HAPLESS HAPAXES AND LUCKLESS RHYMES: THE QUR'AN AS LITERATURE

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If Qur'anic studies—still in its infancy, compared to biblical studies or the study of Christianity—is to make any real progress, an important way forward is to study the Qur'an as literature. Important desiderata in this course of action include (but are evidently not limited to) attention to rhetorical features in the Qur'an, such as rhyme, oath-clusters, narrative technique, and characterization; mobilization of (indeed, producing) such resources as hapaxes lists, rhyme-lists by sura, word frequency lists, and lexico-statistical analyses; and a greater focus on the architecture and poeticity of the text.

That Qur'anic studies has had to wait until 2008 for an article on figures of speech in the Qur'an (Mir, "Some Figures" in *Religion & Literature*!) is but one indication of the embryonic state of the field generally, and of the study of the Qur'an as a literary text specifically. Considering how much ink has been spilled about other (inevitably related) aspects of the Qur'an, it is quite remarkable how few Western scholars have given any substantive attention to the notion of the Qur'an as literature or as literary artifact. Neither "The Qur'an as Literature: Perils, Pitfalls and Prospects," a 1983 essay by Andrew Rippin (University of Victoria), nor "The Qur'an as Literature," a 1988 article by Mustansir Mir (Youngstown State University) following it, have generated much interest in subsequent scholarship, relatively speaking—relatively speaking, that is, to the enormous output on matters legal, theo-

logical, philological, text-historical, and comparative (with the traditions of Christianity and Judaism), some of it of very high quality indeed, for example the proceedings of a 2004 conference at Notre Dame (Reynolds). In the Muslim world, a literary approach to the Qur'an was championed by Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd, but conservative elements successfully forced him out of Egypt and he is now based in the West (University of Humanistics, Utrecht). I do not by this mean to suggest that Muslims are not at liberty to engage in literary analysis of the Qur'an or at liberty to think about it as a literary text; nothing could be further from the truth. One need only consult the widely cited and highly regarded works of such authors as 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. ca. 1078), Diya' al-din Ibn al-Athir (d. 1239), or Jalal al-din al-Suyuti (d. 1505), to name but three, to see this approach in canonical, traditional, even conservative, authors (Larkin, "Inimitability"; Rippin, "Lexical Texts"). And there is much creativity in modern Arab and Muslim authors' creative recourse to the Qur'an (Toorawa, "Modern Arabic Literature"; Wild, "The Koran").

Rippin, Mir, and Abu-Zayd are not alone, but it is a small group indeed that engages the Qur'an as literature. Also at the forefront are A. H. Johns (Australian National University), Angelika Neuwirth (Freie Universität Berlin), Devin Stewart (Emory University) and A. H. Mathias Zahniser (Asbury Theological Seminary) (see also Robinson, *Discovering*; Sells "Sound"). These scholars all contributed to Issa Boullata's edited 2000 volume, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, a title apposite in its creative, and (in my view) productive, way of imagining the relationship between the Qur'an's rhythms and architectures on the one hand, and its function(s) on the other. To Johns and Zahniser goes the credit for having produced detailed analyses of some of the major long suras of the Qur'an, something sorely lacking in Qur'an scholarship (Johns, "Reflections"; Zahniser, "Major Transitions"). Rippin has asked important questions about the Qur'an in the context of some seventy articles and book chapters, many in significant volumes he has himself edited, but Rippin's focus is not the literariness of the Qur'an per se (Rippin, *The Qur'an*). Neuwirth's many important articles complement and extend the argument of a major—some might argue, the major—study of Qur'anic rhetoric and style, the1981 *Studien zu Komposition der mekkanische suren*, but pioneering as it is, that work (recently revised and reissued) is ultimately about situating the Qur'an in the context of, and in relationship to, other Near Eastern religious literature (a most welcome project, to be sure) (cf. Hoffman, *The Poetic Qur'an*; Cuypers, *The Banquet*). What sets all these scholars apart is attention to the Qur'an on its own terms. Stewart and Mir in particular have published crucially important studies of Qur'anic vocabulary (Mir, *Verbal Idioms in the Qur'an*; Stewart, "Saj' in the Qur'an"),

and both turn routinely (and first) to the rich material available in classical and modern Muslim scholarship. Mir has a special interest in themes and characterization, and in the work of the twentieth-century South Asian commentator, Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997) (Mir, "The Qur'anic Story," "The Qur'an as Literature," "Dialogue in the Qur'an"). Stewart focuses on rhyme, form criticism, and the medieval exegetical tradition (Stewart, "Saj' in the Qur'an," "Understanding the Qur'an," "The Analysis of Rhyme"). Remarkably, Stewart's "Saj' in the Qur'an" was the first systematic study of the Qur'an's rhyming, rhythmic prose in English, published, significantly, in the *Journal of Arabic Literature* (cf. Müller, *Untersuchungen*).

An overwhelming amount of recent scholarship on the Qur'an is animated by concerns about its textual integrity. To my mind, this is another sign of the embryonic state of affairs in the study of the Qur'an, not because we are still scratching the surface—if anything, there has been sustained "scratching" for 150 years, ever since the publication of Nöldeke's magisterial *Geschichte des Qorans* but because it is still an atomistic approach. So many of the scholars engaged in learned and recherché attempts to emend Qur'anic words in order to produce what they deem to be better readings, do so with precious little attention to the larger contexts of sura structure, Qur'anic literary structure, and Qur'anic poetics. One illustrative lacuna—for me a major one—is the almost complete lack of interest in hapax legomena in the Qur'an; when modern scholars do flag these, it is virtually always in the context of "foreign words" (loan words) and emendations. That hapaxes did not interest classical and modern Muslims scholars is not hard to explain: like the Masoretes with the Hebrew Bible, they were interested in rare and unusual words—many of which happen to be hapaxes—rather than in hapaxes per se. But modern indifference is baffling. Whereas there have been articles and books about hapaxes in the Bible since 1906, for the Qur'an there is only a slim (and hard to find) 2002 volume in Arabic by a religious scholar (al-Maliji), an excellent newly minted 2008 University of Vienna doctoral thesis (Elmaz), and a forthcoming article in a conference volume (Toorawa, "Hapaxes"). On the other hand, one has no trouble finding a passel of articles on the so-called "foreign" vocabulary of the Qur'an, and on emendations to the Qur'anic text (for example, Reynolds). That by paying attention to hapaxes much might be learned about the Qur'an's literary features and structure appears not to inform prevailing interest in the text.

In a recent encyclopedia article, James Bellamy, the doyen of Qur'anic emendation, notes, "let it be said from the outset that textual criticism has nothing to do with the criticism of music, art or literature. In simplest terms, textual criticism is the correction of errors" (237). It turns out that a very

large proportion of the errors that Bellamy and other scholars believe need to be corrected are hapaxes. Close attention to where these hapaxes occur and how they are deployed *rhetorically* can have a very significant impact on the need to emend. One example should suffice to illustrate this. In *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*, Christoph Luxenberg proposes that the phrase "and he had laid him down on his forehead" (37:103, *wa-tallahu li l-jabin*), be changed to read "He tied him to the firewood." In this phrase, which describes Abraham readying his son to be sacrificed (Ishmael, according to most exegetes), Luxenberg emends "forehead" (*jabin*) to "firewood" (*habbin*) and observes that "the real problem does not lie in the etymologically correct explanation of this expression, but in its misreading. In fact, the concrete guidelines of the biblical account (Gen. 22:9) provide us with an indication of the real sense of this passage. There it says namely that Abraham has 'bound {his son} and laid (him) over the (fire)wood'" (191). But, because he is so tied to the biblical text and because he is operating without attention to the Qur'an's rhetorical purpose, Luxenberg completely misses the point, one that is utterly clear from the Qur'anic passage, namely the son's unquestioning compliance. The whole passage instructively reads: "He said, 'Father, do as you are commanded and you shall find, God willing, that I am among those who are steadfast.' And when they had both submitted to God and he had laid him down on his forehead..." (*qala ya abati 'f'al ma tu'mar sa-tajiduna in sha'a llahu min al-sabirin / fa-lamma aslama wa-tallahu li l-jabin...*) (37:103, translation mine) (cf. Toorawa, "Hapaxes").

Another literary feature of the Qur'an that gets short shrift is rhyme. No English translation of the Qur'an attempts to render either rhyme or *saj'*—the Qur'an's rhymed, rhythmic prose—a defining feature of the text (cf. Toorawa, "The Inimitable Rose"). Since one-third of all absolute hapaxes are rhyme-words (Toorawa, "Hapaxes"), hapaxes are implicated in this inattention. Below are translations of the Qur'an's penultimate sura (113), which includes numerous hapaxes, especially in the rhyme position. I list first two highly regarded translations, then a translation that takes the hapaxes and rhyme into account:

> Say: "I take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak
> from the evil of what He has created,
> from the evil of darkness when it gathers,
> from the evil of the women who blow on knots,
> from the evil of an envier when he envies." (Arberry 668)

> Say [Prophet], "I seek refuge with the Lord of daybreak
> against the harm in what He has created,
> the harm in the night when darkness gathers,

the harm in witches when they blow on knots,
the harm in the envier when he envies." (Abdel-Haleem 445)

Repeat: I seek refuge in the Lord of the dawn,
From the mischief of His Creation,
And from the mischief of nightgloom when it blots,
And from the mischief of sorceresses, spitting on knots,
And from the mischief of the envier when he plots. (Toorawa, "The Inimitable Rose" 154)

In my view, ignoring the rhyme, gives the *traditore* the upper hand over the *traduttore*. And ignoring the stylistic role played by, and the rhetorical deployment of, hapaxes impoverishes any and all attempts to access the Qur'an.

In a splendid foreword to a wide-ranging collection of articles based on papers delivered at a 2004 conference on the Qur'an at Notre Dame, Daniel Madigan observes that "New readings are generated not simply by analysis, that is, by breaking down the text. Rather they result from catalysis, that is, by establishing new links and relations among the elements of the text itself and with the context in which it is read" (xiii). In my view, scholarship of the Qur'an must take cognizance of and be sensitive to the important distinction Madigan draws. New readings and re-readings are welcome, indeed they are desirable, but if these readings focus on individual words without seeking to understand how the words work together, then one risks seeing only the trees without seeing the forest. Or, to use Madigan's chemical analogy, one is likely to identify the atoms (for example, words) and molecules (for example, expressions), without seeing how these molecules interact in sentences and contexts to result in wondrous processes (rhetoric) that yield meaning. There are a great number of studies that analyze the Qur'an by relying on extra-Qur'anic material, but as Madigan argues it is just as important to look for the "links and relations among the elements of the text itself" (xiii).

There is still a tremendous amount of work to be done on the Qur'an, a text that is a veritable gold mine for anyone interested in the intersections of religion and literature. The erstwhile neglect of the hapless hapax and the luckless rhyme is just one indication of how much even simple groundwork yet needs to be done.

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