

KAREL PETRÁČEK

THE SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF THE ROMANCE ON 'ANTAR AND ITS CHARACTER

The romance on 'Antar (*Sīrat 'Antar*)¹ belongs to the most mature Arabic prose works called folk romances or novels² and can, therefore, serve us less than other works as a basis for answering the question of its origin or the origin of similar works representing this genre. Such works form a significant section of Arabic literature — the so-called folk (popular) literature. In our terminology³ we call it common literature.

There is enough evidence of the mature character of the *sīrat 'Antar*. Its linguistic form, as presented in editions published in the nineteenth century, is almost free from the so-called „dialecticisms”, i.e. forms of Middle Arabic⁴; there is no trace of

¹ Cf. in general *Encyclopaedy of islam*, both editions s. v. 'Antar, for the bibliography cf. my article *Die Poesie als Kriterion des arabischen Volksromans*, *Oriens* 23—24, 1970—1, 301—305, esp. the studies by Arab authors. The Czech reader can find some informations in my partial translation of *Sīrat 'Antar (Roman o Antarovi)*, Prague 1968), the russian translation by I. Filshtinsky, *Zhiznj i podvigny Antary*, Moscow 1968, cf. also his *Arabic Literature*, Moscow 1966, 170 ss.

² The term „romance” or its equivalent „Volksroman” are naturally not exact, we use it only because of its traditional place in the terminology of the studies on Arabic literature.

³ Cf. the arguments in *Contributions to the Study of the Rise and Development of Modern Literatures in Asia*, Vol. III, Prague 1970, 198 ss.

⁴ On this term (Middle Arabic) cf. J. Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judeo-Arabic, A Study of the Origine of Middle Arabic*, Oxford 1965, 1—18 with the respective bibliography; cf. also the Czech thesis by J. Fleissig, *Systém střední arabštiny a její postavení*

them even in poetry where they are usually preserved most⁵. The composition of this romance is considerably elaborate and complex as compared, for example, with that of an analogical work on the adventures of the Banū Hilāl tribe conquering North Africa and other places. The above stated evidence clearly indicates that educated editors influenced both the structure and form of this work.

There is a generally acknowledged assumption that the genre of folk romances, as well as other genres of folk epic poetry, was developing on a folklore basis, while its strong connection with artificial literature is not denied.

Without denying the connection with artificial literature, we shall try to support the suggested thesis of the relation of the *sīrat ʿAntar* to the folklore basis from the point of its semantic structure. Relations to this basis with regard to the motifs were already proved by B. Heller's studies⁶. It will be demonstrated that even though the *sīrat ʿAntar* is — as far as its semantic structure is concerned — one of the most mature relics of common literature, it is linked with the principals governing the semantic structure of folklore works.

The fundamental core of *sīrat ʿAntar* is formed by the material on the poet ʿAntar living in the pre-Islamic Arabia which was passed on by means of oral tradition in 6th and 7th centuries A. D. We can rely on the material spread around in this way as long as there is no evidence showing that the stories on ʿAntar are constructed from poems ascribed to him, as is true about other works⁷.

ve vývoji arabského spisovného jazyka, Prague 1968, Mss. (The System of Middle Arabic and its Position in the Development of Arabic Written Language).

⁵ Cf. my article quoted in Ann. 1.

⁶ *Die Bedeutung des arabischen ʿAntar-Romans für die vergleichende Literaturkunde*, Leipzig 1931; *Der arabische Antarroman*, Hannover 1927; *Az Arab Antar — regény*, Budapest 1918 a. o.

⁷ R. A. Nicholson on ʿAdīy ibn Zaid, in his *A Literary History of the Arabs*, 1969⁸, 40, also 46, Ann. 1, 55 a. o.; on the cycle of Basūs War cf. W. Caskel, *Ġamharat an-nasab, Das genealogische Werk des Hišām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī*, Leiden 1966, s. v. *Muḥallil b. Rabīʿa, Taghlīb b. Wāʿil* a. o.; R. Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe*,

If we acknowledge our assumption, then it could theoretically be 8th century that marked a change in the manner of passing this kind of material on, i.e. the recording of sections or of the whole circulating material⁸. It is important to realize, however, that even later was *sīrat ʿAntar* passed on by means of oral tradition⁹ and this went on down the centuries¹⁰; there co-existed two forms of this work then: on the one hand a certain recorded form (varying according to the time), no matter whether a record of entire text or certain rudiments for the needs of the readers were concerned, and, on the other hand, a form passed on by means of oral tradition.

The recording of a folklore work need not in itself mean inner restructuring of the work; nevertheless, it certainly affects the future form of the work by stabilizing the text or even increasing possible interferences between the recorded text and the orally transmitted version. From the point of structure, the recorded work (occasionally edited at the same time) may retain its original character; this may be so because — as in our case — the work continues to serve the purpose of oral presentation without getting

1952 ss., cf. his study *Problème de la transfiguration du poète tribal en héros de roman courtois chez les logographes arabes du III^e/IX^e siècle*, *Arabica* 8, 1968, 131—136; J. C. Vadet, *L'Esprit courtois en Orient dans les cinq premiers siècles de l'Hégire*, 1968.

⁸ On the recording of these materials now esp. F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, I, 1967.

⁹ On the story-tellers cf. I. Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, 1920, 57; R. Paret, *Die Geschichte des Islams in der arabischen Volksliteratur*, Hannover 1927; Ibn Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, al-Qāhira 1348, 422 (al-djuz' ath-thāmin, al-fann al-awwal) ss.; A. Abel, *Formation et constitution du roman d'Antar* [in:] *Atti del Convegno internazionale sul tema: La poesia epica e la sua formazione* (Roma, 28 Marzo — 3 Aprile 1969), *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Anno CCCLXVII — 1970*, 717 ss.

¹⁰ E. W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 1871, II, 117 ss.; A. von Kremer, *Aegypten*, II, 1863, 305 ss.; from the mentions by the Arab authors cf. only Muḥammad Fahmī ʿAbd at-Tayyib, *Alwān min al-fann ash-shaʿbī*, Cairo 1964; Aḥmad Rushdī Šālih, *Funūn al-adab ash-shaʿbī*, II, Cairo 1956; ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Giga, *Min aqāṣiṣ Banī Hilāl*, Tūnis 1968 a. o.; they are today anachronous, cf. J. Berque, *Histoire sociale d'un village égyptien au XX^e siècle*, 1957, 77.

affected by other requirements of construction which are connected with a written work which is to be read.

J. Mukařovský¹¹ includes among basic structural characteristics of composition of a folklore (folk) work a specific treatment of the „detail” which lies in grouping together considerably independent motifs and formulas of the work; this does not aim at creating a semantic unit with a single semantic intention. In this respect it differs substantially from an artificial work in which the requirement of motivation is essential for subject construction: each motif included into a work should be related to one or more other motifs in such a way that all motifs linked together in the work define one another and thus partake in the final meaning of the unit. In this way we can briefly paraphrase Mukařovský's opinions which are valid for both poetry and prose. We can also find appropriate support for them in the sphere of analysing Arabic folk poetry¹². In the following section, however, we shall concentrate only on the prose represented by the *sīrat ʿAntar*.

Let us define the contrast of the structural-semantic construction of an orally distributed (folklore) work and a written (artificial) one by three pairs of oppositions:

Oral Folklore Work

Written Artificial Work

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. semantic independence of details ¹³ | semantic subordination of details to the whole |
| 2. linear (additive) connecting of details | synthetically interlinking details |
| 3. the work is a complex of semantic details | the work is a semantic whole |

Let us now analyze the *sīrat ʿAntar* on the basis of these three criteria and let us find its place in the sphere of relations defined by the three pairs of oppositions¹⁴.

¹¹ J. Mukařovský, *Studie z estetiky*, Praha 1966, in the Article *Detail jako základní sémantická jednotka v lidovém umění*, 209—222 (Detail as a Basic Unit in the Folk Art).

¹² Cf. my *Drei Studien über die südsemitische Volkspoesie*, Prague 1966, in the article *Die Charakteristik der neuarabischen Volkspoesie*.

¹³ The term of J. Mukařovský.

¹⁴ For the documentation cf. my Czech translation quoted in Ann. 1.

The extensive text of the *sīrat ʿAntar*, comprising many thousand of pages, does not form a semantic whole. Its function can be estimated¹⁵ with a certain degree of probability but this does not negate the stated assertion. In the whole of the work there cannot be found any global meaning that would not have already appeared in individual details or their small sequences. It is true that the work could be defined by the top idea of „overcoming obstacles while striving for various goals” (social, amorous, etc.); the whole of the work, however, is characterized only by this idea repeated over and over again since it is already traceable in the basic arrangement of „Ur-ʿAntar”¹⁶. The additive character of the work is quite evident here and it is by this feature that the entire novel is characterized, not by any other global meaning.

The work includes other partial meanings, of course, such as: celebration of friendship, of true love, militancy, etc. These are, however, also traceable in individual details or a smaller sequence of details. The global meaning of the work can in this case equal only the total sum of partial meanings, not their product (or factorial).

The work thus does not have a global meaning and it was not even composed with the aim of having any. This is quite evident also from the point of formal arrangement of the text; chapters are not formed by any set of details grouped together by means of composition but only by the (varying) number of pages. A chapter starts without regard to the beginning of the next narrative or the end of preceding ones and sometimes even in the middle of a motif. The main limits of construction are in fact set up by the time reserved for narrating a certain section of the work (one evening, a few subsequent evenings, etc.).

As a whole, the *sīrat ʿAntar* is thus close to the set of semantic details — criterion No. 3, namely details semantically independent, or possibly, a group of a few

¹⁵ H. Grégoire, R. Goosens, *Byzantinisches Epos und arabischer Ritterroman*, ZDMG 88, 1934, 213—233; A. Abel, *La signification apologétique des apocalypses islamo-chrétiennes au Moyen Age* [in:] *Proceedings of the XXII Congress of Orientalists*, Vol. II, 1957, 533—36.

¹⁶ Cf. *El* s. v. *Antar*.

details combined in what can be, in a purely formal sense, called the macrodetail — criterion No. 1. The work thus has two features of an oral folklore work.

The third indicator (criterion No. 2), however, shifts the *sīrat* 'Antar towards the written artificial work.

The linear connecting of larger groups of details (macrodetails) is quite evident in the framework of the whole work; within these groups, however, individual details form a variety of composition lines on the basis of the retrogradely prospective principle, the principle of partial paralleling, etc. This creates a space of compositional tension, affecting the whole set of details (the macrodetail) and sometimes even growing beyond this set, combining it with the following group of details.

It is not necessary to name other principles of composition¹⁷. Let us mention, however, that there is not applied the principle of framing, as found, for example, in the „Tales of Thousand and One Nights” where the most extensive frame (the narrative of Shahrazād which pervades the entire, evidently heterogenous complex) proves the intention to present the work as a whole.

The distribution of the features of the *sīrat* 'Antar in the sphere formed by the relations among the above mentioned three pairs of oppositions can be illustrated by the following schema:

	<i>Oral-Folklore</i>	<i>Written-Artificial</i>
1.	1	0
2.	0	1
3.	1	0

This distribution can also be interpreted diachronically: the considerably mature and complex composition, combining details into higher and more complex formations (macrodetails), was probably incorporated into the work during its later development and presupposes the existence of a record. The composition of the entire work was never quite completed. The compositional

¹⁷ For the genre of the common literature cf. M. I. Gerhard, *La technique du récit à cadre dans les 1001 nuits*, Arabica 8, 1961, 137—157; *The Art of Story-Telling. A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Night*, Leyden 1963.

tendency ends up mostly at the level of a set of details — our macrodetails.

The concrete way of forming the compositional structure would have to be analyzed in individual manuscripts preserved from various periods, which may show different kinds of influence of various editors. This was not, however, the aim of our paper.

In the ambiguous character of the final form of the *sīrat* 'Antar (two symptoms of an oral folklore work and one of a written artificial work), as we know it from printed editions coming from 19th and 20th centuries, there can be traced one trait appearing in its semantic-compositional construction; this trait is typical for the whole genre of Arabic works of folk epics as well as for the entire common literature: it is the central position between artificial literature and folk production — the folklore.