NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN THE QUR'ĀN AND IN EARLY POETRY

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It is one of the ironies of Arabic literature that, whilst it is dogma for Muslims that the Qur'ān is not poetry, the commentators on it found themselves having to lean heavily on the corpus of early poetry when they came to elucidate the more arcane phrases of the Qur'ān. This was, of course, due to necessity, for virtually all the material in the literary registers nearest to the Qur'ān had either disappeared, in the case of *kāhin* and *ḫaṭīb*-type material, or had been modernized, in the case of *qāṣṣ*-type material.

The result was the gathering of *šawāhid*, lines of poetry that were thought to elucidate various aspects of Quranic grammar and lexicography. I would argue that the value of this small corpus has been considerably overestimated. It is a treasure trove of the recondite; and whilst such material is helpful with some Quranic problems, it is almost always the case that those problems are of a relatively trivial, peripheral nature, concerned with the last few per cent of the Quranic text and not its central meaning. Of course, it would be unnatural for the commentators not to wish to try to explain every word of the Qur'ān – quite clearly they were expected to do so – but their preoccupation with the arcane led to virtual neglect of phrases where there was less difficulty or where poetry and the Qur'ān have drawn on the same general stock of ideas or, even more interesting, where Quranic usage appears to be a modification of pre-Islamic usage.

It is not my intention to deal with these questions in detail here. I have touched on them from time to time in my analyses of early Arabic poems, and after further work I expect to write on them at length elsewhere. However, they are relevant to any discussion of the relationship between the Qur'ān and poetry. Three of the topics that I am looking

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at, and one example of each, will indicate the sort of problem that is involved:

a) complex overlapping phraseology:

There is a very striking example where aš-Šanfarā, *Lāmiyyat al-ʿarab*, line 21 has *wa-aḍribu ʿanhu ḏ-ḏikra ṣafḥan* 'I turn aside my thought from it' (Jones 1992:154) and *Sūra* 43, verse 5 has *a-fa-naḍribu ʿankumu ḏ-ḏikra ṣafḥan* 'shall We turn aside thought from you?'. One might have expected some cross-referencing by az-Zamaḫšarī, the one person who wrote a commentary on both works, but there is none, as there is no real difficulty about the meaning of the phrases.

b) conventional ideas:

A single comparison between aš-Šanfarā, *Lāmiyyat al-ʿarab*, line 34 2nd hemistich *wa-la-ṣ-ṣabru – in lam yanfaʿi š-šakwu – aǧmalu* 'and surely patience is the best course if complaining is of no avail' (Jones 1992:163) with *Sūra* 12, verses 18 and 83 *ṣabrun ǧamīlun* will suffice.

c) development of ideas:

Durayd's famous line *wa-hal anā illā min Ġaziyyata? in ġawat, ġawaytu; wa-in taršud Ġaziyyatu aršudi* 'Am I anyone but one of Ġaziyya? and if Ġaziyya go astray, I stray with them; and if they act rightly, I am right [too]' (Jones 1992:72) shows a limited metaphorical development from the original concrete meanings of such words as *ġawā, ḍalla, rašada, ihtadā etc.* This metaphorical meaning is much extended in the Qur'ān.

There is at least one other field in which a non-traditional approach to the links between the Qur'ān and early poetry appears to help our understanding, and it is this to which I wish to devote the rest of this article. My treatment is suggestive rather than exhaustive. It is intended to encourage the reader to think further about these links.

The dogma that the Qur'ān is not poetry is usually stated in a fairly simplistic, though accurate, way. The Qur'ān does not exhibit the

metres of poetry nor does it use rhyme in the way that poetry does. It is rhythmic and uses assonance, but that is not poetry. Entirely true!

However, even a short step beyond that takes us well away from the well-trodden paths of scholarship. So when I ask the question, "What might the Qur'ān have been like had it been poetry?", I have to form my own answer. Yet this seems to me to be a fair and useful question, even for those who accept as dogma the *iʿǧāz* of the Qur'ān (incidentally, a doctrine that did not develop all that early). If one can show other differences beyond the axiomatic ones, one's general understanding is improved.

There is one specific area in which I think the question might be raised, that of the narrative. Very little Arabic poetry can carry the label, and even that is hardly narrative in the normally accepted sense. Of the examples that do occur, perhaps the best-known is al-Aʿšā's *Qiṣṣatu s-Samaw'al* (*Dīwān*, poem 25; for a commentary see Jones 1994:155-163).

In the form that it has come down to us, the poem consists of 21 lines. It is arguable (and basically immaterial) whether it is complete or only the *ġaraḍ* of a longer piece. After a couple of introductory lines the poem tells how as-Samaw'al of the fortress of al-Ablaq at Taymā' preferred to see the head of a small army, Ḥāriṯ, kill his son rather than hand over some suits of armour that had been entrusted to him. Incidentally, that is all that one can get from the poem itself. The other details of this famous story all come from other, later, sources.

A literal translation of the poem runs a follows:

1. O Šurayḥ, do not desert me after my fingers have today grasped the ropes [of your protection] after I have been in bondage.

2. I have travelled widely through the lands between Bāniqyā and Aden, and my travelling and journeying among the non-Arabs has lasted long.

3. The man who most faithfully kept his promise and was most unyielding in his defence of the one to whom he had given his protection was your ancestor, as is well-recognised and cannot be denied.

4. [He was] like a rain-cloud whose rain gave the bounty that was sought from it; and in times of difficulty [he was] bold as a lion, ready to pounce.

5. Be like as-Samaw'al when the chief came to him at the head of a large army, [dark] as the night, slow moving.

6. The man protected by Ibn Ḥayyā, in the case of someone has received his covenant, has a fuller promise and is better defended than the man protected by Ibn ʿAmmā.

7. His dwelling was in al-Ablaq at Taymā', an impregnable fortress and a protector who was not treacherous.

8. When [the besieger] offered him two courses of humiliation, he said to him, "Say what you want, for I am listening, O Ḥārit̲".

9. He said, "Losing you child or breaking your promise: you [are caught] between them. So choose and there is no happy choice in them for the one who has to choose".

10. [as-Samaw'al] hesitated but briefly, then said to him, "Kill your prisoner. I shall defend that under my protection".

11. "There are things to take his place, if you are his killer and kill a noble [boy] who is without fault,"

12. "Much property, honour in no way stained, and brothers like him who are not bad [boys],"

13. "Who have learned their code from me, without impetuosity, nor devoid of intelligence when War girds her loins."

14. "If you lay your hands on him, a generous lord and fair, pure women will give me other descendants to survive me."

15. "What they say in private in my presence is neither insubstantial nor insincere, and they conceal my secrets if they are entrusted to them."

16. When he stood [ready] to kill the boy, he first said, "Look down, O Samaw'al, and look at the running blood".

17. "Am I to kill your son in cold blood, or will you submit and bring them?" [How Samaw'al] disliked this – and how great was his dislike!

18. Then Ḥārit̲ severed his jugular vein, and [Samaw'al's] breast was enveloped in the pain of calamity, as he was filled with grief for him like the burning that comes from fire.

19. He gave preference to the suits of armour entrusted to him, that he should not be reviled because of them, and his promise concerning them was not broken.

20. He said, "I will not buy shame at the cost of [my] honour", and he chose the honour [in which men would hold him] before shame.

21. The patience he showed was a natural part of his character, and in the matter of loyalty he never failed to kindle the spark [of honour].

I have chosen three Quranic passages for comparison. The first, from *Sūra* 37, is a description of Abraham's would-be sacrifice of his

son. As with al-Aʿšā's poem the name of the son is not mentioned, but that is about all the two pieces have in common. The urgency of the Quranic passage is in striking contrast to the leisurely pace of the poem. I quote from Arberry's translation:

Then We gave him the good tidings of
a prudent boy;
and when he had reached the age of
running with him,
he said, 'My son, I see in a dream
that I shall sacrifice thee; consider,
what thinkest thou?'
He said, 'My father, do as thou art
bidden; thou shalt find me, God willing,
one of the steadfast.'
When they had surrendered, and he flung him
upon his brow,
We called unto him, 'Abraham,
thou hast confirmed the vision;
even so We recompense the good-doers.
This is indeed the manifest trial.'
And We ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice,
and left for him among the later folk
'Peace be upon Abraham!'
Even so We recompense the good-doers;
he was among Our believing servants. [37:101-111]

The second passage, from *Sūra* 12, is the passage from the story of Joseph in which the brothers persuade Jacob to entrust Joseph to them and then sell him to a passing caravan. There is description, dialogue and even some *ḥikma*, but again the pace is much more urgent:

They said, 'Father, what ails thee, that thou
trustest us not with Joseph? Surely we are his
sincere well-wishers.

Send him forth with us tomorrow, to
frolic and play; surely we shall be
watching over him.'
He said, 'It grieves me that you should go with him,
and I fear the wolf may eat him, while you
are heedless of him.
They said, 'If the wolf eats him, and we a band,
then are we losers!'
So when they went with him, and agreed to put him
in the bottom of the well, and We revealed to him,
'Thou shalt tell them of this their doing
when they are unaware.'
And they came to their father in the evening,
and they were weeping.
They said, 'Father, we went running races, and
left Joseph behind with our things; so the wolf
ate him. But thou wouldst never believe us,
though we spoke truly.'
And they brought his shirt with false blood on it.
He said, 'No; but your spirits tempted you
to do somewhat. But come, sweet patience!
And God's succour is ever there to seek against
that you describe.'
Then came travellers, and they sent one of them,
a water-drawer, who let down his bucket.
'Good news!' he said. 'Here is a young man.'
So they hid him as merchandise; but God knew
what they were doing.
Then they sold him for a paltry price, a
handful of counted dirhams; for they set
small store by him. [12:11-20]

The final passage, from *Sūra* 20, is similar in length to al-Aʿšā's poem, and, though the material presented is totally different, the overall thrust

is not too dissimilar. However, in my view, the Quranic passage achieves much more:

> Children of Israel, We delivered you
> from your enemy; and We made covenant
> with you upon the right side of the Mount,
> and sent down on you manna and quails:
> 'Eat of the good things wherewith
> We have provided you; but exceed not
> therein, or My anger shall alight on you;
> and on whomsoever My anger
> alights, than man is hurled to ruin.
> Yet I am All-forgiving to him who
> repents and believes, and does
> righteousness, and at last is guided.'
>
> 'What has sped thee far from thy people,
> Moses?' 'They are upon my tracks,'
> Moses said. 'I have hastened,
> Lord, only that I may please Thee.'
> Said He, 'We have tempted thy people
> since thou didst leave them. The Samaritan
> has misled them into error.'
> Then Moses returned very angry
> and sorrowful to his people, saying,
> 'My people, did your Lord not promise
> a fair promise to you? Did the time
> of the covenant seem so long to you,
> or did you desire that anger
> should alight on you from your Lord,
> so that you failed in your tryst with me?'
> 'We have not failed in our tryst
> with thee,' they said, 'of our volition;
> but we were loaded with fardels,

even the ornaments of the people,
and we cast them, as the Samaritan
also threw them, into the fire.'

(Then he brought out for them a Calf,
a mere body that lowed; and they said,
'This is your god, and the god
of Moses, whom he has forgotten.'
What? Did they not see that thing
returned no speech unto them, neither
had any power to hurt or profit them?
Yet Aaron had aforetime said to them,
'My people, you have been tempted
by this thing, no more; surely
your Lord is the All-merciful; therefore
follow me, and obey my commandment!'
'We will not cease,' they said, 'to cleave
to it, until Moses returns to us.')

Moses said, 'What prevented thee,
Aaron, when thou sawest them in error,
so that thou didst not follow after me?
Didst thou then disobey my commandment?'
'Son of my mother,' Aaron said,
'take me not by the beard, or the head!
I was fearful that thou wouldst say,
"Thou hast divided the Children of Israel,
and thou hast not observed my word".'
Moses said, 'And thou, Samaritan,
what was thy business?' 'I beheld
what they beheld not,' he said,
'and I seized a handful of dust
from the messenger's track, and cast it
into the thing. So my soul prompted me.'

'Depart!' said Moses. 'It shall be thine
all this life to cry "Untouchable!"
And thereafter a tryst awaits thee
thou canst not fail to keep. Behold
thy god, to whom all the day
thou wast cleaving! We will surely burn it
and scatter its ashes into the sea.
Your God is only the One God;
there is no god, but He alone
who in His knowledge embraces everything.' [20:80-98]

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