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### **The formula and theme in the Arabic chivalrous romance**

The anonymous Arabic chivalrous romances (*sīrats*) belong to a large family of heroic epics common to most cultures. After several centuries of oral transmission during which their number considerably increased, they were written down in the 14th-16th centuries in the Mamluk Egypt. However, the art of oral transmission continued to exist. *Sīrats* are extremely bulky: an average work numbers a couple of thousand pages. It has not been explained yet how the narrator controlled such an immense material and managed to transfer it orally as a coherent work, which was very attractive to the middle and lower strata of the contemporary society.

The size of the *sīrat* precluded its being learned by heart. Thus, each recital, which sometimes lasted several days, was an improvisation, that is a one-time creative act, but not the literal reconstruction of the work. This may be evidenced by the surviving versions of the particular *sīrats*, differing between themselves. At the same time, the diversity of language and composition of these literary works can be seen not only within one *sīrat*, but also in the whole collection of *sīrats*. Thus, there had to be some ways which allowed the narrator to recite it fluently, a certain stock of rules and tricks shaping and organizing their linguistic material and theme. In Arabic literature there is no evidence on the skills of the narrator.

The answers to this question may be provided by the results of the scholarly examination of heroic epics of other nations, as well as the texts of the *sīrats*. The most valuable material has been provided by the investigation of the art of oral literature of illiterate Serbo-Croatian bards conducted by Milman Parry and his student Albert Lord, as well as later studies on oral Russian, New Greek and Central Asian epic literature, especially - what is most important to us—contemporary observation of the way of recital of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* in Egyptian villages.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> S. Slyomovics, *The Merchant of Art. An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poem in Performance*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1987.

The command of this art resembled the learning of a native language by a child: by listening and repeating. The would-be performer thus got acquainted with the language and “grammar” of the work or a series of works of oral art in which the role of phrases, sentences and periods is played by the formulas. But he did not need to learn by heart a great number of the particular formulas. He had to master only the basic amount amount of their models, coupled with the method of substitution, as well as feature schemata governing the organization of the theme. The knowledge of such a traditional substance and the rules of construction permitted a fluent reconstruction of the *sīrat* lasting many hours or days.<sup>2</sup>

In the light of the above remarks, Bogatyryev and Jakobson rightly pointed to the analogy between the traditionally established semantic schema of the folk literary piece and *langue* (the language system) as well as between the one-time execution of this schema (reconstruction of the *sīrat* before the audience) and *parole* (recital).<sup>3</sup>

Just as the linguistic system common to a given nation is realized in speaking in various ways, depending on the profession, social status etc., common thematic and phraseological material established by tradition is carried out each time in a different manner according to the performer, region or given situation in communication. Even the same performer does not repeat literally the same work. His art is based on improvisation. This results in numerous versions of the same *sīrat* and it is useless to seek its primary, “original”, or “the only correct version”.

Even after the writing down of the *sīrats* in the 14th-16th centuries in the Mamluk Egypt, the editors of the particular versions, successive copyists or the narrators themselves could change and amplify the *sīrats* by including separate stories being told, adding plots and multiplying adventures of the main characters, even though we might expect that the possibility of using the recorded text might limit the ability of improvisation to a certain extent.

In my opinion, in studying the oral anonymous epics, such as the *sīrat*, we should distinguish the lexical and semantic aspect of the concept of the *topos* (*loci communes*): an established pattern of thoughts, situations, characters, since in oral literature the linguistic aspect of the “common places” is of the utmost importance. On the lexical plane, phraseological relationships established by tradition, recurring in similar situations, were called formulas here; in the semantic plane “common places,” or well-known current motifs in literature were called, after Albert Lord, themes. As P. Grincer rightly pointed

<sup>2</sup> A. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1964, pp. 32-37.

<sup>3</sup> P. Bogatyryev and R. Jakobson, *Folklor jako swoista forma twórczości*, in: P. Bogatyryev, *Semiotyka kultury ludowej*, Warszawa 1979, pp. 306-311.

out, the themes as units of composition should be distinguished from the formulas being the units of the epic language. Themes are placed in a different sphere of the narrative technique and the formulas are a kind of “building material” for them.<sup>4</sup>

Formulas may be classified according to various criteria, depending on the purpose of the researcher’s work. So far, only the oral epics written in verse have been studied; I have not found any attempts at classification of the formulas in the available treatises concerning oral prose or mixed epics. Since this paper deals chiefly with the functioning and mutual relationship between the formula and theme, formulas will be subdivided according to the criterion of their links with the theme. Thus, in the text of the *sīrats* we can distinguish formulas belonging to some definite themes and occurring only with those themes, and universal formulas, independent of the theme, which were divided into: (1) stylistic features (unchanging epithets, similes and metaphors), (2) narrative formulas, (3) formulas of direct speech, and (4) auxiliary formulas (spatio-temporal and meta-textual).

Each formula which is a semantic entity consists of unchanging elements which may be called key words of variables which are drawn from the word resources, expressing the same or similar concept. This is specially well seen in the rhymed prose. We should note two, as it were, opposing tendencies: one strives to place key words in the clauses of rhymed prose, for example:

“and he recited saying (bless the Prophet-Messenger)”,

where the key words are *yaqūl / ar-rasūl*; the other one leaves the clauses open to changes, which makes it easier to find proper rhymes, for example in the metonymy “to give somebody the cup of death to drink”, which is used very often and in which numerous synonyms of death are the variable element.

Formulas are present in the whole text, except for insertions in verse. Their number is greatest in the narrative fragments, especially in themes; the smallest number of them occurs in the direct speech of the dialogues, which on their part comprise all, though not numerous, dialectal phrases used in the *sīrat*. The largest number of the formulas is built up according to the models which can be developed, thus allowing the narrator to show his creative inventiveness and to avoid the monotony. This feature is specially well visible in thematic formulas.

In studies on the prose or mixed forms of oral epics the term “theme” is interchangeable with such names as “recurring” or “typical”: “episode”, “motif,” “situation”, “scene”, “common place”, without giving a precise

<sup>4</sup> P. Grincer, *Drevneindijskij epos. Genesis i tipologiya*, Moskva 1974, p. 96 ff.; *Statističeskie razvertivane temi v sanskritskom eposie*, in the collection: *Pamiatniki knizhnogo eposa*, Moskva 1978, p. 17.

definition. In my paper, the theme denotes a certain separate entity, a typical and recurring element of the world presented in the *sīrat*, with a permanent order of its components. The theme may be the event (shown in the form of a tale) or the state (presented as a description). Unlike the current motif, the theme can be applied only in oral epics. Thus conceived theme is close to the feature functions of W. Propp<sup>5</sup>, differing in a wider extent comprising not only typical activities of the character (schemata of events), but also states (schemata unrelated to events).

The theme is built according to the plan in which the particular components have their permanent places. The narrator, who has a wide repertoire of themes at his disposal, may easily construct the successive tales. This does not mean, however, that he does not have a freedom of creation. The same themes, which are identical in the plan of contents, differ, sometimes considerably, in the plan of expression. In other words, themes in their particular recital do not take the same verbal form, so they can be amplified or shortened depending on the needs of the plot. Just as the form has its key words, each theme has its own set of key components, that is permanent elements, expressed by the same formulas, which constitute its recognition signal. This is the simplest version of the theme. The narrator may certainly use this version several times; thus it will be the literal repetition and surely the easiest one to realize. However, he does it very rarely because the audience, assessing critically excessive innovative activity whose perception can be difficult, would not accept a total lack of inventiveness either. Hence the main feature of any oral literature: combining permanent elements, petrified in the transmission process, with individual improvised elements.

The theme may be amplified in two ways: through repetition of the particular actions by other characters taking part in the event, and in the descriptions through multiplication of elements of the described object or character, either by use of insertions of any length, for example by interrupting the theme of travel by the description of the place, another event or sequence of events which may be themes, e.g. the duel with the character encountered during the travel or entirely individualized way of presenting the adventure, and only then finish up the theme by reaching the destination. In either way of expansion the theme may be interwoven with the character's words or the author's commentary. This depends on the development of the action, that is whether the theme ought to move the action forward or to stop it, whether the theme concerns the main or secondary characters etc.

A great majority of themes of the *sīrat* are well known in the literature of other nations. Among those most frequently used there are: duel, battle, gath-

<sup>5</sup> W. Propp, *Morfologia bajki*, Warszawa 1976.

ering and setting off of the army, sending and receiving messages, travel, prophetic dream, mourning for a dead ruler, telling fortunes, hunting, seeking the protagonist's death by his close relative, fight with the monster (in other literatures it is usually a dragon), growing up outside one's home without knowing one's real background, recognition of an opponent as the close relative's lost child, kidnapping of a beloved one, feast, wedding, receiving and seeing off guests, dressing up and pretending someone else, two related characters being born on the same day, the theme of two brothers: good and bad, growing up of a character, coming to power, occupying the throne in a conquered kingdom, freeing the protagonist from imprisonment by the oppressor's daughter who is in love with him, triumphant return, marrying off the daughter against her will, return at the time of preparations for the wedding of a beloved woman with another man, turning from the enemy into a friend, acquiring an unusual horse or sword, falling in love with an unknown virgin on the basis of a description, favourite theme of a brave virgin marrying only the man who wins in a duel, a theme of love for the uncle's daughter, which is very popular in Muslim literatures (also in high literatures), gathering of the mahru, invasion of another tribe, theft of a valuable horse, taking refuge with another tribe by an expelled wife (or widow) and her son, descriptions of: a horse, knight, armour, virgin, fertile valley (garden), palace, throne, approaching troops.

Some themes function in several varieties, for example in the theme "receiving of the message" the latter may be delivered by a go-between, wandering poet (poets) or somebody from the character's milieu. The character's life may be endangered by his father or foster-parent who may be his close relative or a stranger; the character's age is a permanent element: just after he gets mature. This is an important difference between the *sīrats* and the heroic tales with a mythological origin, where the newly born character is in danger. The defeated monster is usually a strong lion; it may also be a giant or, sporadically, a huge snake (the closest counterpart of a dragon). The opponent recognized as a close relative may be a son (the most frequent theme), a grandson, a brother or a father (reversal of the roles). A beloved woman may be kidnapped by a rival from the same tribe, leader of the band of robbers (always during travel) or chieftain of another tribe during the invasion of a camping ground. A sub-variety of the latter is always giving in marriage a beloved woman (always uncle's daughter) against her will to a powerful chieftain of another tribe or ruler of another country. One may be dressed up as a wandering poet, fortune-teller, saintly ascetic or someone important from the opponent's camp. Two sons of one father from different mothers or a son and a daughter of two brothers may be born on the same day. In other words, we have to do with the phenomenon of interchangeability of

characters performing the same function. Propp's feature functions are marked by the same characteristics. However, in *sīrats* this interchangeability is by far more limited.

This limited freedom in replacing some characters by other protagonists facilitates the organization of contents. The narrator keeps in memory the general plan and chooses the variety of the theme which fits the context. Sometimes, the change of the character is not necessary and serves only to diversify the text, for example the message about a beautiful daughter of a chief or king of a distant tribe or kingdom may be delivered by anybody; this theme will always mark the beginning of a tale about finding a wife. For this theme, the most important matter is the kind of the message, and not who delivers it. But more often the character is more important; the more important its role, the lesser is the possibility of replacing it by another character.

The narrator chooses a schema of the successive tale, and this schema fits the whole of the *sīrat*; this choice either imposes a strictly defined variety of a theme or leaves it to the narrator to decide: to use any variety or not use it at all. A typical example is the simultaneous birth of two related characters. The simultaneous birth of two half-brothers always gives rise to the tale about their rivalry. The birth of a son and daughter of two brothers always marks the beginning of a love affair. However, the two types of tales do not have to begin with the simultaneous birth. If the protagonist grows up in an alien tribe or country and does not know his descent, this always entails the theme of anagnorism. In case of a reversed sequence, the first theme is possible (going back in time), but not obligatory. Likewise, the tale of taking care of a foster child does not need to lead to the theme of threatening to its life.

Although the themes are subordinated to a larger entity, their invariable elements ensure a great independence for them. A high degree of independence of the formula and theme is an extremely characteristic and most conspicuous indicator of belonging to folkloristic epics. The theme exists for itself and at the same time for the whole *sīrat*. The successive narrators must choose the appropriate schema or its variety and adapt the details to a given tale. On the other hand, one can observe a certain influence of the theme used upon the organization of the presented world which is not always explained by the cause-and-effect order. Some themes inevitably lead to others, as has already been said. The threatening of the character's life by a close relative is always followed in the same tale by the saving of this person's life by the protagonist; growing up outside the home being unaware of one's descent always entails the theme of recognition, while recognition always precedes a duel. Characteristically, the *sīrat* always has a happy ending of the theme of recognition. The linking of anagnorism with the theme of duel, which enhances the dramatism of the action, is very popular in epics of other

nations, but it often ends with death there: the old Germanic Hildebrand discovers too late that Hadubrand is his son and the latter dies in several versions; in Ireland, Cachulainn, after killing his son, finds out who his enemy was; the protagonist of the Russian epic folk songs, Ilya Muromec, spares his son after he finds out his identity, but kills him later anyway; The Ossetian Uryzmag finds out the truth only after he accidentally kills his son; in the duel of the main character of Šāhnāme, Rostam, with his son Sohrab, the mutual recognition occurs upon the death of the latter; only in Armenia the fight of David with Mher, the Younger, is interrupted upon recognition.<sup>6</sup>

The logical, cause-and-effect sequence of event determines the sequence of the particular themes included in the given tale. Hence the natural tendency to tie them up into bundles which form a part or the whole of the utterance. We often encounter this set of themes: Receiving the message about the approaching enemy—Gathering of troops—Setting off of troops—Meeting of hostile troops, often preceded by the description of approaching of one of them—Duels—Battle—Return, may fill in the whole tale about war, if the extoled tribe wins (then the tale ends with a Triumphal return and Feast) or part of the tale, if “own” tribe is defeated (which is often followed by Mourning over a killed chief). The set of themes: Receipt of news about the most beautiful virgin—Falling in love while being far away—Travel—may generate a part of the tale about finding a wife, if the hero is a negative character (then the second part is filled up with an account of saving a virgin) or the whole tale, if the hero is “own” (it is then followed by the themes: gaining the virgin’s reciprocity—Return travel with a virgin—Chase—Duels - sometimes a Battle—Triumphal Return—Feast—Wedding.

Each theme has its own set of characteristic formulas, being a verbal realization of its particular components: characters’ single actions or elements of the described reality. They belong to a group called the group of thematic formulas distinguished from the above-mentioned universal formulas, independent of the theme. If we adopt the criterion of the place occupied in the given schema, thematic formula may be divided into permanent, occurring always in the same place, and changing, having certain freedom within the framework of the established order. Here, a certain regularity can be observed. Permanent formulas, also called key formulas, are an invariable component of the theme. It should be added that the persistency of the formulas is not defined in absolute numbers; in other words, not all themes pos-

<sup>6</sup> See: C.M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, London 1961, p. 399; Ferdousi, *Księga królewska. Wybór*, translated and selected by W. Dulęba, Warszawa 1981, pp. 163-172; Dawid z Sasunu. *Epos staroarmeński*, translated by I. Sikirycki, Warszawa 1967, pp.139-141.

sess them. There are defective themes, with gaps or errors committed during the writing down or preparation of the given version for print.

Variable formulas are not obligatory and can sometimes be omitted. The verbal shape of the thematic formulas may be subject to changes consisting, as in the case of universal formulas, in replacing some words by their synonyms, doubling verbal pairs characteristic of the *sīrat* (such as: *al-ḥusn wa-l-ḡamāl / wa-l-bahā' wa-l-kamāl* or *wa-lā atruku kabīr / wa-lā ṣaḡīr / wa-lā 'abd wa-lā amīr / wa-lā ḡanī wa-lā faqīr*) or adding parallel sentences or their elements. However, universal formulas are marked by greater homogeneity and are the same in their changeability (drawing from the same stock of synonyms) in all the *sīrats*, while in thematic formulas the individual style of the narrators specializing in the particular *sīrats* is more conspicuous. In these formulas the similarities and differences between the particular *sīrats* may be observed most easily. The most individualized are those descriptions which usually do not have a permanent order of their elements and are often interwoven with non-formulaic expressions.

It should not, however, be concluded that the tales making up the *sīrat* are composed of the themes only. There is a wide scale of the degree of the tradition strengthening of the particular themes: from a nearly total petrification of structure and verbal form to the increasing in loosening of the schema and growing diversity of expression; finally, at the second end of the scale, themes become motifs of a high level of individualization. The latter can be found in the early *sīrats*, first of all in *Sīrat Ḍāt al-Himma*, but also in *Sīrat 'Antar*. The scale is proportional to both the degree of frequency of use of the given theme and its specific formulas. The themes whose schemata were established in the transmission process to an extent which precludes their further development, are marked by a high degree of saturation with the formulas. These are the most frequent themes. Most probably, they are the oldest themes, having the longest tradition during which they had enough time to become well established in a definite form. These themes are usually connected with war and their selection is determined by this literary genre.