

PARALLELISM IN ARABIC PROSE

Mr Mokhtar **Mehamsadji** M.A.Ph.D
Institut d'Interpretariat — Université d'Alger

ANCIENT Near Eastern literatures - Egyptian Accadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic etc., and above all the Hebrew Old Testament - employ a style of elevated diction which European Scholars have not hesitated to call poetry. The linguistic structure of this style, however, differs greatly from European concepts of verse or for that matter the Arabic concept of *shi'r*; these being dominated by the purely acoustic phenomena of a highly structured pattern of rhythmical recurrences i.e. metre, and in some cases, rhyme or alliteration. Contrasted with this, Hebrew poetry is dominated by parallelism in the field of meaning. In simple terms, this has been described by Eissfeld(1) thus :

« The poetic texts consist of verses (2) formed from two - or more rarely three - stichoi combined in which the stichoi or members are in some way 'parallel' to each other, in that they offer variations on the same idea. This may come about by the second member repeating the content of the first in different words (synonymous parallelism), or it may be that it sets it off sharply with contrasted thought (further and completes it (synthetic parallelism) ».

Eissfeld adds (3)

« It is open to question whether in the grouping together of short verses it is also possible to recognize metrical regularity as well ».¹

Apart from this debated problem of actual regularity in metrical patterns, however, there can be little doubt that rhythmical echoes do play a part in the parallelism as well as purely semantic elements. A further feature is the occurrence at times of what might be described as echoes in the field of grammatical function.

On very simple example of all these features is to be found in Gen. 49:17 where Dan is described as « a viper on the road, a horned snake on the path, who bites the horse's fetlock so that the rider tumbles backward » (N.E.B. version).

The relative diffuseness of this English rendering obscures the taut forcefulness of the original, which runs literally « *viper upon road, snake upon path, biting heels of horse, falls his rider backward* ». In the first part of this we have straight synonymous parallelism, but in the second there is a more complex pattern. The parallelism of the second and third words is arranged in chiasmus : « *rider* » echoes « *horse* », « *backward* » echoes « *heels* ». 1 In the first word of each stichos, any purely semantic parallelism between the underlying concepts of « *bite* » and « *fall* » is not very strong, but it is reinforced by two aspects of grammatical parallelism, one corresponding to semantic synonymy, the other to semantic antithesis : for both words are verbal concepts expressed in a verbal derivative, but the first is a participiale contrasting with the imperfect verb of the second.

The English reader might wonder why the apparently intrusive 'his' is introduced, when « *rider* » alone would seem to furnish a neater parallelism. But here an acoustic factor intervenes, the pronoun morpheme -o in *rokebo* 'his rider' echoes rhythmically the plural morpheme -e in *9iqueb* « *heels of* ». Neither rhyme nor alliteration is typically present in these types of poetic diction.

(1) The Old Testament, an introduction, tr. by P.R. Acroyd, Oxf 1965, p 57

(2) 'verses' here of course to be understood as the conventional divisions of the Old Testament text, not as primarily implying the prose verse antithesis. (3) op. cit. p. 59

1 This example shows that Eissfeld's categories are slightly oversimplified. « *heels* » and « *backward* » are not in the strictest sense synonyms, but they have a conceptual element in common, and this is all that is required for synonymous parallelism

In pre-Abassid Arabic, we encounter two quite distinct elevated styles. On the one hand there is a style characterised by the acoustic features or strict metrical regularity and of rhythm; and it is this and this only that the Arabs designate as *shiʿr*. On the other hand there is the style of the early *khutba* or oration, and it is immediately apparent from what has been said above about ancient Near Eastern poetry, that the *khutba* style is precisely identical with that.

The various features which have been pointed out in Gen.

49:17 are employed in the *khutba*, thus avoiding the monotonous effect which would be created by straight parallelism alone.

Rhyme is not in principal a feature of the pre-Abassid *khutba*.

Such examples as these appear to be largely unintentional, and so result simply from the linguistic structure of Arabic; manifest examples of intentional, sought-for, rhyming do occur but only very rarely.

The following three examples display most of the typical features of the style :

A1- Abu Bakr, speech on assuming the caliphate.

1 - Men, I have been placed in command over you, though I am not the most worthy of you.

2 - So if you see me acting rightly, assist me; and if you see me acting vainly, correct me.

3 - Obey me so long as I obey God in your concerns; but if I disobey Him, no obedience is due to me from you.

4 - The most potent of you in my regard is the weakest - until I can ensure justice for him : the weakest of you in my regard is the strongest - until I can exact justice from him.

5 - That is my declaration of policy, and I ask God's pardon for myself and you.

This shows the style in a simple form. There is no rhyme, unless one were to count the repetition of the pronouns - *kum* « you » and -*ni* « me », virtually unavoidable in Arabic. Each sentence divides into two carefully balanced members, but monotony is avoided by variation in the nature of the balance.

In 2 and 4 each word of the second member is an exact balance in sense and in syntactic function for the corresponding bit of the first member. But in 3 the overall syntactic and semantic arrangement is chiasmic, since the conditioning clause is differently placed in each member. Yet with considerable subtlety, the acoustic effect is one of straight balance.

6ati9ū-ni mā 6ata9tu llāha fikum

(wa-6idā) 9a7aytu-hu (fa-)lā tā9ata li 9alay-kum 1

Apart from the conjunctions bracketed, the balance is perfect : the first word consists of a verb form (grammatically) contrasted between imperative and perfect and with the semantic antithesis between « obey » and « disobey » plus monosyllabic object-pronoun . *lābanalces mā* though their grammatical function is quite different; then we have words showing basic semantic synonymy but grammatically contrasted between verb in the first member and noun in the second; God contrasts semantically with identical pronoun-affixes. The rhythmical balance is particularly striking. The first segment *6āt9ūni* : 9asaytuhu, could be described as the metrical foot *mafā9ilum* subjected in the second member to the variation (*zihāf*) termed *qabd* (i.e. omission of an unvowelled consonant in the fifth position). The third segment is a rhythmical chiasmus - in the first member an open syllable followed by two closed ones (since the last syllable of *6ātā9tu* is closed by the following unvowelled), in the second member a closed syllable followed by two open ones. And if two final segments are taken together, they are rhythmically exactly parallel and constitute the metrical foot *fā9ilātum*. The two bracketed particles do not impair the rhythm because they are inserted in positions of caesura.

1 For Arabic transcription see Appendix A.

Sentence 5 gives the effect of a *clausula* by the device - to become standard in *clausulae* in subsequent Arabic - of making the second member slightly longer than the first. The two strictly balancing phrases of verb and accusative are followed in the first member by « *for me and you* ». This effect would not have been achieved if the speaker had added « *to you* » in the first member as he could well have done on the basis simply of the message to be conveyed.

B - 9Uthmān, speech as successor-designate to the caliphate.

1. You live in a transient world, with but a brief span of life.
2. So anticipate your latter end with the best deeds you can accomplish.
3. You will surely be overtaken (by death), some morn or some eve.
- 4a. Surely this world is wrapped round deception.
- 4b. but be you not deceived by the life of this world
- 4c. nor deceived about God by any deception
- 5a. Consider the men who are bygone
- 5b. strive and be not heedless
- 5c. for no heedlessness will be shown towards you
- 6a. Where are the children of this world,
- 6b. those who clung to it, lived in it,
- 6c. and were vouchsafed long enjoyment of it ?
- 7a. Has it spewed them forth ?
- 7b. Cast away this world
- 7c. where God has cast it
- 7d. and seek that which is to come.

The patterning here is more complex than in text A. Sentence 1 shows straight grammatical parallelism (literally « *you are in an abode of transience and in a brief-remnant of lives* ») though the semantic parallelism is probably intended to be chiasmic, with « *lives* » echoing « *abode* » and « *brief-remnant* » echoing « *transience* ». 2 is chiasmic in sense and grammar : « *accomplish* » semantically echoes « *anticipate* » and « *good deeds* » echoes « *latter end* »; the grammatical structure is verb-noun and then noun-verb. 3 is acoustically a triplet comprising simply three passive verbs in the 2nd person plural, though grammatically the last two parallel verbs are subordinated to the first. 4 is a triplet, in which each member has three words carrying principal stress. The first and third of these show a neat grammatical patterning of the verbal repetitions : world deception, deceived-world, deceived-deception. In the middle segment, « *God* » is a semantic echo of « *life* », and perhaps there is even a semantic association between « *life* » and « *wrapped* » since the verb *tawā* is also used of 'concluding' a period of time. The next bit is an evolving triplet : 5a and 5b show grammatical (two pairs of verbs) and semantic parallelism (« *consider* » : « *strive* » « *bygone* » : « *heedless* »), but 5c is then developed by the repetition in passive form of the verb « *be heedless* ». 6 is a similarly evolved triplet : 6a and 6b are rhythmically parallel, with three main stresses in each, while 6c echoes the last two principal words of 6b : « *were vouchsafed* » echoes, in what Eissfeld calls synthetic parallelism, « *cling to* », and « *long* » parallels « *lived* ». The semantic association between these last two words is closer in Arabic than appears in English, since the form *mu9ammara* derived from the basic verb *9ammara* does imply specifically « *endowed with long life* ». 7 has a yet more complex interlocking structure. 7a and 7b constitute a rhythmical doublet with a dissyllable followed by a trysyllable in each member; 7c echoes 7b in a different way, with repetition of the verb 'cast' followed by the nouns « *world* » and « *God* » which are semantically antithetical : finally 7d echoes 7b in a different way again, with antithetical parallelism in both words « *cast-away* » : « *seek* », « *this world* » : « *world to come* ».

C - Uthman on an incipient revolt.

1. Everything has a blemish, every grace has a defect.
2. There are those who slander and think ill of this faith.
3. Showing you on the surface that which you love but harbouring in their hearts that which you hate.
4. they speak to you and you respond
5. an ostrich-like rabble
6. following the first voice they hear - the waterholes they Love best are the most inaccessible.
7. You conceded to Ibn-al-Khattab more than you begrudge me,
8. yet he oppressed you and trampled on you,
9. and drove you like silly ostriches.
10. By God, I am closer to victory, I have a stronger party :
11. I am better entitled, when I say 'come', to have my call answered, than Umar.
12. Do you lack anything to which you have a just right ? So why should I not do just as I wish ?
13. If I do not do so, why did I become leader ?

This example shows a considerable contrast to the two preceding texts. The intricate interwoven patterning is not present, and the parallelism is of a much simpler kind, and in some places wholly absent. A somewhat similar feature occurs in Hebrew poetry, thus described by Eissfeld(1)

It cannot be said that we only have poetry where parallel members of a verse are present. Here and there, particularly in the prophetic books, there are to be found not long verses with parallel members, but short verses, standing independently and consisting usually of only two or three stresses.

It seems clear that sentences 11 and 13 here make no attempt at parallelism. Where there is parallelism, it is sometimes of the simplest kind, amounting to no more than a single word with its echo : as in 4 (of which the literal rendering would be « *they speak to and you speak* »), and 5 (« *a rabble like ostriches* ») where the echo is much less semantic than acoustic, for it is clear that the word *taḡām* « *rabble* » has been designated chosen because it rhymes with *nāḡām* « *ostriches* », and this is indeed the only clear example of a manifestly intentional rhyme in the whole of these three texts. 8 is again a single-member echo. 1, 2 and 10 are plain straight parallelism, with no chiasmus. In 6 the parallelism is extremely weak, and it might well have been classified along with 11 and 13 as non-parallel, apart from the *nāḡih*. 9 also is regarded as a semantic echo of 8.

The only sentence with a fully elaborated parallelism is 12, which includes the interesting acoustic echo (not semantic) in the last word of each member, *shayḡan* « *anything* », *ḡashāḡ* « *I wish* »; this kind of echo foreshadows a type of acoustic echo (*tajnis*) which was to become characteristic of the Abbasid *babīḡ* style. Apart from this we have interrogative : interrogative, « *lack* » : « *not dot* », « *just rights* » : « *justice* ».

The style of this period thus seems to be subdivided into a more or less elaborate variety. Undoubtedly, ... variety of this style had as keen a sense of rhythm as the practitioners of *shiḡr*, although they did not bind themselves to the strictly repetitive rhythms of the *shiḡr* form. Their productions come very close to ranking as « *vers libre* ». Equally, their diction is in a broad sense truly « *poetical* », in spite of their avoidance of the poetic imagery characteristic of early *shiḡr*.

Whereas the early *khutba* style employs, in order to create its effect, these devices which are precisely those of ancient Near Eastern poetry, early Arabic *shiḡr* knows virtually nothing of them, but relies (apart of course from the deeply poetical nature of the language, imagery, etc.)

only on the metrical structure and the rhyme. The two earliest poems of any length have been preserved, the *lāmiya* of Shanfara and the *Muḡallaqa* of Imru' al-Qays, show practically no trace of this type of rhetorical device. There are only two or three lines in the *lāmiya* which foreshadow *badiʿ*: line 9, with its word play on *tafaḍḍul-ḡafḍal-mutaḡaḍḍil*: and more interestingly line 37, with its repetition of the verb *hamma* in contrasting inflexions and the semantic antithesis between *ḡasdalat* and *shammara*.

Otherwise parallelism is only the very simplest kind, emerging chiefly in enumeration such as line 11 « *bold heart, trenchant sword and long bow* ». Line 3 is exceptional, being the only one where we have a fully developed patterning of precisely the *khutba* type.

D - « *in the earth (is) a place remote for noble man from affront and in it, for the man who fears the malice, (is) a refuge* ».

Here we have exact parallelism but chiasmic arrangement of the items, producing a pattern A B C D / A C D B (A - in the earth : in it, B - place remote : refuge, C - noble man : man who fears, D - affront : malice).

The Abbasid age produced in some aspects a curious reversal of roles between *shiʿr* and the *khutba*.

The ornamental (*badiʿ*) style of Abbasid and post-Abbasid *shiʿr* has adopted all the intricacies of the early *khutba* as manifested in texts A and B and shows in practically every line the elaborate patterning I have described above.

Conversely, in the hands of Ibn Nubata, the *khutba* has taken into itself rhyme, which had not been characteristic of the early *khutba* but which subsequently was to become a frequent accompaniment of this style. The rhyme is between the last word of the second member (and the third member also in a triplet).

Rhyming of this sort occurs in *shiʿr* in the type of text technically called *masṭūr*, the end of the first half of each line rhymes with the end of the second half. This is attested quite early, though relatively seldom in comparison with the commoner type in which a single monorhyme occurs at the end of each full line of the poem. The adoption of this new adornment is the elevated language which was not *shiʿr* led to a lessening of the significance of the parallelitic structure. There certainly is parallelism, but it tends to be of the simpler kind exemplified in text C above, rather than showing the intricate patterning of texts A and B, which had become the province of *shiʿr*.

The style thus developed became practically *de rigueur* for all subsequent prose writing up to (and even in some instances into) the present age, whenever the author wishes to raise his writing to the level of solemn or elevated diction. In particular, prefaces were invariably drafted in this style, even when the main work is particularly scientific. Moreover, parallelism continually crops up, though not always with a literary character, and is specially favoured as a device to mark the *clausula* at the end of a paragraph.

How deeply ingrained this habit has become in Arabic writing, so that its influence is even today not entirely spent, can be seen in an article written by a lecturer at the University of Riyadh on « *The theme of grey hair in Arabic poetry* ».¹ The second paragraph of this article deals with the physiological causes of grey hair, and this is written in wholly modern style modelled on European scientific writing, utterly without linguistic adornment. In the fourth paragraph, on the very same page, he turns to the psychological impact of grey hair, and in dealing with this emotionally charged topic he instinctively reverts to parallelism of the most traditional kind. One could hardly find a better example of the style. Two rhymes occur, at the places marked R1, R2.

¹ 'Ali al-Qasimi, *al-mashḡib fi al-shiʿr al-ʿarabiʿ*.
Al-Arabi n° 139, January 1970, p. 140.

E - Youth is a glorious phase of man's life.

1. dear to his heart,
close to his soul,
2. abounding in every sort of delight and joy
full of all kinds of happiness and healthiness
3. replete with moments of high spirits and adventurousness,
afire with various emotions and passions.
4. by anguish in the heart
and grief in the soul
and sorrow in the spirit
the first grey hair is
- 5a. a warning of the departure of youth and the end of its joys (R1)
- 5b. and a harbinger of the coming of old age and the beginning of its sorrows (R1)
6. Nobody feels this more subtly,
or expresses it more truly,
than the poet who
7. mentions the days of this youth and laments them (R2)
and speaks of the nights of his boyhood and
mourns them (R2)
- 8a. after witnessing the snows of hoariness
- 8b. as they creep fast over his head
- 8c. to tell arrival of the winter of his life
- 8d. and the departure of spring with no return,

The parallelism throughout this text is uniformly direct and not chiasmic, but monotony is avoided by variation between couplets and triplets, and in the elaboration and length (in terms of main stresses) of the clauses : I has only two, 5 has six, divided halfway by a caesura into something like an Alexandrine; 7 has four; the concluding sentence is more elaborately interwoven. Basically it is a triplet, 8abc, with three main stresses in each of its first two stichoi and four in the third according to the normal practice whereby a terminal stichos is made slightly longer than the preceding one (see above); semantically, the main parallelism is between a and c, with the pairs « witness » : « tell », « snows » : « winter », but b is worked in by providing « synonymous » parallelism in « hoariness » : « head » and antithetical parallelism in « his head » : « his life ». Finally there is a three-stress coda paralleling the last three stressed words of 8c, the first two in antithetic parallelism (« arrival » : « departure », « winter » : « spring »), and the third in what might be called in Eissfeld's term « synthetic » parallelism, since « no return » adds a further dimension to the concept « life ».

I have avoided hitherto using the somewhat ambiguous technical term *saj9*, commonly rendered by European scholars 'rhymed prose'. As can be seen from what has been said earlier, rhyme is not an inevitable and necessary accompaniment of the parallelistic style; conversely, *saj9* in its original connotation was rhymed but not dominantly parallelistic for the pre-Abbasid period, therefore, *saj9* and the *khutba* style have to be regarded as distinct phenomena.

A tradition of the Prophet warns his followers against « the *saj9* of the (pre-Islamic) soothsayers ». But it is not easy to be sure exactly what that was, seeing that we are here in a pre-literary age of oral tradition. But on the basis of the few examples which have been recorded for us and which have marks of authenticity, European scholars have frequently remarked that this form has considerable resemblances to the earliest revelations of the Qur'an.

These utterances are broken up normally into extremely short members, often no more than two or three words long. This brevity in itself entails the consequences that one can some times

detect a certain rather feeble parallelism in the members. But any effect that this might have is neutralized by the overriding fact that there is no indication of the members being grouped in couplets or triplets, for there is a monorhyme which sets this feature quite apart from the couplet rhyming introduced later into the khutba. Also the rhythmical length of the members is uneven and not couplet-balanced. Quranic examples of this style are so well known that it may suffice here to recall the utterance of the soothsayer satn, as recorded at the beginning of Ibn Hisham's Sira :

ra 6 aytahumamah
 kharajātamin zulumah
 fawaqa 9 atabi 6arḍi tihamah
 fa 6akalata minhā kulla dhāti jumjumah
*« You saw a flame
 which came out of darkness
 and fell upon the land of Tihama
 and consumed therein every being with a skull »*

This highly specialized type of saj9 had no echo in later literature. The term continued to be used, however, and above all for the distinctive genre of writing initiated by Badi al-Zaman Hamdhani and called maqāmāt, which is both parallelistic and couplet-rhymed on the Ibn Nubata model. There is a world of difference between this and the « *saj9 of the soothsayers* ».

Krenkow's article on saj9 in the EI 1 hardly brings out this fundamental differentia, and his contemptuous reference to « *jingling rhymes* » does a very grave injustice to the maqāmāt style as used by Badi9 al-Zamān and Hariri; although it is certainly pertinent to some medieval writers, such as Imad al-Din al-Katib al-Isfahani, who employed rhyme in a distinctly mechanical and forced way, together with elaborate and artificial ornamentation borrowed from badi9, but little or no sense of rhythm.

From the point of view of literary categorization, it would seem absurd to group the saj9 of the soothsayers with maqāmāt and exclude from this category pieces like that quoted from al-Qasimi; for the two latter styles have far more in common with each other than they have with the extremely primitive style of the soothsayers. If the term saj9 is to be useful in literary history, we must adopt a broad definition of it, as essentially the elevated style insofar as not metrical in structure, and drop from the definition any absolute requirement of rhyme. Certainly most Arabs would be prepared to call the al-Qāsim piece saj9 in a broad sense, even though it is not rhymed throughout.

APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIPTION

CONSONANTS

ء = 6	ص = s
ب = b	ض = d
ت = t	ظ = z
ث = t	ع = 9
ج = j	غ = g
ح = h	ف = f
خ = kh	ق = q
د = d	ك = k
ذ = dh	ل = L
ر = r	م = m
ز = z	ن = n
س = S	ه = h
ش = sh	و = w
ط = t	ي = y

VOWELS

Long: a- u- i
Short: a- u- i

APPENDIX B

-A-

- أيها الناس اني قد وليت عليكم، ولست بخيركم.
- فان رأيتموني على حق فاعينوني، وان رأيتموني على باطل فسدّدوني.
- أطيعوني ما أطعت الله فيكم، فاذا عصيته فلا طاعة لي عليكم.
- ألا أن اقواكم عندي الضعيف حتى أخذ الحق له، وأضعفكم عندي القوي حتى أخذ الحق منه.
- أقول قولي هذا، وأستغفر الله لي ولكم.

-B-

- انكم في دار قلعة، وفي بقية أعمار.
- فبادروا آجالكم، بخير ماتقدرون عليه.
- فلقد أتيتكم، صبحتم أو مسيتم.
- ألا وان الدنيا طويت على الغرور/ فلا تغرنكم الحياة الدنيا/ ولا يغرنكم بالله الغرور
- اعتبروا بمن مضى، ثم جدوا ولا تغفلوا، فانه لا يغفل عنكم.
- أين أبناء الدنيا واخوانه 9 الذين آثروها وعمروها، ومتعوا بها طويلا.
- ألم تلفظهم؟ ارموا بالدنيا، حيث رمى الله بها، واطلبوا الآخرة.

-C-

- ان لكل شيء آفة، وان لكل نعمة عاهة.
- في هذا الدين عيايون ظنانون.
- يظهرون لكم ماتحبون، ويسرون ماتكرهون.
- يقولون لكم، وتقولون.
- طعام، مثل النعام.
- يتبعون أول ناعق، أحب مواردهم اليهم النازح.
- لقد أقررتم لابن الخطاب، بأكثر مما نقمتم علي.
- ولكنه وقمكم وقمعكم وزجركم زجر النعام المخزمة.
- والله اني لأقرب ناصرا، وأعز نفرا.
- وأقمن ان قلت هلم أن تجاب دعوتي من عمر.
- هل تفقدون من حقوقكم شيئا، فما لي لا أفعل في الحق ماأشاء؟

-D-

- هممت وهكت وأشرنا وأسدلت
- وفي الأرض منأي للكريم عن الأذى
- وشمر مني فارط متمل
- وفيها لمن خاف القل متعزل

-E-

- الشباب مرحلة عزيزة من حياة الانسان.
- حبيبة الى قلبه، قريبة من نفسه.
- حافلة بالوان البهجة والمرح، زاخرة بالشكال السعادة والهناء
- بيئة يصنوف النشاط والمغامرات، محتدمة بمختلف العواطف والانفعالات.
- واذ يتقضى هذا الطور يخلف.
- في القلب لوحة، وفي النفس أسمى، وفي الروح حسرة.
- والقتير(هو أول الشيب).
- ايذان برحيل الشباب وانقضاء أفراحه، ونذير بقدم المشيب وابتداء أتراحه.
- وليس هناك.
- أراقى عاطفة، وأصدق تعبيراً.
- من مشاعر الذي
- يذكر أيام شباب وبيكها، ويتحدث عن ليالي ضياء ويرثيها.
- بعد أن شاهد ثلوج الشيب، وهي تزحف مسرعة على رأسه، تعلن حلول شتاء حياته، وذهاب الربيع بلا عودة.

Bibliography

Acroyd P.R. (1965) The old Testament, an introduction Oxford

Al Jabouri A.J.R. (1984) The role of repetition in Arabic argumentative discourse In Swales and Mustapha

Kaplan R.B. (1966) Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education
Language Learning XVI 3-4

Mehamsadji M. (1988) Cohesion and text development in written Arabic Ph.D. thesis University of Salford