STRUCTURAL CONTINUITY IN POETRY

A Linguistic Study
of Five Pre-Islamic Arabic Odes

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M. C. B.

Lines from *Ars Poetica* by Archibald MadLeish are reprinted from his *Collected Poems 1917-1952* (Boston, Mass., 1952) by kind permission of the Hougthon Mifflin Co.

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Notation

The following symbols were used in the phonemic transcription of the Arabic texts:

b m w f θ ð t d s z ṭ ḍ ṣ ẓ j š n l r y k q x ǧ ḥ ʿ ʔ ḫ a i u ā ī ū ay aw

Slightly more familiar forms are sometimes used, e.g. for Arabic names occurring in an English context.

Slanted lines (/) enclose stretches of transcription, vertical lines indicate hemistich (single: |) and line (double: ||) breaks. Glosses (translations) are enclosed in double quotes, to avoid confusion with the transcription. All of these symbols, however, are omitted in Appendix A.

Special types of notation are introduced in some chapters, at the same time as the concepts which they are intended to represent.

Because the sources used are so diverse, bibliographical footnotes are provided in the appropriate contexts, instead of a general bibliography.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> A poem should be palpable and mute
> As a globed fruit
>
> Dumb
> As old medallions to the thumb
> . . . . . .
> A poem should not mean
> But be.
>
> Archibald MacLeish, *Ars Poetica*

We use the word " poetry " to describe a kind of discourse which occurs in almost every language and almost every culture, yet very little of what is normally said about poetry seems to concern the abstract poetic quality which makes it possible to apply the term with such certainty to so many different kinds of things. The quality which informs Maori chants and Japanese haiku, the " Song of Songs " and the poems of Edmund Spenser and Allen Ginzberg poses a riddle which is answered intuitively by lovers of poetry who transcend specific traditions sufficiently to respond to all of these. The effort to define the dimensions of that intuition dissolves all too readily into nonsense.

The individual poem seems to set much the same problem. Very fruitful study has been made of poems in relation to the author's life or period and of the definition of particular genres, and we can go a long way toward defining the difference between haiku and sonnets or between the literature of the San Francisco Renaissance and that of the Elizabethan period, but each poem, studied apart from these external relationships, is " palpable and mute ". A poem is dumb to those asking questions, not turned in meaning to the outside world, but being, autonomous and self-sufficient. It is clear that what

produces awe in some critics and a prying jealousy in others is that a poem is more notable for its internal than for its external relationships. Any item in a poem is truly poetic not because of its reference to the outside world but because of the way it is linked to other items within the same poem. The type of pattern which these relationships form, the kind of intricate interweaving of lines of sound and sense which takes place within each poem, is the common characteristic of poetry. Because the attempt to unravel this web meets such a multitude of knots and tangles, it is virtually impenetrable to the critic of a single work. Because the external relationships and the materials, both of language and content, which are joined in this web vary so widely from culture to culture, the general nature of poetic patterning is difficult to define.

The five long poems which are discussed in this study are in Arabic, a language radically different in sound and structure from English; the formal features that mark this genre of poetry—its appropriate rhyme and meter—are equally different, as is the quality of life which these poems celebrate, from those which are generally familiar to European readers. These are five poems chosen from a famous and much studied collection of seven " odes " called the *Mu'allaqāt* which are either pre-Islamic or were composed early in the Islamic era (late sixth or early seventh century A. D.). However, the linguistic methodology used here was developed within the context of descriptive linguistics, using types of units which are comparable from language to language, and has been designed on the basis of the assumptions about the nature of poetry which are discussed above. Much of this methodology is as strange to the Arabist as the subject matter is to the English or American literary critic and, although the linguist may find relatively ready access to most of the methodology and may adapt quickly to descriptions of linguistic systems with which he is unfamiliar, linguists have traditionally treated problems of aesthetics rather gingerly, preferring not to entangle themselves in the knots of literary analysis. The aim of this study has been to develop methods for an analysis of the internal structure of these Arabic poems which will have the same kind of cross-cultural adaptability that linguistics in general has achieved and to compare the results of these methods to a specific, less rigorous, culturally based analysis of the traditional type. The rigorous analysis is focussed on the language of the poems examined on the ling-

uistic levels of phonology, morphology, and syntax; the traditional analysis is focussed primarily on their content and imagery.

This study attempts to go as far as possible in exploring the patterns of relationship which occur in this corpus. First of all, the external relationships, the general background of the poems, the genre to which they belong as the culture defines it, and their formal relationship to prose are outlined in ways which may sometimes be new as applied to Arabic but are familiar steps in literary criticism. Second, the poems themselves are examined for content, for what they mean; this is an inexact and impressionistic process, but it is bolstered by the Arabic traditions about the ordered themes in poetry of this type and makes it possible to divide the poems into a series of *passages*. Even these discussions of content are essentially concerned with external relationships, but they suggest the passage as a possible frame for the meshing of the external relationships, including those of sense, with the internal relationships traced in the linguistic forms. Finally, the poems are explored on different linguistic levels and here again the passage emerges as a significant unit: within passages the network of internal relationships is especially dense, as sounds, words, and sentence structures echo and interlock. For the smallest units, those of the sound system, statistical methods can be used to show deviations in phonological distribution from the surrounding sections. On the syntactic level more schematic methods are employed which are in turn more informative about internal variation within the passage. The morphological level allows the study of units of intermediate size, yielding a method with some of the virtues of both of the above. When this inventory of relationships is developed, the relationships themselves may be related to each other, forming a pattern which either confirms or reinforces the original impressionistic analysis into passages. There is a correlation between the sound and the sense: between what a poem *is*—the internal, linguistic relationships—and what a poem *means*—the external, semantic relationships. This correlation does not appear so much in the simultaneity of specific types of interrelating networks, so that a particular style might be correlated with a particular theme, but rather appears at the junctions. When the poet shifts his theme, he shifts his form with sufficient frequency so that the shifting forms of the poem give some indication of the pace and movement of the poet's thought. Particular threads of recurring form and sound which are woven

through the poet's whole treatment of a theme are dropped or broken when he turns and creates new regularities to give coherence to the development of some other line of thought.

All of the types of patterning which are discussed here are familiar—the repetition of sounds, syllables or words, parallel sentence types, and so on have always been pointed out in the close study of individual poems. The novelty of this methodology is that the techniques used themselves provide rigorous definitions of the particular types of relationships they reveal and then locate *all* the relationships which fit that definition so that the fluctuating sensitivity of the reader diminishes in importance. It would be virtually impossible, with a corpus of this complexity, to claim to have exhausted the data and located all the significant interrelations, so that all that remains is random in both cause and effect, making a completely neutral contribution to the poetic quality of a passage. Instead, this search has been limited to particular kinds of relationships, leaving open the question of the possible occurrence of other, analogous types which may be implied. The selection of relationships to be studied and the design of techniques to study them are essentially experimental. The purpose here is to assemble enough evidence to make it possible to assert that particular patterns are in fact discernible and that the possibility of their occurrence, realized to various extents in different parts of the poems, is one of the factors characterizing this kind of poetry. The exhaustive study of some patterns demonstrates the presence and significance of a type of patterning.

In this context, it seems important to define more clearly what is meant by the word " pattern ". Pattern is a fashionable word and by its hints of intricacy it makes the idea of dissecting and describing poetry less offensive than would the term " regularity ". Both are primarily concerned with relationships between objects or events and a great many of the possible relationships can be described, on the simplest level, as different kinds of repetition, occurring along some dimension which may or may not be temporal. Regularity is a more abstract concept than repetition, since it refers to the repetition of a relationship—or to a relationship between two repetitions. Complexities enter the process of trying to establish scientific regularities because of the effort to be certain that an event is really being repeated and to isolate events subject to repetition in relation to a minimum number of other events which must also be carefully isolated and defined. Generalization reaches a still higher

level of abstraction when formulated in terms of pattern, since pattern is (at the minimum) a three-dimensional term, implying the introduction of a third coordinate. In contemporary usage, that coordinate is most often a frame or background within which regularities occur, and it is because of the vivid urgency of the background that the leap to generalization in the social sciences is often so dangerously quick.

Questions formulated in terms of pattern are always the most alluring, but the most important step in the search for that pattern is the isolation and examination of unidimensional events, the computation of the relationships between them, and finally the study of these relationships on ever higher levels of abstraction, where the qualitative effects of quantitatively specified trends may be examined. In this study, which aims at insight into the patterns of Arabic poetry, the relationship between events which will be the primary focus is *repetition*. In identifying unidimensional events, it is necessary to identify the basic events of poetic discourse and the relationship between these and the patterning of the spoken language, as follows : the patterned units (events) of speech are taken to be the unidimensional events of poetry.[1] Thus, phonemes, morphemes, and other elements which represent a high level of abstraction in the description of speech must be the starting point for the analysis of poetic style, in spite of the occasional interference produced by irregularities and exceptions in the primary phonological and morphological generalizations about speech. It should not be assumed, however, that the patterns of the basic grammar of a language, reinterpreted as primary units subject to repetition, regularity, and patterning in poetry, will be ordered there in accordance with the regularities upon which the original derivation of those patterns was based. For example, the phonological structure of a language is related to phonetic similarities and contrasts, but the phonemes may be patterned in poetry in a manner largely independent of phonetic relationships. In fact, this independence is only partial, but unless a certain discontinuity is anticipated and allowed for, relevant patterns of poetry might go unseen.

The background or frame for the patterns in this study is provided by the line and passage boundaries in relation to which repetitions occur. Line boundaries are relatively rigid in Arabic poetry and the line is an autonomous functional unit, although there are occasional exceptions. Passages are defined both impressionistically and in

terms of the specifications of the Arab tradition. Patterning in terms of passage boundaries is by far the most interesting since passages are semantically defined, so that a pattern relating linguistic-stylistic regularities with semantic and thematic shifts relates two very different types of phenomena which tend to confirm each other. The most interesting question immediately presented by the data is the linguistic nature of a passage—is there any linguistic regularity related to the passage framework of Arabic poetry which may be called stylistic patterning? The flux and movement of linguistic regularity and repetition, stated in terms of line divisions, are laid out across the framework of the passage divisions in the stylistic maps, and the visual " pattern " apparent in these maps represents the stylistic patterning of passages.

This study is concerned with the patterns of relationships of repetition which characterize poetry—which make it poetic—but in all the dissections that follow, all of the division of the stuff of poetry into units and links between those units, there is no yardstick for the aesthetic value of a particular poem. Specific types of poetry are marked by explicit formal traditions, but in addition to this, all poetry is marked by the high occurrence and manipulation of repetition, so that the poet takes linguistic features whose occurrence is governed by chance in normal speech and considers alternatives which may be introduced to distort that normal occurrence. However, great poetry is not produced by adding more and more regularities, which would make the graphs go soaring up, but by restraint and sensitivity in their placing, and that is what cannot be measured here. Doggerel is more easily described than great poetry.

Poetry acquires its palpable quality, its quality of unity, from the high number of linkages, the repetitions which tie line to line. This assertion, which is based on the describable features of the data, implies a psychology of poetry as well, a process in which both the poet and his audience participate. As a pattern of repetitions converges on word after word, influencing the poet to hesitate and choose a word which will maintain them, the listener's expectation is led to respond. This process is most aptly epitomized in a short verse by Paul Valéry,[2] who was highly conscious of this process :

Je cherche un mot (dit le poète) un mot qui soit :
féminin,
de deux syllabes,

contenant P ou F,
terminé par une muette,
et synonyme de brisure, désagrégation;
et pas savant, pas rare.
Six conditions — au moins !

The force of these patterns is such that it is often claimed that each word, as it is finally set by the poet, is absolutely necessary. However, while these qualities of high relatedness are necessary to weld the poem into a unit, giving it coherence and so on, they are not a source of forcefulness or emotional tension. Tension comes from the abandonment, by the poet, of these regularities, as he changes focus, turns to another subject, or places a word which by its deviation from the hearer's ready expectation suddenly drives home the poet's message; the poignant word is the unexpected word, the word with high " information " cost. This has long been observed as an important feature of poetry, especially in the face of critics who, in working on ancient poetry, are often inclined to overextend the regularity of their emendations and so lose the force of the awkward word, the apparent *non sequitur*, or the broken grammatical rule which gave the poem its life.[3] However, since most of the irregularities of poetry are only irregular vis-à-vis the fragmentary expectations the poet had begun to develop by his previous word choices, they can hardly be studied systematically on the basis of comparisons with prose, and the first step is, surely, to discover the nature of poetic repetitions, so that the number of obvious anomalies may be swelled by the number of induced ones.

The effect of this reasoning is that whereas the technique of this study locates passages which are characterized by high regularity, any increase in that regularity might have turned the passages into doggerel. In addition, although regularity must be established in order to be distorted, so that the most poignant phrases are likely to occur in passages stressed in this discussion, those phrases are likely to be the phrases which are not themselves systematically covered by the description. The rises in patterning on the stylistic maps are rises in expectation; the surprisal which occurs when the pattern is shattered is the dynamic event which occurs in this matrix but cannot be systematically marked.

The obvious question that emerges from an examination of the motions of tiny linkages from line to line is how and why the poet, unless he were a linguist in disguise, could have produced them ;

they hardly correspond to the normal view of poetic inspiration. However, the question of consciousness on the part of the poet, or the hearer for that matter, is secondary; the goal of linguistics, as of any science, is to describe empirically observable patterns. Their very presence is a strong argument for their relevance. In addition, if they occur throughout a corpus, especially if they are susceptible to statistical tests of significance, it is unlikely that they are random : pattern breeds pattern and it tends to occur at some point in a non-random chain of cause and effect. If good poetry is characterized by certain types of pattern, then the poet must have put them there, and the sensitive listener must be responding to them, even though we do not know enough about linguistic behavior to describe the working of the poet's mind. Most poets are to some extent aware that they are participating in this process and can point to the mechanics governing some of their word choices. Some, like Valéry (see above), Gerard Manley Hopkins, or Edgar Allan Poe, in his essay on the composition of *The Raven*,[4] are highly self-conscious. Their examples, however, only dip into the complex interweaving relationships of poetry. Even for them, conscious, purposeful manipulation must account for only a few of the patterns that occur in their poetry.

It seems likely that people become poets because of a sensitivity to the relationships between words which are added on to their normal linguistic relationships in conveying content. This sensitivity may complement a sensitivity to relationships and patterning of all kinds which produces skill in dealing with imagery and metaphor. As poets respond to these additional relationships between words, word choice is affected by properties which do not normally affect it so that the probability of each word's occurrence is distorted.

Words are normally inserted in a sentence according to probabilities which change with each word:[5] if variations in subject matter are controlled or held constant, the word has a general probability of occurrence somewhere in a stretch of discourse (high for " the ", low for " antidisestablishmentarianism "), and within each sentence the probabilities fluctuate — at some points in a grammatical sequence the writer or speaker has a very wide range of possible choices and at others a more limited one. It has been demonstrated, in statistical studies on problems of disputed authorship,[6] that the general probability of a word's occurrence in a stretch of discourse varies from writer to writer (and presumably from speaker to speaker)

and varies further at different periods in a writer's life. Word choices are normally made primarily by semantic and syntactic criteria and can be studied statistically because the choice which the speaker is consciously aware of making is random as to many of the characteristics of the item he chooses, e.g. when he says " I am going to the concert " instead of " I am going to the ball game, " he has chosen from among the forms which are syntactically permissable in the last position in this sentence the one which fits his meaning. The occurrence of a word beginning /k-/ instead of a word beginning /b-/ was governed by chance. For the poet it is not. His sensitivity to word forms introduces a whole set of additional criteria. When Ogden Nash says,[7] " Did his wife go to San Francisco ? He was glad it wasn't Los Angeles ", his choice of a final word is not phonologically random; it is determined by the fact that he has set himself the almost impossible task of finding a rhyme for the word which ends the previous line—tarantulas. Furthermore, the extent of the poet's involvement in these criteria may fluctuate as they limit his choices more at one point than at another, and this involvement is related to his thematic involvement. When he shifts from one theme to another and breaks the continuity, he may approach the point of choosing forms which are random in relation to the preceding passage. The same argument may be extended to involve all linguistic levels.

What this means is that poetry is characterized by a disturbance in the relationship between different linguistic levels, so that choice and chance are confused by new criteria, spreading the domain of choice. This is what is meant by looking for a word until it " sounds right " and rejecting other words which convey a satisfactory semantic content, what Valéry called " hesitation between the sound and the sense "[8]. This process starts as the poet first strings words together to make a line and then adds line after line; it is enhanced as he reviews the poem, changing a word here and a word there—as the poem is " tuned and tuned and tuned and tuned "[9]. If such patterning is to take place, the different lines cannot grow from totally different acts of composition, and if it is to reach a high degree of intricacy and balance, the poem cannot be completely *ex tempore.* In addition, if the poem is said to have been mutilated by clerks and copyists over the centuries, as is often claimed of pre-Islamic poetry, these copyists must have been men of very fine poetic taste.
This then is the context within which all that follows must be under-