NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN THE QUR'ÂN AND IN EARLY POETRY

It is one of the ironies of Arabic literature that, whilst it is dogma for Muslims that the Qur'ân is not poetry, the commentators on it found themselves having to lean heavily on the corpus of early poetry when they came to elucidate the more arcane phrases of the Qur'ân. This was, of course, due to necessity, for virtually all the material in the literary registers nearest to the Qur'ân had either disappeared, in the case of kāhin and khaṭīb-type material, or had been modernized, in the case of qāṣṣ-type material.

The result was the fathering of shawāhid, lines of poetry that were thought to elucidate various aspects of Quranic grammar and lexicography. I would argue that the value of this small corpus has been considerably overestimated. It is a treasure trove of the recondite; and whilst such material is helpful with some Quranic problems, it is almost always the case that those problems are of a relatively trivial, peripheral nature, concerned with the last few percent of the Quranic text and not its central meaning. Of course, it would be unnatural for the commentators not to wish to try to explain every word of the Qur'ân—quite clearly they were expected to do so—but their preoccupation with the arcane led to virtual neglect of phrases where there was less difficulty or where poetry and the Qur'ân have drawn on the same general stock of ideas or, even more interesting, where Quranic usage appears to be a modification of pre-Islamic usage.

It is not my intention to deal with these questions in detail here. I have touched on them from time to time in my analyses of early Arabic poems, and after further work I expect to write on them at length elsewhere. However, they are relevant to any discussion of the relationship between the Qur'ân and poetry. Three of the topics that I am looking at, and one example of each, will indicate the sort of problem that is involved:

a) complex overlapping phraseology:

There is a very striking example where al-Shanfara, Lāmiyyat al-'Arab, line 21 has wa-adribu ʿan-hu l-dhikra ʿaṣhān 'I turn aside my thought from it' and Sūra 43, verse 5 has a-fa-nadribu ʿan-kumu l-dhikra ʿaṣhān 'shall we turn aside thought from you?'. One might have expected some cross-referencing by al-Zamakhsharī, the one person who wrote a commentary on both works, but there is none.

b) conventional ideas:

A single comparison between al-Shanfara, Lāmiyyat al-'Arab, line 34 wa-
la-l-ṣabru (in lam yanfa‘i l-shakwu) ajmalu with Sura 12, verses 18 and 83
ṣabrun jamīlun will suffice.

c) development of ideas:

Durayd’s line wa-hal ana illā min Ghaziyyata? in ghawat, ghawaytu; wa-in
tarshud Ghaziyyatu arshudi ‘Am I anyone but one of Ghaziyya? and if
Ghaziyya go astray, I stray with them; and if they act rightly, I am right
[too]’ shows a limited metaphorical development from the original con-
crete meanings of such words as ghawa, dallā, rashada, ihtadā etc. This
metaphorical meaning is much extended in the Qurʾān.

There is at least one other field in which a non-traditional approach
to the links between the Qurʾān and early poetry appears to help our
understanding, and it is this to which I wish to devote the rest of this arti-
cle. My treatment is suggestive rather than exhaustive. It is intended to
courage the reader to think further about these links.

The dogma that the Qurʾān is not poetry is usually stated in a fairly
simplistic, though accurate, way. The Qurʾān does not exhibit the metres
of poetry nor does it use rhyme in the way that poetry does. It is rhythmic
and uses assonance, but that is not poetry. Entirely true!

However, even a short step beyond that takes us well away from the
well-trodden paths of scholarship. So when I ask the question, “What
might the Qurʾān have been like had it been poetry?” I have to form
my own answer. Yet this seems to me to be a fair and useful question,
even for those who accept as dogma the tazkīya of the Qurʾān (incidentally,
a doctrine that did not develop all that early). If one can show other dif-
fences beyond the axiomatic ones, one’s general understanding is
improved.

There is one specific area in which I think the question might be
raised, and that is narrative. Very little Arabic poetry can carry the label,
and even that is hardly narrative in the normally accepted sense. Of the
examples that do occur, perhaps the best-known is al-Aʾshāʾ’s Qissatu l-
Samawʿal (Diwan, poem 25).

In the form that it has come down to us, the poem consists of 21 lines.
It is arguable (and basically immaterial) whether it is complete or only
the gharad of a longer piece. After a couple of introductory lines the poem
tells how al-Samawʿal of the fortress of al-Ablaq al-Taymāʾ preferred to
see the head of a small army, Ħārith, kill his son rather than hand over
some suits of armour that had been entrusted to him. Incidentally, that
is all that one can get from the poem itself. The other details of this
famous story all come from other, later sources.

A literal translation of the poem runs as follows:

1. O Shurayḥ, do not desert me after my fingers have today
grasped the ropes [of your protection] after I have been in
bondage.