The Relationship between poetry and Sacred Texts in Arabic and Hebrew Poetic Traditions

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Published in:
Poetica medievale tra oriente e occidente

Citation for published version (APA):
The Relationship between Poetry and Sacred Texts in Arabic and Hebrew Poetic Traditions

by Arie Schippers

The relationship between Arabic poetics and the Koran is an ambiguous one. As we know, in the Koran poets were at first condemned, and many anecdotes and traditions point at the danger, felt apparently by strict Muslims in the first period of Islam, the poets faced as composers of invective poems, whereas their style resembled that of pre-Islamic kahins, representatives of paganism — whose utterances were considered lies compared to the true messages of God.

In later periods, poetry developed into an independent phenomenon, separate from the development of Islam as a religion. Many Abbasid poets, including many of their predecessors or successors, debauched themselves and described their debauchery in their poetry. Poets such as Abu Nuwas and Bashshar ibn Burd were sinners, drinking too much wine while fulfilling their religious duties such as the salat, and having homosexual and pederastic affairs, which Islam forbade. A strict Islamic scholar would not be amused by such a behaviour.

In all kinds of poetry — ranging from wine to ascetic poetry — the pre-Islamic notions of al-Zaman (Time), al-Ayyam (Days) and al-Dahr (Fate) are still in vogue, even though they are contrary to Islam because the belief in a capricious Fate to whom mankind is subdued is an infringement of the omnipotence of God. The notion of Time and Fate have their own development in Arabic literature: in the laudatory poem (madahib), Fate provokes misfortune, and is the counterpart of the Maecenas who guarantees good fortune because he is supported by God. At first, the banat al-dahr (daughters of Time) are the fickleness and whimsicalities of Fate; later on, the banu al-zaman are the poet’s contemporaries who are often envious of him. Also in elegies, the pre-Islamic terminology and pre-Islamic themes survived: Fate has won when someone’s death is announced.

Arab poets-basing themselves on a long poetic tradition, starting with pre-Islamic poetry-drew from a poetic language. The poets compiled anthologies and wrote treatises on poetry. Perhaps we should consider poetry an anti-text of Koran, as Suzanne Stetkevych proposes. However, since the poets are part of Islamic society — in which power is not only based on poetry and munificence, but also gets its justification from religion — the Koran was also taken into account in stylistic treatises, even though it was apparently not considered poetry, but as something sui generis. A whole series of treatises came into being with the theme of the inimitability of the Koran with
regard to poetry, the so-called \textit{Ijaz al-Qur'an} works (e.g. the work by Basgillani, d. 1013). In these works, the authors show much interest in poetry and stylistic figures. They are interested in showing that the Koran has the same stylistic figures as poetry. A special relationship with the Koran shows in the poetry in which the stylistic device “quotation from the Koran or Holy Writ” is used. In Arabic poetry, this figure of speech – called \textit{tadhkim} or \textit{iqtibas} – involves a conscious allusion to the Koran.

The Hebrew Poetic School of Muslim Spain – which imitated the secular Arabic poetic tradition – recognised Arabic superiority in poetry and took over the Arabic definition of poetry. Moses Ibn Ezra (d. 1138) wrote a treatise on poetry in which he compares figures of speech in Arabic and Hebrew poetry with those in the Bible and the Koran. Hebrew poetry then continued for centuries in Spain, Languedoc, Provence, Italy and even Holland, as an offspring of the Arabic grammatical and poetic tradition, making use of a language distillated from the holy language of the Hebrew Bible.

Just like the language of Classical Arabic, that of Secular Medieval Hebrew poetry is a very formal, literary language, which is not spoken but based on a centuries-old literary tradition, Medieval Hebrew poets – such as Moses Ibn Ezra (1055-1138) and Yehudah ha-Levi (1074-1141) – endeavoured to write a form of poetry that formally and thematically followed the Arabic model, but which adhered linguistically to a purist conception of the language of the Hebrew Bible. In this lecture, we will discuss the different relationship of Arabic and Hebrew poets with the Koran and the Bible.

In his famous work on the Hebrew Poetic Tradition, David Yellin (1864-1941) bases his definition of “quotation from the Holy Writ” or “setting a precious stone” (\textit{shibbut}) on Arabic sources, which have the most prestige among Arab literati. It appears from Arabic sources that not every quotation from the Holy Writ is acceptable as such. Whereas the al-Matbuh al-sa’ir by Ibn al-Athir (1165-1239) counts it among an author’s benefits “that he inserts amidst his words parts of verses in suitable places which undoubtedly gives them prestige and splendour”, Ibn Hijja (d. 1434) in his chapter on \textit{iqtibas} (taking a fire) in the \textit{Khizana al-Adab} divides this figure of speech into three parts, according to its acceptability or otherwise. Furthermore, \textit{iqtibas} can be divided in two manners: whether the passage borrowed has the same meaning as in the Koran, or whether it goes beyond its original meaning. Moreover, the \textit{Najabat} by al-Nabulusi (d. 1751) explains in his chapter on \textit{iqtibas}, that this figure of speech occurs when the speaker introduces among his words in poetry or prose a word from the Koran or from a hadith (a tradition of Muhammad) without recognisable change, in such a manner that they do not feel that it has been taken from those books.

Mehren, who has many quotations which occur in Ibn Hijja’s \textit{Khizana} as well, translates \textit{iqtibas} as “drawing from a light or fire” (Koran, sura 57, verse 13). He quotes examples from al-Hariri (1054-1121)’s \textit{Maqamat}, first of all some prose texts but among them two lines of poetry, which go as follows:

\begin{quote}
If you had decided to leave us without any injury, patience is beautiful / And when you decide to substitute us by others, God is enough for us and He is a wonderful trustee. //
\end{quote}

This method taken from al-Hariri consists of ending two subsequent poetic lines with Koranic quotes, in this case from sura 12: verses 18 and 83, and sura 3 verse 167, respectively. Mehren quotes as examples (taken from Ibn Hijja’s \textit{Khizana}) two verses from Ibn al-Rumi (836-866)’s poetry, where the borrowed words are taken out of their original context and put into a new one:

\begin{quote}
If I make such a mistake in praising you as you made in your refusal / I leave my hope in a valley without vegetation.
\end{quote}

Here is a quotation from the Koran sura 14: 40 [37]: “I have let them dwell in a valley without vegetation”.

And to finish, a last example from Mehren, which is also in the \textit{Khizana}: this is a poem where the formula in sura 2: 51 “We are from God and to Him we return” is quoted, but the poet changes the borrowed words somewhat. The poet does not mention the beginning of the verse, and changes the “Him” of the original into “God”. The borrowing is meant as an expression of being hurt by a misfortune. The verse goes as follows:

\begin{quote}
Now has taken place what I was afraid of that it would happen: we are returning to God.
\end{quote}

Mehren says at the end: “Finally we observe that several Muslim orthodox sects consider these allusions in profane texts as a devaluation of the Koran and therefore unacceptable”.

The greatest authority in Arabic poetics in their adaptation to Hebrew poetics is Moses Ibn Ezra (1065-1138) in his famous \textit{Kitab al-Muhadarah wa-l-Mudhakara} (The Book of Discussion and Memorisation). After the last section (no. 20) on the figures of speech, in the eighth and last chapter of this work Moses Ibn Ezra says, speaking about quotations from the Koran, without however using the term \textit{iqtibas}:

\begin{quote}
\[154b\] The Arabic poets found it laudable to introduce verses from their Koran what they call ayat or “wonders” in their poetry, and in their eyes these belong to their glorious sayings. And most of what they introduced in their hemistichs and metres, goes according to what one of them said [namely Abd al-Rahman Ibn Muyqana (d. 1068), the famous poet from Qabdaq near Sintra and Lisbon]:

He said: “He wrote with musk on his doors: go in to them in safety and security [sura 15: 46].”
\end{quote}
In this line – quoted by Moses ibn Ezra from the famous náníyya, which was recited to the Hammudite prince Idris ibn Yahya al-Mu'tali (de-throned 1046) – the Koran is used outside its original context.

In the text by Moses ibn Ezra which then follows40, we see a totally different approach. He tries to find Arabic metre in the Koran, and then even in Biblical texts, just like classicists who try to find the famous hexameter in Julius Caesar's De Bello Gallico. He says:

And we found even a metrical verse in their Koran, namely:

“They will not get piety before they have not spent everything what they were fond of.”

This Koranic verse that sound in Arabic: lan tanalu 'l-birra batta tunfigu mimma tabhibbun (sura 3: 91) apparently has to be scanned as a ramal di-metre (v--/v--/v--/v--/v--).”

Then Moses ibn Ezra continues:

The poets of our religion have sometimes been capable of a similar procedure in whole verses, or parts of them, which they introduced in hemistichs of verses of various metres with a slight addition or suppression or without any of the two. Most of them we find in the rajaz poems of Psalms, Job and Proverbs.

Now Moses ibn Ezra gives examples of verses according to the Arabic metre in the Bible41. His example from Prov. 21: 13 can be read as a sequence of two times eight long syllables, if we do not count the shewas or long ones:

1. Otem ozno miz-za'[a]qat dal gam bu yaqra [tev]-lo ye'aneb [2x8 long ones] 

v.[y]--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v-- ("Who so stops his ears at the cry of the poor/ he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard.") Perhaps the phrase “with elision of the letter waaw” further on in the text applies to the above verse. Other examples of this are to be seen in, among others, Prov. 21: 22 and Psalm 69, 13 [12]:

2. ‘Ir gabburn ‘atib bahkam wa-yored lo ‘oz mutsebab [with an addition of lo; 2x8]

v.--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v-- ("A wise man scales the city of the mighty, and caws down the strength of the confidence thereof.")

3. Yasibhu bi yashve sha'ar u-nginot kol sbote shekbar [with addition of kol; 2x8]

v.--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v-- ("They who sit in the gate speak against me, and I was the song of the drunkards.")

Moses ibn Ezra adds a verse in “short metre” in which one shewa should not be read (Prov. 18: 23):

4. We-tah[a]lmuim yedabber rasb we-'ashir ya'[al]neb 'azzor [with an addition of a ya']

v.[y]--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v--/v-- ("The poor use intreatise, but the rich answer roughly.")

In a further passage he shifts to themes, giving first an Arabic example from the Koran:

And the Arab poets have wonderful examples in verses with themes taken from their Koran which can only taken in such a manner from it as the themes you can see in the following verse about meagerness by one of them:

W-a-law anna ma bi min nubalin murakkabun ‘da jamalin, ma kana fi ‘l-nari khubadu?

“If the meagerness which is in me (because of my love passion) would have been build in a camel, no sinner would enter the Fire [of Hell] in eternity”42.

Because in their Koran is said [surah 7: 40]:

la yadkhuluna ‘l-lannata hatta yalija ‘l lamalu fi sammt-‘l-khiyati ("They will not enter paradise, unless a camel goes through the sammt of a khyay i.e. the eye of a needle").

And this poet says:

“If the meagerness of his body would be in a camel, it had become so meagre that it entered the eye of a needle so that no person would stay in the fire eternally (laq anna nubala jimni-1i yakumu be jamalin la-nabala batta yadkhula ‘ayna ‘l-ibrati fa-lam yabqa fi ‘l-nari, salamu makkhidun)"

Then Moses ibn Ezra gives examples from his contemporaries, who wrote in Hebrew:

Among our companions, there are who used this device and they disposed in their verses of themes which can be explained in the Holy Writings. To these belong those who reach their goal in one verse and there are those who only reach their goal in two verses. Shemuel ha-Nagid said in his long letter to rabbi Yosof may God have compassion on his soul:

[50: 27, 28] “You were plagues for our hearts, as plagues of someone whose high-ness is deep; Our letters we made them two living birds; that was on the day of his purification.”

Another poet has said [Moses ibn Ezra]:

[130:10] “If I would speak to the Rock, then it would give water.”
[Abu 'Umar] Ibn Sahl has said:

"The dew of his favour is upon the earth, but my soul is dry as the fleece of Yer-uba'al".

All these cases mentioned by Moses ibn Ezra are references to prescriptions of offerings or stories in the Bible. They are quoted as references to the contents of the Bible rather than the borrowing of sentences and phrases. From the Bible he took the motif of Moses striking the rock so that water comes out, and that of the fleece of Gideon in Judges 6:36-40.

In the nineteenth century, Shaul ibn Abdallah Yosef — a Baghdad-born merchant living in Hong Kong (1849-1906) — was also interested in the figure of qitbas, which he mentions several times in his Commentary on the Laudatory Poems of Jehudah ha-Levi (1075-1140), entitled Gin'at Shaul.

He notices several direct quotes from the Bible put in the context of Yehuda ha-Levi's secular poems, among which the following:

1. In poem 2:11, which is directed to Rabbi Abraham Yehudah, ha-Levi uses the biblical expression “according to his service and his burden”, thus alluding to the biblical Abraham (Numeri 4:19) saying: "Abraham and his sons give them each according to his service and his burden".

2. In poem 95:6 Yehudah ha-Levi quotes Song of Songs 4:17:16: “Awake north wind and come thou south, blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out”.

3. Speaking about himself and referring to his friend Moses ibn Ezra, Yehudah ha-Levi quotes in poem 37:13 Ecclesiastes 4:8 ("there is one alone, and there is not a second; yea ye had neither child nor brother") saying:

   There is one alone and no second and also he has no son or brother and there is no end for his pains/
   Bad time gave him gracious confidence on one day and on the second he robbed him/.

4. And in poem 59:2, Yehudah ha-Levi says about Shemuel ha-Nagid, quoting Daniel 9:24 and 11 Sam 3:8:

   It is time to sent a redeeptor to Jerusalem
   my Lord increases to call another time Samuel.

David Yellin also comes up with some examples from secular poetry, among which are two instances from Solomon ibn Gabriol’s long elegy on Yequi’el (no. 156), whose beginning he has marked as an allusion to scripture:

5. The mirth of tabrets (=drums) ceased", and gladness is taken away on the day his feet were tied and the day they were chained.

Especially verse 64 is modified to a great extent, because the text of the Bible says: "There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay and hatch, and gather under her shadow there shall the vultures also be gathered, everyone with her mate".

Resuming the situation of Hebrew poetry and its links with the Bible, one can best sum up the situation in the words of Yellin:

The use of parts of verses of the Hebrew Bible and especially from the stylistic works and the poetry therein, is very extensive in the words of literati and poets from the whole period of the Middle Ages and afterwards, nearly until our days. Because it conveyed and added grace and splendour to their words. It aroused in the heart of the listener a pleasant feeling since he suddenly recognised words which he’d known for long at a time when he found himself surrounded by something totally different.

From what we have seen so far from the Hebrew sources, we notice a difference between Moses ibn Ezra and nineteenth and twentieth-century theorists such as Shaul Abdallah Yosef. As far as Moses ibn Ezra is concerned, we can come to the following conclusions: without using a specific term like qitbas, Moses ibn Ezra distinguishes three ways of poetically using a Holy text:

A. Quotation of literal wordings: he gives only Arabic examples of poetry with borrowings from the Koran; he does not present any Hebrew examples, probably because all the wordings of Hebrew poetry come from the Bible.

B. Scanning parts of the Holy Writ according to Arabic metre: he comes up with one example from the Koran and several from the Bible.

C. Quotation of motifs and themes from the Koran and the Bible in poetry: the concept of the camel which goes through the eye of a needle, taken from the Koran; the concept of striking the rock, like Moses, and that of the fleece of Gideon and others from the Bible.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century theorists, such as Shaul Abdallah Yosef and David Yellin, give examples of quotations of literal wordings, contrary to Moses ibn Ezra. They had less awareness of the fact that the whole corpus of the poetry of the Hebrew Andalusian school consists per definition of the holy language. Some authors — for instance, the early nineteenth-century Leopold Dukes and the late twentieth-century Dan Pagis — were more conscious of this. Hebrew poems are mosaics of pieces from the Hebrew Bible. Dukes mentions several heroes of profane literature, including Al-Charizi and Immanuel da Roma (p. 131). He also mentions some later scholars (pp. 134-135) and their opinions about musif (mosaic) style, such as Moses ibn Habib (1450-1520), Joseph del Medigo (1591-1653) and Samuel Archivolti (1515-1611).
Moses ibn Habib considers in his Darke No'am the insertion of Biblical passages to be a privilege, in the literal and figurative sense, of the Hebrew language, which no other language can imitate.  

Joseph Delmedigo (1591-1655) was negative in his judgement in his Novelot Hokhmab:

I saw a very bad evil with the writers of my nation. They do not write so understandably as the writers of other nations, whose works one can understand as soon as one knows their language and which one can translate easily. The Jewish authors are to be divided into two classes. In one of them they mix Bible and Talmud language with each other. Who hears it, his ears shrill, and when looking at it, it is strange. The other class of poets, who adorn themselves with elegance, speak in prophetic, obscure words, distort Biblical passages and slip strange meanings under words, totally punctuated so that their productions can be read only with great difficulty, not translatable into any other language, as if those works were written only for Jews. Therefore, Jewish authors have so little prestige with other peoples.

Samuel Archivolti (1515-1611) discusses this style in his book Arugat ha-Bosem and warns that one should not use Biblical passages for profane purposes. Archivolti wants no attack or constraint on biblical passages, and wants to use them only in their original context, and warns against mixing with Aramaic, although some Talmudic passages may be incorporated when the style is adorned by them.

Leopold Dukes in his book Kenntnis der neubeuärischen religiösen Poesie (Frankfurt am Main 1842) speaks about the origin, definition, expansion and history of Biblical quotations. According to Dukes, Jews who normally at the age of fifteen knew their Hebrew Bible by heart, were used to quoting Biblical texts also in a different context to that they were borrowed from (p. 114), also in jokes with allusions to two different meanings of words (p. 115). This style is called by Dukes musit, which refers to a mosaic of Bible verses. This style is fit to give a rebirth to a dead language, as Hebrew was in his time.

A dead language is a closed room, in the formation of words as well as in the images and tropes. It is a legacy of a vanished time, an inalienable inheritance, which can be utilised but not estranged. To enrich an ancient language with words and other forms, is certainly the most superfluous of the superfluous. So the one who enriches it must have conceived seriously the idea of inventing a new language. Who writes in a dead language, when he does not want an ideal anachronism, has to comply seriously with the considerations it presents.

By means of the musit style one eliminates the difficulties of the gap between the prehistory of the Hebrew language and the poverty of that language now (p. 122).

Since the last two quotations about borrowing from Biblical Hebrew have their impact also upon prose, we will end with a statement by Ibn al-Athir in his Al-Wasby al-Marqum about quotations from Koran, prophetic akhbār and poetry, which a secretary has to recompose in the prose of his letters:

But I do not mean by recomposition of the meanings of the Koran, the prophetic reports, and poetry that a katib should tie himself exclusively to it, such as that his speech derives only from it, and he saying nothing except that which is based on it. Were he to do this, it would take him a long time to complete a single text. What I mean is that he should achieve competence, have ideas in abundance, and strive to understand their intricacies and subtleties, this would his mind produce ideas in the generation of which he will be assisted by these three instruments. Whoever achieves competence and has his mind well-disposed will have ideas occurring to him without him striving for them strenuously.

This passage gives insight into what was considered for secretaries as the sources of Arabic, but also warns against an accumulation of quotations. From this we can conclude that the situation of Arabic clearly differs from that of Hebrew, as described by Delmedigo, Dukes and others.

The difference between the effectiveness of the figure of speech "quotation from the Holy Writ" in both Arabic and Hebrew, lies in the different sources of poetic language: whereas the Arabic poetic language is based on the corpus of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry – and not upon the Koran – the Hebrew poetic language is derived directly from the Hebrew Bible. The latter is used as a kind of dictionary: it is no surprise, therefore, that the Holy Writ is present in almost every line, because ideally – according to the purist attitude of the poetic school – every word in Hebrew Andalusian poetry can be found in the Bible.

Notes

Culture in Time of Tolerance: 
al-Andalus as a Model 
for our own Time 
by Maria Rosa Menocal*

Niebla, just west of Seville, on the road to Huelva. August 1064.

Love, may God honor you, is a serious illness, one whose treatment must be in proportion to the affliction. It's a delicious disease, a welcome malady. Those who are free of it want not to be immune, and those who are stricken want not to be cured.

'I've a sickness doctors can't cure. 
Inexorably pulling me to the well of my destruction. 
Consented to be a sacrifice, killed for her love, 
Eager, like the drunk gulping wine mixed with poison. 
Shameless were those my nights, 
Yet my soul loved them beyond all passion.

(from Ibn Hazm, The Neck-Ring of the Dove)

Niebla was a terrible place to die. From afar it is picture-book pretty, a pink-walled and towered little medieval city on the Guadalquivir, halfway between Seville and the sea. But for a man who in his mind's eye could still see the gardens of Madinat al-Zahra at the height of their splendor, a man whose hometown was the metropolis of Cordoba, capital of the caliphate and center of the civilized world at the time of his childhood, whose libraries of tens of thousands of volumes he knew well, for such a man Niebla was the end of the earth. It was there, in that isolated backwater that in the summer of 1064 Ibn Hazm, the preeminent old man of Andalusian letters, whose acquaintance with the intellectual and cultural life of the Islamic world was so complete, died in lonely and embittered exile. He was of the same generation as Granada's vizier Samuel the Nagid, and indeed the two men, born within months of each other, knew one another, perhaps well, and had even once, as young men, debated publicly, during one of their final years in Cordoba. Their lives later forced them as grown men to leave their beloved homeland and make new lives in exile that could not have been more different.

A decade before Ibn Hazm died in Niebla, after a never-easy lifetime spent defending the hopeless Umayyad cause, his counterpart, the nagid, had died, the wealthy and much honored vizier of his taifa and the beloved

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di Maurizio Pistoso

Gli autori

Questo volume raccoglie gli atti del convegno che si tenne a Bologna l’11-13 maggio 2000, intitolato “Poetica medievale. Confronti e incontri: tradizione arabo-islamica e tradizione occidentale”. Come accade, il volume non rispecchia perfettamente le giornate del convegno, ma, pur con qualche lacuna, offre una buona e fedele immagine dei “lavori svolti”.

Da che cosa nasceva l’idea, non ancora il progetto, del convegno? Perché, poetica medievale: per la volontà di mettere a confronto, in maniera diretta e indiretta, alcuni aspetti delle tradizioni poetiche e poetologiche delle grandi civiltà che si svilupparono intorno al bacino del Mediterraneo nel Medioevo: la greco-bizantina, l’arabo-islamica e l’Europa occidentale, latina e romanica. Sapendo che nel Medioevo il Mediterraneo è un centro economico, commerciale, spirituale sul quale gravitano le grandi comunità culturali appena ricordate, la cui estensione va ben oltre i limiti strettamente geografici del mare Mediterraneo (il mondo greco-ortodosso si espande sull’Europa orientale e sulla Russia, il mondo islamico dalla penisola iberica si spinge sino in Indonesia, il mondo latino-occidentale si riversa sui paesi toccati dal mare del Nord).

Non c’è dubbio che al di là, e attraverso, la concorrenza politica ed economica, la concorrenza culturale e spirituale fra religioni sorelle che si volevano tutte universalis (ebraismo, cristianesimo, islam), il Mediterraneo medievale costituiva un “sistema”, un insieme di rapporti economici, commerciali e culturali in cui conoscenze e strumenti si spostavano con facilità da una sponda all’altra. Ecco, perciò, la volontà di mettere a confronto tradizioni, saperi, esperienze letterarie di queste grandi comunità culturali, indagare e riflettere sui loro rapporti reciproci, su quanto le accomuna e su quanto le separa. Poi, è chiaro, proprio per farsi progetto concretamente realizzabile, l’idea, la volontà si è via via delimitata e determinata, anche in ragione di pure e semplici circostanze empiriche. Ma è apparsa subito chiara una cosa, sulla quale si può sollecitare una riflessione: ciò che qui sopra abbiamo chiamato “mediterraneo” non esiste più, oggi. Non esiste più il Mediterraneo come sistema commerciale, economico e culturale. Dopo il xvi secolo l’Europa si è volta verso l’Atlantico, e negli ultimi cinque secoli ha consumato una profonda rottura con il resto del Mediterraneo. Tutto questo può essere significativo, quando si affronta, oggi, lo studio delle poetiche medievali.
Poetica medievale
tra Oriente e Occidente

A cura di Paolo Bagni e Maurizio Pistoso

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via Sardegna 50,
00187 Roma,
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