Arabic Influence in the Poetry of Todros Abulafia

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This paper deals with the Hebrew poetry in Arabic style of Todros ben Yehudah ha-Lewi Abulafia who lived from 1247 until 1306 in Toledo where he was born under Christian rule. He was a member of the famous Abulafia family where his homologue, who was born in 1220 and died at the end of the thirteenth century of the common era, was a distinguished grand rabbi of Toledo as well as a well-known kabbalist who fulfilled a position at the court of the Christian king Alfonso El Sabio (Alphonse the Wise). We are especially concerned with Todros Abulafia’s poetic production as a reflection of Arabic culture during Christian reign.

We will dwell shortly upon some of the following aspects of his poetry:

a. forms of poetry.
b. themes and genres.

In the conclusion we will determine his position vis-à-vis the earlier poets of the Hebrew Andalusian school.

As far as the forms of poetry are concerned, Todros Abulafia associated himself with the developments which manifested themselves in later Arabic poetry. I will give in the following a sketch of these developments of Arabic poetry in later periods. Several manneristic and artificial tendencies in the forms of the poems became more and more popular, also in Muslim Spain. The early twelfth-century poet Ibn al-Zaqqaq, a nephew of the famous Ibn Khafadjah, is not only well-known because of his fantastic reworking of poetic concepts, he also made artificial innovations by composing an alphabetical poem, the first line starting with alif, then bāʾ, tāʾ, thāʾ, dāʾim and so on, according to the order of the Arabic alphabet. Elsewhere in Arabic poetry we have observed the tendency to begin and end poetry lines with the same letter. This procedure is well-known in the Diwan of the early fourteenth-century poet Safiy al-Din, where he devoted 28 poems of 28 lines beginning and ending with the same letter to the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet. This procedure has ultimately led to a poem like the ‘ayin poem in the form of an eye, a little love poem in a modern Algerian collection of traditional, mostly strophic, love and wine songs, which can be read endlessly, because the verses are grouped around the eye (=‘ayin) in the middle. To some extent the early Hebrew Andalusian poets have introduced artificialities that went further than the examples of the Arabs of the time. So Moses ibn Ezra is one of the first to write a badiʿīyyah i.e. a poem which deliberately contains at least one example of all well-known figures of speech, at the end of the badiʿ chapter in his
Kitab al-Muhadarah wa-l-Mudhakarah. The Arabic specimens of these kind of poems are of a later date or contemporary. Moreover, Moses ibn Ezra’s tadjnis-collection, which is thematically subdivided into ten chapters, called Sefer ha-’Anaq [the ‘Book of the Neck Lace’] or in Arabic, Kitab Zahr al-Riyad [the ‘Flowers of the Flowerbeds’], is entirely devoted to complete paronomasia [in Arabic tadjnis tamm]. The Arabic poets of course practised this figure of speech first, but - to my knowledge - they never went as far as Moses ibn Ezra in making a whole collection dealing with this subject. Moses ibn Ezra was probably inspired by the results of Biblical linguistics. Treatises such as Ibn Bil’am’s Kitab al-Tadjnis about homologues gave him the incentive to experiment with the possibilities of Biblical Hebrew, which was recently rediscovered as a poetic language.

One of the most conspicuous later forms was of course the muwashshah, a strophic poem, invented in al-Andalus in its final form, but preceded by all kinds of tasmit or strophic poetry, also in the East. But eastern Arabic poets did not take strophic forms too seriously in the beginning, attached as they were to the prestigious qasidah, which was the monorhymical and monometrical structure their patrons appreciated most. According to Monroe, strophic poetry developed especially during the Almoravid and Almohad periods, since courtly poetry was less appreciated in these times, and the popular and learned audiences which were left, could be more easily reached and amused with strophic forms. Strophic forms may well have existed in early periods, but did not reach us, because they had no prestige.

Muwashshahat poems became more and more in vogue with Hebrew Andalusian poets. The first poets such as Samuel han-Nagid and Solomon ibn Gabirol did not yet distinguish themselves very much by this form, but the other two great poets, Moses ibn Ezra and Yehudah hal-Lewi, left us several examples of muwashshahat, even occasionally with khardjah’s in Romance and Classical and vernacular Arabic.

Other later forms of poetry which may have occurred earlier, but became popular only at a later stage, were the tasdisat and takhmisat which were derived from famous poems. They incorporated quotations of lines and half lines and repeated the rhyme by addition of five or six verses. We have also earlier examples of quotations from older poets plus new additions in the poetry of the eleventh-century poet Ibn Hazm.

Under Persian influence the repertoire of formal structures increased: the quatrain and the Dhubayt or Dubayt (a little poem with rhyme-scheme aaba in combination with a given metre) were used by Arabic poets, the principle consisted of a more complex rhyme-scheme than only one.

Innovations are also the 'concretes', i.e. poems in the form of a tree or other concrete forms. They were used by Arabic poets mostly under Persian influence. Nevertheless, an example is already to be found in the Arabic poetry of Fatimid Egypt. So we find a tree poem directed to the Fatimid caliph Al-‘Aziz (975-996) written in the last part of the tenth century. It’s poet is a certain al-Iskandar. According to Muhammad Kamil Husayn, a modern Egyptian author who wrote a study on Fatimid poetry, this poem is unique. We know nothing more about the poet, who, in the panegyric on his caliph, made use of ideological terms connected with the Fatimid shi’ite ideology. His praise poem ends with a tree which is to be read from the top to the bottom of the branches at the right and the left, and the middle of the tree. From the middle line or stem of the tree, segments are also to be read as parts of the branches. The seven lines on each side may be symbolic for the ideology of the Fatimids, where seven circles of spiritual
leaders were to be succeeded by another seven circles. It can also have other hidden meanings. Other Arabic examples of tree poems in Arabic poetry are mostly three centuries later under the influence of the Persians. The first Hebrew Andalusian poet with a tree-poem probably is the twelfth-century poet Abraham ibn Ezra, mentioned by Dan Pagis in his Change and Tradition in the Secular Poetry: Spain and Italy.

Looking at the forms of poetry used by Todros Abulafia, we see how in his poem no. 430, dedicated to rabbi Todros he also utilised a tree-form, according to the same scheme as we saw earlier with the Fatimid poet al-Iskandar. Only in his scheme we have eight verses at the left as well as at the right. Also the type of tree is different as well as the way of reading. Unlike the Arabic poem shown earlier, one should not read from the top, but first from the bottom to the right, then the middle line, and after that the left lines: one can start at the bottom as well as at the top. Perhaps total of eight branches at each side also has a hidden meaning or even a kabbalistic meaning but to me this secret has not been revealed. The poet's superscript reads: 'For him I made a (utterance of the lips) like a tree hanging over the streams because the good things of the tree can be eaten and it is a desire for the eyes'. The content is praise. Underneath the poet presents his poem with the words: 'A tree of flowery speech and its fruits, the intelligence restores the life of its owners, because the good smell of its praise, yes, because of your glory shines on it, and its ornaments and the rings of its frontbands.' Further on the praising lines inspired by Psalm 71:18 do not have very specific elements.

The central line goes as follows: 'I will explain every day your praise, o lord, for everyone who comes, your heroism.' On the last segments or segment of this line is varied sixteen times depending on the place of the branch within the tree.' One of the branches goes as follows: 'I will explain every moment that truly the virtues are your heritage and property' and 'I will declare that you are high and great and pleasant and that grace is cast on your lips.' Another tree-poem by Todros Abulafia was directed to Samuel ben Yosef Abrabanel. In this tree (in poem no. 590) there are seven branches on the left and seven on the right of the stem.

The different strophic forms of poetry are very developed in the poetry of Todros Abulafia: he has composed more than 50 muwashshahat with a couple of Romance and Arabic khardjahs, a large quantity compared with his predecessors. Other poems of his have different rhyme varieties. Some of Todros' elegies consist of two rhyming hemistichs with seven syllables each followed by a kind of refrain ending with the name of the deceased, for instance Shelomoh. Each two hemistichs have different rhymes, but afterwards the name Shelomoh is a unifying factor. This we see in poem 408. I shall give the first line as an example:

1. Yam dim'i ga'a ga'o / kmo hay-yam hag-gadol o/ ke-yad ham-melekh Shelomoh/

1. The sea of my tears is huge and high like the great ocean or like the [generous] hand of king Solomon.
The third part is a quotation from the Tenakh. This procedure of quotation is repeated in poem no. 410, another elegy on the same Shelomoh Abi Yishaq ben Sadoq: there are three verse parts that rhyme with each other, followed by a quotation from Tenakh ending with eres, the word for earth, which is now the dwelling place of the deceased, the inner side of earth.

We give some lines as an example with the biblical references between brackets:

1. 'Al meh shhaqim rahu/ u-sba rom tamahu/ mi hu zeh w-e-zeh hu/ asher sam sammot be-ares/

2. 'Al meh 'arsah hoshlakh/ helel ba-yqum malakh/ kalah 'anan w-yelakh/ han-noten matar 'al pene ares/

1. What are the clouds of the sky scared of and the army of stars of the high heaven bewildered by? Who is that and what is he that he made wars to cease unto the end of the earth? (Psalm 46: 9)

2. Why has the star of the morning been cast upon the earth, a star that reigned the world. A cloud perished and passed away, the one who gave rain upon the earth. (Job 5:10)

Also the use of paronomasia is widely spread in the poetry of Todros Abulafia: like Moses ibn Ezra he showed his virtuosity in the discovery of hidden possibilities of the Hebrew language. He even made two collections, divided in ten chapters dealing with conventional poetic themes, just like Moses ibn Ezra did. The first collection was dedicated to Todros Abulafia the kabbalist, the second to rabbi Shelomoh ibn Sadoq. In the Arabic preface of the second collection the poet calls tadjnis the most beautiful example of the rhetorical or badi' style. But for some people it is difficult to understand. That is why he added some marginal notes to the text in which he explains the complex meanings of his poems. Along with this collection of tadjnis tamm (complete paronomasia, that means the poems consists of homologue rhymes), the poet occasionally made poems which he burdened with paronomasia. One of those poems is poem no 571. This poem is dedicated to Abul-Hasan Me’ir ibn Shoshan al-samin (the fat one). Brody noticed the following about this poem: 'The above-mentioned addressee sent a poem from one of the villages where he was used to take rest from his work; the poet sends him an answer apologising for the fact that his own poem is less valid and skilful than the addressee’s poem.' The paronomasia in the poem is a complete one, within one line the same word combinations are repeated, but with a different meaning. I will give an example of three lines:

1. Be-eres suf we-tokh qiryat ye’arim/ ‘ase da’at ha-tahtobh kay-ye’arim/
2. We-nahnu hotebhim ‘esim yeshebhim/ le-ma’khal ha-‘ayarim be-‘ayarim/
3. We-ti’eh lakh kefarim bak-kefarim/ we-nokhal nahnu tebhen ke-farim/
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1. In the land of honey and amidst the town of honeycombs, do you hew the trees of knowledge in the forests?

2. While we are cutters of dry wood as food for the wild asses in the towns?

3. And you pasture for you the cyper-flowers in the villages, while we eat the straw like oxen.

Next to the two above-mentioned collections, the poet composed two collections of alphabetical verses dedicated to Yishaq ben Sadoq. In these collections conventional themes are dealt with just as in the paromastia collections. Each line of the letter-poems begins and ends with the same letter, just as his younger Arab contemporary in the East, Safiy al-Din al-Hilli, does.

When talking about traditional themes, we noticed how Todros Abulafia followed Moses ibn Ezra in making his collections, which were exercises in conventional themes and the Hebrew Biblical language at the same time. There are other instances too, which show Todros' traditional point of view in thematics. He sticks very much to the most classical poets of the Arabs such as al-Mutanabbi. This poet exclaimed in an attitude of despair [about the convention of the erotic introduction preceding a laudatory poem]:

'When there is a laudatory poem, then a love introduction has to precede it. Has every eloquent poet who composes a poem to be someone foolish in love?

'Verily the love for ibn 'Abdallah is more obvious, and therefore with the beautiful mention [of his name] the poem should be started and ended.'

This theme of al-Mutanabbi about the insincerity of the poet, has been widely elaborated by Todros Abulafia in more than one poem, to begin with poem 49, lines 8-12:

'Truly it is not beautiful to praise our master with a poem that speaks about love affairs at the beginning.' [...]

'Therefore when I make poetry my tongue begins and ends with the praise of the master.'

and poem no. 25:

'Truly, wise poets let not words which are serious be preceded by frivolous ones at the beginning of every praise
Because [poets who do so] only want to extend their poem, and did not find anyone with praiseworthy things.
And love and other affairs are added to this, o patron, therefore they are wasting their songs.
But now I found master Yishaq who is great in lofty deeds, and frequent in actions

21
Therefore when I make a song in honour of him, I begin and end the poem with his praise.

Both poets, al-Mutanabbi as well as Todros speak here with irony. As far as Todros Abulafia is concerned, there are different people who studied this case of literary irony, among which most recently Ross Brann in his book The Compactuous Poet who came to interesting conclusions. I for my part, want to underline the dependence of Todros upon the motif of al-Mutanabbi, already mentioned by David Yellin. Both poets are accustomed to making erotic introductions, and have a lot of experience in dealing with nasib motifs in a most artificial way. They undermine their own masterpieces by giving expression to their dissatisfaction with the Arabic tradition of beginning the laudatory poem by an erotic prelude. At the same time they make beautiful nasibs. Because in the Arabic adab saying is one thing, but then saying and doing the opposite belongs to the best Arabic literary tradition, not only in poetry but also in their reflections on storytelling.

Among the other traditional themes of Arabic poetry is the courting of cupbearers who belong to another religion or ethnic group than the poet. In the wine scene, the cupbearers are 'gazelles' or 'fawns', i.e. young male or female objects of love and lust. In the case of Arabic poetry, wine is served by non-Arabs or non-Muslims, sometimes Christians, sometimes Jews, or Zoroastrians or even Turks. In Hebrew poetry the cupbearers are non-Jews, i.e. Muslims or Arabs, or Christians. Since the motifs of love and wine poetry often come together in later poetry, the object of love, the fawns and gazelles are always from another religion than the poet himself. Todros Abulafia sticks to this tradition; his beloved women are non-Jewish: Christian (i.e. Spanish), or Arabic or even Slav. Other genres such as his poems written in prison also are closely connected with their Arabic examples, where the sidjiniyyat had a prominent position, not only in oriental Arabic poetry, but also in Andalusian poetry where al-Mu'tamid's aghmatiyyat are to be considered as such.

The interest of this poet, of course, lays in the fact that in Christian territory there were no Muslim intellectuals left. The remaining of Muslim culture was in the hands of the Jews. Since the Arabic civilization of that time stood at a higher level than that of the Christians, the Jews who knew Arabic culture very well gained their prestige from that fact. Poets such as Todros wanted to show how excellent a poet he was in the Arabic tradition and how the Hebrew language was capable also to express the sophisticated Arabic ideas. Todros Abulafia developed the traditional forms, just as later Arabic (and also Persian) poets did. Todros poetic forms show the same tendencies as we can find in contemporary Arabic poetry. In this respect there lays a world of difference between him and an older contemporary Meshullam da Piera, who lived in the periphery of Spain and deviated from the Classical Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian model, whereas Todros Abulafia who is in the centre of the peninsula sticks to the formal conventions including the new tendencies, and also to the Arabic conventional themes of his time.

The poetry of the Hebrew Andalusian school lived at the grace of the Arabic example with which they rivaled. When the example would be removed, the whole exercise
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would be without avail. Already in the periphery the Arabic example was waning. Todros Abulafia had more reasons to conserve the Arabic tradition than the earlier poets of the Hebrew Andalusian school. Where the first poets of the Hebrew Andalusian school such as Ibn Khalfun did not profess all the traditional Arabic themes yet and focussed on occasional correspondence, Todros Abulafia tried to revive the whole gamma of old themes, which legitimised him as a poet in the Arabic tradition. In the poetic forms he followed the new developments in form of the later Arabic poetry. Creativity consisted of old themes in new forms.

1 I thank Dr. Geert Jan van Gelder (Groningen) for the references in notes 6 & 15 and Dr. Pieter Smoor (Amsterdam) for the reference in note 14.
2 For this poet and his homologue see A. Saenz Badillos, Diccionario de autores judíos (Sefarad. Siglos X-XV), Ediciones El Almendro, Córdoba 1988, pp. 115-116.
8 See the editions by A.S. Halkin (Jerusalem, 1975) and Montserrat Abumalhan Mas (Madrid, 1985-86- Vol. I-II) the poem at the end.
9 E.g. the Kafiyyah al-badi'iyyah by Safiyy al-Din al-Hilli (1278-1349).
10 See A. Sáenz Badillos, Diccionario , pp. 129-130.
14 Muhammad Kamil Husayn, Fi adab Misr al-Fatimiyyah, Cairo 1970, p. 175.
15 According to the early twelfth century literary theorist Diya’ al-Din Ibn al-Athir (1163-1239), Mathal al-sa’ir, ed. Cairo 1962, vol. III, p. 211, he saw a tree-poem 'written by someone in the West (Egypt, al-Andalus?)'. However, he did not transmit the poem, he judged it too artificial. The Persian examples are of later date.
16 Dan Pagis, Change and Tradition in the Secular Poetry: Spain and Italy, Jerusalem 1976, p. 195; id., 'Shire Temunah 'ibriyyim we-‘od surot mlakhutiyyot' in Has-Sifrut 25 (1977), pp. 13-27 [in which he postulates their European origin].

18 Cf. Gan ha-Meshalim we-ha-Hidot, Jerusalem 1934, Vol. II, part I, p. 79 (no. (53) 590 [133]).


20 Gan ha-Meshalim I, p. 143-144 (no. 408 [346] [2]).

21 Gan ha-Meshalim I, p. 147-151 (no. 410 [348] [4]).


23 Gan ha-Meshalim I, pp. 67-112 [devoted to tadjnas tamm].

24 A. Sáenz Badillos, Diccionario, p. 97.

25 Gan ha-Meshalim II, part I, pp. 66-67 (no. 571 [673]).

26 Councillor of Alphonse the Wise, perhaps father of Don Çaq de Maleha, see A. Sáenz Badillos, Diccionario, p. 172.

27 Gan ha-Meshalim I, pp. 7-29.


29 Gan ha-Meshalim I, p. 33.

30 Gan ha-Meshalim I, p. 18.


32 David Yellin, Torat hash-Shirah has-Sefardit, Jerusalem 1940 (repr. 1972) pp. 74-75.


34 Cf. Ross Brann, The Compunctuous Poet, p. 145 (note 111). Todros Abulafia also put this poetic motif into practice. He was accused because of his promiscuity with Christian women. An interesting article on this motif in his muwashshahat was written by Tova Rozen-Moked in Federico Corriente and Angel Sáenz Badillos, eds., Poesía estrófica, Actas del Primer Congreso Internacional sobre Poesía estrófica árabe y hebrea y sus paralelos romances (Madrid, diciembre de 1989), Madrid 1991.