NONLINEARITY IN MEDIAEVAL ARABIC AND PERSIAN POETRY

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In modern criticism, poems are often praised for the unity of their effects. Their coherence or their smooth procession from stanza to stanza, line to line, are often given as the criteria for good verse.

In the Mediaeval Near East, poetry was thought of in quite different terms. For Arab and Persian literary critics, and the poets themselves, the basic unit of a poem was the verse and much indigenous criticism centered on single verses, analyzing their merits and demerits in great detail. The overall structure was given far less attention.[1] A famous Arabic saying, borrowed by other Islamic languages, compares a good poem to a necklace, consisting of individual pearls of superb beauty. This image has actually given a term for "poetry" to all these languages, *nazm*, as opposed to *nathr* "prose." *Nazm* denotes "stringing (pearls), arranging," *nathr*, by contrast, "dispersing, scattering."

A good poem was not merely any necklace of pearls, it was a necklace where all the pearls, the verses that is, are of equal beauty and perfection and, though this is rarely spelled out, the pearls are, in a sense, identical to each other, as they should be in a necklace. And since they were identical, they were also interchangeable. Arabic and Persian poems show a much higher rate of variation concerning the order of the verses in a poem than any other literary tradition.

There are various features in the Near Eastern literary tradition which make this possible. First, there is the monorhyme. Arabic and Persian poems, with few exceptions, retain their rhyme throughout the poem.[2] Thus, the rhyme does not provide any mechanical aid for keeping the verses in a certain order or, in other words, there are no rhyme schemes that would necessitate certain verses coming in a certain order and, accordingly, would organize them naturally into a stanzaic structure which would lock the verses in place. There may, of course, be stanzas even in a poem without rhymes or containing monorhymes, but a quick look at stanzaic poems of pre-Modern times in various cultures shows how rare stanzas are which are not based on rhyme, and how important rhymes are for structuring poems. With a monorhyme, or without any rhyme at all, verses do not fall into place but instead retain a certain freedom of order, as the logical order of the ideas remains the only organizing principle.

The same holds true for metre, another organizing principle in poetry. In the Arabic and Persian traditions, the metre of a poem remains the same throughout the poem. Thus, each verse is metrically identical with all other verses of the poem. There is no metrical variation between the verses of one poem such as is found in haikus and tankas or Horatian metres, but the poems metrically resemble the epic poetry of, say, Homer or the *Kalevala*, where each line is metrically equivalent to all other lines.

Arabic poetry was originally oral, and Persian poetry was modelled after it in Islamic times. This ancient oral poetry remained exemplary until the modern period, and, thus, some of its features became canonized in literary theory.[3] One of these was the prohibition against enjambment, which, with its run-on syntax, is an organizing mechanism in a poem. Oral poetry, in general, tends to avoid enjambment, since it strains the memory of the singer. Enjambment ties larger pieces together in a fixed order which the poet has to memorize as such, whereas oral poetry prefers shorter units which the poet may recreate during performance.

The lack of enjambment, thus, does away with yet another organizing principle of the poem, giving more independence to each verse, as they are more or less independent syntactical units.[4] Arabic poetry shares this feature with other oral poetries, such as the Homeric epics or Yugoslavian epic poetry. In Arabic poetry, however, this remained a constituent feature of later, completely literary poetry.

The nature of Arabic, and following it Persian, poetry still needs one general note before we take a closer look at some examples. Despite its technical affinities with, e.g., European epic tradition (monorhyme, nonvarying metre, lack of enjambment), Arabic poetry is neither epic nor narrative. It is closer to lyric, not in the romantic European sense of the word but in the sense that instead of narrating events in a logical order, it gives the reader images and allusions, and it is these which Arabic poetry is based on, not stories. There may be short narrative passages, and in some genres narrative has a somewhat larger share, but as a general rule one may say that the narrative parts rarely extend over a couple of lines. Thus, there is no story that would necessitate a certain order of the verses. This does not mean that Arabic poetry would be a haphazard collection of unrelated verses, as was sometimes suggested by 19th-Century scholarship, rather each verse is independently related to the central topic(s) of the poem, not so much to the preceding or succeeding verses.

There are two aspects of Arabic and Persian poetry which still need to be mentioned. Firstly, in a manuscript culture, publishing a book meant copying every single line of each copy by hand. This rather obvious remark is not without relevance for literary tendencies. In a printing culture, books may be produced with little effort and the number of pages does not play any major role: it may be a whit more expensive to print 500 pages than 100 pages, but the difference is not colossal, and the manual work needed for producing larger number of copies or more voluminous tomes does not basically differ much from the work involved in producing one slim volume. In manuscript culture each word has to be counted: copying a book of 500 pages takes several days for one copyist and copying it in two copies, or copying one volume of 1000 pages, takes exactly twice as much time and labour. Thus, in manuscript cultures a certain amount of excerpting and anthologizing is necessary, and only the most treasured works – such as the Bible, the Qur'an, Homeric epics or, in Persia, the national epic, *Shahname* – were constantly recopied in their complete form, despite their length. Usually longer poems tend to be excerpted for their choicest verses and passages only.

Secondly, poetry and linguistics have always had close ties with each other in the Near East, especially in Arabic literature. Since the eighth century, a word was deemed pure Arabic if, and only if, one could produce a testimonial verse, or a witness (*shahid*), for it from ancient poetry or from the Qur'an. This made individual verses, where an interesting word or construction was attested, widely diffused: both lexicographers and linguists were overjoyed with

Bedouin poetry that could prove the use of a word or a grammatical construction.

Let us now proceed to some examples. A good case of changes caused by anthologizing and selection is the so-called *Umm ar-Rajaz* "The Mother of *Rajaz*", the most famous poem written in *rajaz* in Classical Arabic and consisting of 191 verses.[5] The poem was written by Abu'n-Najm al-'Ijli (d. before 750) and it has been preserved in only one manuscript.[6] In addition, its verses spread in Classical Arabic literature, being quoted throughout the centuries both by lexicographers and grammarians for their linguistic features as well as by anthologists for their poetic merit or to illustrate anecdotes about the poet.

When we take a look at some major fragments of the poem quoted in literature, we immediately come across questions of selection and order. Instead of quoting pieces consisting of consecutive verses in the order in which they are found in the poem itself, there are widely divergent versions. Thus,[7] as-Suyuti, in his *Sharh shawahid al-Mughni,* quotes, in this order, verses 1/var. a-b,[8] 2-5, 141-146, 176-177, 121-124, 20-21, 77-79, and al-Baghdadi, in his *Khizana,* quotes verses 1 var. a-b, 2-6, 141-146, 175-177, 121-124, 77-79, 20-21.

From this list, one can see how verses are freely selected and reorganized. Both authors had at their disposal the whole poem: they were not ignorant of its complete shape, and both make it clear that they are selecting verses from a longer poem. The freedom with which the question of order was considered is clearly seen in the difference in order of the last two groups of verses in as-Suyuti and al-Baghdadi, which differ both from each other and from the complete poem. Whether it was as-Suyuti and al-Baghdadi themselves or their sources that were ultimately responsible for these changes in the order of verses is not important. What matters is that anthologists and linguists were not interested in retaining any "original" order of verses – had they wanted to, they could have checked it against the complete poem. The point was not in faithfully reproducing an original but in making a suitable poem out of verses of the poet and expressing it in a more economical way, as was necessary in a manuscript culture.

This also leads us to another consideration. The reasons given in the beginning of this article made it possible to rearrange verses at will. That they indeed *were* rearranged rather freely is related to the idea of copyright. Mediaeval authors knew full well what plagiarism meant and theoreticians engaged in lively discussion about it, but copyright was, in a sense, restrained to the material, not to the selection or order. To plagiarize a verse by Abu'n-Najm would have been reprehensible – if it was done as a literary trope, the matter was, of course, different: allusions and intertextual play were favoured almost as much as in modern culture.[9] To reorganize the material was another matter and there was nothing to prevent it. Verses were copyrighted, but their arrangement was considered copyright-free. Today, no objection is made to reframing an old painting.

To further elucidate the nature of Near Eastern Classical poetry, one may turn to the *ghazals* by the Persian national poet, Háfez (d. 1390). Háfez's poems even during his own time were criticized for floundering around between various themes instead of restricting themselves to one theme each. In modern scholarship they have aroused discussion as to their thematic and/or structural unity and this discussion has involved the whole Persian *ghazal* as a genre.[10] Many older scholars have deplored the lack of unity in Persian poetry, whereas more recent voices have been raised to defend the poems by showing their underlying thematic unity. To sum up a complicated issue in a few words, one might say that in modern scholarship, Persian *ghazal* is often seen as a group of verses revolving around a central theme, discussing it in turn from various angles. Thus, even when the individual verses change their order or are omitted, a clear unity still remains.

Technical features, as in the poem we are going to discuss, often mark both the first and the last verse and give them a fixed place in the poem[11], whereas the order of the other verses may change. In old manuscripts of his *Diwan* a very famous *ghazal* by Háfez is found in three different versions.[12] I will first give the text of the *ghazal* in Persian, followed by a literal translation which does not aim at any poetical rendering:[13]

1a. agar án tork-e shírází be-dast árad del-é má-rá
1b. be-khál-é hendovísh bakhsham Samarqand ú Bokhárá-rá
2a. be-deh sáqí mey-é báqí ke dar jannat na-khwáhí yáft
2b. kenár-é áb-e Roknábád o-golgasht-é Mosallá-rá
3a. feghán k-ín lúliyán-é shúkh-e shírín-kár-e shahráshúb

3b. chonán bordand^e sabr az del ke turkán khván-e yaghmá-rá
(4a. ze-'eshq-é ná-tamám-é má jamál-é yár^e mostaghní-st)
(4b. be-áb ú rang o-khál ú khatt che hájat rúy-e zíbá-rá)
5a. man-az án hosn-e rúzafzún ke Yúsof dásht^e dánestam
5b. ke 'eshq az parde-é 'esmat berún árad Zoleikhá-rá
6a. agar doshnám^e farmá'í v-agar nefrín do'á gúyam
6b. javáb-é talkh^e mí-zíbad lab-é la'l-é shekarkhá-rá
7a. nasíhat gúsh^e kon jáná ke az ján dúst^{e}tar dárand
7b. javánán-é sa'ádatmand^e pand-é pír-e dáná-rá
(8a. hadís az motreb-ú mey gú vo ráz-é dahr^e kamtar jú)
(8b. ke kas na-gshúd o-na-gsháyad be-hekmat ín mo'ammá-rá)
9a. ghazal goftí o-dor softí bi-yá ú khvash be-khván Háfez
9b. ke bar nazm-é to afshánad falak 'eqd-é Sorayyá-rá

1a. If that Shirazian Turk would comply to my wish,
1b. I would give both Samarqand and Bokhara for his beauty mark.[14]
2a. Saqi, give me the rest of the wine! In Paradise, you will not find
2b. the banks of the river of Roknabad, nor the meadows of Mosalla.
3a. Alas! These audacious, sweet-behaving, city-confusing gypsies
3b. have robbed my heart of patience like Turks robbing the table.
(4a. The beauty of the Beloved does not need our imperfect love:)
(4b. what need has the beautiful face of (artificial) liquids and colours, beauty marks and lines?)
5a. The daily-increasing beauty of Joseph has made me understand
5b. that it is love that brings Zoleykha out of the purdah of chastity.
6a. Even if you malign and curse me, I will pray for you:
6b. a bitter reply embellishes crimson sugar-lips.
7a. Dear (heart), listen to my advice: young men of good fate
7b. love the advice of a wise old man better than their own life:
(8a. Speak of singers and wine, search less for the secrets of Time)
(8b. because with his wit no one has solved, nor will solve, this riddle.)
9a. You composed a *ghazal*, you pierced the pearls. Now come, Háfez, sing sweetly:
9b. the heaven itself will scatter the necklace of the Pleiades upon your poetry.

This *ghazal* is a perfect example of Háfez's art in which themes of love, wine and conceited awareness of one's genius are intertwined, the whole construction being placed before the eyes of the reader in superb array. The verses follow each other in smooth succession, taking the reader from the love themes of the beginning to the final *carpe diem* wisdom of the last verses: in a style similar to Omar Khaiyam, Háfez advises himself to shun cosmological speculation and to concentrate on wine, love and the delights of his own poetry. One might think that the poem would show little variation in different sources, as the *Diwan* of Háfez is well preserved and the author was very early on virtually canonized – his collected poems are often called the Qur'an of the Persians and his verses are even today used for *estekhare*, or fortune telling: to know what lies ahead, one opens the *Diwan* of Háfez at random and reads the first verses one comes across. Their interpretation will contain the answer to any questions that are troubling you.[15]

However, the canonized position of Háfez has not preserved his poems in an unchanged form – if they ever had such a form: it is quite possible that the poet himself may have altered his works. Mediaeval authors never quite fixed their work but changed it at will: after the poems were "published" they could be republished in an updated form.[16] Whatever the case might be, there are three other versions for the order of the verses of this poem in early manuscripts of Háfez's *Diwan*, viz.:[17]

B: 1-2-3-4-8-5-6-7-9
C: 1-2-3-5-4-6-7-8-9
D: 1-2-3-5-6-7-9

In comparison to A, the standard recension given above, D merely omits[18] two verses (vv. 4 and 8), whereas B and C change the order of some verses, B placing v. 8 in an earlier position and C changing the order of vv. 4 and 5. Thus, the version of B reads (I am omitting here the first two verses):

3a. Alas! These audacious, sweet-behaving, city-confusing gypsies
3b. have robbed my heart of patience like Turks robbing the table.
8a. Speak of singers and wine, search less for the secrets of Time
8b. because with his wit no one has solved, nor will solve, this riddle.
4a. The beauty of the Beloved does not need our imperfect love:
4b. what need has the beautiful face of (artificial) liquids and colours, beauty marks and lines?

5a. The daily-increasing beauty of Joseph has made me understand
5b. that it is love that brings Zoleykha out of the purdah of chastity.
6a. Even if you malign and curse me, I will pray for you:
6b. a bitter reply embellishes crimson sugar-lips.
7a. Dear (heart), listen to my advice: young men of good fate
7b. love the advice of a wise old man better than their own life.
9a. You composed a *ghazal,* you pierced the pearls. Now come, Háfez, sing sweetly:
9b. the heaven itself will scatter the necklace of the Pleiades upon your poetry.

C reads (I am again omitting the first two verses):

3a. Alas! These audacious, sweet-behaving, city-confusing gypsies
3b. have robbed my heart of patience like Turks robbing the table.
5a. The daily-increasing beauty of Joseph has made me understand
5b. that it is love that brings Zoleykha out of the purdah of chastity.
4a. The beauty of the Beloved does not need our imperfect love:
4b. what need has the beautiful face of (artificial) liquids and colours, beauty marks and lines?
6a. Even if you malign and curse me, I will pray for you:
6b. a bitter reply embellishes crimson sugar-lips.

Version D omits the bracketed verses of A, given above.

What is striking is that v. 8 which might seem to us to be a more or less necessary answer to v. 7, is, after all, not the case, as we can see from its replacement in B and its omission from D. This is due to the thematic conventionality of the Persian *ghazal*: the reader, in fact, knows the themes of the *ghazal* in advance, and he does not need the poet to tell him what might be the advice of the wise old man because that is self-evident. To write a *ghazal*, one had already to be in a *carpe diem* mood.

In other poems variation may be much wider, but let this example suffice here. However, to show the range of possibilities in a *ghazal*, let us end our discussion of Háfez with our own version of the poem, stepping completely outside the Persian tradition, to show how radically the verses could be reorganized without the readability of the poem suffering too greatly:

Speak of singers and wine, search less for the secrets of Time
because with his wit no one has solved, nor will solve, this riddle.
Alas! These audacious, sweet-behaving, city-confusing gypsies
have robbed my heart of patience like Turks robbing the table.
Even if you malign and curse me, I will pray for you:
a bitter reply embellishes crimson sugar-lips.
The daily-increasing beauty of Joseph has made me understand
that it is love that brings Zoleykha out of the purdah of chastity.
The beauty of the Beloved does not need our imperfect love:
what need has the beautiful face of (artificial) liquids and colours, beauty marks and lines?
Saqi, give me the rest of the wine! In Paradise, you will not find
the banks of the river of Roknabad, or the meadows of Mosalla.
If that Shirazian Turk would comply to my wish,
I would give both Samarqand and Bokhara for his beauty mark.
Dear (heart), listen to my advice: young men of good fate
love the advice of a wise old man better than their own life:
You composed a *ghazal*, you pierced the pearls. Now come, Háfez, sing sweetly:
the heaven itself will scatter the necklace of the Pleiades upon your poetry.

Nonlinearity was not restricted to poems. In the Classical period, i.e., before the nineteenth century, prose was not highly developed in Arabic and Persian literatures. There was nothing corresponding to a modern novel, and even parallels to the Mediaeval European *novella*, the ancestor of the short story, were rather marginal and rare. What we have instead is a lively and well-developed artistic prose. In collections of these prose pieces, one finds the same principle of nonlinearity as in the *ghazal*: passages may be freely organized in many ways.

The same holds true for *Diwans* where, especially in later times, the poems were organized mechanically, according to the rhyme, thus excluding any thematic organizing principles. For the difference between Classical, and linear, European taste and the nonlinear nature of Near Eastern poetry, one can hardly find a better example than the *Quatrains* of Omar Khayyam. In FitzGerald's famous translation, the quatrains are organized as a series of short poems, making up a continuous story and forging a narrative out of these poems. In the original, the poems, the *ruba'iyat*, are totally unconnected and are organized merely according to rhyme. The collection, moreover, has absolutely no fixed form, but the individual quatrains and their order vary from one manuscript to the other. As a collection, the quatrains have a nonlinear form which was made linear only by FitzGerald who, thus, worked in a tradition of nonlinear Near Eastern poetry to produce a linear work in the target language suitable to Western literary tradition.

Is Mediaeval Near Eastern literature, then, nonlinear? The answer depends on how exact we wish to be. There certainly is a strong tendency to see works of art as nonlinear entities, superstructures which consist of smaller elements that can relatively freely be selected and rearranged. Where this differs from modern nonlinear literature is that this nonlinearity was always taken for granted and no works of literature were consciously aimed at breaking any – non-existing – rules of linearity and the works were not construed with such aims. Nonlinearity was the result of the natural development of literature, not a countermovement questioning existing norms.

1. For Mediaeval literary criticism in general, with an emphasis on the question of unity and coherence, see van Gelder (1982).
2. For notes on the aesthetic effect of this, see Lyons & Cachia(1970). The main exception to this rule, as well as the rule of retaining the same metre in all verses of a poem, comes from Islamic Spain where, perhaps under the influence of Romance folk poetry, metre and rhyme could vary in the non-Classical poetic forms of *muwashshaha* and *zajal*.
3. For attempts to apply oral formulaic theory to early Arabic poetry, see Monroe (1972) and Zwettler (1978). The oral formulaic theory of Parry and Lord fits epic poetry quite well, but its application to non-epic poetry using a wide variety of metres is more difficult. Cf. Ewald Wagner's criticism of Monroe and Zwettler (Wagner 1986, 21-25).
4. To be exact, Arabic poetry does admit verses that are syntactically dependent on the preceding verse, but each verse must end in a syntactically complete sentence which may then, optionally, be expanded by an additional verse but it must not *require* this addition. Hence, they are not problematic to oral poetry, as would syntactically incomplete verses, which necessarily require other verses to make them understandable.
5. *Rajaz* is both a metre and a style. It differs from all other Arabic metres in being composed of short lines of eight syllables, whereas all other metres are composed of verses containing two hemistichs which make up the verse and, in most cases, the hemistichs are longer than a complete *rajaz* verse. *Rajaz* poems of literary aspiration were especially popular in the eighth century A.D.
6. This poem and all known fragments have been published in Hämeen-Anttila (1993). See also Ullmann (1995); Hämeen-Anttila (1996); Weipert (1999). The poem has been translated into German by Ullmann in his article.
7. For exact references, see my edition, p. 50.
8. In many sources, the poem begins with two verses (1 var. a-b) similar to v. 1, which take its place.

9. For a particularly enlightening case, see Hämeen-Anttila (1997). 'Amr ibn Hawbar's poem is built on a poem by the famous Bedouin poet Dhu'r-Rumma.
10. This discussion and the problems involved are conveniently summed up in Michael C. Hillmann (1976).
11. The first verse, the *shahbayt*, is marked by an internal rhyme (both hemistichs rhyme), rare in later verses where only the second hemistich of each verse rhymes. The last verse is marked by the *takhallos*, the mention of the author's pen name, here "Háfez."
12. I exclude here from discussion some small variants in the text. These have no effect on the question of linearity.
13. Note also that Háfez's verses are almost proverbially full of multilayered meanings. As the intricacies of the meaning of the poem are not here under discussion, I content myself with a simple reading of the poem in its most obvious meaning. For a more detailed analysis the reader is referred to Hillmann (1976). For my reading of this poem as contemporary poetry, cf. my Finnish translation (Háfez 2004, 13-15). An accent above a vowel indicates length (while partly depends on the metre), and a small superscript *e* indicates an auxiliary vowel which is audible when reading the poem but is grammatically irrelevant. Verses 4 and 8 are bracketed for reasons that will soon become evident.
14. As Persian, like Finnish, does not have grammatical gender, the sex of the beloved Turk remains, in theory, unmarked. However, the Persian tradition of love poetry strongly suggests a male beloved here. In the prudish and somewhat over-elaborate, late eighteenth-century translation by Sir William Jones (see Arberry1962), the beloved is, of course, rendered as female. The word "black" (*hendoví*), naturally, refers to India, too. For Persians, it was (South) Indians who were black, not Africans.
15. Even today, Persians use *estekhare*, and they also train birds to pick a slip of paper (called *fal*) from a bunch. Each paper contains a verse by Háfez, together with its explanation, to be used as an *estekhare*. I received one such *fal* in Tehran 2004, telling that even though I am a wise man, I have lost my way but, thanks to God, everything will turn out well.
16. Naturally, some European poets have done the same with their work.

17. For bibliographical details, the reader is referred to Hillmann (1976, 25-26), and Arberry (1962, 141). For the sake of convenience, I will merely call these versions B, C, and D, reserving A for the "standard" recension.
18. Note that my use of language is here purely pragmatic. We have no way of knowing which was the original order of the verses and it is quite conceivable that the poem would have originally consisted of less – or more, for that matter – than nine verses.

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