

ARABIC LITERATURE: POETICS AND STYLISTICS. II:
TO THE PROBLEM OF CORRELATION OF THE TRADITIONAL AND
THE ORIGINAL IN MEDIEVAL POETICS (ABOUT "IMITATION" IN
CLASSICAL LITERATURES OF THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST)

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Modern readers, who mostly base their idea of literature on their knowledge of the works by 19th—20th centuries' writers may be astounded by the variety of the types of "imitation" and the role which they played in the medieval literature of the Near and Middle East. Even specialists on medieval literature have long been puzzled as in this occasion they came across a peculiar phenomenon in the history of world literature which required special explanation. In this article we will try to characterize this phenomenon in the historical-poetic aspect.

First of all we should say a few words about the most common terms to define "imitations". Medieval theorists of literature distinguished *jawāb* (literary "response"), *tatabbu'* (literary "following"), *naẓīra* (literary "resemblance"), *istiqbāl* (literary "entry for an honorary meeting"), *taqlīd* ("imitation"), *payrawī* (literary "following in somebody's tracks"), *muqābila* (literary "going towards") etc., over ten terms altogether. However, the first three were used most widely. As contents of these terms in trustworthy works in Arabic, Persian, Turkic languages and Urdu can not be defined exactly, we can not be sure about the boundaries of the phenomena they describe. However, we are now concerned with the essence of this phenomenon rather than its definitions and its characteristic features which can be found in most types of "imitation".

If a work is an imitation of a lyrical work, it should repeat the metre, the rhyme, the *radīf* (if there is any), most often the topic and an artistic technique (*ghazal*, *rubā'ī*, *qaṣīda*). If the subject of an "imitation" is a narrative, the poetic meter, the main elements of the plot, the number of chapters etc. (*mathnawī*) should correspond to the original. According to E. È. Bertel's, the conditions for imitating an epic work are even more complicated than for poetry.

"When beginning to write such work, — the researcher says, — a poet should fill the gaps between the node points outlined in advance in a completely different way, he should introduce a new motivation for the characters' actions, change their character and psychology" [1].

Not only separate epic works but also collections of works can be "imitated". The most common example is the so-called "Quintet" (*Khamsa*) by Niẓāmī (ca. 1141—1209) which had a centuries-long tradition of imitations. In the Near and Middle East imitations were often written on a language different from that of the "original" (for example, an "imitation" of a work in Persian was written in Turkic). Let us give some examples to illustrate this.

A famous panegyrist of the Muslim Spain Ibn Darrāj al-Qaṣṣālī (958—1030) wrote by request of the ruler al-Manṣūr a *qaṣīda* which imitated a well-known work by an outstanding poet of the 'Abbāsīd period Abū Nuwās (ca. 755—ca. 813). The Andalusia poet repeats the rhyme, the meter and the main themes of his predecessor's work. However, when interpreting the themes raised by Abū Nuwās, Ibn Darrāj usually develops them in more detail. As a result he coped with his task successfully and created a work which brought him wide popularity "in the East and in the West" [2].

A Persian poet from Iṣfahān Kamāl al-Dīn Ismā'īl (ca. 1172/3—1237) created a unique work in which in 94 lines (*bayts*) he repeats the word *mū* ("a hair") 102 times. The poets most important task, according to Z. N. Vorozheikina, was to use "all semantic 'valencies' of the given lexeme" by "creating dozens of poetic expressions based on the same word and skilfully playing it up in different word combinations, idioms and puns" [3]. The *qaṣīda* "Hair", which is considered by specialists to be a poetic masterpiece, provoked a flow of "imitations". However, none of his followers (including an outstanding poet Salmān Sāwajī) managed to create a poetic work which would meet all the requirements to a *naẓīra* [4].

An Indian Persian-speaking poet Fānī Kashmīrī (d. 1670) wrote his poem *Haft akhtar* ("Seven Stars") as an imitation of *Haft peykar* ("Seven Beauties") by Niẓāmī. The plotline of the original is altered; it lacks the characters of the hunter-king Bahrām Gūr and the beauties-narrators. At the same time Fānī Kashmīrī introduces into the poem seven independent stories etc. A certain independence of

the "imitation" is obvious, but its connection to the "Seven Beauties" is also doubtless [5].

It is interesting to see what part "imitations" played in the works of the Near and the Middle East authors, in the literary process of this region on the whole. It is known that a 13th century poet Sayf Farghānī created around a hundred *qaṣīdas* and *ghazals* as "imitations" to one *qaṣīda* and 81 *ghazals* of the great Sa'dī (1184—1298). Thus, one seventh of all his *qaṣīdas* and *ghazals* are written as "imitations" of Sa'dī's works [6]. In Abū Ishaq Aḡ'im's (d. 1433) collection of works 90 *ghazals* are "imitations" of 24 poets of the 13th—beginning of the 15th centuries, and, thus, only ten of his *ghazals* are "original" ones [7].

Wide popularity of "imitations" of famous authors' *ghazals* was reflected in the creation of anthological collections *Radāif al-ash'ār* ("Categories of Poems") compiled of such works. If we judge by the anthology of Fakhrī Harātī created in 1523, in the 15th—the first half of the 16th century most "imitations" were written on the *ghazals* by Amīr Khusraw al-Dihlawī (1253—1325): on 48 "original" *ghazals* 308 "imitations" were written, Sa'dī (the ratio is 31—231 accordingly), al-Jāmī (1414—1492) — 27—135, Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1389) — 23—125. On the whole, in Fakhrī's anthology 1399 *naẓīra ghazals* written by 276 poets correspond to 234 "original" *ghazals* written by 234 poets [8].

"Imitations" were created in the Near and Middle East throughout the whole Medieval period, beginning from the 10th and up to the 20th century. Interpretation of their nature by Medieval and modern scholars is of great interest to us. A common element for both is considering "imitation" as a *contest*, *rivalry*. The first modern researcher to express such point of view must have been H. A. Gibb at the end of the last century [9]. The point is that the "imitator" is viewed not just as a thoughtless copyist of his predecessor, but as his rival. And one of the conditions is that the subject for "imitation" should by no means be an ordinary, mediocre work, but outstanding, exemplary *ghazals*, *qaṣīdas*, *mathnawīs*, collections of poems, etc. An "imitation" was considered a success if in it the author managed surpass his predecessor in realization of certain elements of form or contents. This task was an extremely difficult one and not all "imitators" could cope with it. Thus, a medieval philologist wrote about one of the masterpieces of Arabic-Spanish lyrics — *qaṣīda Nūniyya* by Ibn Zaydūn (1003—1071): "And this *qaṣīda* is incomparable, many have tried to imitate it, but were not able to surpass it" [10]. Al-Jāmī wrote about one of the poets: "It happened so that nobody coped with the 'response' to his famous *qaṣīda* as it was required..." [11]. In another source we read: "... Connoisseurs of poetry have created numerous 'responses' to this *ghazal*, but none of them surpassed it" [12]. However, the literary history of the Near and Middle East also knows many cases when the "imitation" exceeded the "original" [13]. Anyway, it is important to realize that only a self-confident author who had authority in literary circles dared to write "imitations". It is enough to mention that "imitations" of Niẓāmī's poems were written by such outstanding authors as Amīr Khusraw Dihlawī, 'Alī Shīr Nawā'ī, al-Jāmī, Fuḍūlī (Fuẓūlī).

Most modern researchers tend to view "imitations" as a kind of *rivalry*, *competition*. What was the aim of such rivalry?

There is an opinion that "imitation" was an effective instrument of literary rivalry between court poets who tried to prove their superiority over their competitors. 'Alī Shīr Nawā'ī's task, according to E. È. Bertel's, was, in particular, to create such works which would be "able to meet the competition and put the rival to flight". *Naẓīra* was an ideal form to accomplish this task as it gave equal status to the competing authors: "When a connoisseur reader looked at a work based on an already well-known theme... saw that the same problem, the solution of which he already knew was solved in a new, possible more elegant and original way" [14]. We know of cases when poets tested each other's or a beginner's skills with the help of *naẓīra*, or organized somewhat a literary contest when all participants had to write a "response" to the same poet. Thus, a poet, according to A. Mirzoev, measured "his talent through other poets' talents" [15].

Such view on "imitations" is to a large extent justified by medieval literary practice. However, it does not fully reveal the nature of the rivalry mentioned above. In this connection let us turn to the fact that, according to E. È. Bertel's, to some extent reveals the 15th century poetry technique. A royal author Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, having written a *ghazal*, "writes two more *ghazals* with the same rhyme and *radīf*. In other words, he wrote a sort of a "response" (*naẓīra*) to his own poems" [16]. Such example of a poet's competition with himself must have been a rare one, but a more common phenomenon is, undoubtedly, linked with it. The above-mentioned poet Sayf Farghānī, who wrote "responses" to Sa'dī's 81 *ghazals*, favoured 9 *ghazals* of his outstanding contemporary with two "responses" [17]. In this case the author competes not only with his rival but also with himself.

The latter examples prove the fact that "imitation" has not always been a means of "putting one's rival to flight". We can be even more precise. A norm for "imitation" is a "peaceful co-existence" of the author of the "original" and the "imitating" authors who compete with him. A Turkish poet Ādharī (Āzerī) (d. 1585) in his poem *Naqsh-i khayāl* ("Patterns of Imagination") written as a *naẓīra* to Niẓāmī's *Makhzan al-asrār* ("Treasury of Mysteries") writes the following about his predecessors—"rivals":

The leader of all this caravan [of poets],
The ruler of the country and the talent...
Niẓāmī, who bears the stamp of eloquence...
Composed a perfect poem *Makhzan al-asrār*...
He was followed by Khusraw...
And his *Khamsa* became a cresset lighting the world...
And he wrote the book "The Rise of Stars".
After that we heard the voice of al-Jāmī...
Now in Rūm's acres live eloquent poets,
And there are great masters among them.
And each of them created one poem,
And wrote it in *naẓīra* technique... [18].

From this fragment it follows that the Turkish poet wanted to "beat his rivals with their own weapon, and to do this he could not go within the borders of themes outlined by them" [19]. It seems doubtful that 'Alī Shīr Nawā'ī, to whom the last quotation from E. È. Bertel's refers, wanted, "imitating" *Khamsa*, to "beat" his great predecessor. How-

ever, he entered into a dialogue with him, into a dispute and competition, acknowledging and emphasizing the genetic ties of his work with Niẓāmī's work.

The view on *rivalry* (even in wide interpretation of the word) as on the basis of "imitation" does not explain all peculiarities of this form of creative work for a modern researcher. Let us get back to the idea that Ibn Zaydūn's *qaṣīda Nūniyya* is incomparable, "it was imitated by many but they did not seem able to exceed it". If we preserve the medieval essence of this phrase but fill it with names and characters from world literature of the 19th—20th centuries, it sounds like nonsense: "As 'imitation' of 'Bel Ami' by Guy de Maupassant writer O. wrote 'Bel Ami' but could not surpass his predecessor". The term "creative imitation" which is widely used today instead of just "imitation" which emphasizes the necessity to introduce changes into the "original" while writing a "response" to it, does not make it sound any better. A modern reader and researcher must be surprised with an incorrect, according to modern views, equalization in rights of the author of the "original" and the author of the "imitation", in other words: the author and his copier. However, such equalization was common for medieval writers, readers and scholars. In this case we undoubtedly deal with peculiar concept about author's originality in medieval literatures of the Near and Middle East.

Bertel's focused on this aspect of "imitation" in more detail than other researchers. Many of his ideas deserve careful attention even today, several decades later. The researcher finds it wrong to call the authors of *naẓīras* "imitators" as it is a sign of anti-historical approach and misunderstanding of the characteristic features of feudal literature, and the tendency to "measure all past phenomena by one's own bushel". In that society the choice of themes was "extremely limited" by the "narrowness of interests, the restraints of life and the slow paste of life". Because of this even the authors who could renew the circle of themes (it would have been absurd to assume that Nawā'ī could not introduce a new theme in literature if he wanted to) did not aim to go beyond the limits of traditional themes. The narrowness of the circle of themes together with intensive literary life led to "extreme sensitivity to the culture of the word" and development of views close to the concept of "art for the sake of art", as "often the aim of a literary work was mere demonstration of skill framed with a well-known plot". However, it would be wrong to assume that such view on literature sufficiently minimizes its social value, as "a talented writer even in these difficult conditions, limiting his imagination, will be able to affect the thoughts and emotions of a reader and to open before him new aspects of human soul" [20].

Bertel's ideas allow us to make some conclusions. Medieval literature of the East and the West are different by distinct traditionalism determining the peculiarities of their artistic system. "Imitations" like *naẓīra* were popular not only in the Near and Middle East. In vagant collections of works there are numerous works in which similar themes and images are developed. Each such work was not a result of changing or altering it, but of "imitating, it is not 'spoiling a text', it is an artistic contest"— insists

M. L. Gasparov [21]. Different types of "imitations" in medieval literature were united by their common aim — creative perception of the "original", *rivalry* and *competition* with it.

The notion of *contest* was one of the central concepts in the system of medieval literature. It was based on non-historical concept (ahistorical concept) of the traditional creative thought. The works of old Russian literature "lived for many centuries", "in literature there existed 'simultaneously', or better, beyond any time limits, everything written now or in the past" says D. S. Likhachëv [22]. The non-historical method was realized in "removal" of chronological distance while comparing: a five-hundred-year or even a thousand-year interval did not confuse researchers comparing the results of a "contest", the authors' belonging not only to different epochs, but also to different literatures and cultures was not taken into account.

An important element of *contest*, which needs special explanation, was artistic optimism of the "copyists". What did they hope for: it is obvious that no medieval author would have "competed" with a predecessor knowing that his task is doomed to fail?

An indispensable condition of *contest* in the Middle Ages was the authors strong belief in the uniqueness and invariableness in time (no matter how long) of the aim they pursued. The idea of the "absolute", of the unreachable genre or stylistic canon created a base for concrete comparisons. An original author who created the first work on some theme was viewed by everyone as a person who made a necessary step towards a common goal. An original author in medieval view only "passed ahead" of his rivals in the competition, "overtook" them on their way to the objectively given, common and imperative for all authors aim.

Such understanding of the "original", an "example" attached to it two peculiar features. First of all, in the eyes of medieval scholars it could not be perfect, as any interpretation of the eternal could not be full and final. Secondly, the "original" could not in any way be considered as anybody's possession as it was of common value, being the first, but still only one of the necessary for everybody steps towards the perception of the absolute.

These peculiarities determined the attitude to an "exemplary" work in literature. No "original" was qualified by medieval scholars or authors as the best achievement on the way to the absolute. The followers felt it was their duty to perfect and improve the "discovery" to advance towards the absolute.

Thus, the attitude to the "examples" was ambivalent. As a step towards the absolute they required being reproduced by the followers. As a fruit of human thought they could not be an adequate realization of the absolute and were bound to be imperfect. Thus, following the examples not only allowed but implied altering the inherited "examples" to pursue one goal: advance to the absolute. Variation of "images" in the "imitations" of the followers thus acquired special meaning and the individual and the collective were dialectically connected with each other in the chain of endless mutual transformations on the way of endless perfection.

Notes

1. E. È. Bertel's, *Izbrannye trudy. Navoi i Djami* (Selected Works. Nawā'ī and Jāmī) (Moscow, 1965), p. 435.
2. For more details see: A. B. Kudelin, *Klassicheskaia arabo-ispanskaia poësiia (konets X—seredina XII v.)* (Classical Arabic-Spanish poetry (Late 10th—Mid-12th Century)) (Moscow, 1973), pp. 52—5.
3. Z. N. Vorozheikina, *Isfahanskaia shkola poëtov i literaturnaia zhizn' Irana v predmongol'skoe vremia. XII—nachalo XIII v.* (Isfahan School of Poets and Literary Life of Iran During the Pre-Mongol Period. 12th—Beginning of the 13th c.) (Moscow, 1984), p. 64.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 64—5.
5. G. Iu. Aliev, *Temy i siuzhety Nizami v literaturah narodov Vostoka* (Niẓāmī's Themes and Plots in the Literatures of the East) (Moscow, 1985), p. 5.
6. A. Afsakhov, Saifi Fargoni (Dushanbe, 1976), p. 85; quoted from: A. Afsakhzod, *Lirika Abd ar-Rahmana Djami. Problemy teksta i poëtiki* ('Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī's Poetry. The Problem of Text and Poetics) (Moscow, 1988), p. 123.
7. A. Mirzoev, Abu Ishak (Dushanbe, 1971), p. 26; Afsakhzod, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
8. Afsakhzod, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-1.
9. Quoted from: *ibid.*, p. 120.
10. Kudelin, *op. cit.*, pp. 54—5.
11. Quoted from: Afsakhzod, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
12. Quoted from: *ibid.*
13. Aliev, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
14. Bertel's, *op. cit.*, p. 435; Afsakhzod, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
15. Quoted from: *ibid.*, p. 120.
16. Bertel's, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
17. Afsakhzod, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
18. Quoted from: Aliev, *op. cit.*, pp. 10—1.
19. Bertel's, *op. cit.*, p. 436.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 435—6.
21. M. L. Gasparov, "Poëziia vagantov" ("Vagants' poetry"), *Poëziia vagantov* (Moscow, 1975), pp. 471—2.
22. D. S. Likhachëv, *Poëtika drevnerusskoj literatury* (Old Russian Literature Poetics) (Moscow, 3rd ed., 1979), pp. 20, 94—5.

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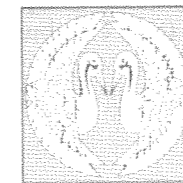
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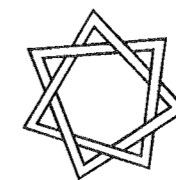
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Plate 2. *Birds.* Chinese watercolour on pith (37 × 25 cm), second half of the 19th century. MAE RAS, Collection of Nicholas II. Shelf-mark 311-1/12 (4). Courtesy of the Museum.

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