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Tradition and Canon in Medieval Arabic Poetry

Every art to some extent orients itself on traditional patterns, even if it opposes tradition. It goes without saying that a work of literature requires a reading public (or an audience) living within the particular culture, familiar with its poetical idiom and able to decipher the existing system of social, cultural and poetical symbols. Should the reader be unfamiliar with that system, or should the work have no connection with any tradition whatsoever (though such a possibility is rather doubtful), the poetical language ceases to be communicative and is unable to evoke any feelings or associations in the audience.

The tendency of being normative and traditional is to a great extent characteristic of every medieval art which, like folklore, was an art of recognition and which was appraised according to generally accepted aesthetic patterns and norms. This in many cases led to the development of a classical canon, that is the creation of a conventional and enduring system of principles, rules and means of expression. That canon became a fundamental aesthetic law of the given age retaining its conventional and unchanging character. It was the universal ideal of beauty and harmony. Evolving in the course of the artistic practice of previous epochs, the canon established a definite ideal of beauty which had been developed in the imagination of the people and had become traditional. Tradition manifests itself in spontaneously and customarily following the acknowledged patterns, whereas the canon is tradition evolved into a system and becoming law.

Orientation on the canon is associated with a definite kind of artistic thinking peculiar to the mind of medieval man, who felt himself to be a part of an organic whole both spiritually (of the universe) and socially (of the corporate society) and who had not yet acquired an interest in the personal, individual or the existentially unique. This characteristic feature of medieval art prevailed in Arabic poetry throughout its development from ancient times to the 17th century, and contributed to the formation of the classical canon, completed in the 9-11th centuries. As I shall show further

even the period of "rebellion" or "modernization" of the poetical canon is not an exception. Paradoxically enough the pre-Islamic pagan poetry came to be considered the norm not only by Arabs but by the subjugated peoples who had also adopted Islam.

At first sight it seems surprising that with the powerful ideology of Islam dominating all aspects of life and culture within Arabic Muslim society, the pagan pre-Islamic traditions of Bedouin nomads proved to be strong enough to make Arabic poetry develop definitely along secular and even pagan lines (with few exceptions). The poetry of court panegyrists abounded in high-flown praise for their noble and rich patrons, the wine-songs were full of joy, asceticism and mysticism were absent from the urban love-lyrics. Even the sufi poetry, though close to the mystical and ascetical outlook, often strayed far from the doctrine of orthodoxal Islam and showed an inclination to borrow poetical subjects and images from the secular genres of wine-songs and love-lyrics. No matter how hostile to everything pagan Islam was, it could not repress the pre-Islamic pagan traditions; moreover in some way it even contributed to their preservation. The pagan poets being very dear to their hearts, even the zealous Arabs were eager to rehabilitate them and to this end created myths about them. Thus they invented the legend which tells us that a moralistic bard Zuhayr enjoined his son to reject polytheism in favour of monotheism, which calls to mind the European belief in Virgil's having foretold the coming of the Messiah.

An explanation of this phenomenon can be found both in historical and psychological material. Preservation of ancient poetical traditions, of which the Arab conquerors were especially proud, was an additional means to enabling the ruling élite to reinforce their claims to ideological domination in the cultural-aesthetical sphere. Among this milieu the culture of pagan Arabia was regarded their legitimate and artistically consummate legacy. It was taken for granted that even an imperfect imitation of ancient patterns was morally and aesthetically superior to any venture in the field of original creativity.

Besides, the medieval Arabs were inclined to idealize their ancient tribal relations and to borrow from antiquity their poetical and moral ideals of a romantic type. With social reality greatly different from Islamic doctrine, the Arabs nostalgically and devotedly thought back of "the Golden Age" of their history. And though it was advisable to keep in cheque such feelings, because to dream of a genuine renaissance of the ancient traditions meant to encourage heathen thoughts, to revert to the cultural legacy and above all to poetry was not only permissible but desirable as well.

The medieval Arabs looked upon their heathen past in some special abstract and rationalistic way. The cult of pre-Islamic poetry which is the main characteristic feature of Arabic classicism takes the form of an abstract ideal or conventional scheme. That scheme was based on the worship of primitive tribal virtues, which seemed ideal for people living in a developed medieval society. While ancient poetry created in the conditions of primitive tribal relations reflected the unity of the primitive community and the individual belonging to it, which was expressed in the manner of extolling the hero, showing him to be the embodiment of the tribe and a mouthpiece

of its interests the legends of the tribe's history constituted not only a storehouse of poetical images but also the soil from which they arose, in medieval poetry the ancient pagan images acquired a purely formal character. For medieval poets heathen antiquity was merely a source of symbols, which included ancient folklore, mythology, the descriptions of Bedouin everyday life and so on. Introducing into kasida-panegyric a traditional Bedouin beginning, the Arab poets brought their readers into the ancient system of ideas and associations and evoked in their minds heroic feelings, linking the praised person with the glorious Arabic past. While borrowing from the ancient legends and verses the subject-matter and images in order to endow the patrons they praised with pagan valour, the medieval encomiasts nevertheless belonged to Islamic culture with its hierarchy and fully depended on their patrons' whims. But doing so they completely lost the spirit of pagan poetry and employed the ancient legacy merely to embellish their verses. Nevertheless the timeworn ancient images, owing to their widely accepted and familiar meaning and their concentrated emotional appeal turned out to possess greater suggestive power than the new imagery, which was more concrete and realistic.

The medieval Arab poet was very much like an artisan belonging to a respective guild. By a long process of learning the art of composition, the master-poet reached the level achieved by his forerunners, which was to become his starting point and was not zero. The hard canonical form came to him as a "gift" from the past, from centuries-tested fixed poetical system. Studying this system sharpened and polished his talent. Summing up the efforts of many generations of forerunners, whom the poet tried to excell, the canon saved them a good deal of seeking and effort and freed their creative energy for new accomplishments. Supported by the collective artistical achievements concentrated in the canon, the medieval poet sought in them and with their help the expression of his age's ideal.

Arabic medieval poetry had a strict system of normative genres. Every genre (panegyric, satire, love-lyrics, wine-songs, elegy etc.) becoming an expression of some definite feelings and situations. The selected theme involved a definite genre and style, the theme (always a traditional one) and poetical phrasing being indissolubly connected. In the kasida-panegyric constructed according to a given scheme a poet was to praise his patron for definite virtues which were considered proper to his personality, by using traditional formulas. Correspondingly in satires he accused the person he was ridiculing of all Bedouin sins which were the exact opposite of the virtues glorified in the panegyrics. The lyrical hero of wine-songs and love-lyrics was endowed with definite traits of appearance and behaviour; this applies too to the sweetheart, the drinking companions and so on. A Calif-benefactor, a ridiculed adversary, a mourned dead friend or relatives of the protector, drinking companions, a damsel — all of them had their special "role" and were pictured in accordance with an ideal pattern, the description of their actions and behaviour in traditional formulas repeated from poem to poem.

The subject was not the only thing borrowed by the medieval poets from their forerunners, they drew from the common store-house cliché similes, epithets, tropes

and different kinds of stylistic figures. Thus the creative act of poets was reduced to selecting images and formulas proper to this or that occasion. The lamentation uttered by a "lyrical character" at the sight of a deserted encampment, monotonous descriptions of friendly gatherings or beautiful damsels always compared with a gazelle and with the moon, the praises to the generosity of a patron compared with brimming rivers, his wisdom compared with that of Solomon, his glory with the sun, his valour with a lion etc. were repeated from poem to poem. The medieval Arabic poetical genres (*madh*, *ritha'*, *hidja'* etc.) acquired one of the main features of an epic that is the schematizing of a time fact and abstractizing an individual one. The poets of classical epoch did not know the art of concretizing portraits. According to the demands of the genre the hero of their verses was to be endowed with canonical features (positive or negative). The only thing that mattered was that the behaviour, looks and speeches of the personages should correspond to those traditional for the genre, and that he should be pictured in the most favourable (or most unfavourable in *hidja'*), most idealized manner.

The image of the poet himself as he was imagined to be by the following generations was also very often determined by the poetical genre he most frequently used. For example tradition pictures *Abū Nuwās* a light-minded man, the creator of the philosophic-acsetic genre *Abū l-'Atāhiyya* a very pious man and so on. This makes us doubt whether the medieval sources are reliable enough for reconstructing the poets' biographies and personalities. It seems to us that medieval philologists endowed them with normative genre characteristics corresponding to the content of their poetry, depicting one as a court mendicant, the others as light-minded Epicureans, unhappy lovers, ascetics and so on.

This normative approach to poetical creativity and the poet's task fully coincides with the concept of *sariqāt* (borrowing of poetical subjects by one poet from another) developed by Arab philologists. The medieval critics did not consider it blameworthy to make use of a subject already treated in the verses of a predecessor. The critic *I b n R a š ī q* (the 11th century) said: "The creator of a poetical theme is sure to be praised for it ... But he, who later treats the same theme better, rendering it in a more laconic manner when its first expression was too verbose ... and more clearly, whereas it had been previously expressed in a vague manner, ... who finds for it more exact words and better metre ... has even more reason than the author of the theme to consider himself its creator"¹.

Restricted by the narrow framework of traditional genre Arabic poetry developed "in=depth" by means of making the poetical technique more and more complicated. The number of poetical subjects and themes being scant and the possibilities to manipulate with clichés being boundless, the way of their arrangement acquired special importance. The work of an Arab poet resembled that of a carpet-weaver, who made countless combinations out of scanty amount of figures. At the same time the lexical abundance of the Arabic language opened up for the poet practically boundless

¹ *I b n R a š ī q*, *al-'Umda*, Cairo 1963-1964, II, 290.

possibilities for expressing normatively selected ideas. As the evaluation of the poet's skill depended on his ability to use the images and artistic details which had been selected in the course of time, he naturally strove to demonstrate his mastery by an utmost concentration of the poetical figures. From the 9th century on, the poets loaded their verses with exquisite puns, complicated metaphors and improbable hyperboles, all of them taken from tradition. The medieval poet was always an erudite, with a brilliant command of a canonized series of poetical subjects and figures. Under the circumstances the individual style of the creator found expression mainly in details often unintelligible for a modern reader.

Beginning with the time when the subjugated peoples became included into the cultural life of the Caliphate, the Arabic poetical tradition rooted in the art of pre-Islamic Bedouins faced the danger of being radically changed by the bearers of local traditions. As a rule one culture cannot be swallowed by another without causing any essential commotion for the victorious culture. In the Caliphate the bearers of ancient Arabic traditions opposed any new cultural elements by all possible means, seeing them as dangerous encroachments on the purity of their legacy by "strangers" (the Persians in the first place). The result was that regardless of ethnical origin of the poets (though the Persians predominated among "the modernizers" of the canon one can find some offsprings of the conquerors among them as well) the struggle against the deviations from the tradition acquired a certain political colour.

The meeting of two typologically different cultures opened up new possibilities for acquiring knowledge about the world and consequently for a critical estimation of traditional forms. The re-evaluation of ancient artistic ideals led to the modernization of poetry, which however, because of the social and psychological pattern of medieval man, could not and did not result in destruction of the basic normative principle itself.

At different times Arab poets in different ways went beyond the limits of the canon. The early Abbasid bards (B a š š ā r I b n B u r d, A b ū N u w ā s, A b ū ' l - ' A t ā h i y y a etc.) started introducing new subject-matter into poetry and created new genres. They remained within the boundaries of medieval normative and abstractivizing aesthetics but tried to bring the artistic media nearer to the subject of representation. Some "realistic" elements appear in their verses, especially in nontraditional ones, some artistic details in their descriptions allow the reader to get a visual idea of the subject, whatever it may be — a landscape, a scene from everyday life or a tale of battle. The traditional abstract mode of the presentation of the world coexists in their verses with an attempt to bring into them the poet's personal experience and impressions. Even in the sphere of pure lyrics, not rich in concrete material, one can find new images drawn from the poet's immediate observations, their psychological truth being emphasized by artistic details.

The significant thing is that even the new genres as soon as they were created by the modernists evolved the new canonical patterns from that time on followed by every poet working in those genres. Thus the modernization itself took rather the form of enriching the canon than that of destroying it.

Even in the creative work of those poets of the 9th century who, contrary to the modernists, were striving hard to preserve the Bedouin tradition (A b ū T a m m ā m, A l - B u ḥ t u r ī), we can also trace some trend of violating the canon. No longer satisfied with the laconic form of their ancient predecessors who were "economical" in using their poetical media, they tend to develop a florid and sophisticated style. And though in their panegyrics they still follow the folklore tradition in picturing the events and portraying their characters in lofty and transfigured way, depicting some ideal images of heroes and their superhuman deeds, still now and then they give way to personal experience telling about political events and wars without idealizing life and portraying a benefactor or his adversary in an earthly way, so that one can recognize in them real personalities with all their merits and weaknesses.

Besides that in the verses of many poets of the 8-9th centuries (B a š š ā r I b n B u r d, A b ū N u w ā s, A b ū 'l - 'A t ā h i y y a, I b n a r - R ū m ī) one can come across some critical and sarcastic remarks concerning normative poetical forms and even outspoken parodies mocking the traditional approach to poetry and the "classical" canon itself, as something alien to the townsman's mentality.

To appreciate the meaning and degree of modernization in the creative work of the 8-9th century poets one must bear in mind that they worked inside a fixed normative system, their poetical language and, what is more important, the very structure of their poetical thinking being conditioned by the aesthetics of traditionality. The result was that Arabic medieval poetry always retained some constant proportion of tradition and creative innovations. "The modernist" consciously repudiating the tradition remained to a great degree within its limits, and vice versa "the classicists" consciously cultivating the tradition unwittingly modernized and transformed it².

In this way the Arabic classicism was developed with its poetical practice and its theory minutely elaborated in the works of Arab philologists of the 9-11th centuries, with its worship of the pagan past, with strict division of the genres into lofty ("official" panegyric and elegy) and inferior (love-lyrics, wine-songs, satires), with its trend to rigorous normative attachment to a definite style and phraseology of respective genres. Reaching its acme in the 10th century in the creative work of Al-Mutanabbī, the Arabic classicism gradually degenerated into the lifeless feeble imitations of classical patterns existing in this way up to the 19th century.

² For the detailed consideration of this problem see I. M. Filshtinsky, *Arabskaia literatura v srednie veka*, t. I: *Slovesnoe iskusstvo arabov v drevnosti i rannem srednevekovie*, t. II: *Arabskaia literatura VIII-IX vv.*, Moskva 1977-1978.