
Sound and Sense in Classical Arabic Poetry. By GEERT JAN VAN GELDER. Arabische Studien, vol. 10. Wiesbaden: HARRASSOWITZ, 2013. Pp. xv + 399. €78.

Sound is the pivotal dimension of poetry's artistic space; its significance in versification is not limited to the repertoire of potential tools and methods of the acoustic design of a poetic work. As in the case of fine art, where the ability to perceive and to distinguish colors is not simply conducive to the application of a palette of various paints, but substantially defines the nature of this art itself, the sound in poetry both generates phonic effects and is primarily a constitutive aspect of poeticism—as such, it is the essential element of poetry.

In its utterance, each word acquires its external, i.e., acoustic, sound. At the same time, as Wassily Kandinsky (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Munich³1912, 28) observes, “the word is the inner sound.

This sound originates partly (or mostly) from the object, which name the word denotes.” Poetry combines inextricably the outer and the inner sound of the word, the latter being closely related to its sense. The poeticity, and thus the aesthetic appreciation of a literary work, depends largely on the harmony between the phonic effects of the outer sounds and the exposure of the inner sound of the words and the level to which this harmony elevates the emotional perception of the text.

In classical Arabic poetry, aural aspects are of paramount importance. Circulation of Arabic poetry was traditionally facilitated through recitation and singing, and this alone provided considerable weight to the qualities of its external sound. More importantly, however, these qualities correlate essentially with the artistic expression of the inner sound of the word, i.e., its poetic meaning. It is only by paying close attention to both sound and sense that classical Arabic poetry can be fully understood and appreciated.

The monograph by Geert Jan van Gelder under review represents an important contribution to the study of the essential, yet greatly overlooked, subject of the phonic aspects of classical Arabic poetry. It marks a pioneering attempt to comprehensively investigate the unity of sound and sense as a fundamental base of poetry using the material of the premodern Arabic literary tradition. Van Gelder is mainly concerned with the aesthetics of poetic sounds and limits himself to the level of sounds in works that were understood as poetry in the classical Arabic tradition, excluding other metrical or rhyming texts such as parts of the Quran. The study relies on the analysis of written texts of classical Arabic poetry and takes into account relevant information provided by traditional Arabic grammarians and literary critics.

In the classical Arabic literary tradition the aural aspects of poetry were to a large extent defined by poetic meter and rhyme, and in two extensive chapters Van Gelder offers a detailed investigation into how both functioned in classical Arabic poetry. Contrary to most existing works on traditional Arabic prosody, the focus here is not on historical or normative aspects, but on the actual role of the sounds of poetry. Various aspects of meter (chapter two) and rhyme (chapter three) are discussed in the context of their correlation with modes or themes in classical Arabic poetry. Other major sound patterns of classical Arabic verse rooted in the linguistic sounds of the Arabic language, and their influence on the meaning of poetic texts, are investigated in chapter four, including onomatopoeia, parallelism, paronomasia, word-play, and other forms of sound effects.

Classical Arabic poetry applies no formal principles that unambiguously determine the interrelationship between the various sound patterns of poetry, including meters and rhymes on the one hand and the conventional modes and motifs on the other. Therefore, exploring the aesthetic effects of prosodic features in works of classical Arabic poetry requires a sensitive examination of each poem. Avoiding perfunctory simplifications, the present study reaches fruitful conclusions on the bases of close reading and careful analysis of primary sources, not only presenting convincing results but also introducing useful methodology for further research on the aesthetics of classical Arabic poetry.

The final chapter five, “Sound and Sense,” deals with the less tangible concepts related to diction and style in poetry. The concepts of *insijām* (“fluency”), *tashīl* or *suhūla* (“easiness, smoothness”), as well as *bayān* and *balāgha* (“eloquence”) and *al-sahl al-mumtani*⁶ (the concept of the “seemingly easy”) are presented on the bases of works by Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī and other premodern Arab literary critics. Although these concepts attach most emphasis to the easiness of the sense of poetry and the semantic clarity of the poetic language, they also indicate that avoiding unnecessary complexity and obscurity in the meaning denotes euphony. One way to enhance the smooth and melodious sound in Arabic poetry, as Van Gelder observes, is to increase the number of long vowels. Higher frequency of long vowels attested in poems with lyrical and elegiac themes, as well as the usage of harsh sounds in texts with rough topics, clearly demonstrate a meaningful and close correlation between sound and sense in classical Arabic verse. The final section of the study analyses the sound patterns in a text by the renowned pre-Islamic poet al-Aʿshā, classified by traditional Arabic critics as an example of bad poetry, and thus shows *ex contrario* that the inherent relationship between sound and meaning—that is, the aesthetic merits of its form as much as its content—is just as significant for the appreciation of poetry.

The volume combines extensive use of primary sources of classical Arabic poetry and traditional Arabic literary criticism with a detailed and precise analysis, offering students and scholars of classical Arabic literature a treasure trove of truly encyclopedic philological knowledge. At the same time,

dealing with such a fundamental question as to how sound and sense relate to each other in poetry, Van Gelder explicitly reaches out to a wider academic audience concerned with poetics. In the introductory section and throughout the book, the author frequently refers to relevant phenomena in premodern European and other non-Arabic literatures, introducing profound comparative perspectives. In addition, the author's efforts to carefully elucidate all the specialized concepts and terminology positively contribute to the accessibility of the study beyond the confines of the academic community of Arabists. The book also features an appendix providing a short overview of traditional Arabic meter and rhyme systems, which might be useful for students of classical Arabic poetry in particular, and another appendix briefly describing the sounds of Arabic for readers with no knowledge of the Arabic language.

With his genuine interest in Arabic poetry as both an object for scholarly study and a source of literary enjoyment, Van Gelder has written a monograph that promotes the reading of classical Arabic poetry and admiration of the qualities of its sounds. The book is a scholarly manifesto for adequate perception and consideration of phonic and prosodic aspects and the paramount importance of the inherent affinity between sound and sense in classical Arabic poetry. It also introduces the crucial aspect of sound in Arabic poetry into a broad context of comparative research on poetics. The book reveals the horizons of the classical Arabic poetic tradition as a creative and inexhaustible interplay of sound and sense, and in doing so invites further research into the aesthetic aspects of meter, rhyme, and other sound patterns of classical Arabic poetry.

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