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STYLE AND REGISTER IN ARABIC, HEBREW AND ROMANCE
STROPHIC POETRY

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In this paper I wish to deal with the typology of strophic Hebrew Andalusian and Arabic poetry in comparison with Romance poetry (the poetic genres of the Occitan troubadours, which had a large diffusion in the Iberian peninsula) on the basis of two aspects:

1. The system of reference in the poetry. In this connection I shall look at some of Zumthor's findings and their adaptation to Occitan and Medieval Arabic poetry. Are his conclusions about the nature of the poetry of the trouvères (or trouvères) also valid in describing the characteristics of Medieval Arabic and Occitan poetry?

2. Closely connected to this point are: the themes of poetry.

The first point to be discussed is the typology of Medieval poetry, both Arabic and Romance. Zumthor has attempted to construct a typology of the French trouvères poetry on the basis of internal, textual evidence. Bencheikh and Van Gelder have also tried to use some of Zumthor's notions namely with respect to Arabic poetry. In turn, I will try to evaluate these notions and their usefulness for comparing Arabic with Occitan poetry.

In his article on style and register in the poetry of the trouvères, Zumthor wanted to avoid defining style as merely rhetorics and amplification. He looked at recurrent expressions in the semantic field,


noted different ways of expressing the same notions and concepts of joy and love; or the servility of a lover towards the beloved. From his analysis it appears, for instance, that the frequency of the verbs is far higher than that of substantives and adjectives. He considered this to be an important factor in the register. Furthermore, he regarded as significant the frequent occurrences of the first person singular in the verbs, as well as possessive expressions in the first person. Certain poems of the genre consist of extensive cumulative catalogues of recurrent motifs which were also frequently used elsewhere.

Zumthor’s analysis is also valid for the earlier Occitan poetry, especially the love poetry which was in a sense the precursor of trouvére poetry, especially in the examples of love poetry where the poet complains about his situation: his loyal love towards his beloved, but the harsh treatment of his beloved to him; his feeling of desperation, hope and fear.

In the following section I will try to describe some Arabic and Hebrew muwaṣṣāḥāt in terms of Zumthor’s register. On another occasion this year I have already had the opportunity to make some remarks about a muwaṣṣāḥ of Ibn Baqī (d. 540/1145) which could be described in terms of Zumthor’s register. This muwaṣṣāḥ begins with the words ajrat la-nā min diyār al-khillī and resembles Occitan and trouvére–like love poetry in the thematic sense: the theme of the wind as a messenger of the beloved’s country which we see in Occitan poetry expressed by Peire Vidal and Bernart de Ventadorn, is found here in an identical form.

5. ZUMTHOR, op. cit., p. 264.
6. ZUMTHOR, op. cit., p. 270.
7. ZUMTHOR, op. cit., p. 272.
8. ZUMTHOR, op. cit., p. 272.

The first three strophes clearly indicate that Zumthor’s analysis can be adapted to them:

0. Ajrat la-na min diyār al-khillī
Rīḥu l-ṣabā ‘abarātī{l-dhali{l

1. Habbat hubāba {l-danā fī badanī{l
wa-hayyayatā mā maḍā min shajātī{l
thudī tahiyyatu man ‘addhābā{l-nī{l
jawan ‘alā kābidī {l-mu’tallī{l
wa-kāna yawma {l-nawā fī ḥillī{l

2. Mādhā ‘alayya {l-hawā ‘ajnā-hul
mudh ṣadda ‘an-nī{l-ladī{l ‘ahwā-hul
wa-layṣa Ḳī {fī-l-hawā ‘illā-hul
kaya{l-ṣibīrī{l Ḳaba ‘an waṣfī{l
wa-mā-hayyālī ‘alay-hī, qul ilī{l

3. Ḳūbī ‘alay-hī ‘a-rīḥu ‘āblī{l
wa-ballīghī watāna {l-mabībī{l
tahiyyata {l-‘āshiqī {l-makrābī{l
wa-qabībī{l fi makānī l-qubī{l
‘an-ni wa-hayyī bī-‘arfī {l-dallī{l

Return, breeze, return to where you have come from and take greetings from a sad lover to the homeland of my beloved one. Give on my behalf "Can la frej’a’ura vente/ Deves vostre pais/ Vejaire m’es que senta/ Un ven de Paradis/ Per amor de la genta/ Vas cui eu sui aclis/" in: MARTÍN DE RIQUER, Los trovadores, I, p. 388 (no. 61). Cf. also Peire Vidal, quoted in Los trovadores, II, p. 872 (no. 169): Ab l’aln tir vas me l’aire/ qu’ieu son venir de Prousens;/ tot quant es de lai m’agensa/. And an anonymous poet in Los trovadores, III, p. 1696 (no. 364): Per la douss’ aura qu’es venguda de lay/ Del meu amic belh e cortes e gay/ Del seu alen ai beugt un dous ray/. And Raimbaut de Vaqueiras in Los trovadores, II, p. 844 (no. 165): Oy, aura dulza, qui ven deu lar/ Un nun amic dorm e sejorn e jai/ del dolz aleyn un beure m’aportay/ La bocha obre, per gran desir/
a kiss on his face and greet him with the perfume of courtesy.  

What is striking here is that the 'framework' of this Arabic poem is so similar to that of Romance poems, although it is part of a different tradition. The "I" and "now" are present in abundance in the poetry by means of the first person as well as possessive forms e.g. badani (my body), shajani (my sorrow) (strophe 1), 'alayya (against me), 'anni (away from me), istibār (my suffering, bearing, enduring), waslī (my rendez-vous), iḥtiyālī (my using stratagems), qul li (say me) (strophe 2), etc. Here again the focal point, i.e. the love-object, is referred to as a third person. The verb and its derivatives are also dominant in this poem (in favour of adjectives and substantives), but this may be a coincidence. The key-words are those pertaining to love, which may appear in various guises. Hope and fear, possession and deprivation are connoted by the use of time.

I give some further examples of the register in Arabic and Hebrew strophic love poetry: I wish to deal with two poems by Ibn Māʿ al-Samāʿ and one by Moses ibn 'Ezra.

In poem no. 1 (p. 5, sarī') Ibn Māʿ as-Samāʿ stresses the unjust deeds of the beloved one, but the beloved one and his killing glances can do so without being blamed. The beloved and his glances are compared with a king who rules over a people:

0. Man walā - fi ummatin amran wa-lam ya'dili/l
Yu'dhalī - illā lihāza- r-rashā'ī-l-akhlālī/l

0. Someone who reigns with authority over a people and does not practise justice, will be blamed except the black eyes of a fawn [they will not be blamed].

The poet then addresses the fawn by saying:

1. Jurta fl-ḥukmi-ka fi qatliya yā musrifufl/
 Fa-nṣīrī-fa-wājibun an yunsīfla-l-munṣīfl/

1. You did wrong in your sentence to kill me, O extravagant person! Be just, it is a duty that the just one will be just.

Only then does the poet-lover ask compassion for the fire of his longings. The beloved one kindles the fire of temptations by his prominent appearance. When he shoots, he cannot fail to hit the shields of the hearts. 'How would I then', the poet-lover exclaims, 'escape from your arrow that you sent to me, come to me, let me stay alive, do not kill me'.

The poet describes his beloved one in stereotype terms: he is the splendour of the sun, he is more brilliant than the stars, he is the wishes of the poet's soul, his endeavour, his request. He exclaims: 'O me, would your enemies overcome, what has overcome me! My reprovers are separated from the sufferings of separation, and the one who is free from love does not ask about the one who is afflicted by it.' Here we have the enemies of love, who have no part of it and do not understand the pains of love because they are not inflicted by it.

Love makes right wrong or in the words of the poet to his beloved one:

4. Anta qad - sayyarta bi-l-husni min ar-rushdi ghayll/
 lam ajid - fi (arafay hubbi-ka dhanban 'alayll
 fa-tta'id - wa-in tasha' qatliya shay'an fa-shayll
 ajmili - wa-wālī-nī min-ka yada l-mufdīllil/
 fa-hya li - min hasanālī z-zamānī l-muqbilīll/

4. You made through your beauty from the right way a misguiding one. I did not find in the two extremities of your love a crime against me. But be slow, when you really want to kill me, so want! Be kind and reach me from you the hand of a benefactor. [Such a hand] would belong for me to the good things of the coming time.

The glances of the beloved one are of great value, they make the poet-lover live and they reveal the love secret. The heart of the lover is in possession of the beloved, while the poet-lover sings the kharja:

5. mā-ghādā - (arfu-ya illā bi-sanād nāzaray-kil/
 wa-ka-dhā - fi-l-wūbī mā bi-laysa yakhfā 'alay-kīl/
 wa-li-dhā - unshīdū wa-l-qalbū rahāfīn ladāy-kīl/
 yā 'alīyy - sallāta jafnay 'ka 'alā maqālīll/
 fa-bqā lī - qalbī wa-jud bi-l-faḍālī, yā mawīlīll/

5. My glance can only be nourished by the splendour of your eyes.
from the love that is in me nothing is concealed from you. Therefore I recite, while my heart is held in pledge with you: 'O elevated person, you have established your eyelids as rulers — charged with my death. But let live my heart and be generous with your kindness, O my refuge'.

The paradoxes of love frequently occur at the end of this type of poem: joy together with vexation is expressed, a monologue of the poet—lover about his situation, alternated with feigned conversations with the beloved one. The statistics reveal the interaction between the first and second person by the alternation of 'I' and 'you' and 'my' and 'your' and the high rate of imperatives (11x) and vocative particles (6x). Thus not really so different from Occitan love poetry and trrouèr poetry as described by Zumthor.

Ibn Mà' al-Samà's poem no 2 is interesting because here the beauties of a woman are described, and love is compared with religion. The poet begins with the idea that love for beautiful women or wild cows is a religion. From all these splendid bracelets a moon rises. From the beauty of the horizons of perfection its most marvelous beauty appears. In the rest of the poem the most beautiful woman among all women is described using all kind of metaphors and comparisons. At the end of the third strophe the poets tells how he cried out aloud: 'O heart belonging to a young girl who possesses power, whose glance is more cutting than the sharp edge of a polished blade of a sword on a most courageous hero.'

In the next strophe breasts (this time quinces) and eyes are described. In the last two lines which form the simt the poet once again exclaims that love for him is a religion: 'My love for her is an act of devotion, I seek protection against this glorious pride with a fawn who pastures in the garden with the flowers of beauty, every time I become ripe.' The last couplet is again devoted to the lady:

5. *'afifatu dh-dhuydli - naqiyyatu th-thiydbill*
   sallâbatu-l-wâqûli - araqqu min sharâbîll
   *adâh la-hâ nuhâll - fi-l-hubbi min 'adâbîll*
   *fi-n-nawm lî sharâdâh - wa-hukmu-hâ hukmu-qidârî - kulla-mâ amna'll*
   - min-hâ, fa-in ûayfu-l-khayyâl - zâra-nî ahja'll

5. She is decent and innocent and pure of garments. She takes away the intellects, is thinner than wine. My emaciation for her in love has become my punishment. In sleep there is a flight for me; while her sentence is a powerful one, the more I withdraw from her. When a phantasm of her visits me, I sleep peacefully.

In this poem the poet speaks at length about the beauties of the lady, and her power. For the description of his own sufferings the poet uses only the *simt* of the strophes 3, 4, 5. Even here love is more an act of devotion, a religion. So in this poem 'she' dominates, the 'I' only exists as an extension of this description.

After these three types of Arabic muwâsâhât which look very similar to the Occitan type of love poem, we will deal with a Hebrew Andalusian muwâsâh, which describes tormented love.

The Hebrew muwâsâhât may occasionally reveal the same tormented love as the Arabic examples. They also reveal the same characteristics as the Occitan love poetry. Moses ibn 'Ezra', however, by no means exclusively favours tragic love in his muwâsâhât. Who does not remember the love adventure with a boy which he described in one of his muwâsâhât?* There he described how he took off the clothes of the boy in a rendez-vous, which had been successful. It is quite in the style of Abû Nuwâs' poems of the kind, which describe how he took off the clothes of the boy after having seduced him with wine**. Moses ibn 'Ezra' also has love muwâsâhât about elegiac and tormented love, whose inspiration is comparable with the description of tormented love in the poetry of the troubadours. We will consider in the following the contents of his poem no. 255.

0. Sha<x>lay - èk lo nispanu - madâwâ lehabîll
   Sha<x>lu - *'ofer akzarî - yi'tof ke-labîll*

0. Those who ask me why the illnesses of my heart are not concealed, ask a cruel gazelle which lacerates my heart like a lioness.

1. *Etshe'on - hishqi sefanî - bënot se'ala'yll*
   *ki ge'on - appo yagorti - lüle dam'ayll*
   yom se'on - *sîri neta'ftî - gillu nega'ayll*
   *'okeray - 'ênay ki banu - sod mah<x>shabîll*
   riggelu - *bal-la' el-'ofri - way-ye<x>naf bîll*

1. I have concealed the noise of my love in my interior, because I feared his pride, were it not that my tears that I shed on the day of the outbreak of my sorrow, revealed my blows. My slanderers are my eyes since they revealed the secret of my thought. They spied secretly for my gazelle (2 Sam.I) so that he is furious with me.

The poet describes in the next strophe that even his enemies have compassion for him when they see the gazelle's harsh treatment of him:

2. Ah<q>etrê - man'amme yofa - shat lêb me'odalli
ye<q>reh - mig-ganneh lehyo - ëni weradalli
yeh<q>reh - ki-sam et-sibyo - nesheq le-yadalli
sor<q>rây - ot ëyabonnu - bi-r'ot merîbîl!
yish<q>lu - fanaw u-sh'êrî - killah shebîbîl!

2. [To go] after the blisses of his beauty [my] heart has put its strength - while my eye plucked from the garden of his cheek its roses. He became harsh with me, so that he made his beauty his weapon. Even my enemies have compassion for me when they see my adversary; his face shines when the sparks of my passion have consumed my flesh.

3. Asefah - et orah 'ayish - li-fnî me'eroll
tarefah - bat 'êno layish - ëszuz be-suroll
anefah - wat-tasem dayish - labî le-sîroll
ok<q>bay - al-na tallînu - ki ma'q<q>âsabîl
'ol<q>lu - ënaw u-mzori - ba-hem we-tubîl!

3. The Great Bear [Ursa Major] has collected its light from the face of his star. The pupil of his eye could lacerate a ferocious lion by the sharpness of its steel. The eye was furious and trampled down upon my heart with its sorrow. O my lovers, do not make complaints [murmur] against me, because his eyes inflicted my grief. From them comes my illness and my recovery.

In the fourth strophe the poet describes how the hairlocks of the gazelle's head are black like his own heart which is black because of sorrow and burning pain. The gazelle's eyes unsheathen a sword on the poet's back, piercing and beating him with their glances. Finally he has become thin and meager like the gazelle's waist: his hair locks of his head are black like my heart and his eyes inflicted my grief. From them comes my illness and my recovery.

4. Mahlefot - rosho ki-lbabî - qaderu, we-ënawll
sholefot - hereb 'al gabbî - 'ad shab ke-moinawll
dolefot - dema' 'al-ôsbi - 'ënay ke-shinnawll
ak<q>lay - ëlî yikkonu - darkê <q>hubîl!
yahmelu - 'ënaw li-mzori - u-t'-ot keêbîl!

4. The hair locks of his head are black like my heart and his eyes unsheathen a sword on my back, so that it becomes [thin and meager] like his [i.e. the gazelle's] waist. My eyes are dripping tears because of my grief like his teeth [dripping with saliva]. Would that the ways of my beloved were directed towards me and that his eyes showed compassion with my passion and great distress.

From these four strophes we can gather that there is a suffering 'I and a 'he', the object of love. In every simq a third category is introduced, namely, my slanderers, my enemies, my lovers. The poet personifies his eyes as slanderers. This and other features such as the comparison of the black hairs of the beloved with the blackness of his heart gives the whole poem a manneristic tone. In this respect some poetry in Hebrew and Arabic may differ from Occitan love poetry, which in general is not that complex.

An important feature of strophic poetry in Arabic and Hebrew in contrast to non-strophic poetry in these languages is that a certain motif such as the description of the sufferings of the lover is dealt with more extensively than would have been in non-strophic poetry. So the extension and repetition of the motif is perhaps a quality inherent within the strophicness of the poem. And this makes strophic love poems in Arabic and Hebrew look like strophic poems in Occitan poetry, e.g. when themes such as the cruelty of the beloved and the sufferings of the lover are broached.

However, a difference with Occitan lyrics occurs due to the presence in Arabic and Hebrew muwâsâhât of khârjas in partly colloquial Arabic, partly Romance language. These are present in two cases of the muwâsâhât discussed above. In these two examples by Ibn Baqi and Moses ibn 'Ezra', the poet who is suffering out of love for a boy, in the last strophe, also compares himself implicitly with a girl who suffers from love.

In Ibn Baqi's case the last strophe, including the khârja, goes as follows:

5. Wa-rubba khawdin jafâ-hâ -l-wajdull
wa-shaffa-hâ -l-bayna thumma -l-bu'dull
fa-'a'lanat bi-l-firdqi tashdull
Benid, la Pasqa, ay, aun shin ellill
Lasrandol[?] meu corajon bor ellill.

5. Many a girl who was in love and suffered from rejection, and who had
become thin because her beloved went away and is now far from her, declared her loneliness by singing: "Easter has come, but without him, my heart is torn due to him."

The kharja (final part) is a piece that does not fit totally into the poem, it destroys in a way the unity of the poem, because there is no longer an "I" and "now", instead there is a comparison with another lover. Sometimes the main poem even belongs to another genre than the kharja.

We can see this in the case of a kharja which has been used in a Hebrew elegy by Yehudah hal–Lewi (d. 538/1143/4903) about a brother of Moses ibn 'Ezra (d. ca. 535/1140/4900).

The last strophe of Yehudah hal–Lewi's poem goes as follows:

5. Shīr ah meferad be-lebbi kidodod/
Yashir ke'amah lebabah yiddodod/
Ki mo'adah ba we-lo ba had-dodod/
Venid la pasqua: adivien sin elu/
Como-cande meu corazón por elu/

5. The song of a brother who has been left alone is a fire in my heart. He sings like a maiden whose heart flutters, because the appointed hour has come, and the beloved has not arrived: 'The time of the tryst has come without him; How my heart burns for him.'

The preceding elegy is totally different from the love poetry and has another source of inspiration, but then, in the last strophe, preceding the kharja, the poet compares Moses ibn 'Ezra's distress with that of a woman in love. It is a particularity of the Hebrew strophes that precede the kharja that they often try to use the same notions in Hebrew which subsequently occur in the kharja in another language. Stern makes this very clear in his articles by translating the last Hebrew strophe and using capitals for identical notions which occur later in the kharja.

We see how in the three lines of the last strophe that 'is a fire (on a sparkle) in my heart' is a prefiguration of the Romance phrase 'How burns my heart for him', whereas the phrase 'The appointed hour' etc., is more or less repeated in the song of the girl. In the Arabic muwaṣṣah by Ibn Baqi on a love theme the link of the kharja with the three preceding lines of the last strofe is not as strong as in the last strophes of Hebrew Andalusian poems.

In the last strophe of Moses ibn 'Ezra's poem the comparative

beloved one to Paradise.24

Other themes are the obstacles to love, such as the guardian (guardador or raqib); the slanderer who reveals the secret love; the jealous person, and the reproacher. Among the themes listed by Ecker as occurring in both Arabic and Medieval European poetry are several which are to be found in love literature from throughout the world, for example, the beloved wounding with her eyes her lover’s heart; or the heart of one lover being stolen by the other; the alba motif or the departure motif; the weeping of the lover; the haughtiness and cruelty of the beloved; the nobility of the character of the lover engendered by love; love as an illness; dying from love and the loyalty of the lover despite the beloved one’s fickleness.25

These themes are not only present in Arabic and Occitan love lyrics, but can be found in other, contemporary forms, for example, Galician and later Castillian lyrics. In Galician lyrics we find the theme of love during the pilgrimages, which again also appears in early Islamic love poetry. Indeed, the pilgrimage to Mecca was regarded by some as an excellent opportunity for meeting a lady.26

However, there are certain differences between Arabic and Romance love lyrics. Post-eighth century A.D. examples of Arabic love lyrics are mingled with the wine genre. It should be noted that wine poetry is totally absent in the Occitan repertoire. In Arabic love poetry often the beloved, who is usually a male rather than female, often pours out the wine for the drinking company. Thus a major difference in the Arabic song is the presence of a boy as the love object whereas in Occitan love poetry the love object is always a woman. Although Ḥamza, one of the reciters of Abū Nuwāṣ Diwān, counted some twenty women with whom the poet professed to be in love with,27 Abū Nuwāṣ admitted to preferring male lovers to female. The description of the love object is also different in Arabic poetry compared with Occitan poetry: the description of the Arabic boy is more concrete one whereas in Occitan love lyric the beauty of the woman is described in general, even in moral terms and there are seldom concrete descriptions other than perhaps the pale colour of the woman’s face.

24. Cf. GHAZI, op. cit., I, p. 184 (Ibn ‘Ubāda, line 1): "From the source of the blessed in Paradise...".

25. See the sources given in note 2) and see also the bibliography given in notes on pp. 20 and 22 in: MARTÍN DE RIQUER, Los trovadores, I, Barcelona (Planeta), 1975.


27. See Abū Nuwāṣ, Diwān, Wiesbaden (Bibliotheca Islamica no. 20) 1972, IV [ed. G. SCHÖLER], see the preface of the muʾannathāt by Ḥamza.

The similarities in love themes of Arabic/Hebrew and Occitan and other Romance poetry may be due to the fact that both lyrics are part of the universals which often crop up in matters of love: the obstacles of love, the eye like an arrow which hurts the heart; the cruelty of the beloved, spring and alba motifs.28

But it is not only in the field of love poetry that thematic resemblances exist between Arabic and Romance poetry. Other genres with similarities also occur, for example, elegies; war poems, debating poems, invective poems, laudatory poems and poems of self-praise. This may point to the fact that Arabic and Hebrew poetry had the same function at the courts as Occitan poetry.

As an example of how the Occitan elegy or planh is usually structured Caroline Cohen describes the following order of subjects:29

a) invitation to lamentation; b) speaking about the high lineage of the deceased one; c) enumeration of countries and persons distressed by his death; d) laudatory passage on the virtues of the deceased; e) prayer in order to perpetrate the salvation of the soul of the deceased one; f) distress produced by his death. It is not surprising that this enumeration of elegiac topics sounds familiar as Arabic and Hebrew elegies also deal with these topics.

Conclusions.

Hebrew, Arabic and Romance strophic poetry have many features in common, not only on the level of form, but also on a thematic level and with respect to the register. Arabic and Hebrew strophic poetry like the muwaṣṣāḥāt, a poetic form which originated in Andalusia, have the same themes as non-strophic poetry; the difference may lay in the distribution of the themes over the poem. In strophic poetry certain love themes can be extended over the whole poem in the case of the muwaṣṣāḥāt whereas in the qašīdā or monostrophic poem there is greater progress from one theme to another. The fact that in strophic Arabic and Hebrew poetry nearly the whole poem can be dedicated to the description of the sufferings of an unrequited love, makes these poems look like certain love poems in the Occitan poetry of the troubadours and that of the trouvères of Northern France.

28. See on this universal theme: A. T. HATTO, ed., Eos, an Inquiry into the Theme of Lovers' Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry, the Hague (Mouton), 1965.

29. See however our note 18) above.

At first sight, Arabic, Hebrew and Occitan poetry have in common many motifs, themes and poetic genres. However, from some Arabic and Hebrew strophic poems it becomes clear that Arabic and Hebrew poetry had already reached a stage of high rhetorization, and from this point of view it is not comparable to the beginning Occitan poetry. In Arabic and Hebrew love poetry, the concept of the lover's eyes which are at the same time his slanderers, is a rhetoric elaboration and combination of two stock motifs which cannot be found in Occitan love lyrics. In Romance poetry we have to wait until the appearance of Baroque poetry or the Italian manneristic poets of the Seicento to make such combinations possible. In other poetic genres such as the laudatory or encomiastic genre, this fact is even clearer. The Occitan laudatory poem about the Spanish kings is derived from a different inspiration than Arabic or Hebrew laudatory passages.

Having said this, is it quite possible that the genre of the muwasaḥāt, due to its musical performances, became popularised to a degree that the high rhetorisation became less, and just only the common stock of motifs are mentioned without any rhetoric elaboration. This is apparently the case with many of the so-called muwasaḥāt andalusīyah which are sung to this day.
