, only material relevant to the portrayal of the individual whose life they are portraying. Biographers are often interested not only in hard data, but also in stories which will entertain as well as illustrating points of an individual's character and scholarly profile. Such *akhbār* may be in the first person.

There is no way of recovering what collectors and successive compilers have discarded: compilers act, as Kilpatrick mentions and as may be seen in the passage translated above, as "producers" of the *vitae* they report; thus, the material we have cannot possibly amount to a full picture of an individual's self-portrayal. In this respect, a better source for autobiographical material will be a work of any genre where the author himself gives information about his own life.²⁶ On the other hand, the advantage of autobiographical material in a compilation of heterogeneous sources is that it may be contrasted with accounts in other people's voices, thus affording the opportunity to tackle questions different from those emerging from an autobiography. Moreover, to counterbalance the selectiveness of compilers, one may extend the notion of fragmented autobiography to include material found in more than one compilation, when more than one offers the material required.

In what follows, biographical material on Tha'lab will be examined, paying particular attention to those accounts which are attributed to him directly and are narrated in his own voice. It will be investigated whether accounts on the life of Tha'lab scattered across different sources answer Reynold's loose definition of autobiography, and whether they are also able to explicitate some degree of introspection. In other words: does autobiographical material — autobiographical in the way in which it has just been defined — on this particular individual actually amount to an autobiographical account? And how do *akhbār* in Tha'lab's own voice relate to *akhbār* on him in someone else's voice? Do they corroborate or contrast with each other? Can one distinguish a personal imprint in first-person accounts? And through which channels do these reach the compiler?

FRAGMENTS AND CLUSTERS IN YĀQŪT'S BIOGRAPHY OF THA'LAB

The biography in the *Fihrist* provides three *akhbār* narrated by Tha'lab: his close encounter with al-Ma'mūn illustrating his date of birth; his *curriculum studiorum*; and an episode

²⁶ One such case is Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī's *Kitāb al-awrāq*. In his annals of the 'Abbāsīd caliphs, al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947) chronicles the years during which he worked at court as a boon-companion and teacher. In between the history of greater events, al-Ṣūlī narrates episodes detailing his own experience of the caliphal household and the officials connected to it, as well as his financial situation, his aspirations and judgement of the people he met. See Osti, *In Defence of the Caliph*, 286–289. A more detailed study on the fragmented autobiography of al-Ṣūlī is in progress.

illustrating his brilliancy as a student. Another, much longer biography, containing about seventy accounts, is found in the *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ* by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī.²⁷ This biography is translated in full in the appendix to the present study and divided for convenience into numbered paragraphs. At the beginning of the biography, after standard information on Thaʿlab’s birth and death, a first assessment of his scholarship, his teachers and students, Yāqūt presents a cluster of eleven consecutive *akhbār* in Thaʿlab’s voice, which in the translation are marked Y6–Y18 and some of which coincide with the accounts in the *Fihrist*, although given in a partially different order.²⁸ This cluster of *akhbār* touches upon several themes: Thaʿlab’s brilliancy as a student and, later, as a scholar; his success in public debates, especially against Basrans; grammarians’ in-jokes; and his relationship with his employer and patron. The series of first-person accounts is interrupted only once (Y14), when Yāqūt adds a disparaging comment on a grammatical point from another source.

This cluster of accounts does not appear to originate in Thaʿlab’s books: Those works that have come down to us do not seem to contain autobiographical accounts, nor do they offer material concerning his own life or coinciding with the one found in biographical collections.²⁹ Ibn al-Nadīm says that he has read the accounts “in the handwriting of Ibn Muqla,” but he does not include the latter in the list of people who related Thaʿlab’s *Majālis*, nor does he record him as the author of any book.³⁰ Indeed, Ibn Muqla is not even named among Thaʿlab’s students, although, having been born in 278/892, he would have been just old enough to attend Thaʿlab’s lectures. To be sure, Ibn al-Nadīm probably means that the book was copied, not composed by Ibn Muqla; however, the latter is mentioned several times in the *Fihrist* in the following way: “I read in the handwriting of Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Muqla, on the authority of Thaʿlab: ...” Yāqūt read a later copy of the same written material, as he specifies in Y6.³¹

After this long autobiographical cluster, Yāqūt’s biography continues with *akhbār* narrated by Thaʿlab’s colleagues and friends, alternating specific episodes with general assessments. Here, third-person accounts are interspersed with further autobiographical material: more remarks on Thaʿlab’s curriculum (Y25, Y35); an exchange with his teacher Ibn al-Aʿrābī on his having an only daughter (Y32); an account of his work for Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir; an account of his visit to Ibn Ḥanbal (Y41); a debate with a Basran grammarian (Y44).

²⁷ Yāqūt, 536–554.

²⁸ Yāqūt, 537–540.

²⁹ I have only found two cases in which passages in the *Majālis* partly coincide with passages in biographical collections and even these instances are better described as contiguous rather than as analogous. In al-Zubaydī, 146 Thaʿlab comments on a line by Imruʿ al-Qays which is also mentioned in *Majālis*, 172, although a different point of the line is commented on. Three lines composed by Thaʿlab himself lamenting old age, and found in *Majālis* 139, are also mentioned by Yāqūt in Y36 and in al-Khaṭīb, vii, 14, in the entry on the Qurʾān reader Idrīs al-Ḥaddād (d. 292/905). Here, the poem follows an episode where Thaʿlab and Idrīs meet, both of them already old. Ibn al-Nadīm says that he has seen only one book by Thaʿlab (in his own hand?), *Kitāb al-awsaṭ*, whose title implies a digest of grammar, unlikely to contain autobiographical – or biographical – accounts.

³⁰ Ibn Muqla’s entry (*Fihrist* ed. Sayyid I/1 23–24; ed. Tajaddud 12) is among the calligraphers.

³¹ Yāqūt’s copy is “in the handwriting of Abū Sālim al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī,” who is mentioned only this once in the *Muʿjam*.

These single autobiographical accounts sometimes come equipped with an *isnād* and usually originate with students of Tha'lab who related not only autobiographical accounts, but also episodes involving their master and set in his *majlis*, which they witnessed. This does suggest that the autobiographical accounts were remarks made by Tha'lab to his students during his lessons, but does not establish with certainty whether they were told as occasional snatches or a continuous narrative.

Many of these scattered accounts reach Yāqūt in two steps: he reads them in the biographical collection of al-Marzubānī,³² who in turn is quoting from the *Ta'rikh* of Abū Muḥammad 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥusayn b. Sa'd al-Quṭrabbulī,³³ brother of Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Ishāq, who had been appointed to look after Tha'lab's books at his death,³⁴ and also related to Abū 'Umar b. Sa'd, who is one of the transmitters of autobiographical material.³⁵

In sum, Yāqūt seems to derive his autobiographical accounts mainly from two distinct sources: of one, Ibn Muqla's, he has a manuscript; of the other, the *Ta'rikh* of al-Quṭrabbulī, he has extracts taken from another book. Because of this intermediate passage, it is impossible to know whether autobiographical accounts in the *Ta'rikh* were originally grouped together or scattered, but we know that the *Ta'rikh* is also the source for accounts in other people's voices.

If one accepts the postulate that accounts in Yāqūt's biography of Tha'lab have come down to us in the order in which its author intended it to be, it is difficult to understand the criterion followed by Yāqūt in compiling information; at times he seems to follow a source-by-source order, whereas at other points he juxtaposes different sources on the same subject. While the first part of the entry appears as an edition of several sources consulted at the same time, the second part could be a series of new sources added as they became available to the compiler. On the other hand, one could look at this biography as a circular, or spiral, structure, where first all the bare information is given, then the essential comments, then the less essential ones, and finally the purely entertaining ones. In this way, a reader who only wants basic data will be able to find it quickly, without needing to read the whole entry. Above all, and keeping everything connected, is poetry: classical, about which Tha'lab knows everything, but also modern, which gives Tha'lab some frustration.

A study of autobiographical material, then, will have to consider such material both *per se*, investigating its source and original purpose, and within the immediate context in

³² Although the versions we have of al-Marzubānī's work is most probably not the one at which Yāqūt was looking, in *Nūr al-Qabas*, one of the two seventh/thirteenth century summaries which have come down to us, we can recognise several passages which have been used by Yāqūt in his biography of Tha'lab. Sellheim, al-Marzubānī, points out that the two summarised versions of al-Marzubānī's work which have come down to us are different, especially regarding their *isnāds*.

³³ *Fihrist*, I/2, 387 (ed. Sayyid), 178 (ed. Tajaddud); *Fihrist*, I/1, 231 (ed. Sayyid), 82 (ed. Tajaddud). Al-Ṣūlī mentions Abū Muḥammad frequently in his *Akhbār al-Buḥturī* as a close friend of the poet (al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār al-Buḥturī*). This puts Abū Muḥammad both in the timeframe and in the intellectual environment of Tha'lab. Much of the information reaching Yāqūt through al-Quṭrabbulī is also found in al-Zubaydī's biography of Tha'lab, but he has it from his main informant al-Qālī through a different chain of informants.

³⁴ Al-Zubaydī, 149–150.

³⁵ Al-Zubaydī, 146.

which each compiler places it. In this sense, Yāqūt's biography is particularly interesting because, despite the fragmentation of the material used, it does provide a coherent portrait of Tha'lab, by no means totally positive. In what follows, the autobiographical fragments of Tha'lab found in Yāqūt and amplified by material from other compilations is sorted into loose thematic groups and contrasted with non autobiographical accounts.

EARLY LIFE

Much of the information on Tha'lab's birth and early years is narrated in Tha'lab's own voice. The episode with al-Ma'mūn, which Tha'lab uses to establish his date of birth (F2 and Y7), is reported by most biographies and certainly makes for good entertainment.³⁶ Of course, it was as impossible to verify such an account at the time when it was narrated as it is today: one can very well imagine that, by the time Tha'lab began relating this story, very few would be alive who could disprove it. To be sure, the device of connecting a point in one's personal life with a famous event for the purpose of dating is used in Islamic historiography since its earliest expressions.³⁷ However, the *khbar* with al-Ma'mūn is more than a simple boilerplate placeholder for a date, as it stresses the personal nature of the recollection³⁸.

Tha'lab is also generous with stories about his life as a student. The story narrated by Tha'lab in the *Fihrist* (F3) may be compared with two *akhbār* found in Tha'lab's entry by another early biographer, al-Zubaydī. One of these is very similar to that found in F3 and Y8, and is repeated in Y25.³⁹ Here, Tha'lab highlights his diligence in studying the work of al-Farrā', as well as his own prodigious memory. However, while this would seem an impressive scholarly feat, both al-Zubaydī⁴⁰ and Yāqūt (Y30) quote another scholar who assesses Tha'lab's abilities differently: notwithstanding his excellent memory, says Ibn al-Mudawwar, Tha'lab was not eloquent in his writing. The theme is similar to that touched upon by Tha'lab in the *Fihrist* – the student surpassing the master – but in this case most of the *khbar* actually consists in criticism of Tha'lab's scholarship. This kind of mixed review is not infrequent, as shall be seen later: Tha'lab was the best of *the Kufans*, but was lacking in many other areas even within the grammatical discipline. Tha'lab himself seems to admit it, in Y35, when he lists all the teachers with whom he would have liked to study but had not been able to.

³⁶ See for instance al-Zubaydī, 145, Ibn Khallikān, i, 103–104.

³⁷ Donner, *Narratives*, 232, mentions dating through autobiographical episode (“this happened when I was a child of x years”). In fact, Tha'lab uses another point of reference elsewhere, remarking that he was born in the year when the mystic Ma'rūf al-Karkhī died (al-Khaṭīb, v, 206).

³⁸ Tha'lab uses al-Ma'mūn's arrival in Baghdad as point of reference for other events. See for example al-Sīrāfi, *Ṭabaqāt*, 51: “Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā said: al-Akhfash died after al-Farrā', and al-Farrā' died in 207, three years after al-Ma'mūn entered Iraq.”

³⁹ Al-Zubaydī, 147.

⁴⁰ Al-Zubaydī, 143.

POWER AND MONEY

A significant portion of biographical material on Tha'lab is devoted to money and power. Besides the training of students who went on to become professional grammarians, Tha'lab's main employment was in the household of rich patrons. Here he provides a list:⁴¹

Abū 'Umar b. Sa'd said: Abū l-'Abbās said: "I became a companion of Aḥmad b. Sa'īd b. Salm in 223; he was refined (*ẓarīf*) and looked exactly like refined people do; I left him in 225. I was the companion of al-'Abbās Būkradān until 243. I became the companion of Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir in that year on the 1st of Muḥarram, and I remained his companion for thirteen years until he died, God have mercy on him."

We also know that Tha'lab taught the children of *kuttāb*, like the perfidious al-Qāsim b. 'Ubaydallāh (d. 291/904), and that he received a monthly pension from the Regent al-Muwaffaq; his books include one called *al-Muwaffaqī*, but we do not have details on the pension itself, other than that it was a generous one (Y59) and that the then vizier Abū l-Ṣāqr Isma'īl b. Bulbul (278/892) prompted al-Muwaffaq to grant it.⁴²

There are many references in Tha'lab's biographical material to his main patron, Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir,⁴³ the governor of Iraq, whom he served for thirteen years. In a *khābar* reported by al-Zubaydī⁴⁴ and retold in Y7, Tha'lab describes his work as tutor of Muḥammad's son Ṭāhir, as well as his salary, both in money and in kind. Muḥammad, Tha'lab continues, was generous with all of his dependents: he would provide meat and flour to so many as 3,600 people, many of whom were not in a situation of need, and refused to give up this practice even when, during the civil war between al-Musta'īn and al-Mu'tazz,⁴⁵ flour and meat became difficult to get.

Other accounts speak more explicitly of mutual admiration and appreciation, as Tha'lab modestly confirms in Y16. The relationship was so good that Tha'lab would be able to correct his employer's mistakes without embarrassment and without fearing repercussions. In Y17 Tha'lab recounts that he found a diplomatic way of letting his patron understand that *alf*, thousand, is masculine and not feminine. The relationship between Tha'lab and Muḥammad is also illustrated in descriptions of the *majālis* which took place at Muḥammad's house, many of which seem to have had as a central piece a debate between Tha'lab and his arch-rival al-Mubarrad.

Tha'lab's detailed account of his work and salary seems to denote a particular attention to financial matters. As in the case of his scholarship, this aspect is confirmed in accounts

⁴¹ Al-Zubaydī, 147.

⁴² On the various employments of Tha'lab, see Osti, *Practical Matters*, especially 155–157.

⁴³ See K.V. Zetterstéen [C.E. Bosworth], Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir, and the bibliography cited there. Here his date of death is given as 253/967, although Tha'lab's account would place it three years later, in 256. For a more detailed accounts of Muḥammad's role in promoting culture in Baghdad, the dwindling of the family's influence at court, and the scholarship of Muḥammad's brother 'Ubaydallāh, see Bosworth, *The Ṭahirids*, especially pp. 70–74. I am grateful to Michael Bates for sharing with me his thoughts and bibliography on the Ṭahirids.

⁴⁴ Al-Zubaydī, 148–149.

⁴⁵ The conflict ended in 251/866 with the abdication of the former in favour of the latter. The court was at that time at Samarra but fighting went on in Baghdad as well.

narrated by his contemporaries who, however, portray this attention in a less flattering light, for instance in Y21: if Tha'lab were a true ascetic, says the madman, he would not accept handsome payment from his patron; and if he hated showing off his wealth, he would not show off his scholarship in his patron's assemblies either. On the contrary, as shall be seen later, enlivening assemblies was integral part of Tha'lab's work.

Al-Zubaydī has two more accounts on the subject of Tha'lab's avarice, the first of which is retold by Yāqūt in Y29:⁴⁶ even when weak, after being cupped, Tha'lab would not spend money to buy meat. Al-Zubaydī continues:

His daughter had spent 1000 of 2000 *dīnār*. He insisted in demanding them back from her, abusing her; he gathered his companions around her and argued with her in their presence. My brother told me that he was among those who talked to her from behind the curtain. She said: "He certainly knows about money! That he was stingy I knew already. He always went out in a hurry, coming back at midday. He would take his [outside] clothes off and say: 'Do you have something to eat?' The slave girl would lay a table in front of him with semolina buns, a piece of goat or chicken, what was left of a jar of sweets; he would eat that and never asked where we got it from. This is still his habit, but he never enquires about what is served him, about the fruits and delicacies that were bought for him." The students then told Tha'lab: "Those *dīnār* went in the food you were eating without enquiring about it!" The argument imposed itself on him, and he didn't get any of the money that had gone from him.

Neither of these stories about Tha'lab's avarice has the fantastic, exaggerated character of those found in al-Jāhiz's *Kitāb al-bukhālā*. They appear to be plausible descriptions of a very parsimonious man. Thus, the attention to financial matters in Tha'lab's account is a corroboration of the avarice others see in him.

Tha'lab's daughter,⁴⁷ his only child, reappears in an episode, narrated by Tha'lab himself, where her mention is also connected to financial matters. The episode, first narrated by al-Marzubānī, is retold by Yāqūt (Y32) and, later, by Ibn al-Qiftī.⁴⁸ In his exchange of verses with his teacher Ibn al-A'rābī, Tha'lab makes it clear that a daughter, especially when an only child, will only give her father preoccupations, both for the financial strain she puts on him while he lives, and for the fear that she will be destitute after his death. Tha'lab's daughter, however, would not suffer such a fate.

SOCIAL LIFE, DEBATES AND ASSEMBLIES

It is impossible to discuss Tha'lab without also mentioning the controversy between the Basran and Kufan grammatical *madhhabs*, embodied by and culminating in the personal rivalry between Tha'lab and his Basran rival al-Mubarrad (d. 285/898). Modern scholars have discussed the exact meaning of the term *madhhab* in the context of third/ninth century grammatical tradition. They have offered different explanations, based on scholarly

⁴⁶ Al-Zubaydī, 142–143.

⁴⁷ This daughter was married to the Basran grammarian al-Dīnawarī (d. 289/901–2). Al-Mas'ūdī mentions a nephew, Yahyā b. 'Alī (al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, §3387).

⁴⁸ Al-Marzubānī, *Nūr al-qabas*, 334–335; Ibn al-Qiftī, *Inbāh*, i, 149.

methodology as well as social analysis.⁴⁹ In particular, it is clear that, by this period, the division between Basrans and Kufans was less geographical than it is implied by its name, as al-Mubarrad was indeed a Basran, but Tha'lab's only physical connection with Kufa was the origin of his main teacher, Ibn al-A'rābī; in the third/ninth century, research, teaching and debating happened in Baghdad. Much of the importance of these labels lies in what Bernards describes as "the social aspects of geographical origin and, particularly, academic lineage."⁵⁰ And in retrospect, the division into schools was useful for those who, generations later, needed to classify biographies of grammarians. Thus, if it is universally accepted that the grammatical *madhhab* in the third/ninth century were not the same structured institution as the legal *madhhab* in the fifth/eleventh, it is also true that, not many generations after the death of Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad, the distinction between Basrans and Kufans was integral part of grammatical tradition, and its practitioners identified themselves in such distinction. By the time al-Sīrāfi writes his *Ṭabaqāt* of the Basran grammarians at the end of the fourth/tenth century,⁵¹ this does not seem to be controversial.

Despite the geographical distinction and scholarly disputes, having received the teaching of both Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad did not subtract from the prestige of a grammarian's pedigree, but rather added to it. This is testified by the many occasions when the pair appear side by side as teachers in biographies of grammarians of the following generation.

The above two points lead to one consideration for the purpose of a study on Tha'lab: the rivalry between him and al-Mubarrad is important within the former's biography, at least as much as it is significant from the point of view of methodological differences in the scholarship. The material produced by scholarly differences is used knowingly by biographers, indeed to create an occasion for illustrating a grammatical point, but also as an entertaining story in its own right — in other words, a perfect fulfilment of the function of *adab*. Thus, Tha'lab seems to owe much of his professional identity both to his personal nemesis and to the Basrans as a group, and his biographies are full of references to these competitors.⁵² This is less true for al-Mubarrad, for whose characterisation the rivalry is far less important.⁵³

Most of the descriptions of disputes between Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad come from the same source, al-Zajjājī's *Majālis al-'ulāma'*. Al-Zajjājī relates twenty-six *majālis* involving Tha'lab with different fellow-debaters, mostly Basrans. One of these debates is cited in the *Fihrist* and then by Yāqūt (F4 and Y9), and it is in Tha'lab's voice. Yāqūt cites three more, also related by Tha'lab: in Y12 and Y44, Tha'lab shows to the Basran al-Riyāshī that he knows the teaching of his master Sībawayh better than him; as a consequence, al-Riyāshī declares that he will give up philology and pursue only the disciplines in which he excels. In Y13, Tha'lab spars with al-Mubarrad and comes out on top.

While Y12 and Y44 happen in a strictly scholarly environment, many others found in

⁴⁹ See for example Bernards, *Delusion of Identification*.

⁵⁰ Bernards, *Changing Traditions*, 95. The subject is further elaborated on in Bernards, *Grammarians' Circles*.

⁵¹ Al-Sīrāfi, *Ṭabaqāt*.

⁵² For more details see Osti, *Scholarly Competition*.

⁵³ See al-Mubarrad's biography in Bernards, *Changing Traditions*.

al-Zajjājī's *Majālis*, including the ones between Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad, are set at the home of Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir. Here Tha'lab, as an employed teacher, acted also as an animator of his patron's social life by participating in Muḥammad's parties and debating with other scholars as well as entertaining the audience with morsels of *adab*. In fact, Vadet portrays him as "grammairien d'Adab;"⁵⁴ and a few amusing stories related by him suggest a companionable setting in which they would be related for pure entertainment. Some of these concern personal experiences, as for instance the bathhouse joke with the physician Ibn Māsawayh (Y10), or this vivid picture of a naïve good man:⁵⁵

Abū l-Ḥusayn related to me: Niḡawayh related to us: Tha'lab related to us: we had in al-Ḥarbiyya⁵⁶ a virtuous porter who was praised for his asceticism. He would not work for anyone connected with the caliph, and if he carried something it was as heavy as all he was able to carry, with effort, no less, and then he would rest. He would only carry light loads, such as meat and fruit, as the maximum he could carry was about fifty *raṭl*. One day — continued Tha'lab — I followed him without his noticing, and I saw that he would set a foot on the ground and say "praise be to God," then lift it and say "God forgive." I asked him why he was doing that, and he replied: "I am between Grace and sins, so I praise Him for the Grace and ask for forgiveness for the sins."

In his study of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, Shawkat Toorawa introduces the concept of proximity, arguing that the arrangement of notices in a biographical collection may suggest relations between two or more individuals which are not explicitly stated, and that individuals consistently cited as sources in adjacent *akhbār* may be connected to each other and be seen as a social circle.⁵⁷ While the former postulate is not relevant to the biographical collections concerned here (because they used an explicit criterion for ordering their entries), the latter may be applied to *akhbār* on Tha'lab found in compilations such as Yāqūt's, which are not limited to grammarians. Such perspective would confirm Tha'lab as a true socialite: although he is never explicitly referred to as a *zarīf*, which in the third/ninth century denoted belonging to a specific social group of refined people,⁵⁸ he is certainly surrounded by individuals who identify themselves with such term: apart from Aḥmad b. Sa'īd b. Salm, several students of his, such as al-Ṣūlī⁵⁹ and Ibn Dāwūd al-Isfahānī (297/910)⁶⁰, are known to have been *zurafā'*, and another student, al-Washshā' (d. 325/936), is the author of the manual for *zarf*, where Tha'lab is one of the main sources.⁶¹ All these relate many *akhbār* and poetry on the authority of Tha'lab, as well as episodes where they interact with him and, as we have seen here, accounts of Tha'lab's life in his own voice. A *zarīf* is of course at home in elegant *majālis*.

⁵⁴ Vadet, *L'esprit courtois*, 281–287

⁵⁵ Al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, viii, 61 (story 22).

⁵⁶ A neighbourhood in Baghdad.

⁵⁷ For instance, in the *Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā' al-muḥdathīn* by Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 296/908), which has no stated criterion of order, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's entry appears near those of individuals who were all somehow associated with him. Another aspect of proximity is that mentions of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir as source are often near to mentions of his associates as sources. See Toorawa, *Writerly Culture*, 102–122.

⁵⁸ See Montgomery, *Zarīf*.

⁵⁹ *Fihrist*, I/2, 464 (ed. Sayyid), 167 (ed. Tajaddud): "zarīf."

⁶⁰ *Fihrist*, II/1, 63 (ed. Sayyid), 272 (ed. Tajaddud): "aḥad al-zurafā'."

⁶¹ Al-Washshā', *al-Muwashshā'*.

FRUSTRATION AND INSECURITY

Tha'lab lived longer than many of his contemporaries; therefore, it is not necessarily surprising that he is the narrator of most of the debates involving himself; and to be sure, one should not be surprised either that in all scholarly debates narrated by himself he is the winner of the argument. However, not all his criticisms originate in rivals or scholars of a younger generation: Tha'lab himself seems to be pairing his boasting about precocity and excellence with displaying insecurity. One illustration of this is the immediate context of Y13: after reporting Tha'lab's account on his successful debate against Tha'lab, Yaqūt (Y14) quotes a comment by a Basran scholar refuting Tha'lab's argument. And after this, in Y15 Tha'lab himself admits that he was often mocked by another Basran for what he had said during the debate.

The sources provide critical evaluations of both Tha'lab's scholarship and his character. As for the latter, as has been seen above, he was accused of avarice. His scholarship is said to be deficient and restricted only to some subjects, while he was ignorant of the teaching and methods of *Sībawayh*. We also know that, despite his regular attendance of *mujālasāt*, Tha'lab would try to avoid debates, especially with his main rival: whatever the balance of victories recorded in al-Zajjāji's *Majālis*, Tha'lab was mostly the loser in debates with al-Mubarrad because, in the words of his son-in-law al-Dīnawarī,

al-Mubarrad is capable of good diction, smooth clarification, an eloquent tongue and clear explanation. The way of Tha'lab, instead, is the way of teachers. When they get together in a party, favour will be given to the one who is exteriorly better against the one who knows things in depth.⁶²

There are also accounts describing Tha'lab at a loss on how to answer a question (Y48); and he is criticised for not being a refined connoisseur of poetry: as Ibn al-Rūmī explains to al-Buḥturī, who derides him for going to Tha'lab's lessons, the latter's competence is not in those areas, but in the correct grammatical analysis of poetry and in its rare words.⁶³ Finally, Tha'lab made mistakes when speaking Arabic, as is remarked in Y22: "when he entered the *majlis* we would stand up and he would say 'aq'udū (sit down), aq'udū!', with a, [instead of u'qudū]."⁶⁴

Tha'lab's own accounts touch all of these topics. Two episodes involve his older contemporary and colleague Ibn al-Sikkīt (d. 243/867). In the first, he and Tha'lab are sitting in the class of Abū l-Ḥasan al-Athram (232/846), and Tha'lab tries to prevent Ibn al-Sikkīt from asking a question which he thinks the master will not be able to answer. Ibn al-Sikkīt proceeds anyway, managing to embarrass and outshine the master, who, saying "You want to be the master!" goes back into his house.⁶⁵

Tha'lab relates another episode on Ibn al-Sikkīt, where either the transmitter or the compiler adds an aside to explain that Tha'lab was short-tempered. The story, first related by Abū Ṭayyib al-Lughawī,⁶⁶ is quoted in Y39. In another version of the same story, Tha'lab

⁶² Al-Zubaydī 143; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, 3382.

⁶³ Al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār al-Buḥturī*, 135-139.

⁶⁴ See also al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi*, viii, 244.

⁶⁵ Ibn al-Anbārī, *Nuzhat al-alibbā'*, 101.

⁶⁶ Abū l-Ṭayyib al-Lughawī, *Marātib*, 95.

openly acknowledges his shame, and his error, which must be the reason for relating the episode to others:⁶⁷

Tha'lab said: I went to see Ya'qūb b. al-Sikkīt while he was working at a book of his. He asked me something about *i'rāb* and I answered, but he wouldn't understand, so I shouted. 'Don't shout!' he said, 'I only want to learn!' I felt ashamed.

Thus, Tha'lab displays sympathy for masters who are embarrassed by students on the one hand, and on the other admits his own impatience with slow learners as a teacher, while making it clear that between himself and Ibn al-Sikkīt he is the better scholar. Y47 also shows Tha'lab's anger at a slow student.

In Y41, Tha'lab relates an occasion in which he himself is rebuked by a senior scholar, when he meets Ibn Ḥanbal, the famous traditionist (d. 241/855), who recites to him a piece of *zuhd*, ascetic poetry, composed in the style of the *muḥdath* poets. Ibn Ḥanbal is not only exhorting Tha'lab to repent, but also presenting him with language to which Tha'lab may not be used. Tha'lab is sometimes described as a *ḥanbalī* in the sources and does appear in *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābila*,⁶⁸ but his entry there consists only of this *khābar* and does not specify other connections: Tha'lab is not a traditionist.

Ibn Ḥanbal's rebuke introduces the ultimate point of insecurity: is the study of grammar in itself a worthy choice? Y55, an account narrated by the well-known Qur'ān reader Ibn Mujāhid,⁶⁹ illustrates this: Tha'lab complains to Ibn Mujāhid that, while there is certain reward in heaven for those who studied Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, the pursuit of grammar is a less direct path to the Hereafter. Ibn Mujāhid is able to reassure him the next day, having been given a message by the Prophet in a dream. However, Ibn Mujāhid himself seems to have been uncertain as to Tha'lab's pre-eminence within his own subject; the Basran grammarian and biographer al-Sīrāfi records him as saying: "I missed out on much knowledge from [al-Mubarrad] because of my decision to stick with Tha'lab."⁷⁰

It is conventional to apologise for devoting oneself to a subject other than the religious sciences.⁷¹ However, here the insecurity is also connected with the broader question of the place of grammar within the context of other Islamic sciences. This question will not be resolved until, in the fifth/eleventh century, al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) uses the term *'ulūm adabiyya* for the first time and considers linguistic disciplines as integral part of *adab*.⁷² During Tha'lab's life, however, grammar seems to have a much more uncertain status, and

⁶⁷ Ibn al-Qiftī, *Inbāh*, i, 148.

⁶⁸ Ibn Abī Ya'lā, *Ṭabaqāt* i, 83–84.

⁶⁹ Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Mūsā, d. 324/935. See *Fihrist* I/1 81; 34 (ed. Tajaddud); al-Khaṭīb, v, 144–8; Yāqūt, 520–3.

⁷⁰ Al-Sīrāfi, *Ṭabaqāt*, 102.

⁷¹ See for example, even several centuries later, how Yāqūt introduces his *Mu'jam* with an apology for not writing about *ḥadīth* (Yāqūt, 9–15).

⁷² See Versteegh, *Sociological view*, 290. See also Heinrichs, *Classification: a couple of centuries after Tha'lab* (fifth/eleventh century) there was a clearly defined field of *'ulūm adabiyya*, of which *adab* was the main discipline and grammar one of the ancillary ones. Heinrichs here investigates whether and how this was codified before, using seven works which attempt at classifying sciences. His conclusion is that, although one can identify trends, there is no systematic classification until al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) for the first time uses the term *'ulūm adabiyya* and considers linguistic disciplines as integral part of *adab*.

grammarians formed a compact community of scholars of a fluid discipline, which remained without a formalised process of training even after the advent of *madrasas* as the standard educational institution, legal learning centres greatly promoted in Baghdad by the Saljūq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092).⁷³ At least partly for this reason, it may be argued, it was all the more important to possess a powerful tool, such as *ṭabaqāt*, to make sense of their predecessors, providing them with a solid pedigree and the opportunity to pay allegiance to a group. It is not surprising, therefore, for Tha'lab's life, as it is related both by himself and by others, to be circumscribed within the circles of fellow-grammarians and the famous pupils he tutors: in his biographies, Tha'lab is surrounded by mentions of his students, his colleagues, and his patrons.⁷⁴ One feels tempted to see scholars of grammar and lexicography as a group through which all scholars and learned men had to transit at one point of their education — but most of them went on to other subjects and careers, and those who remained would be the equivalent of modern-day nerds. An echo of this uncertainty seems to remain in Tha'lab's own accounts.

BACK COVER: OLD AGE, DEAFNESS, DEATH

None of the information on Tha'lab's death is of course provided in his voice. However, some points reflect what has been found on other topics and are worth exploring.

Tha'lab is described as having remained healthy into his old age,⁷⁵ except being hard of hearing. Some stories show his students exploiting this deafness at the teacher's expenses.⁷⁶

The last image we have of Tha'lab (Y3) is that of the accident leading to his death: he is going home from the mosque, followed by students, immersed in a book and oblivious to all that happens around him.⁷⁷ This account is given by the grandson of Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir who, apparently, was studying with his father's old master. The death of Tha'lab is caused by a member of the Mādharā'īs, a family of high officials and revenue officers, originating from Iraq, but whose fortunes came from the power they had in Egypt and Syria. From there, where they had the control of finances granted to them by the local rulers, the Ṭūlūnids, they could intervene in Baghdadi politics, influencing the rise and fall of Baghdadi viziers. In other words, the death of Tha'lab is caused by a rich parvenu, and the heir of an old family who accompanies him does nothing to prevent it.

⁷³ See also how Versteegh explains that the study of grammar remained outside the standardised system also in the post-*madrasa* period (Versteegh, *Sociological View*, 295).

⁷⁴ Bernards reaches the same conclusion for al-Mubarrad (Bernards, *Changing Traditions*).

⁷⁵ Al-Zubaydī, 143–144.

⁷⁶ According to al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, §3386, things would have to be written down for Tha'lab to read. See for example al-Zubaydī, 151, where the future vizier al-Qāsim b. 'Ubaydallāh and his brother try to embarrass Tha'lab. The story is translated in Osti, *Vizier as a Villain*.

⁷⁷ This scene brings to mind that of the Greek philosopher Thales falling in a well because too busy looking at the stars; Plato, *Theætetus*, 174a : A9. And indeed, the *topos* concerns at least another Arab grammarian: al-Khalīl "died in 791 [...] as the result of his scholarly pursuits: when he entered the mosque one day, pondering a scientific problem, he ran into a pillar and lost his life" (Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought*, 18).

Tha'lab, who was obviously able to save, left a large inheritance to his only child, the above-mentioned daughter, while his entire extensive library was given over to the administration of a student of his, who proceeded to sell it.⁷⁸ A former pupil of Tha'lab's, al-Qāsim b. 'Ubaydallāh, managed to buy most of the books for a pittance.⁷⁹ Al-Qāsim, who was now vizier, had not been fond of his teacher, but his revenge would not last long, as he died in the same year, considerably younger than Tha'lab.

Even in his scholarship, Tha'lab did not die undefeated: to be sure, he had amassed a fortune, but the Kufan *madhhab* would peter out not long after Tha'lab's death with a few of his students who survived him. By the time of his death the star grammarian was Tha'lab's renegade pupil, al-Zajjāj, who had begun working at court and would remain there until his death in 311/922.⁸⁰

CONCLUSIONS

The life of Tha'lab is an ideal object for an investigation into autobiography: having lived longer than most of his contemporaries, Tha'lab had the monopoly on memories of his early years, as well as events and relationships in his later life. The present survey yields both general and particular answers to the questions we have posed.

There seems to emerge, from autobiographical fragments on Tha'lab, an individual with a distinct personality and a vision of himself, which accounts in the third person corroborate: as can be expected, Tha'lab highlights the positive aspects of his scholarship and career. This suggests a natural desire to show himself in a flattering light. What is more remarkable is that some of the stories he relates do reveal self-doubt: he did not study with all the masters who were available to him; he was rebuked by a scholar he admired; he was ashamed of his short temper; he regretted having one only daughter.

Does this amount to introspection? It is difficult to establish this on the evidence of the autobiographical accounts only. The sense of insecurity and frustration only emerges if these accounts are added to other material. For instance, in Yāqūt's biography the story related by Ibn Mujāhid on Tha'lab's doubts on the merits of grammar enhances Ibn Mujāhid's own account of the missed opportunities in his youth.⁸¹ And in al-Zubaydī's biography, stories on Tha'lab's avarice frame his statements about money and asceticism.

This mechanism is most remarkable in stories concerning Tha'lab's scholarship: in many cases, Tha'lab's accounts of his success in debates are juxtaposed to remarks diminishing his claims to excellence. We have seen examples of this in the biographies of al-Zubaydī and Yāqūt. This contrast makes Tha'lab's accounts appear almost pathetic attempts at regaining a preeminence which had been lost to al-Mubarrad and his students. In other words, compilers do not touch the content of autobiographical accounts, but place these

⁷⁸ This can be contrasted with Abū Nuwās, who left in the possession of his mother as little as a few books and notebooks, drafts of poetry, a chess set, and a backgammon set, for the value of 200 *dīnār* (Wagner, *Abū Nuwās*, 96).

⁷⁹ Al-Zubaydī, 149–150.

⁸⁰ Osti, *Practical Matters*, 149–151.

⁸¹ See Kilpatrick, *Context*.

in a subordinate position to those accounts over which Tha'lab had no monopoly, i.e. his old age and death, and an evaluation of his scholarship.

At this point, it may be concluded that these fragments of autobiography could be pieced together to form a coherent account, but they only convey a strong image when used retrospectively by compilers and integrated with non-autobiographical accounts. An individual relating events in his own life will then be, in this sense, little more than a particularly well-informed, if biased, source amongst others, barely distinguishable from them.

One element, however, remains to be considered: we do in fact have something closely resembling Reynold's definition of "a description or summation of the author's life, or a major portion thereof, as viewed retrospectively from a particular point in time." While we have scattered autobiographical accounts, we have also identified a long continuous narrative in the first person. Whether such account belongs to a free-standing work or not is not clear, and in any case the list of Tha'lab's books provided by the *Fihrist* does not include titles consistent with such a work. To this extent, it may be going too far to say that Tha'lab purposely set out to give an account of his life. However, in whatever form Tha'lab dictated these accounts, they were very soon written down, copied at least twice, and cited as a continuous narrative by two successive biographers. This succession of accounts concerns, in order, Tha'lab's birth and childhood, his education, his early career, his time as an employee of Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir, and his rivalry with al-Mubarrad.

The main questions this paper set out to address are connected with the definition of a type of classical Arabic autobiography. While material on Tha'lab does not appear to shed definitive light on the question of introspection, there is enough evidence to allow at least for leaving the question open on whether, as early as the third/ninth century, scholars were already in the habit of conceiving autobiographies not only as snatches of recollections, but as consciously constructed accounts aimed at providing a flattering portrayal of their lives.

APPENDIX

Yāqūt b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229), *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*. *Irshād al-arīb ilā ma‘rifat al-adīb (irshād al-alibbā’ fī ma‘rifat al-udabā’)*, ed. by Iḥsān ‘Abbās, 7 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993, 536–554.⁸²

Y1. Aḥmad b. Yahyā b. Zayd b. Sayyār Abū l-‘Abbās Tha‘lab, *mawlā* of the Shaybān tribe, the grammarian and lexicographer, the leader of the Kufans in grammar and lexicography, trustworthiness and religion.

Y2. He was born, according to what al-Marzubānī mentioned on the authority of his masters, in the year 200, and he died the 17th of Jumādā I 291, during the caliphate of al-Muktafī b. al-Mu‘taḍid,⁸³ at the age of 90 and some months. He had seen eleven caliphs, the first of whom was al-Ma‘mūn and the last al-Muktafī. He had become deaf before his death. He was buried at the cemetery of Bāb al-Shām, in a chamber which had been bought for him and built afterwards. His tomb is there in a known place. His wealth was inherited by his daughter: he had left 21,000 *dirham*, 2,000 *dīnār* and shops in Bāb al-Shām worth 3,000 *dīnār*. Abū Aḥmad, the money-changer, owed him 1,000 *dīnār* in trade. This is mentioned in the *Ta’rīkh* of ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥusayn al-Quṭrabbulī.

Y3. Al-Marzubānī⁸⁴ transmitted, on the authority of Abū l-‘Abbās Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Ṭāhirī (Abū l-‘Abbās Tha‘lab was the teacher of his father Ṭāhir b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir): the reason for the death of Abū l-‘Abbās Tha‘lab was that on the Friday he was going back home from the mosque after the afternoon prayer, followed by a group of his companions. I was one of them. We followed him that evening, until we got to the road (he named it) in the area of Bāb al-Shām and, as it happened, a son of Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad al-Mādhārā’⁸⁵ was proceeding behind him on a mount, followed by a servant of his, also on an mount, which was agitated and restless. On that evening, [Tha‘lab] was holding in his hand a notebook at which he was looking and which distracted him from everything else. When we heard the noise of the animals’ hoofs behind us, we retreated from the middle of the street, but Abū l-‘Abbās did not hear the noise of the animals’ hoofs because he was deaf. The servant’s animal struck him and he fell banging his head on a hole which had been dug in the ground. He could not get back on his feet, so we carried him home confused and complaining about his head. This was the cause of his death, God have mercy on him.

Y4. Al-Marzubānī transmitted, on the authority of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-‘Arūḍī:⁸⁶ Abū l-‘Abbās surpassed his contemporaries for his memory in the sciences in which the old

⁸² Translations of different passages taken from this biography have already appeared in the following publications: Osti, Vizier; *eadem*, Scholarly Competition; *eadem*, Practical Matters.

⁸³ R. 289/902–295/908.

⁸⁴ Cf. al-Marzubānī, *Nūr al-qabas*, 337.

⁸⁵ A rich ‘Irāqī family who were powerful in Egypt and Syria. See Gottschalk, *Mādhārā’*.

⁸⁶ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Abū l-Ḥasan al-‘Arūḍī, d. 342/953–4. See al-Khaṭīb, v, 140; Yāqūt, 471–2; *Fihrist* I/1 90 (ed. Sayyid); 37 (ed. Tajaddud).

masters specialised. On the other hand [the Basran] Abū Sa'īd al-Sukkarī⁸⁷ had very many books, and wrote himself what no one else had written. They were at variance because Abū Sa'īd would not separate himself from the *Book* [of Sībawayh] when meeting people, while Abū l-'Abbās would not touch a book, because he depended on his memory, and he trusted the clarity of his recollection.

Y5. Al-Khaṭīb said:⁸⁸ [Tha'lab] heard [the lessons of] Muḥammad b. Sallām al-Jumaḥī, Muḥammad b. Ziyād b. al-A'rābī, 'Alī b. al-Mughīra al-Athram, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mundhir al-Ḥizāmī, Salama b. 'Āṣim, 'Ubayd Allāh b. 'Umar al-Qawārīrī, al-Zubayr b. Bakkār and many others. People who related on his authority: Muḥammad b. al-'Abbās al-Yazīdī, 'Alī b. Sulaymān al-Akhfash,⁸⁹ Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. 'Arafa Nifṭawayh, Abū Bakr b. al-Anbārī, Abū 'Umar al-Zāhid, Abū l-Ḥasan Ibn Muqsim, the judge Aḥmad b. Kāmil and many others. He would say: "I heard one hundred thousand *ḥadīth* from al-Qawārīrī."

Y6. I read in the handwriting of Abū Sālim al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī: I copied from the handwriting of al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Muqla: Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā said: I began to study language, poetry and lexicography in 216[/831]. I was born in the year 200, the second year of the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn.⁹⁰

Y7. Abū l-'Abbās said: I saw al-Ma'mūn when he arrived from Khurāsān in 204, when he went out from Bāb al-Ḥadīd heading for the palace of al-Ruṣāfa, and the people were lined up as far as al-Muṣallā. My father was leading me by the hand, and when al-Ma'mūn passed he lifted me up and said: "This is al-Ma'mūn, and this is the year [20]4." I have kept this in memory until now.⁹¹

Y8. I was proficient in the Arabic language and I learned the books of al-Farrā', all of them until the last letter. I was by then 25, and I wanted to practise grammar more than anything else. However, once I had mastered [grammar] I applied myself to poetry, meaning of words and rare expressions. I attached myself to Abū 'Abdallāh Ibn al-A'rābī for more than ten years.⁹²

Y9. I remember one day he went to see Aḥmad b. Sa'īd b. Salm. I was there, together with other people amongst whom al-Sadrī and Abū l-'Āliya. [Aḥmad b. Sa'īd] remained, and we talked about the poetry of al-Shammākh; they began discussing its meanings and the questions connected to it. I took to replying and would not stop, while Ibn al-A'rābī listened on, until we covered most of his poetry. He turned to Aḥmad b. Sa'īd, surprised about me.⁹³

⁸⁷ See footnote to F4.

⁸⁸ Al-Khaṭīb, v, 204.

⁸⁹ Al-Akhfash al-Aṣghar, d. 315/927. Al-Zubaydī 115–116; al-Khaṭīb, xi, 433; Yāqūt, 1770–74; Ibn Khallikān, iii, 301–3.

⁹⁰ Coincides with F3 above.

⁹¹ Coincides with F2 above.

⁹² Coincides with F3 above.

⁹³ Coincides with F4 above.

Y10. Abū l-‘Abbās said: I asked Ibn Māsawayh⁹⁴ about an illness for which I was consulting him: “Do you think I should take a bath?” He answered: “If man is ready, after forty years, to be the keeper of a bathhouse, he should do it!”⁹⁵

Y11. Abū l-‘Abbās said: *alladhī* cannot have an attribute because it can only be completed by a relative clause.⁹⁶ The Arabs only give an attribute to an *ism tāmm*,⁹⁷ whereas *alladhī* and what follows it form a *ḥikāya*, which cannot take an attribute because it does not change [its *i‘rāb*].⁹⁸ Abū l-‘Abbās said: Ibn Qādim⁹⁹ was asked about this while I was away in Fārs, and he said *alladhawī* [instead of *alladhī*]. When I arrived [back] and was asked [to repeat that lesson] I said “it does not take an attribute” and I offered the above explanation.¹⁰⁰ This reached the ears of Ibn Qādim and when we came together he came back to my lesson.

Y12. Abū l-‘Abbās said: I would go and see al-Riyāshī¹⁰¹ to listen to him; his knowledge was unadulterated. One day he told me, after teaching (*raġaz*):

*mā tanqamu l-ḥarbu l-‘awānu minnī
bāzili ‘āmayni ḥadīthin sinnī
li-mīthli hādihā waladatnī ummī*¹⁰²

“What would you say, *bāzili* or *bāzilu*?” I replied: “Do you ask me such a linguistic question, [when I am here to learn from you]? Actually, I’ll tell you something more: [this word] is transmitted as *bāzila*, *bāzili* and *bāzilu*. In the nominative it indicates a new sentence, in

⁹⁴ Abū Zakariyā Yuhannā, a famous physician of the period, d. 243/857. See Vadet, Ibn Māsawayh.

⁹⁵ *Ḥammām* means both bath and bathhouse. Tha‘lab means it in the former sense; Ibn Māsawayh mockingly understands it in the latter.

⁹⁶ *Lā yunsab ilayhi*: it cannot be followed by an adjective on its own, but must be followed by a relative clause.

⁹⁷ The relative complement. See Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar*, 151–152.

⁹⁸ As a grammatical term, *ḥikāya* “means the exact repetition of a word used by a speaker with a vowel of declension no longer appropriate to its function in the new context, e.g. “*ra‘aytu Zaydan*” – “*man Zaydan?*” (instead of *Zaydan*), but this *ḥikāya* is not possible when the noun is followed by a qualifying element” (Pellat, *Ḥikāya*). In the case of *alladhī*, this becomes apparent only in the dual, e.g. *ra‘aytu l-rajulayni lldhayni ma‘ahu*, where *alladhī*, although it is the subject of the relative clause, stays in the case of the noun to which it refers.

⁹⁹ One of Tha‘lab’s teachers, Abū Ja‘far Aḥmad (or Muḥammad) b. ‘Abdallāh b. Qādim. Al-Zubaydī, 138–139.

¹⁰⁰ *‘illa* is a technical term indicating the explanation (literally, “cause”) of a grammatical point. In this case, it is the illustration of the reason why *alladhī* cannot take an attribute. See Fleisch, *‘illa*, and Baalbaki, *The Book*, 130–2.

¹⁰¹ Muḥammad b. Yasīr al-Riyāshī, the Basran grammarian, d. 257/871. See Ch. Pellat, al-Riyāshī. The source for this debate is al-Zajjājī, *Majālis*, 58 (*majlis* 25).

¹⁰² “Recurrent war does not take revenge on me; I, who am an experienced man, young in age; For this my mother gave birth to me!” *Bāzil* indicates the camel which has reached eight or nine years of age and has cut his *nāb* tooth. *Bāzil ‘āmayn* means “that has passed two years” after cutting that tooth, but also “a man perfect in his experience and intellect.”

the genitive for attraction,¹⁰³ in the accusative as a *ḥāl*.¹⁰⁴ He felt ashamed and stopped [talking].

Y13. Abū l-ʿAbbās said:¹⁰⁵ one day I entered [a gathering] at Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir's. Al-Mubarrad was there, together with a group of the host's relations and secretaries, as Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā¹⁰⁶ had talked to him about al-Mubarrad. When I sat down, Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh asked me: "What do you say about this verse by Imru' al-Qays (*mutaqārib*)?"

*lahā matnatāni khazātā kamā
akabba ʿalā sāʿidayhi l-namir*¹⁰⁷

I said: "It is unusual that it is said *khazā*, with *zā*' and *alif*, when it means firm backbone and he describes a horse. "*Kamā akabba ʿalā sāʿidayhi l-namir*" means "in the firmness of the leopard's forelegs, when it lands on its paws. *Matn* means the path spreading from the right of the body to its left [flanks]. The noticeable thing from the linguistic point of view is *khazātā*:¹⁰⁸ when the *tā*' is vocalised, [the poet] restores the *alif* because of the vowel *fatha*.¹⁰⁹ [Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir] turned towards Muḥammad b. Yazīd, who said: "God exalt the commander! [The poet] meant to put *khazātā* in construct with *kamā*."¹¹⁰ I said: "Nobody has ever said this." Al-Mubarrad said: "On the contrary, Sībawayh says that." I said to Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh: "No, by God! Sībawayh never said that. Here is his *Book*, let it be shown." Then I turned to Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh and told him: "And why do we need the *Book* of Sībawayh? Can one say *marartu bi-l-Zaydayn ḡarīfay ʿAmr*, putting in construct the qualifier of one thing with another thing?" Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh said with certainty: "No, by God, this cannot be said," and turned to al-Mubarrad. He remained silent and did not say anything. I left and the *majlis* broke up.

¹⁰³ *Ittibāʿ* indicates various forms of assimilation, including that of a vowel with the one preceding it in the same word.

¹⁰⁴ I.e. as an accusative of state. Later grammatical tradition does not seem to admit this interpretation.

¹⁰⁵ Source for this story is al-Zajjājī, *Majālis*, 109–110 (*majlis* 50). See also al-Zubaydī, 160–161.

¹⁰⁶ Probably the same Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā who appears in another episode concerning Thaʿlab and his Ṭāhirid employer (Y16), who is the source for several autobiographical accounts. He might be one of the brothers of the vizier ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā, a secretary himself, of whom little is known (see Sourdel, *Vizirat*, 748).

¹⁰⁷ "She has two flanks firm like the leopard landing on its paws." The line is found in Imru' al-Qays, *Dīwān*, poem n. 29, v. 32 (p. 164).

¹⁰⁸ Al-Zubaydī's edition has *khazātā*.

¹⁰⁹ Thaʿlab intends this word as a perfect (in its pre-classical, adjectival value) third person dual feminine from the root *khẓw*, *khazātā*, where the weak radical, which disappears in the third person feminine singular because of the *sukūn* ending (*khazat*), reappears because of the final *alif*.

¹¹⁰ Al-Mubarrad intends the word as the feminine dual of *khāẓ*ⁱⁿ, *khazātāni*, which loses the final *nūn* because it is in a construct. Most commentaries to this line favour this second reading but report both.

Y14. ‘Abdallāh al-Faqīr¹¹¹ said on this: “I do not know why this should be impossible; I do not think anybody forbids a sentence like: *ra’aytu l-farasayn markūbay Zayd*, or: *al-ghulamayn ‘abday ‘Amr*, or: *al-thawbayn durrā’atay Zayd*, and so also: *marartu bi-l-Zaydayn ẓarīfay ‘Amr*, because it is in construct with ‘Amr, being a *ṣifa* of Zayd. This is clear to everyone who thinks about it.”

Y15. Abū l-‘Abbās said: when al-Māzinī saw me, vied with me in grammar and went out to Samarra, he would mention me and address me saying “Your brother (*akhika*) greets you.”¹¹²

Y16. Abū l-‘Abbās said: Muḥammad b. Īsā told me, in the presence of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir: “We prefer you because the *amīr* prefers you.” I answered: “O *shaykh*, I have not made myself learned for the preference of *amīrs*, but for that of scholars.”

Y17. Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā said: Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh would write *alf dirham wāḥida*, and if he found *alf dirham wāḥid* written, he would correct it with *wāḥida*.¹¹³ His secretaries disliked this, and would be angry and despise him for it, but did not like to take the initiative [in pointing out the error] to him. One day he said: “Do you know why al-Farrā’ wrote the *Kitāb al-bahī*?” “No.” “He wrote it for my father ‘Abdallāh, on the order of my grandfather Ṭāhir.” I said: “He had also written for him other books, among which the *Book of the Masculine and Feminine*.” He asked: “What is in it?” I said: “Things like *alf dirham wāḥid*, as *wāḥida* is not correct.” His eyes opened, he realised and abandoned [his habit].

Y18. Abū l-‘Abbās said: “‘Abdallāh b. Ukht Abī l-Wazīr sent me a note on which was written, in al-Mubarrad’s handwriting: *darabtuḥu bi-lā sayfīn*. He asked: ‘Is this correct?’ I wrote back to him saying: ‘No by God, I have never heard it.’” Abū l-‘Abbās said: “This is definitely wrong because neither a genitive nor anything else can follow the negation (*lā*), because it is a particle, and a particle cannot follow a particle.”¹¹⁴

Y19. Al-‘Ajūzī¹¹⁵ said: I went to see al-Mubarrad together with al-Qāsim and al-Ḥasan, the sons of ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Wahb. Al-Qāsim said to me: “Ask him something about poetry.” I said: “What do you say, may God make you mighty, on these verses of Aws [b. Ḥajar] (*tawīl*)?”¹¹⁶

*wa-ghayyarahā ‘an waṣlihā l-shaybu innahu
shafī un ilā bīḍi l-khudūri mudarrabu*¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ The same story, with the final comment, appears also in Ibn al-Qifṭī, *Imbāh*, i, 145–146. Here the comment is attributed to a general *al-baṣriyyūn*, and the example which Tha’lab uses is not *ẓarīfay* but *ṣadīqay*.

¹¹² Al-Māzinī, who is al-Mubarrad’s teacher, begins his sentence with a construct in the genitive (*akhika*), in mockery of the view expressed by Tha’lab in the previous *khābar*.

¹¹³ Presumably the use of this expression is similar to the use of “only” to cross the amount of money on a modern cheque.

¹¹⁴ The correct form would be *bi-ghayri sayfīn*.

¹¹⁵ This might be Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, a student of Ibn al-A‘rābī like Tha’lab. See *Fihrist* I/1 214 (ed. Sayyid); 77–78 (ed. Tajaddud).

¹¹⁶ One of the major pre-Islamic poets. Aws b. Ḥajar, *Dīwān*, poem 2, v. 2 (p. 5).

¹¹⁷ “[My] old age changed her [attitude] regarding her favour; indeed [youth] is a skilled advocate

He said, after pausing, taking his time and smacking his lips: "He wants to say that women like his company and go to him unveiled." Then we went to Tha'lab, and when the *majlis* was crowded I asked him about that line. He said: "Ibn al-A'rābī told us: the *hā'* in *innahu* refers to youth even though it is not mentioned, because it is understood." I turned to al-Ḥasan and al-Qāsim and I said: "Where does our master stand, in comparison with yours?"

Y20. Ḥamza¹¹⁸ said: when al-Māzinī died, al-Mubarrad succeeded him. [Al-Māzinī's] fame was established in Baghdad and Samarra, without anybody diminishing it, until Ibn al-Anbārī mentioned him in some of his writings,¹¹⁹ with the aim of diminishing him and raising his own master, Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Tha'lab. He proceeded according to his habit of supporting the Kufans against the Basrans, saying: I heard Abū l-'Abbās (meaning Tha'lab) say: "I decided to go to al-Māzinī to debate with him, but my companions stopped me saying: 'It is not good that the like of you should go and see a Basran: tomorrow they will say that you are his student!' I did not want to disagree with them." Ibn al-Anbārī wanted to lift Tha'lab, but he lowered him. He did not limit himself to this detraction of al-Māzinī, but he did it also with al-Khalīl, claiming that Tha'lab recounted to him that Abū Ja'far al-Ru'āsī¹²⁰ made a book on grammar and called it *al-Fayṣal*; that al-Khalīl sent for it to borrow it and he duly sent it to him; [Ibn al-Anbārī] said: this means that al-Khalīl learned grammar from the book of al-Ru'āsī for those passages which can be found in *Sībawayh* introduced with his mention when he says "*qāla l-kūfi*." When this was heard, it was known that Ibn al-Anbārī only spoke out of partisanship.¹²¹

Y21. I read in the book of Ibn Abī l-Azhar, in the handwriting of 'Abd al-Salām al-Baṣrī:¹²² opposite Abū l-'Abbās Tha'lab's house was a man who had lost his mind; he would sometimes go out and sit at the door, the door of his own house, watching people. One day he saw a servant of Abū l-'Abbās bringing into the house brown bread. He said to him: "Abū l-'Abbās, why don't you buy white bread? What is this poverty and paucity?" He answered: "This [paucity] is better than need, and than sacrificing one's honour putting on a show for others." He laughed and said: "I am surprised at what you say; is your wealth not a result of showing off in public and asking for favours? Don't accept gifts from anybody if you

to women's compassion." While al-Mubarrad interprets the line as saying that when a man is old women let him go to them because he does not pose a threat to their virtue, Tha'lab's interpretation is the exact opposite: women will not let an old man visit them, because they only bestow their favours on young men.

¹¹⁸ Probably the historian and grammarian Ḥamza l-Iṣfahānī, d. before 360/970. See Rosenthal, *Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī*.

¹¹⁹ This probably refers to a sixth/twelfth century source by the author of the above-mentioned *Nuzhat al-alibbā'*: Ibn al-Anbārī, *Inṣāf*.

¹²⁰ A grammarian who lived in the late second/eighth century and was allegedly (according to a story related by Tha'lab) the founder of the Kufan *madhhab*. See Danecki, Ru'āsī.

¹²¹ The question regarding the origin of al-Khalīl's book and his alleged plagiarism of Kufan ideas is addressed in Talmon, *Arabic Grammar*.

¹²² 'Abd al-Salām b. al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī Abū Aḥmad, a Baghdadi grammarian and head librarian, d. 405/1014. See al-Khaṭīb, xi, 57-8.

are sincere.” [Tha‘lab] turned towards me¹²³ and said: “He has said something [important]!” then recited a *zuhd* poem (*sarī*):

Our time is difficult and our brothers’
hands are indolent in giving,
All [true] men are dead and there only remains
in your time, pure avarice.
We have barely enough to survive on;
nothing is left to give away prodigally:
Hold tight to your property
and be deaf to blame.¹²⁴

I was surprised at him reciting these lines after being addressed in that way.

Y22. Aḥmad b. Fāris al-Lughawī¹²⁵ said: Abū l-‘Abbās Tha‘lab used not to watch his *i‘rāb*. He would enter the *majlis* and say, when we stood up: *aq‘udū, aq‘udū*, with a *fatḥa* on the *alif* [instead of *uq‘udū*].

Y23. The judge Ibn Kāmil said: Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Allāf¹²⁶ recited to me these verses of his when al-Mubarrad died (*kāmil*):¹²⁷

Al-Mubarrad is dead, his days elapsed;
with al-Mubarrad, Tha‘lab will soon be.
One house of *ādāb*, half of it is
rubble, and another remaining quarter will be destroyed.
Cry for what time snatched away, and get yourselves used
to a time of mourning.
Al-Mubarrad went where you cannot hope to reach him
ever, and the one whom you can reach is going to disappear.
Learn from Tha‘lab, as from the same cup
from which al-Mubarrad drank, he will soon drink.
Squeeze milk from his words as if you were
at his deathbed, and on it some reward were assembled
I deem it good that you write down his [last] breaths
if indeed these are breaths which should be written down
He will certainly join him who has departed, staying behind
[only a little]; he will go and we shall go.

Y24. Abū l-Ṭayyib ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Lughawī says, in his book called *Marātib al-naḥwiyyīn*:¹²⁸ Tha‘lab depended on Ibn al-A‘rābī in lexicography, on Salama b. ‘Āṣim in grammar; he

¹²³ This must be Ibn Abī l-Azhar.

¹²⁴ Because nobody gives generously any more, it is necessary to hold on to one’s wealth in order to survive.

¹²⁵ D. 369/979–80. See Yāqūt, 410–18.

¹²⁶ This could be the poet al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Aḥmad, who died in 318/930 or 319/931 at the age of 100. See al-Khaṭīb, vii, 379–80.

¹²⁷ Part of this poem is reported in al-Khaṭīb, v, 209 and Ibn al-Qifṭī, *Inbāh*, 141. In this context, *ādāb* means philological sciences.

¹²⁸ Abū l-Ṭayyib al-Lughawī, *Marātib*, 96.

related the books of Abū Zayd on the authority of Ibn Najda and the books of Abū 'Ubayda on the authority of al-Athram, the books of al-Aṣma'ī on the authority of Abū Naṣr, on the authority of 'Amr b. Abī 'Amr the books of his father. He was trustworthy and exact; because of his fame it is not necessary to comment on him.

Y25. [Abū l-Ṭayyib] said: Tha'lab was a competent authority, pious, devout, famous for his memory and truthfulness, the great amount of his transmissions, and the perfection of his knowledge. When Ibn al-A'rābī was in doubt about something, he would ask: "What do you have on this, Abū l-'Abbās?" out of trust for the breadth of his memory. He was born in the year 200; he started studying lexicography and language in 216. He said: "I started to study the *Ḥudūd* of al-Farrā' when I was 18. By the time I was 25, there did not remain one single question to al-Farrā' which I had not memorised together with its place in the book. At this time there was nothing in the books of al-Farrā' which I had not memorised."

Y26. Al-Marzubānī transmitted:¹²⁹ 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥusayn b. Sa'd al-Quṭrabbulī said in his *Ta'rikh*: Tha'lab was unsurpassed in learning, knowledge, soundness of speech, knowledge of obscure words, transmission of ancient poetry and knowledge of grammar according to the Kufan *madhhab*. He had studied deeply the books of al-Farrā' and al-Kisā'ī, but he did not know the Basran *madhhab* nor did he practise analogy, nor did he require it. He would say "al-Kisā'ī said" and "al-Farrā' said" but, when asked about the proof [of it] and [its] true meaning, he would not go deep into the examination.

Y27. His son-in-law Abū 'Alī Aḥmad b. Ja'far [al-Dīnawarī] the grammarian, husband of his daughter, would go out of his house while he was sitting at the door of his apartment, and would go past his companions, carrying his inkwell and notebook, as he was studying Sībawayh's *Book* with Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Mubarrad. Tha'lab would rebuke him and say: "When people see you going to that man and learning from him, what will they say?" Al-Dīnawarī would pay no attention to his words.

Y28. Al-Quṭrabbulī said: this son-in-law of his was known as al-Dīnawarī and was knowledgeable. I heard Ismā'īl b. Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Muṣ'abī ask him: "Abū 'Alī, how did al-Mubarrad the grammarian become more knowledgeable on the book of Sībawayh than Tha'lab?" He said: "Because al-Mubarrad learned it from the scholars, while Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā read it by himself.

Y29. Al-Quṭrabbulī said: Tha'lab was a prominent scholar from the days of his youth. However, he was stingy and parsimonious. My brother, who was his companion and testator, transmitted to me: I went to see him one day, when he had just been cupped. He had a plate in front of him with three buns, five eggs, herbs and salad, and he was eating. I said: "Abū l-'Abbās, you have just been cupped: if a *raṭl* of meat was brought to you [to give you some strength, you would feel better." He said: "a *raṭl* of meat];¹³⁰ add to it the price of coriander and so on also for the rest of the household, sum it up and you know what it means!"

¹²⁹ Al-Zubaydi, 141, has the same *khavar* from a different source.

¹³⁰ The part in square brackets is integrated from al-Zubaydi's text, 142.

Y30. [ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥusayn b. Saʿd al-Quṭrabbulī] said:¹³¹ I heard Aḥmad b. Ishāq b. al-Mudawwar say: I would see Abū ʿAbdallāh b. al-Aʿrābī have doubts on something and say: “What do you have on this, Abū l-ʿAbbās?” out of trust for the breadth of his memory. Despite this, he was not described as eloquent, nor does it seem to me that, when he wrote to colleagues in government service, he went beyond the talent of ordinary people. However, when you took him in poetry, obscure words and the *madhhab* of al-Farrāʿ and al-Kisāʿī, you saw the equal of nobody, and somebody who could not be challenged.

Y31. He and Muḥammad b. Yazīd were two scholars who put a seal to the history of *adab*. As a modern poet says (*mutaqārib*):¹³²

Searcher for knowledge, do not be ignorant;
take refuge with al-Mubarrad or Thaʿlab.
You will find with these two all human learning:
do not be like the mangy camel;¹³³
The whole knowledge of mankind is conjoined,
with these two, in the East and the West.

Al-Marzubānī said: al-Ṣūlī informed me that ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥusayn b. Saʿd al-Quṭrabbulī recited to him these verses as his own.

Y32. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad the *kātib*¹³⁴ transmitted: Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā the grammarian transmitted to me: Ibn al-Aʿrābī asked me: “How many children have you got?” I answered: “One daughter” and recited to him (*basīṭ*):¹³⁵

Were it not for Umayma, I would not have cared about poverty,
and I would not have wandered the nights, black of darkness.
She desires me to live, and I desire her death out of pity for her
as death is the most honourable estate for a woman

And Ibn al-Aʿrābī recited to me, to the same effect (*ṭawīl*):

Umayma¹³⁶ loves the life of a *shaykh* who would rejoice
if she died before dark, did she but know it;
He fears people’s unkindness to her after he [dies];
one cannot wish for a son-in-law more affectionate than the grave.

Y33. It was transmitted on the authority of Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥakīmī, on the authority of Yamūt b. al-Muzarraʿ;¹³⁷ Abū l-ʿAbbās Thaʿlab wanted to travel to Basra to see Abū Ḥātim

¹³¹ The first part of this *khavar* is the same as part of Y25.

¹³² See al-Sīrāfī 104–106, al-Zubaydī 143, and al-Khaṭīb, v, 208, where the poem appears in full and is attributed to Abū Bakr b. Abī l-Azhar.

¹³³ The mangy camel is infectious and stays away from the herd; similarly, a student would be isolated if he did not study with al-Mubarrad and Thaʿlab.

¹³⁴ Al-Marzubānī, *Nūr al-qabas*, 334–335; Ibn al-Qifṭī, *Inbāh*, i, 149.

¹³⁵ These are the first and last lines (with slight variations) of a poem by Muḥammad b. Yaṣīr al-Riyāshī (d. early third/ninth century, see Pellat, al-Riyāshī), which can be found in Ibn al-Muʿtazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 281. The poem laments a daughter will not have an easy time after her father’s death. The application to Thaʿlab’s own case is obvious.

¹³⁶ Al-Marzubānī has *ʿUmayma*.

¹³⁷ Yamūt b. al-Muzarraʿ b. Yamūt Abū Bakr al-ʿAbdī, d. 303/916. Al-Zubaydī 215–216; al-Khaṭīb,

al-Sijistānī, but heard that Abū Ḥātim had become notorious one day when he saw a group of young men who were writing in his *majlis*. A youth from among them looked at him and asked him: "God make you healthy, which *lām* is this?" He said: "It is a *lām kay*, my son." Abū l-'Abbās decided not to go out to see him.¹³⁸

Y34. Al-Ṣūlī transmitted: one day we were at Tha'lab's and a man asked him: "Al-*maṣjid*, this is known, but what is the verbal noun?" "The verbal noun is *al-sujūd*." "Tell me what [vocalisation] is not correct for this [root]." Tha'lab said: "Miṣjid is not correct," then he laughed: "It would be long to describe what is not correct: what is correct is prescribed in order to indicate that everything else is not correct. For example: Ibn Māsawayh prescribed a man a treatment, then he said: 'Eat chicken and a little fruit.' The man said: 'I want you to tell me what I should not eat.' He answered: 'Do not eat me, nor my donkey, nor my servant, and gather many sheets of paper and come to see me early, as what I have to prescribe you is very long!'"¹³⁹

Y35. It was transmitted on the authority of al-Ṣūlī: Abū l-'Abbās Tha'lab said: I did not study with a number of people, all of whom I saw and could have become a student of. Even if I had wanted to, it would not have been possible for me to get from them all I was searching for. Among them were: Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām,¹⁴⁰ Ishāq al-Mawṣilī,¹⁴¹ Abū Tawba,¹⁴² and al-Naḍr b. Ḥadīd.¹⁴³ I remember the death of al-Farrā' well, as it happened while I was still in the *kuttāb*.

Y36. [Al-Ṣūlī] also transmitted: On another day Tha'lab said: "Old age is an illness in its own right. When it is accompanied by [another] illness, it is a dreadful thing." Then he recited (*tawīl*):¹⁴⁴

I see my sight, every day and night
become dim and my steps grow shorter than before.
He who has lived through ninety years
they change him, but time does not change.
By my life! If I walk (as if) shackled now,
it is a long time since I have walked freely!

xiv, 358–60; Yāqūt, 2845–6; Ibn Khallikān, vii, 53–61.

¹³⁸ The young man asking the question must have been handsome enough to provoke such a *risqué* response from Abū Ḥātim. Whether Tha'lab did not go because he was outraged by such behaviour, or simply because he feared the same advances, one cannot say.

¹³⁹ This anecdote is better understood in al-Marzubānī's rendering, *Nūr al-Qabas*, 335: "A man asked Abū l-'Abbās: *al-maṣjid* is known; what about *al-maṣjad*?" Tha'lab said: "It is the *maṣdar* of *al-sujūd*." "Tell me what [vocalisation] is not correct for this [root]." Tha'lab said: "*al-miṣjid* is not correct, nor is *al-musjud*." The rest of the anecdote is analogous.

¹⁴⁰ D. 224/838, an eclectic grammarian who for a time was the protégé of 'Abdallāh b. Tāhir, the father of Tha'lab's patron (see Gottschalk, Abū 'Ubayd).

¹⁴¹ D. 767/850, the famous musician and poet.

¹⁴² A student of al-Kisā'ī. See Yāqūt, 2739.

¹⁴³ A contemporary and friend of al-Mu'taṣim (*Nūr al-qabas*, 316)

¹⁴⁴ These lines are also found in *Majālis*, 139 and in al-Khaṭīb, vii, 14, in the entry on the Qur'ān reader Idrīs al-Ḥaddād (d. 292/905). Here, the poem follows an episode where Tha'lab and Idrīs meet, both of them already old.

Y37. Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Zubaydī transmitted:¹⁴⁵ Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir appointed me to the education of his son Ṭāhir. He reserved for me an apartment in his [son’s] apartment and established a daily allowance for us. I would stay with the child for up to four hours a day, then I would leave when he wanted to eat. This reached [Muḥammad’s] ears, so he furbished the room, the porches, [the assembly rooms and the air conditioning],¹⁴⁶ adding to the dishes [cool air, fruits and furniture]. Still, when mealtime came, I left. This reached his ears, so he told the servant who was assigned to us: “I was told that Tha’lab leaves at mealtimes and at midday. I thought that he found what was served to him too little, and that he did not find the place agreeable, so we had the food doubled and increased the air conditioning. Then I was told that he still left. Now you ask him on your part: is your house cooler than ours? Or is your food nicer than ours? And you tell him on my part: Your leaving to go home at mealtimes is an insult for us.” When the servant told me this, I stayed, and continued in this way for thirteen years. [Those of his inner circle who were present would eat with us, such as Ibn ‘Awn and others.] In addition to this, he would present me with seven daily rations of *khushkār* bread, one ration of semolina bread, seven *raṭl* of meat and fodder for animal. He also gave me a salary of 1,000 *dirham* a month. [He would check with the person who gave me the rations of bread and meat, so that he would connect this to his own payment and would not be late in it.] When the year of the *fitna*¹⁴⁷ came, flour and meat became difficult to get, so [Muḥammad’s] kitchen secretary wrote to him informing him of the shortage in which he found himself and of the great efforts he had to undergo to get the provisions, and asking him to order that a register be prepared, [containing a list of those who received flour and meat], so that he could cut what was not necessary [since the list included many people who were not in need, not even in such a situation and at such a time]. He allowed the list to be drawn: it included 3,600 people, and I saw Muḥammad had added to it in his own handwriting, then he wrote on it: “I am not going to cut from anyone things to which I have got them used, especially anyone who says: Give me bread. Distribute things as they are in the register. Be patient with these provisions, as either we shall all live, or we shall die together.”

Y38. Al-Zubaydī said:¹⁴⁸ He left precious books. He appointed as executor [of his testament] one of his best students, ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Kūfī. He directed him to hand his books over to Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Ishāq b. Sa’d al-Quṭrabbulī. Ibrāhīm al-Zajjāj¹⁴⁹ told al-Qāsim b. ‘Ubayd Allāh: “These books are precious, do not let them escape you.” So he summoned Khayrān the copyist, who priced what was worth ten *dīnār* at three *dīnār*, for a total of less than three hundred *dīnār*. Al-Qāsim bought them for this price.

¹⁴⁵ See al-Zubaydī 148; the story is also found, partially, in Ibn al-Qiftī, *Inbāh*, i, 147–148

¹⁴⁶ *Al-khaysh*, i.e. a man-moved ventilator made of cloth. In this story, parts in square brackets are integrated from Yāqūt’s version.

¹⁴⁷ This refers to the battle for power between al-Musta’in and al-Mu’tazz, which ended in 251/866 with the abdication of the former in favour of the latter. The court was at that time at Samarra but fighting went on in Baghdad as well.

¹⁴⁸ See al-Zubaydī 149–150 and Ibn al-Qiftī, *Inbāh*, i, 48.

¹⁴⁹ D. 310/922. Al-Zajjāj belonged to the rival group of grammarians and he was asked to become the teacher of al-Qāsim as an act of revenge against Tha’lab. See Osti, Practical Matters.

Y39. Abū l-Ṭayyib 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. 'Alī al-Lughawī said in the *Kitāb marātib al-naḥwiyyīn*:¹⁵⁰ The science of the Kufans reached its peak with Ibn al-Sikkīt and Tha'lab. They were trustworthy and reliable. Ya'qūb [b. al-Sikkīt] was older, died earlier and was the better at composing books. Tha'lab knew more about grammar, in which Ya'qūb was considered weak. Tha'lab said: "One day I was at Ibn al-Sikkīt's and when he asked me something I shouted at him." In fact Tha'lab was very impetuous. He said: "So [Ibn al-Sikkīt] said to me: 'Don't shout, I was just asking.'"

Y40. Abū Aḥmad al-'Askarī transmitted in the *Kitāb al-taṣḥīf*:¹⁵¹ Abū Bakr b. al-Anbārī informed us: my father transmitted to me: al-Quṭrabbulī repeated in front of Abū l-'Abbās the verse of al-A'shā (*ṭawīl*):¹⁵²

*fa-law kunta fī ḥubbin thamānīna qāmatan
wa-ruqqīta asbāba l-samā'i bi-sullamin*¹⁵³

Abū l-'Abbās said: "Your house is destroyed [i.e. your verse is wrong]: have you ever seen a jar (*ḥubb*) of eighty fathoms? Indeed it is a well (*jubb*)!"

Y41. Al-Khaṭīb transmitted:¹⁵⁴ Tha'lab said: "I wanted to see Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, so I went to him. When I entered, he asked me: "What are you looking for?" I said: "Grammar and language." Abū 'Abdallāh [Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal] then recited to me (*ṭawīl*):

If ever you are alone one day, do not say
"I am alone," but say: "I have a Watcher."
Do not imagine that God ignores your past deeds
or that He cannot see what you [try to] hide from Him.
We were oblivious of sins as they passed in succession
crimes, with crimes after them.
Would that God would forgive our past sins
and grant that we may repent!

Y42. Al-Khaṭīb said:¹⁵⁵ Abū Muḥammad al-Zuhrī said: "Tha'lab had a mourning ceremony for one of his relatives, and I was late for it because it was unknown to me. I wanted to apologise, but he said: "Abū Muḥammad, you don't need to apologise, because the friend is not held to account and the enemy is not taken into account."

Y43. I found in the handwriting of Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. 'Ubayd Allāh al-Mīsmī al-Lughawī: Abū Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Nawbakhtī¹⁵⁶ transmitted to me: Abū l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad b. Ja'far al-Marāghī the grammarian transmitted to me: Abū Bakr b. al-Khayyāṭ¹⁵⁷ the

¹⁵⁰ Abū l-Ṭayyib al-Lughawī, *Marātib*, 95.

¹⁵¹ Al-'Askarī, *Sharḥ*, 40.

¹⁵² Maymūn b. Qays, *Dīwān*, 94 (poem 15, line 32). Tha'lab had edited his *Dīwān*.

¹⁵³ "Oh, were you in a jar of eighty fathoms, and rose to the sky on a ladder..."

¹⁵⁴ Al-Khaṭīb, v, 205, with differences in the poetry. This piece of *zuhd*, ascetic poetry, has been attributed to Abū Nuwās (Yāqūt, 546, footnote 4), but apparently Tha'lab does not recognise it.

¹⁵⁵ Al-Khaṭīb, v, 206.

¹⁵⁶ This could be the son of al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, the theologian d. between 300/912 and 310/922.

¹⁵⁷ Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Maṣṣūr Abū Bakr, d. 320/932. Al-Zubaydī 117; *Fihrist* I/1 249 (ed.

grammarian transmitted to me: I was at Tha'lab's one day, when a man asked him (his hearing was already bad then): "Abū l-'Abbās, God exalt you, what is *al-ṣūṣ*?" He answered: "*al-ṣūḥ* is the base of a mountain." The man repeated his question because he understood that the *shaykh* had not heard. Tha'lab answered: "*al-sūḥ* is the plural of *al-sāḥa*." The man repeated his question for the third time, and Tha'lab understood that he hadn't heard the man, so he told him: "Come closer to me, make your mouth swallow my ear and speak." He did that, and when Tha'lab understood the question he said: "Yes, the Arabs say: *ra'aytu ṣūṣan 'alā aṣwaṣ*, meaning a vile man on a noble camel."

Y44. Al-Zajjājī Abū l-Qāsim¹⁵⁸ transmitted, on the authority of 'Alī b. Sulaymān al-Akhfash: Aḥmad b. Yahyā Tha'lab informed me: "Al-Riyāshī came to Baghdad in 230[/845], and I went to see him to study with him. He said to me: 'Shall I ask you a question?' I agreed. 'Do you consider it correct to say *nī'ma l-rajulu yaqūmu* [i.e. what a good man who stands]?' 'Yes, most people consider this correct. Al-Kisā'ī considers it resulting from the suppression of the implicit *nī'ma l-rajulu rajulun yaqūmu*, because he considers *nī'ma* a verb. On the other hand, al-Farrā' does not consider it resulting from suppression because he considers *nī'ma* an *ism*, so that he puts *al-rajul* in the nominative with *nī'ma*, and *yaqūmu* is the attribute (*ṣila*) of *al-rajul*. As for your master [Sībawayh], he does not consider it a suppression of anything. He also considers *nī'ma* a verb, but he places *yaqūmu* as *mutarjim* [interpreter], which is what they call apposition (*al-badal*):' He was silent. I asked him: 'Shall I ask you a question?' He agreed. 'Do you consider it correct to say *yaqūmu nī'ma al-rajulu*?' He said: 'It is correct.' 'This is considered wrong by most. As for the *madhhab* of al-Kisā'ī, he does not put a verb next to a verb. As for the *madhhab* of al-Farrā': he considers *yaqūmu* an attribute of *al-rajul*, and the attribute cannot precede the *ism* to which it is attributed. As for the *madhhab* of your master Sībawayh: it is not correct because it is a *tarjama*, and a *tarjama* is an explanation and a clarification of the clause which precedes it; therefore it cannot precede the sentence.' [al-Riyāshī] said: 'I give up philology; receive [the transmissions] you wanted to receive.' The *ayyām* of the Arabs, the *akhbār* and poetry had been disclosed to him, and he opened for me the flow of the sea [regarding these questions].

Y45. [Al-Zajjājī] transmitted:¹⁵⁹ 'Alī b. Sulaymān al-Akhfash informed me: I was one day in the presence of Tha'lab, and I was in a hurry to leave before the conclusion of the *majlis*. Tha'lab asked: "Where are you going? I see you can't stay away from the *majlis* of al-Khuldī," i.e. al-Mubarrad. I told him: "I need to do something." He said: "I see he places al-Buḥturī before Abū Tammām.¹⁶⁰ If you go and see him, ask him: what is the meaning of this verse by Abū Tammām (*wāfir*)?"¹⁶¹

Sayyid); 89 (ed. Tajaddud); Yāqūt, 2309–10.

¹⁵⁸ See al-Zajjājī, *Majālis*, 59–60 (*majlis* 26).

¹⁵⁹ Al-Zajjājī, *Amālī*, 56–58.

¹⁶⁰ Disputes between the supporters of al-Buḥturī and those of Abū Tammām were a classical theme of discussion among the critics of modern poetry. We know from al-Ṣūlī's *Akhbār al-Buḥturī* that the poet was a friend of al-Mubarrad's. In one episode (56) al-Mubarrad praises al-Buḥturī for his modesty in refusing to be thought better than Abū Tammām.

¹⁶¹ Abū Tammām, *Dīwān*, ii, 336 (poem 92, v. 3), with *naḥīb* (lamenting) instead of *najīb* (noble one).

Beloved of the noble one, how many separations
will happen again, which are the herald of reunion?

Abū l-Ḥasan said: when I went to see Abū l-‘Abbās al-Mubarrad I asked him about that verse and he answered: “The meaning of this is that the lovers are separated and parted freely but not for a decision to separate [for good]. When the [moment of] departure draws near and they perceive that they will be separated, they return to affection and share the fear of separation, and the fear that it will be a long time before they meet again. So separation becomes the cause of reunion, as another says (*khafīf*):¹⁶²

On the day they parted, parting was to be their comfort
although they sought protection in crying and embracing.
How many times did they keep their passion secret from people, out of precaution
and how many times did they hide their ardent desire and yearning!
Separation offered them shelter, and they encountered in it
a separation which brought them agreement.
How can I imprecate destruction upon separation
when [our] reunion was the morning after the day of separation?

[Abū l-Ḥasan] said: when I returned to Tha‘lab he asked me about it and I repeated to him the answer and the lines. He said: “He is so wrong! He didn’t do anything [to explain the line]. The meaning of the verse is that man separates from his beloved in the hope of gaining wealth by going away, going back to his beloved with no need to seek further employment, so that he can be with her for a long time. Don’t you see? In the following line he says (*wāfir*):¹⁶³

Only he who has suffered the grief of parting
can experience the joy of returning

And this is similar to what the other said, but in fact Abū Tammām took the idea from him (*ṭawīl*):

I seek to dwell far away from you, so that you may draw near
and my eyes shed tears only so that they may be dried

This and that mean the same.”¹⁶⁴

Y46. It was recounted that one day Tha‘lab went out to see his companions and found only a middle aged man, or a *shaykh*. So he recited, quoting (*ṭawīl*):

Ah, how often have I vexed the jealous? And
wide, languishing (and yet not sickly) eyes afflicted me.
So it afflicts me that [now] the jealous loves me¹⁶⁵
and that my boon companions are stately old men.

I myself like this very much!

¹⁶² Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 446. Here these verses are attributed to the early ninth century poet Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Ṣīmī, whose biography can be found in the same work, 304–5.

¹⁶³ This is v. 4 of the same poem 92.

¹⁶⁴ With this episode, Tha‘lab claims to be more expert on modern poets than al-Mubarrad.

¹⁶⁵ A jealous person will love Tha‘lab only when the latter no longer attracts jealousy, like now in his old age.

Y47. Jaḥḻa transmitted in his *Amālī*: One day I was at Tha‘lab’s *majlis* and a man asked him: “Master what is *al-ba‘jida*?” He said: “I don’t know this to be in the speech of the Arabs.” The man said: “But I found it in the poetry of ‘Abd al-Ṣamad Ibn al-Mu‘adhḥal,¹⁶⁶ where he says (*mutaqārib*):

*a ‘ādḥilatī aqṣirī abī‘ jidatī bi-l-minan*¹⁶⁷

Abū l-‘Abbās got very angry and said: “Oh people, give his ears a good rubbing, unless he promises not to come back to my circle.” We did so.

Y48. Abū ‘Umar al-Zāhid transmitted:¹⁶⁸ I was at the *majlis* of Tha‘lab when somebody asked him something and he answered: “I don’t know.” “How can you say you don’t know, when camels are beaten over their livers in your direction, when people travel to you from far and wide?” Tha‘lab answered: “If my family had as much dung as the things I don’t know, I would be rich.”

Y49. Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Aḥmad al-Zuhrī said:¹⁶⁹ “Between Tha‘lab and me there was true affection, and I would ask his advice on my affairs. One day I went to see him to ask his advice whether I should move from one place to another, because of disturbance coming from the neighbours. He told me: “Abū Muḥammad, the Arabs say ‘Being patient with disturbance coming from somebody you know is better for you than finding new problems you don’t know,”

Y50. Abū ‘Umar al-Zāhid said: Abū l-‘Abbās Tha‘lab recited to me:¹⁷⁰

Whenever you want to put a friend to the test
test his affection for *dirham*
If when you ask, flaws come to light [in some of them]
then the features of the more noble ones will be known [to you]

Y51. Al-Khaṭīb transmitted:¹⁷¹ between the two Abū l-‘Abbās, Tha‘lab and al-Mubarrad, there were many controversies; people differed in their preference of one of them over the other. [Al-Khaṭīb] said: a man went up to Tha‘lab and said: “Abū l-‘Abbās, al-Mubarrad satirised you.” “With what?” He recited (*sarī*):

I swear by [my lover’s] sweet mouth
and him who complains of his love to the lover,
If [Tha‘lab] were to write down grammar at God’s dictation
it would only make his heart more blind¹⁷²

¹⁶⁶ A satirical poet, d. 240/854. See Pellat, ‘Abd al-Ṣamad.

¹⁶⁷ “Carping women, desist; [let me] spend my wealth in acts of generosity.” The student has misread two words for one.

¹⁶⁸ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 210 and Ibn Khallikān, i, 103.

¹⁶⁹ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 206.

¹⁷⁰ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 205, with slight differences in the wording.

¹⁷¹ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 208.

¹⁷² Al-Mubarrad is accusing Tha‘lab of lacking the emotional insight which is as necessary as memory for the study of grammar.

Tha'lab said: "Somebody recited to me verses which were recited to him by Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā' (*sarī*):

The servant to the Banū Misma' mocked me
and I defended from him myself and the dignity.
I did not answer to him out of disdain of him;
if a dog bites, does one bite it back?"

Y52. [Al-Khaṭīb] also transmitted:¹⁷³ Abū l-'Abbās Muḥammad b. 'Ubayd Allāh b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir said: my father¹⁷⁴ told me: I was present at the *majlis* of my brother Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir. Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad, the two grammarians, were also present. My brother Muḥammad told me: "These two *shaykhs* have attended; let them debate, and I would like to find out who is the more knowledgeable." The two debated on something concerning grammar which I knew, and I participated in the discussion until they became too specific and I could not understand. I returned to [my brother] after the end of the *majlis* and replied to his question: "They talked of something I knew and I joined in their [discussion] for as much as I could; then they became too specific and I did not know what they were talking about. By God, my lord, only one who knows more than them can say which one is the more learned, and I am not the man" He said: "Brother, you did well by God, but this is better" (i.e. my acknowledging this).

Y53. Abū 'Umar al-Zāhid told me: I asked Ibn al-Sarrāj:¹⁷⁵ "Who is the more knowledgeable, Tha'lab or al-Mubarrad?" He answered: "What shall I say of two people who have the world between them?"

Y54. Abū 'Umar also transmitted:¹⁷⁶ one day we were at Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā's and he was angry. A *zāhirī* shaykh told him: "If you knew your reward for benefiting people with science, you would be patient with the annoyance they bring you." He answered: "Were it not for that, I would not suffer this torment." Then he recited something which ended in this way:

With twigs they tease every gap-toothed [mouth]
shiny. Their mouth did not run dry
Their kisses taste of honey, their teeth polished
with a twig from the *ḍarw* tree or the branch of the *arāk* tree
Only for such women do I ride a lean camel
and brave the cold winds of the South¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 208–209 for this and the next *khābar*.

¹⁷⁴ 'Ubayd Allāh b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 300/913), the brother of Tha'lab's employer and a poet and *adīb* in his own right. See *Fihrist* I/1, 363 (ed. Sayyid); 131 (ed. Tajaddud); al-Khaṭīb, x, 340–4; Ibn Khallikān, iii, 120–3.

¹⁷⁵ Muḥammad b. al-Sarī Abū Bakr, d. 316/929. Al-Zubaydī 112–114; *Fihrist* I/1, 161–163 (ed. Sayyid); 67–68 (ed. Tajaddud); al-Khaṭīb, v, 319–20; Yāqūt, 2534–7; Ibn Khallikān, iv, 339–40.

¹⁷⁶ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 210, with slight variations in the wording.

¹⁷⁷ The lover suffers all the adversities of his travels only for the sake of women, in the same way in which Tha'lab bears the burden of teaching only because of the rewards which will be granted to him in Heaven.

Y55. Abū Bakr Ibn Mujāhid transmitted:¹⁷⁸ I was at Tha‘lab’s and he told me: “Abū Bakr, people worked on the Qur‘ān and were successful; jurists worked on *fiqh* and were successful; *ḥadīth* scholars worked on *ḥadīth* and were successful. I worked on Zayd and ‘Amr,¹⁷⁹ and I wish I knew what will happen with me in the Hereafter.” I left, and that very night I saw the Prophet in my sleep. He told me: “Greet Abū l-‘Abbās from me, and tell him: you are the master of the science which surpasses [all others].” Al-Rūzabādhī said: [the Prophet] meant to say that discourse is completed by [this science], and speech is embellished. Another time he said: [the Prophet] meant to say that all sciences need [grammar].

Y56. Al-Khaṭīb recited:¹⁸⁰ Abū l-‘Abbās Tha‘lab recited:

I reached in my age eighty
and I was only hoping for fifty
Praise be to God, and thanks to Him
that he added to my life thirty
I only ask God to reach
what satisfies Him, Amen, Amen!

Y57. I copied from the book of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik al-Ta‘rīkhī, in the *Akhbār al-naḥwiyyīn*:¹⁸¹ Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Zayd Tha‘lab al-Shaybānī the grammarian is the arbiter¹⁸² of grammarians and tester of lexicographers among Kufans and Basrans; he has the most truthful tongue and the greatest standing among them, the largest renown, the highest power, the rightest knowledge, the widest insight, the most skilled memory, the greatest fortune in religious and worldly matters. Al-Mufaḍḍal b. Salama b. ‘Āṣim transmitted to me: Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā was the leader of the grammarians; people started frequenting him in 225.

Y58. [Al-Ta‘rīkhī] said: I heard Ibrāhīm al-Ḥarbī say, when people were discussing on the *ism* and the *musammā*: “It reached me that Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā the grammarian mentioned the discussion on the *ism* and the *musammā*; therefore, I forbid you and myself what Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā forbade, and I approve for you and for me of that of which Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā approved.

Y59. [Al-Ta‘rīkhī] said: Abū l-Ṣaqr Isma‘īl b. Bulbul al-Shaybānī¹⁸³ mentioned Abū l-‘Abbās Tha‘lab’s name to al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh al-Muwaḥḥaq¹⁸⁴, who gave him a splendid annual pension. This pleased the people of science and *adab*, and one of them recited to Abū l-Ṣaqr and Abū l-‘Abbās, among some lines he mentioned (*tawīl*):

¹⁷⁸ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 211 and Ibn Khallikān, i, 102–103.

¹⁷⁹ The two proper names normally used for grammatical examples.

¹⁸⁰ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 211–212.

¹⁸¹ See al-Khaṭīb, v, 209–210 for this and the next three *akhbār*.

¹⁸² *Fārūq*, an epithet of the Caliph ‘Umar: “he who distinguishes truth from falsehood.”

¹⁸³ The vizier of al-Mu‘tamid, d. 278/892 (see Sourdél, al-Shaybānī).

¹⁸⁴ The brother and regent of the caliph al-Mu‘tamid, see Kennedy, al-Muwaḥḥaq.

Two mountains of Shaybān,¹⁸⁵ may you not cease
to be to her allies of glory among the humans, and of favour
One [of these mountains] is made for exploits of generosity, sword and spear
the other for spreading knowledge [among men] without niggardliness¹⁸⁶
On you, Abū l-'Abbās, is all reliance
because you are, after God, the best on whom to rely
You disclosed the norms of grammar after they had been locked
and clarified them with explanation and illustration of the problems
How many dwell in the shade of your favour!
which will withstand the passage of time better than Thabīr and Yadhbul
You send knowledge forth to your brethern
and you have made place after place fertile in it¹⁸⁷

Y60. Al-Ta'rīkhī mentioned Tha'lab's death as above. He said: a companion of [Tha'lab] said, elegizing him (*basīṭ*):

Ibn Yaḥyā died, so died the reign of *adab*
Aḥmad died, the best grammarian among foreigners and Arabs
If Abū l-'Abbās is dead
his fame will not die, among people and books

Y61. Al-Ta'rīkhī himself wrote an elegy for Tha'lab. We shall mention it in his entry.¹⁸⁸

Y62. Al-Ta'rīkhī said: Abū l-Ḥuṣayn al-Bajalī transmitted to me: the Kufans say: we have three jurists, of a sort of which people have never seen the like: Abū Ḥanīfa, Abū Yūsuf and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan. We also have three grammarians of the same sort: Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Ḥamza al-Kisā'i, Abū Zakariyā Yaḥyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā' and Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Tha'lab.

Y63. Here ends what we copied from the book of al-Ta'rīkhī.

Y64. Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāq al-Nadīm mentioned [Tha'lab] in the *Kitāb al-fihrist*:¹⁸⁹ Among his books are: *al-Maṣūn fī-l-naḥw*, which he arranged in classes; *Ikhtilāf al-naḥwiyyīn*; *Ma'ānī l-Qur'ān*; a digest of grammar which he called *al-Muwaffaqī*; *al-Qirā'āt*; *Ma'ānī l-shi'r*; *al-Taṣghīr*; *Mā yaṣarif wa-mā lā yaṣarif*; *Mā yujrā wa-mā lā yujrā*; *al-Shawādh*; *al-Waqf wa-l-ibtidā'*; *al-Hijā'*; *Istikhrāj al-alfāz min al-akhbār*; *al-Awṣaṭ*; *Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān al-latīf*; *al-Mas'īl*; *Ḥadd al-naḥw*; *Tafsīr kalām Ibnat al-Khass*; *al-Faṣīḥ*.

¹⁸⁵ Both Tha'lab and Ibn Bulbul belonged to the Shaybān tribe. Ibn Bulbul is praised for his role as vizier and for helping Tha'lab to receive a pension, thus gaining glory for his tribe. Tha'lab also is a glory for the tribe, because of his excellence in grammar.

¹⁸⁶ The first hemistich probably refers to the recently defeated Zanj rebellion. *Jūd* (generosity) and *mubakkkhal* (mean) form a *ṭibāq*.

¹⁸⁷ The last two lines refer to pre-Islamic concepts: Thabīr and Yadhbul are two places in the Arabian Peninsula which often recur in classical poetry, whereas *manzil* indicates here the place where a tribe alights to pasture its animals.

¹⁸⁸ Al-Ta'rīkhī's entry in the *Mu'jam* is lost.

¹⁸⁹ Coincides with F5 above.

Y65. It has been mentioned that *al-Faṣīḥ* is a work of Ibn Dāwūd al-Raqqī which Tha'lab attributed to himself; on this [Ibn Dāwūd] there is an entry [in this book].¹⁹⁰

Y66. [Ibn al-Nadīm] said:¹⁹¹ Abū l-ʿAbbās also had *mujālasāt* and dictations which he dictated to his companions in his *majālis*. They comprise some grammar, lexicography, *akhbār*, explanations of the Qurʾān and poetry. These were related on his authority by several people. Abū l-ʿAbbās also edited part of the poetry of the *dīwāns* of the Arabs and commented their obscure words; these include al-Aʿshā, the two al-Nābighas and others.

Y67. Tha'lab was asked the meaning of the saying, *lā ukallimuka aṣlan*. He said: “It means that I cut [the talking to you] at its root (*aṣl*),” and recited (*ṭawīl*):

I would sacrifice my people for her, whose niggardliness does not cut my desire
for her, and her whose niggardliness increases because of my desire
On her account I have been much reviled
for people are malicious
I grant her my pure love, even though, could she
draw from the sea, she would not offer me as much as a bucketful.
You have kept offering my love, in turns, hope
and niggardliness, for so long that you have eradicated it

Y68. I read in the *Amālī* of Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim al-Anbārī: Abū Bakr recited to us these verses by Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā the grammarian (*ṭawīl*):¹⁹²

Since you, food of my life, have abandoned me
how long will the life last that you nourished?
It will last as long as the desert-lizard can live in water
as long as the fish can live in a verdant plain

Y69. He said: Abū l-Ḥasan b. al-Barā' added for us (*ṭawīl*):

Were you mistaken about me, because I seemed patient,
though you had wounded me fatally?
If what I suffer were inflicted on the solid rocks, it would overthrow them
if on the wind, the wind would cease to blow, and would remain in a lengthened slumber
But patience! God may cause us to meet again
and then I shall complain to you of the woes I faced because of you

It was like this in the book; I do not know whether this was Tha'lab's poetry, or if he recited it and it was by someone else. However, in this book it is attributed to Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā, as you can see.

¹⁹⁰ Ibn Dāwūd al-Raqqī is not mentioned anywhere else in what we have today of the *Muʿjam*.

¹⁹¹ Coincides with F5 above.

¹⁹² See Ibn Khallikān, i, 103. My translation of this and the next piece are based on De Slane's translation of Ibn Khallikān (*Biographical Dictionary*, i, 83–90).

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