Review of Takhyil: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics

Rebecca Gould
This volume represents the first collaborative scholarly examination of classical Arabic balāghah accompanied by an anthology of primary source material in a European language. As such, it marks a watershed in the study of classical Islamic literary theory. Previous anthologizing endeavors by single scholars working in isolation include Vicente Cantarino’s *Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age* (Leiden 1975), and Louis Sheikh’s *Kitāb ‘Ilm al-adab* (Beirut 1887-1913, in four volumes). Precedents for *Takhyīl’s* second volume, concerned with commentary, again by single scholars, include Wolfhart Heinrichs’ *Arabische Dichtung und griechische Poetik* (Beirut 1969), S.A. Bonebakker’s *Materials for the History of Arabic Rhetoric: from the Hiyat al-Muhādara of Ḥātimi* (Naples 1975), Ismail Dahiyat’s *Avicenna’s Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle* (Leiden 1974), Mansour ‘Ajami’s *The Alchemy of Glory: The dialectic of truthfulness and untruthfulness in medieval Arabic literary criticism* (Washington, DC 1988), and van Gelder’s *Beyond the Line: Classical Arabic literary criticism on the coherence and unity of the poem* (Leiden 1982).

Among works not cited in the present volume are Ignaty Krachkovsky’s collected articles on balāghah, translated into Arabic as ‘*Ulām al-badī wa-al-balāghah* ‘inda al-Arab* (Beirut 1981), Amjad Trabulsī’s *La critique poétique des arabs* (Damascus 1956), ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrinkūb’s *Naqd al-Adabī* (Tehran 1982), A.B. Kudelin’s *Srednevekovaia arabskaiia poezia* (Moscow 2003), and Muhammad Rida Shafi’i Kadkani’s *Suwar-i khyal dar shīr-i farisi* (Tehran 1987). Of this list, the last named volume by Shafi’i Kadkani, which provides a systematic account of takhyīl in Persian literary theory and poetry, with attention to Arabic precedents, is most relevant to the volume under consideration here. With the exception of Shafi’i Kadkani’s comprehensive treatment and Heinrichs’ brief discussion of al-Zamakhshari’s concept of takhyīl (“Takhyil and its Traditions,” in *Gott ist Schön und er liebt die Schönheit* [Bern, 1994] 227-247), none of these monographs or articles concentrate on takhyīl as such. Additionally, the present volume provides what none of the aforementioned works offer to an adequate extent: an opportunity for the reader to enter the texts directly—albeit through the mediation of translations—and following that, to step back from the primary-text encounter and reflect on the material at hand through the critical engagements of a wide range of scholarly perspectives.

The translated selections are, for the most part, excerpts of larger works: from al-Fārābī’s *Kitāb al-Mustaqṣi al-Kabīr*, the chapter on syllogism from *Al-Mantiq* of Ibn Sinā’s *Kitāb al-Shīfā*, ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjānī’s *Arār al-Balāghah*, Ibn Rushd’s *Talbkiṣ al-Khitābāb*, Abū l-Barakat al-Bagh-dādi’s *Kitāb al-mu’tabar*, Al-Khaṭṭīb al-Qazwīnī’s *al-Idāh*, and Hāżm al-Qurtajjānī’s *Minbāj al-Balāghah*. (The controversial decision to translate al-Qazwīnī’s less-influential text rather than the widely read *Talbkiṣ al-Miftah* is explained as necessitated by the impossibility of translating the latter without an unwieldy critical apparatus, p. 114). The only text translated in full is al-Fārābī’s brief “*Kitāb al-Shīfā*.” The annotated bibliography (pp. 120-127) valuably condenses a wide range of secondary and primary source material. The introductions by Sheppard and Heinrichs helpfully frame the selections.

Although the footnotes and introductions to each text are generally superb, it would have been desirable, given the specificity and complexity of the Arabic technical vocabulary and the impossibility of rendering the dense web of balāghah terminology adequately into any other language, to have left key Arabic terms untranslated or listed parenthetically. Terms such as *tasbih*, *ta‘ājub*, *wajh*, and *kadhīb*, lose their conceptual resonances and intertextual associations when imported into English as “comparison,” “amazement,” “face,” and “untruthful” (pp. 40, 58, 66, 45 respectively) without any indication given of their multivalent implications in Arabic. Such losses may be endemic to any act of translation, but a greater inclusion of Arabic terms...
would have been one way to forestall, or at least to ameliorate, these consequences. Also helpful would have been an index of Arabic rhetorical terms, along with their English translation, along the lines of what Heinrichs’ provided in his classic study of Arabic metaphor, *The Hand of the Northwind: Opinions on Metaphor and the Early Meaning of Isti‘ara in Arabic Poetics* (Wiesbaden, 1977).

The contributions of Katrina Kohl, James E. Montgomery, and Yaron Klein are united by a common endeavor to interrogate Aristotelian mimesis via al-Fārābī’s and Ibn Sinā’s conceptualizations of takhyīl. Kohl provocatively suggests that *mimesis* for Aristotle and others defines “the relationship between poetry and the world within the framework of philosophy,” whereas language offers a better basis for a comparison of literary norms through a medium “shared by all types of poetic literature without laying down a specific purpose or a particular relationship with the world” (134). Her persuasive analysis of Ciceronian *rhetorica* as a counterpoint to Aristotelian *mimesis* suggests that one major virtue of Arabic literary theory from a comparative literary perspective lies in its ability to navigate the terrain between theory and practice, poetry and philosophy.

One line of analysis Kohl’s provocative contribution does not pursue is the implications of the isti‘ārah / tashbīḥ (metaphor / comparison) distinction in classical Arabic and Persian poetics. Most major Arab / Persian literary theorists, from al-Rummānī to Shams-i Qays, saw the basic axis of distinction between metaphor and comparison as lying in a linguistic trope’s relation to *asl al-lughat* (language in its denotative sense), as coined by wadīʿ al-lughat, language’s founder. That this distinction was made not according to *visual* but *linguistic* and even grammatical criterion reveals the philological basis of Islamic literary criticism, in contrast to the idealistic philosophical traditions described and critiqued Kohl. (The philological approach to literary criticism is also discussed in Beatrice Gruendler’s important contribution to this volume.)

Montgomery’s wide-ranging history of the emotions in the Arabic *qasīdah* and *adab* illuminates Kohl’s philosophical intervention. Relying largely on the music theory of Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī and other contemporary writers, Montgomery argues that literary convention in the medieval Arabic context was irremediably bound up with social and psychological exigencies. Analogously to the Aristotelian *catharsis*, arts such as music and poetry were understood by medieval Arabic critics and artists to stir the emotions for the purpose of personal and communal cleansing. Quoting Michel de Certeau, Montgomery concludes that poetic conventions brings into play “a way of thinking invested in a way of acting, an art of combination which cannot be dissociated from an art of using.” If *mimesis* presupposes a disassociation between the act of creation and the moment of its rationalization, *takhyīl* in Islamic literary theory asks us to think these two moments together.

Given the contrast between the Greek philosophical approach to poetry and the Arabic tradition in the preceding contributions, it is no surprise to discover in Klein’s contribution another confirmation of Arabic philosophy’s transformation of Aristotelian categories (p. 179). Kohl suggests and Montgomery confirms that the rhetorical approach is more socially-grounded, and hence more political, than the idealist approach enshrined in Platonic-Aristotelian *mimesis*. If Kohl’s and Montgomery’s arguments may be accepted, then Klein’s demonstration that al-Fārābī endeavored to justify music against the accusations of religious scholars, acquires even greater significance.

Alone among the volume contributors, van Gelder discusses Persian literary theory’s contribution to Arabic norms, in particular the *bādī’ ḥusn al-tālīl*, which he translates as “fantastic aetiology,” and analyzes as the assignment of causes to one side of a poetic equation in order to bind it to the other. Van Gelder references the eleventh century Persian *bādī’* treatise of Muhammad b. ‘Umar Rādūyānī, *Tarjumān al-balāghah*, as the first extant appearance of ḥusn al-tālīl in the *bādī’* manual tradition. As van Gelder notes, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) had earlier devoted a large section of his *Asrār al-Balāghah* to a discussion of ḥusn al-tālīl, without however
treat ing it as an autonomous *badīʿ*. Van Gelder’s denial of ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī’s influence on Rādūyānī (p. 229) is intriguing. One would like to know how this conclusion was reached. If *hun al-ta’il* did not reach Rādūyānī via ‘Abd al-Qāhir, how was the concept ultimately transmitted back from Persian into Arabic in altered form? Did the two Muslim authors, one writing in Arabic (al-Jurjānī), and the other writing in Persian (Rādūyānī) share a common no longer extant source?

Van Gelder notes briefly that the definition of the *badīʿ* *hun al-ta’il* in Rashīd al-Dīn Wātwaṭ’s *Haddāʾiq as-sihr fī daqāʾiq ash-shiʿr* (The Magic Gardens: On the Nuances of Poetry, 1150) was also influential on the Arabic tradition. Wātwaṭ’s text is in Persian, though it employs Arabic and Persian citations more profusely than any classical Persian treatise; this may explain in part why Wātwaṭ’s *Haddāʾiq* seems to have been the source for the elaboration of two major Arabic tropes: *hun al-ta’il* (noted by van Gelder) and *ihām*, or, as it is known to Arabic literature, *tawrījah* (not noted by van Gelder). The subsequent debt of late classical Arabic literary theory to bilingual theorists such as Wātwaṭ remains to be explored. Nonetheless, van Gelder’s contributions here and elsewhere have considerably enabled future scholarship on this question.

Justifiably, *Takhyīl’s* the scope is limited to examining the theory of the imagination (*takhyīl*), primarily in the context of philosophical aesthetics (al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā, Ibn Rushd), and secondly in the context of *balāghah* (al-Jurjānī, al-Qazwīnī, al-Qartājānī). A comparison of the division of labor between *takhyīl* in *falsafah* and *takhyīl* in *balāghah* in the two volumes yields interesting results: volume one devotes more page space to anthologizing *balāghah*, but the majority of the commentarial section of volume two is devoted to *takhyīl* in *falsafah*, perhaps suggesting the comparatively greater difficulty of translating the foundational concepts of *balāghah* into European aesthetics and the comparatively greater susceptibility of the *falsafah* lexicon to cross-cultural comparison. Does this stem from a common legacy in ancient Greek thought, or did the triumvirate of Arabophone philosophers consciously strive for a moral universal aesthetic language than did their philological counterparts?

One issue raised through the choice of selections is the relation between *balāghah*, formulated originally in the context of Qur’ānic hermeneutics, as the discipline that became known as *iʾjāz al-Qur’ān*, and on the basis of Arabic philology and grammar, and philosophical aesthetics, inspired largely by Neoplatonic and Aristotelian traditions. Nearly a century ago, Ignaty Krakhkovsky noted the non-convergence of these two separate paths (*Izbrannye sochineniia* vol. 6, Moscow, p. 133), and perceptive Arabists have followed Krakhkovsky’s lead independently. Grundler reminds us of the divergence between al-Fārābī’s and Ibn Sinā’s concept of *al-qawwāh al-mutakhabayyīlih* and the practical application of *takhyīl* in Arabic poetry in her contribution (p. 200). Yet the *balīgh* (al-Jurjānī, al-Qazwīnī) and the *falsafah* (al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā, Ibn Rushd) are presented here together, as though the relation between the divergent traditions they representation was seamless. This may have been the case for Aristotelian *balīghs* such as al-Qartājānī and Qudāmā b. Jāʿfar (not included in this volume), but, as the editors note, al-Qartājānī represents an anomaly in the history of Arabic literary theory, and it would be problematic if we were to regard such examples as representing normative *balāghah*.

Given the counter-historical nature of *Takhyīl’s* juxtapositions, perhaps more could have been done to reflect on the decision, which is admirable, if not fully articulated, to place texts belonging to distinct intellectual genealogies in dialogue with each other. Depending on how one narrates the history of *balāghah*, the historical trajectory of *takhyīl* itself may be seen to argue for the fundamental interrelatedness, which is not yet isomorphism, between *balāghah* and *falsafah*. Though best known to scholars of comparative literary theory as one of the Arabic terms for Aristotelian *mimesis* (other equivalents being *tashbīḥ* and *muhakāh*), *takhyīl* also entered *balāghah* as the equivalent of *ihām*. Wātwaṭ is our first and one of our best sources for the convergence between *ihām* and *takhyīl*, and thus between *falsafah* and *balāghah*, insofar as he was the first to define *ihām* as *takhyīl* in his *Haddāʾiq* (ed. Iqbal-Ashtiany, Tihrān, 1984, p. 39-42). Like so many
other basic concepts in Arabo-Persian poetics, the relation between takhyīl in the diverse schools of thought represented in this volume thus remains unresolved. But Takhyīl has gone a long way towards making it possible to pose these questions better than before.

As the examples adduced above have tried to suggest, just as balāghah cannot be studied in any of its Persian, Urdu, and Ottoman offshoots without taking serious account of its Arabic foundations, so too certain aspects of classical Arabic literary theory, takhyīl among them, cannot be adequately understood without reference to the Persian tradition. Takhyīl was at least as productive in Persian poetry and theory as it was in Arabic. Arguably, the Persian transformation of takhyīl had implications for post-Jurjānīan Arabic literary aesthetics, especially in the eastern Islamic world. For these reasons and others, it would have been desirable to have included in this volume relevant excerpts from the writings of the Persian theorists Shams-i Qays, Nizāmī ‘Arūdī, and the much-maligned and misunderstood Watwāt (who receives inadequate attention in every study cited in this review, not only in Takhyīl, in spite of his signal contributions to Arabic and Persian balāghah). In concluding, it should be noted that Takhyīl is sure to become the standard introduction to Arabic literary theory, replacing Cantarino’s anthology. It will open countless minds within and outside the classroom to the riches of one of the world’s least understood literary-critical traditions.