

## IBN ṬABĀTABĀ'S POETICS\*

László Tüske

*National Széchényi Library, Budapest*

Ibn Ṭabātabā (d. 933/34) is an outstanding representative of 10<sup>th</sup> century Arabic literary criticism whose famous *ʿIyār aš-šīʿr* ('The Criterion of the Poem') contributed to the development of medieval Arabic literary aesthetics. The work occupies a special place among critical writings because, in contrast to the contemporary writers who generally spent their efforts discussing the rhetorical details of literary works of art, Ibn Ṭabātabā focused his attention on the rationally apprehensible creative activity, determined by ends and means. He made a detailed analysis on the process of literary communication: he studied the creator from the angle of the created work, the work of art from the angle of its structure and the recipient from the angle of the impact of the work. His thoughts on the creator and the work were continued in critical tradition, but his observations on reception and impact were practically forgotten by literary studies. His position on poetics is determined by rational demands made of poetry, and his aesthetics too is based on a rational conception of poetry. This seminal work has come down to us in a single 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript (Escorial 238, 22 – 57). This paper sums up our investigations concerning Ibn Ṭabātabā's poetics and, to some extent, his aesthetics. In this work the medieval author started with the position that the poets of his age were subjected to "persecution" (*mihna*) because they were unable to attain in their poems the poetic requirements of "old" Arabic poetry regarded as the model. To resolve this crisis he elaborated his poetics according to the considerations of the *habit* of poet (and recipient). In its essential elements this was in line with the system of medieval Arabic poetic principles developed in the works of contemporary literary scholars and summed up later in the concept of *ʿamūd aš-šīʿr* ('the principles of poem-making').

In order to place Ibn Ṭabātabā's critical activity in its proper context we have to study the development of medieval Arabic literature. It is known that in keeping with the animistic world view, the development of Arabic poetry began from a magic "undifferentiated art" and after the appearance of Islam it was transformed into urban-courtly "official" poetry on the one hand and "folklore" art on the other. One way of studying the transition from the popular mode to the aristocratic mode is to examine the shift in ideas on inspiration in the given literary material. This analysis shows that the sacral image of the poet as inspired by a *ǧinnī* characteristic of the early stage of Arabic poetry, gradually disappeared by the appearance of Islam. The

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\* This paper sums up the author's views on this subject as elaborated in his monograph of the same title (in print).

process was strengthened by the Prophet Muḥammad's rough outline of a cosmology which placed the traditional source of inspiration, the *ǧinnī*, on a lower level of the spheres of existence. He attributed his own inspiration (*wahy*) to the "real" transcendence (*Allāh*), and so distinguished himself from the inspiration of poets, soothsayers and others which became "secondary" and so could no longer be regarded as sacral. The documents referring to "muses" can be found in the invocation parts of poems, or in the narratives discussing the poet's creative difficulties. An analysis of these shows that over the three centuries from the time immediately preceding the birth of Islam to the ʿAbbāsids, the *ǧinnī* addressed in this invocation gradually disappears. The fact that poetry fell silent for a while after the appearance of Islam shows that its source of inspiration was eradicated. A long transitional period followed in which poetry gradually became part of practical life showing an independent rationality of end and means, while its sacral nature was taken over by the Qur'ān. In this way the sacral was reformulated within the general frame of Islam, and the Qur'ān filled the role of sacral text. This is expressed in the dogma of the inimitability of the Qur'ān (*i'ǧāz al-Qur'ān*), which gradually became fixed. And on the other side, literary activity, in contrast to inspiration, came under the paradigm of craft (*sinā'a*).

Historically, the paradigm of craft characterised literatures of the population of the conquered territories and as such became the basis of the new Arabic speaking courtly poetry and culture that was being organised. In shaping the world-view of the new empire created through conquest, it drew on Byzantine Christian, Persian Mazdaist, heathen Bedouin Arab and early Muslim traditions and by placing these on new foundations created its own distinctive system. On the general basis of *hylomorphism*, medieval Muslim thinkers interpreted the phenomena of the world from the angle of *material* and *form*, and regarded things, implements and art objects to be created as transformation or shaping, the development of new forms. "Craft" or Arabic *sinā'a*, is used to designate all kinds of courtly crafts and can mean arranging material into new form. This paradigm originated in the Hellenistic traditions and strengthened into Muslim courtly culture. Its origin can be sought among Stoics for, surprisingly, in the work of al-Āmidī (d. 987) and al-Hafāǧī (d. 1063) we find the same analysis of the Aristotelian "causes" – the material, formal, creative and the aims – characterising the process of creation that can be read in Seneca (*Epistulae* No. 61). The connection between Stoic philosophical thinking and that of medieval Arabic speaking critics is attributable to the living traditions of classical schools of rhetoric operating on the conquered territory of the Byzantine or Iranian empire. However, it is obvious that such a rigid use of the formal elements cannot lead to an understanding of the mimetic nature of poetry. While the craft paradigm helps and supports the acquisition of routine and promotes its fulfilment in creative activity, on the other hand the "cast" notion of a work of art (*sabīka mufrāǧa*) restricts the assertion of its elevated generalising role. In this way the poetic work of art is rather an art of object, an objectivity that can be viewed from all sides and held in the hands

which, together with its basic literary (aesthetic) functions – *dulce et utile* – must also serve functions of social representation, particularly in the case of genres offering the possibility of serving such functions in medieval Arabic literature, such as the panegyric (*madīh*), the lament (*marṭiya*), the boasting song (*iftihār*). It was his encounter with this craft-type poetry that made Ibn Ṭabāṭabā write his work. Poetry is a craft, its function according to the prophetic tradition is to offer wisdom (*ḥikma*) and provide enjoyment (enchantment: *sahr*) for the recipients. This concept coincides with the position of other literary scholars of the time and it can be said that with the spread of Islam it became the general paradigm of the verbal arts. Systematic acquisition of the knowledge needed for the craft, study of the poetic tradition, and practice of the skills learned became the most important constituent elements of the *habit* of the craftsman-poet, in which natural endowments (such as a sense of rhythm) are not of decisive importance since man's most distinctive characteristic is his *educable reason*, and *everything can be learned*. He sums up the knowledge that can be acquired and the ability of acquisition in the concept of *kamāl al-ʿaql* ('mature reason'). Ibn Ṭabāṭabā shows the requirements made of a poetic work of art in conjunction with his detailed analysis of the creative process. Naturally the application of hylomorphism plays a decisive role in this. He regards the work as a shaped unit of a given content, as "one" (unity: *wahda*), in which the most important criterion is the harmonious fitting (*ʿitidāl*) of the parts. It can be observed that this unity appears in the first instance on the level of rhythm, but it becomes clear from his analysis of the creative process that he also understands this *ʿitidāl*-concept to include the non-rhythmic harmony of the parts of the work. However, the text convinces us that this unity (*wahda*) cannot be interpreted in the domain of the "organic" unity of the works of art. It can be seen that, as in the case of his contemporaries, the line (*bayt*) is the central verse concept in Ibn Ṭabāṭabā's system of thinking, because it contains in itself a thought or fact of life (*maʿnā*) which determines the whole genre. Whatever the case, the author defines the genre and from that the structure of the poem from the angle of the subject-matter and perhaps this is why, when comparing a poem with the structure of a letter (*risāla*), he cites the rhetoricising statement of al-ʿAttābī (d. 823) that "*the poem is formal prose, the letter is informal verse.*" Ibn Ṭabāṭabā also demands unity in style and word usage and, in addition to the rules for the internal equilibrium and harmony of the given work of art, he expects the work to comply with the system of conditions of the audience which can be taken into account: regarding style, word usage, names, etc. Furthermore, the author supports the unity of the given work of art by stressing the significance of the *ṭahalluṣ* (connective) lines which have the function of linking the parts of the poem together. He is the first author to deal with this question and in this respect he also performs a literary history analysis, showing that this type of inserted pieces is more frequent in the poetry of the "modern" writers than it is in the old ones regarded as model. So, it can be clearly seen that the work of art is in reality an art object, a real cast (*sabīka mufra-*

ga), created by craft determined by the rationality of ends and means. The harmony of the parts, the rapport with the audience, the internal (logical) and technical linking of the parts once again reinforces the assertion of the craft paradigm.

Now, the rational conception of poetry does not allow the poet to use metaphors (*isti'āra* or *mağāz*), or at least not ones that cannot be controlled by the reason. Consequently, the chief creative methods are description (*wasf*), comparison (*tašbih*) and wisdom expressed in proverbial form (*hikma*). The rationality demands Ibn Ṭabāṭabā's study to give prominence to similes among the creative methods. Therefore he discusses in detail meaning, structure and possibilities of similes. In this it draws on the work of predecessors, and at the same time also represents the opinion of contemporaries (e.g. Ibn Abī 'Awn d. early 10<sup>th</sup> century). We can say that the craft paradigm linked to a rational world-view does not allow for the author to prescribe usage of the uncontrolled identification by metaphor (*this is that*) in place of logically controllable full comparison (*this is like that*). In the history of poetry this means that the position Ibn Ṭabāṭabā adopts on the question of the metaphor *versus* simile gives precedence to the rationally controllable simile over the vagueness of the metaphor. Arabic literary criticism treated plagiarism (*sariqa*) as a central issue. Following from his conception of poetry, Ibn Ṭabāṭabā discusses the poetic heritage of the past as a *material* (*ma'nā*) that can be recycled, merely warning that with certain techniques modern poets should adopt the solutions, poetic images and similes of the old poets. This position legitimised borrowings and proposed standard solutions, e.g. that the poet should mask the borrowing by changing the genre or through some kind of *reformulation*. In this way he opened a possibility for imitation similar to that proposed by Quintilian in his *Institutio*.

It is the exceptional merit of the work of Ibn Ṭabāṭabā that, after analysing the creator and the work, he also devotes attention to reception, to the impact of the work. In this too, he can be shown to draw on Hellenistic, and more precisely, on Stoic traditions. In describing reception, the *assent* of the Stoics can be recognised from the choice of words (the beautiful: actually 'full' – Arabic *wāfīn*, and the ugly: actually 'incomplete' – Arabic *nāqis*) and the train of thought. However, it is very difficult to clarify the question because the author's conception of the psyche cannot be identified clearly from the laconic sentences of our text. On the basis of the data available it can only be regarded as probable that reception (or rejection) takes place through 'comprehension' (*fahm*) under the control of the "mature reason" (*kamāl al-'aql*), operating through man's natural characteristic, the criterion of truth. In my opinion the word 'criterion' (*'iyār*) in the title of the work refers specifically to this situation of *reception*. It has historical significance because the question did not arise at all anywhere else among the early Arab critics. The main point is that reception is a twofold event in the psyche leading to knowledge: first, it is a physically determined perception and second, it contains a shift of interest to comprehension and knowledge. It seems to me that this notion of reception corresponds to the epistem-

ology of theologians influenced by Stoicism who state that the basic condition for all knowledge is the existence of a correspondence between the perception of senses (*maḥsūs*) and the immediate knowledge of soul (*ma'qūl*). (This epistemology can be characterised as being built on two foundations: on the universal reliability of sense perception and on the universality of the immediate knowledge of the intellect.) The work of art is thus evaluated according to the criterion of truth. However this means that it is not the expected beauty that is the most important category, but the truth (*ṣidq*), and its opposite is not the ugly, but the false or untrue (*kaḍb*, *kaḍib*). The most important demand made of a work of art is that it correspond to reality.

However, the sense in which Ibn Ṭabāṭabā speaks of correspondence to reality is open to question. Discussing the origin of the work of art, Martin Heidegger made a distinction between the real and the means-nature of works. The real work of art can be described as "*factum est*", as truth, but the work which is of means-nature can be summed up in the formula "*N.N. fecit.*" On this basis Ibn Ṭabāṭabā's whole theory of art regards as the ideal works in the form determined by the end-means rationality of craft, technically works of means-nature in the sense of Heidegger, but it demands of these the quality (truth) which characterises the "miracle", "*factum est*" works. It seems to me that medieval Arabic literary criticism did not recognise the real difference between the pre-Islamic and the so-called "modern" (*muḥḍat*) poets. They compared the "undifferentiated art" bearing original and sacral truth of the original community with the possible poetry of their own age merely as a product of a special craft and expected it to be imitated on that level. However, they did not have the stock of tools needed to reveal the universal truth of their own courtly art. Because, on the other hand the Qur'an – as direct manifestation of the truth – fully served all the functions of "undifferentiated art" for the Muslim community. Poetry demanding to be regarded as an art became a technical question of entertainment and instruction.

The analysis of the impact of the work promises to show clearly that Ibn Ṭabāṭabā was aware of the complex phenomenon of the emotional and intellectual influence and attempted to analyse this with the method at his disposal. He saw the function of poetry as transmitting wisdom and providing pleasure, but he also recorded, even if only with a simile, the modification taking place in a non-mechanical, hidden, miraculous way in the recipient's *ethos*. Here too, the fact that we are unable to reconstruct in full the author's knowledge of psychology causes some difficulty. Whatever the case, Ibn Ṭabāṭabā writes that poetry "*makes the cowardly brave,*" and it acts like fine wine and the pleasure this brings – *aryahiyya* ('exaltation, joy') – appears practically as a *terminus technicus* in the relevant passages of the work. As regards pleasure, it seems to be an additional element of the psyche acquiring knowledge through a work of art, and more precisely it springs from the "tranquillity of soul" (*sukūn an-nafs*). This quietude of the soul is a positive, purely subjective experience, it is the symptom of the correctness of knowledge, or a sign of the correspondence

between external reality and subjective knowledge. And as such, it is the criterion of the poem.

Arabic literature underwent significant changes in the course of the 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this transitional period the original poetry having the nature of "undifferentiated art" became "professional art" and within this new "professional art" two literary styles (methods) followed each other in succession: the poetry of moderns (*muhḍatūn*) and then the rhetoricised "mannerist" (*badī'*) poetry. The tension between the change in the creative method used for poetry and the traditional canon raised the questions which gave rise to an independent discipline to formulate and answer them. This was the discipline of medieval Arabic literary criticism (*naqd aš-šī'r*). The extensive interest led to the development of the distinctive discourse of medieval Arabic literary studies, providing a frame within which this culture was able to understand, interpret and appreciate works of literature. Right from the start two research directions were followed: the poetic in the narrower sense and the so-called linguistic-rhetorical method.

First, the basic principles applying to poetry, the system of norms and requirements known as the *'amūd aš-šī'r*, took shape in an early stage in the history of criticism. This system of norms was already formulated in the 10<sup>th</sup> century within the frame of general literary research and it comprised the requirements made for poetic creative activity. It rests on the foundation that in Muslim courtly culture, creation is regarded as a craft (*ṣinā'a*), and so works are approached from the angle of their method of production. The considerations for the study of literature were compiled on this basis, starting from the formal definition of the poem, and with the expectations and requirements formulated the foundations of the practical theory of poetry were laid. These considerations were expressed most comprehensively in al-Marzūqī's (d. 1030) edition and explanation written on the classical collection of poetry, *al-Hamāsa* by Abū Tammām. But a few coherent elements of this system of norms had also appeared earlier, here and there in fragments, for example by al-Ġāhiz (d. 868/9), Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), Qudāma b. Ġa'far (d. 948 or 956), and these norms can also be traced in the arguments contained in such works of critical production as those of al-Qāḍī al-Ġurġānī (d. 1003) or al-Āmidī (d. 987).

In addition, the linguistic means of expression became increasingly profound and the rhetorical examination that reached its peak with the activity of 'Abdalqāhir al-Ġurġānī (d. 1078) created the well-known *'ilm al-balāġa* (the science of 'eloquent speech') which, from the summing up by as-Sakkākī (d. 1142) also formally comprised three groups of learning. These were 1) the *'ilm al-ma'ānī* (the science of 'thought contents') analysing the means of expression from the grammatical and logical viewpoints, 2) the *'ilm al-bayān* (the science of 'clear expression'), which examines various possibilities for the linguistic expression of a given thought, and 3) the *'ilm al-badī'* (the science of 'linguistic ornaments') dealing with the questions of ornamentation in language. This group of learning was a kind of rhetoric and formed

the scholarly basis of medieval Arabic literary studies and also set the pattern for all Muslim literatures and literary studies. It is part of the educated literary public discourse and its influence can be traced right up to the present.

According to the material available, it can be said that the relationship between *'amūd aš-šī'r* and *'ilm al-balāġa* was that the *balāġa* disciplines focused mainly on linguistic-rhetorical phenomena, while those of the *'amūd aš-šī'r* concentrated more (or more precisely, in opposition to the later *balāġa*) on phenomena of literary theory. The borderlines between the two disciplines are often blurred and in the first summing up of literary studies by Abū Hilāl al-*'Askarī* (d. 1010) and Ibn Rašīq (d. 1063 or 1071), the considerations of literary theory and rhetoric are brought closer together, including in the form of treatment. The background to this is that, as a result of the steady spread of *badī'* ('mannerist') poetry, and in the thinking it evoked, attention gradually shifted from the poetic to the rhetorical. The abstract of al-Marzūqī can already be read as a system of norms and principles parallel to the *balāġa* discipline (or within the general frame of rhetoricised literary studies), which sets the closed form of the *habit* poet and recipient once and for all and there is no longer a possibility for its living research basis or the many-sided scholarly interest producing it to raise new considerations.

More generally, it can be said that the summing up of the *'amūd aš-šī'r*'s closed system marks a borderline between two periods in the history of medieval Arabic literary studies. It closes the period that began from naive critical reflection and may have set itself the goal of creating an independent criticism specific to poetics. This period raised the questions of stylistics, rhetoric and aesthetic through the many-sided and systematic study of the phenomena of literature. However, the work done by al-Marzūqī hides, even in form, thoughts and experiments in thinking of the previous period falling outside its own scope of interest, which for that reason it did not include among the "principles" of the canon. In this way, the change in the 11<sup>th</sup> century marks the end of the formative (*'amūd aš-šī'r*) period in literary studies and at the same time opens up a new (*balāġa*) period.

The question arises of how the work of Ibn Ṭabātabā fits into this history of learning when we know that he was no longer cited and probably not copied either after the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The answer is that he was displaced from literary tradition as a result of this change of eras: on the one hand because the ideas later approved by the canon demand a system different from his and on the other because his insights concerning the reception and impact of the poem were not regarded as constituent elements of the *'amūd aš-šī'r* and so were simply neglected. Moreover, he did not deal with the actual questions of rhetoric and stylistics and so did not provide new material for the emerging *balāġa* discipline. However, the oeuvre of Ibn Ṭabātabā deserves attention and a further clarification of its details can lead to a more complex picture of medieval Arabic literary studies.

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