ZAJAL AND MUWAŞŞAH: THE CONTINUING METRICAL DEBATE

In an earlier issue of this same Journal, I gave an account of the early stages of my work on the Hispano-Arabic zajjal, Ibn Quzman.¹ The Spanish review Al-Andalus (= And) has just published something of a broadside against the metrical point of view I had expounded;² the following is intended as an answer to those parts of the And articles which are concerned with the prosody of the zajal and the muwaššah. I shall also take this opportunity to draw on some of the results of the metrical study of IQ’s Diwan made in conjunction with the critical edition in Arabic script which I have now completed.³

The study by Sr. F. Corriente attempts to show by statistical analysis that ‘la poesía popular andaluza’, by which he means the zajals of Ibn Quzman, is more likely to be based on a syllabic-accentual rhythmical system than on the quantitative metres of the Arabs. The factor upon which Sr. Corriente relies is the proportion of long syllables to short ones in Classical Arabic poetry, or rather in the metrical paradigms of the sixteen established metres. He first establishes that, since the smallest average quantity of short syllables in any of the metres is 25% of the total, and the greatest average quantity is 75%, it would be most difficult to apply the rules of Classical Arabic prosody or ‘Arūd to any language having less than 25% or more than 75% short syllables. The normal distribution curve indicates that this pattern is most suited for a language which has about 40% short and around 56% long syllables, which coincides almost exactly with the figures obtained by M. Cantineau and Sr. Corriente himself, whether based on the mu'allaqat, four suras of the Qur'ān, the Kitāb al-bihālā, the 1001 Nights, or a novel by Najib Mahfūz.

Though I have no competency as a statistician, the procedure thus far would seem to be logically acceptable, though its chief implication seems to be that Classical Arabic prosody is well suited to Classical Arabic. The point of the exercise, however, concerns 'Andalusian popular poetry'. The songs of Ibn Quzmán are subjected to the same sort of analysis as the other texts mentioned above, and the conclusion is reached that the proportion of short syllables to longs in 'Hispanic Arabic' was much altered in favour of long syllables when compared to Classical Arabic. This would make the application of 'Arūd to the Hispano-Arabic dialect, though not statistically impossible, very difficult. The author wonders

porqué un poeta popular, o al menos un género popular, habrían de caracterizarse por una dificultad tan rebuscada y superior a la de la versificación clásica, de la que hay que suponer trataban de liberarse en alguna forma al abandonar la lengua y género clásicos (p. 9).

This, in my opinion, touches on the crux of the problem: what sort of poet was IQ? Is he 'popular' in any sort of intelligible sense? On a more concrete level, are his zajals really written in colloquial Hispanic Arabic as it was spoken?

It has been argued that Anglo-Saxons are 'impermeable' to the Menéndez Pidalian theory of 'traditional poetry'. Whatever may be the truth of that statement, I shall refrain from venturing beyond the sufficiently challenging domain of IQ, and say only that 'popular' is one of those ubiquitous words which mean both too much and too little, and that I can see no meaningful way of applying such a label to a poet as singular, as solitary in literary history as IQ. As for his language, which might be one criterion for determining whether or not there is anything 'popular' about him, it remains very much to be proven that it reflects accurately the actual spoken Arabic of twelfth-century Córdoba. It is safe to say that, whenever his usage is obviously divergent from anything one could call Classical Arabic (even a 'low' level of it such as the 1001 Nights), the divergences are very likely to reflect phenomena characteristic of the Hispano-Arabic dialect of Western Middle Arabic. The fact remains, however, that his usage is often very close to

4 And XXXIX (1974), p. 281, in an article also signed A. Ramírez Calvente ('Jarchas, moaxajas, zejeles (I)'; the unjustifiably violent attack it contains against the motives and scholarly career of S. M. Stern and his posthumous editor, Professor L. P. Harvey, elicited a protest from the latter which is printed (along with an unrepentant rejoinder) in And XLI (1976), pp. 235-239.