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What are Neoplatonic Poetics? Allegory; Figure; Genre

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POETRY AND THOUGHT moved between Greek Neoplatonism and Arabic Neoplatonism. In this chapter I use genre differences between the two literary cultures (and some references to English poetry) to help answer a question that has arisen from the collective endeavour of the conference from which this volume is drawn: 'what *is* Neoplatonic poetics?' I argue for the relevance of three core categories: allegory, figure and genre. They are found in every literary culture. But is Neoplatonism also found in every literary culture? Neither in Ancient Greek nor in Classical Arabic was poetry composed or criticism written under such a label. It is only 21st-century critics or scholars who choose to identify and then trace a 'Neoplatonic poetics'.

Today we can turn to the classical handbooks for help with the task of identifying allegories, figures or genres, but when it comes to Neoplatonism there is no such assistance to be had. I would therefore like to start to trace a Neoplatonic poetics with the help of three short snatches of poetry from different times and places. This will frame some of the central dynamics for our conversation, not least the concern that unlike allegory or figures, Neoplatonic poetics do not really exist outside this collected volume or similar endeavours. My quotations come from Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj's early 10th-century *al-ʿishqu fī azali -l-āzāli*, Robert Lowell's 1946 *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket* and Robert Duncan's 1960 *Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow*. Here is my somewhat free translation of al-Ḥallāj's poem (‏‏):[1]

> Love has always been. In the eternity of eternities.
> There with God. From God. A beginning appears.
>
> Love is not an event. Love is a quality.
> Of a God whose slain are alive.

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[1] For a more literal translation see Ernst (2018: 128), with references to the sources of the Arabic text and relevant secondary literature.

Qualities from him. In him. Not created.
Created things don't create anything else.

In the beginning God made his love appear. As a quality.
There. A fire glittered.

The 'f' and 'r' of 'fire' connect. Composed.
Each is one. But they reach the mind together.

We can separate them into two. And when we do.
They become a slave and a lord.

This is how truth works: the fire of longing flares
up out of ontological reality. Whether or not they stay or go.

They are weak beyond measure when they light up.
The very strongest are weak when they desire.

The beginning of this short poem sets the scene and fixes its conceptual orienta-
tion: God's love, at the moment of the creation of the universe, is already there.
The God who can raise humans to a real afterlife, 'whose slain are alive', has love
even before he starts to create. The act of divine creation does not create love, it
just makes it appear. With that cosmology and theology in place, al-Ḥallāj then
introduces the metaphor: God's love is a fire, kindled in the space of the beginning
of the world. And then he slips out of the oracular mode into hermeneutics: the
source of his metaphor, the word 'fire', acts on the mind as a single unit, but also
has letters that can be separated. That separation leads to an allegory of slave and
lord, and 'this is how truth works'. The final couplet reaches into the spiritual lives
of the audience with an ascetic inversion of strength and weakness.

The first three couplets present a static divine cosmology, and then at the end of
the fourth couplet we meet the spark that animates and drives action in this cosmo-
logical space. The fire is knowledge, it is love, and it is longing. Catalysed by a hier-
archy, it is witnessed and experienced by humanity. The combination of cosmology
and desire is an old one; in the penultimate couplet al-Ḥallāj uses an Arabic word
for 'longing' (*shawq*) that also appeared at the beginning of the Arabic *Theology
of Aristotle* when the author of that work was explaining the principle that drove
action and motion in the Plotinian cosmological space. When immaterial intellect
descended into the world of corporeal reality it acquired this longing, a desire to con-
struct the world in accordance with the Intellect.[2] As Cristina D'Ancona (2017) has
noted, that was a moment when Aristotle's *Metaphysics* shows through in Plotinus: it
is desire, together with thought, that moves the unmoved mover of *Lambada*.

A millennium after al-Ḥallāj, Robert Lowell 'looked out at the turbulent
Atlantic where his cousin died during World War II [with] the classical elegy in
mind' (Hass 2017: 165). His poem 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' ends
(Lowell 1961: 14):

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[2] The passages in question are: *Enn.* IV 7 [2] 13, A: IV 389 and Badawī (1955: 18.13f.). They are
analysed here: D'Ancona (1999: 70–6). The Greek word for desire, *orexis*, is that used by Aristotle in
De Anima for the appetite of the soul for what is pleasant (Arist. *De an.* 414b6, cf. *Metaph.* 1048a.10).

… It's well;
Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,
Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish:
Unmarried and corroding, spare of flesh
Mart once of supercilious, wing'd clippers,
Atlantic, where your bell-trap guts its spoil
You could cut the brackish winds with a knife
Here in Nantucket, and cast up the time
When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime
And breathed into his face the breath of life,
And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

In the stormy Atlantic Ocean, angels move up while monsters move down. Earlier in the poem, the ocean has been divine: 'in the hand of the great God, where time's contritions blue …'. But now there is a Lord God who 'survives the rainbow of his will'. I am following Robert Hass's reading of the poem here quite closely; Hass identifies two gods: 'as in a lot of cosmologies, he [Lowell]'s had to split off the good God from the bad one. Here the Creator Spirit is one thing and the blue killer of the Atlantic another' (Hass 2017: 180). Another approach to the cosmological stance of the final line is to read it as reflecting the tension between a God on whom cosmology depends as the first cause, and a God who is involved with 'the rainbow of His will'; the business of ruling and controlling the created world. D'Ancona (2017), again, has noted that the question of the deity's dual role goes back to, again, Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In the final line of *Lambada*, Aristotle gave a polit-ical valence to his Prime Mover's role ('the rule of many is not good; let one be the king') that would prove problematic for subsequent Neoplatonists and catalyse the distinction between the One and the Intellect.[3] In a reaffirmation of the human ten-dency to trace such connections across languages, genres and centuries, Aristotle was with that phrase quoting some old poetry: Odysseus rallying the Greeks to Agamemnon's leadership in Homer's *Iliad*.[4]

The last of my opening three poetry quotations comes from Robert Duncan in San Francisco at the beginning of the 1960s (Duncan 1973: 7, 📑):

Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow
as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,
that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein
that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.
Wherefrom fall all architectures I am
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved

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[3] Arist. *Metaph*, 1076a.
[4] Hom. *Il.*, ii:204.

> whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.
> She it is Queen Under The Hill
> whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words
> that is a field folded.

This is an internal scene of creation, a personal mental cosmology. But just like al-Ḥallāj's creation scene it is eternal, and there is a fire representing a driving force. Language is here too, but in place of al-Ḥallāj's letters that reach the mind together we have an enfolded disturbance of overlapping words. And there are shadows here that fall from the light, creating an architecture of forms that are 'likenesses of the First Beloved'. Just as with al-Ḥallāj, there is love at this cosmological starting point, and the force of the copula in 'shadows that *are* forms' lends the predicate 'forms' a status equivalent to the use of a Platonic uppercase 'F'.

The juxtaposition of these three snatches of poetry, selected almost at random from vastly disparate historical contexts, forces us to ask: who chooses to connect poetry to something called Neoplatonism, and how do they do it? With al-Ḥallāj, Lowell and Duncan it does not take a particularly close reading to draw out the cosmological scenes, their metaphysical stakes and the shared dynamics: God, fire and language in al-Ḥallāj and Duncan, vertical hierarchies in Duncan and Lowell. The same is true of the differences between their visions: al-Ḥallāj's deity is prior and static with a love that flares and connects, Lowell's God rises untrammelled above the test of his own creation, and Duncan's God may only exist in the poet's hidden mind – 'Under The Hill'. All this can be usefully called 'Neoplatonism'; poetics and theology of a certain sort. But there is much more in the poems beside this, and al-Ḥallāj would not have known what 'Neoplatonism' meant. Lowell too may well have been thinking of Dante more than Plotinus, and Duncan of the medieval and Renaissance literature he studied at Berkeley.

The scale of the historical disparity defeats any attempt to trace influence (Cristina D'Ancona faces the same question with Dante and Plotinus in her contribution to this volume). When we choose to give the dynamics that these poems share the label of 'Neoplatonism', our choice exerts a centripetal force on the subsequent analysis. Duncan's poem ends with dreams, secrets and 'a given property of the mind that certain bounds hold against chaos' (Duncan 1973: 7). While Lowell's poem is all about the relationship between God and man (it is introduced by a quote from the Bible, 'Let man have dominion over the fishes of the sea…' Gen. 1:26), the two gods problem that Hass identified is arguably not its central concern. And al-Ḥallāj was speaking to his audience about their God, not to Plotinus's audience about his. The 'Neoplatonism' label pulls diversity into conversation, and it does so as a deliberate critical act, one that has an ethical salience in the moment that it is made. To give up on the label would be to give up on that *critique*.

If we are therefore determined to continue the experimental practice of locating something called Neoplatonism in poems (and I am), we need to develop a framework within which to do so. I would like to propose a tripartite analytical structure here – allegory, figure, genre – in the hope of giving us a better sense of the variety

of ways in which poems can be Neoplatonist. While it is self-evidentially not the case that allegory, figure and genre comprise a toolbox sufficient to describe all poetry (even if one wanted to do such a thing), I think that there is a strong case to be made that all the vectors and dynamics that one can read as Neoplatonist fall into one or more of these three categories. They therefore constitute our Neoplatonist poetics.

1. Allegory

I will start with allegory, which I understand here as a set of words that target and sustain a nonverbal realm (the word in classical Arabic theory is *mathal*: proverb, analogy, example). In Neoplatonic poetry, the nonverbal realm sustained is almost always divine. This fits well with allegory, which 'designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin' (de Man 1983: 207). Allegory has therefore always been a good way for human language to deal with the ineffable; it refers 'to a meaning that it does not itself constitute', and to a cosmological realm that must have been there before the words of the allegory itself were put together.[5] This separation of the target from the source lends itself to the development of hierarchies within the audience, as well as to exegetical performances of expertise. As al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (litterateur and exegete, fl. in or before 1018) understood it, the allegory (*mathal*) pairs a universally accessible surface with a depth that needs the investment of recovery (al-Rāghib 1988: 181.11–183.16; Key 2011). There is an irony here, for in order for someone to have enough knowledge to recover the details of the target realm, they must necessarily be without need of the allegory itself. Allegories are therefore fundamentally pedagogical. Allegory exists in a symbiotic relationship with its own explication, and it needs someone to be in charge. In al-Rāghib's Islamic context God was in charge and said so: 'God uses allegories for human beings; perhaps they will understand' (Qur'an 24:35). And al-Rāghib (1988: 182.8–9) said that God uses allegory for a reason; he is not just telling stories. For in allegory there is always something else at stake, and in Neoplatonic allegory that something else is both true and divine; it is what al-Rāghib called *al-ḥaqāʾiq* (the truths, the accurate accounts) (1988: 182.10, 183.13).

The same allegorical mechanism that al-Rāghib identified in the 11th century can be found in the Greek *Enneads*, that foundational 3rd-century text by Plotinus. Plotinus uses poetry in the *Enneads* to help him describe the relationship between the realms of human beings and the gods. Homer's 'dread and dank house which even the gods loath' is a description of the underworld, referenced by Plotinus ('what the gods hate, as a poet says') to explain how heaven was lifeless and dark before soul entered it.[6] Homer's Odysseus drew a distinction between the ghost of

Hercules and the ghosts of Agamemnon and Achilles: Hercules was immortal and, unlike dead men, actually present on Olympus rather than being down in Hades. For Plotinus, this distinction is useful because it helps him explain how the soul can be divine but also descend and inhere in the body.[7] Homer's Odysseus also wanted to leave Circe's magical pleasures and go back to his real home with Penelope in Ithaca, a desire for true beauty that Plotinus uses to explain how inner sight works. When invoking Odysseus in this last example, Plotinus hinted at the allegorical function of Homer's poetry: 'We shall put out to sea, as Odysseus did, from the witch Circe or Calypso – as the poet says (I think with a hidden meaning).'[8] In all three of these examples, Greek poetry provides illustrative imagery for Plotinus's philosophy, and in that last example imagery is understood as useful because it contains meaning that is both hidden and recoverable. None of these passages or quotations of poetry became part of the Arabic *Theology of Aristotle*.

But one Plotinian reference to poetry did become part of the Arabic. It was Plotinus's remark that Pythagoras was 'unclear because he writes poetry', made because Plotinus thought we should stick to Plato.[9] The Greek phrase (*tō de parēn kai dia poiēsin ou safei einai*) was translated as: *innamā kallama l-nāsa bi-l-amthāli wa-l-awābid* (Badawī 1955: 23.12–13). The Greek word for 'poetry' (*poiēsin*) has become the Arabic word for 'allegories' (*amthāl*), and the Greek phrase for 'unclear' (*ou safei*) has become the Arabic word for 'wild' or 'bizarre' (*awābid*). Allegory might seem to be a mistranslation, but this is not the case. We will see how the Arabic translator/author of *The Theology of Aristotle*, which was a detailed Aristotelian engagement with Plotinus, made an accurate assessment of what poetry was to Greek Neoplatonists.

Poetry for Greek Neoplatonists was of course still Homer. The *Odyssey* and *Iliad* were, as we have just seen, a reliable source of imagery and meaning, but Homer was nearly a millennium old when Plotinus taught. There was more recent poetry available, and it was used primarily as a source of myth accessed via allegory. Luc Brisson (2017: 214–20) has shown how Proclus and his 5th-century contemporaries used the *Orphic Rhapsodies* and the *Chaldean Oracles* to develop their Platonic philosophies. Both works were in verse, and allegory was how the School of Athens could preserve myth within a Platonic system: 'the Chaldean Oracles and the Orphic Rhapsodies were supplanting Homer's and Hesiod's poems as sources of myths, though these last two were not totally neglected'.[10] David Hernandez, in his contribution to this collaboration, has demonstrated the impact this had on Greek poetry itself from the 5th century onwards. The Arabic translator of the *Enneads* was right: Greek poetry in Plotinus's world was read as allegory.

We therefore have in Greek two familiar and connected ways to deal with poetry: one can use it to convey truth, and one can read it to divine truth. Both paths

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[7] *Od.* 11.601-602, *Enn.* I 1 [53] 12.32f, A: I 121, Plotinus (1964: 1.121).

[8] *Il.*, 2.140, *Enn.* I 6 [1] 8.17–20, A: I 257, cf. *Od.* 9.29f and 10.483–484 via note in Plotinus (1964: 1.257).

[9] *Enn.* IV 8 [6] 1.21f, A: IV 397, Plotinus (1964: 4:399).

[10] Brisson (2008: 88); see also Brisson (2012: 128–30).

are allegory, connections to a nonverbal realm. But in Classical Arabic, the situation was slightly different. Poetry was certainly used to convey truth, but often through force of style rather than reference to otherworldly realms like Homer's Aeaea, Olympus or Hades. For example, in al-Rāghib's book of ethics, a*l-Dharīʿah*, just as in almost all Arabic prose of this period, there is a substantial amount of poetry quoted in the service of the work's goals. The famous poet al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) is quoted to make the following point about wealth and glory:[11]

> There is no glory in this world for the poor
> There is no money in this world for the weak

Poetry here was used as a source of apposite phrasing; al-Rāghib knew what he wanted to say and he turned to al-Mutanabbī's Arabic in exactly the same way as Plotinus turned to Homer's Greek (al-Rāghib intended the exact opposite of the Gospel allegory that it is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven).[12] Poetry is marshalled in support of a truth already laid out in the prose text. This is not allegory; truth does not lie in the text, waiting for hermeneutic explanation, and no separate world is invoked.

Al-Rāghib did not read poetry as allegory. He read the Qurʾan as allegory. Revealed scripture played the same role in his Arabic Neoplatonism that the *Rhapsodies* and *Odes* did in Greek. And while the Qurʾan self-identifies as not being poetry,[13] it is unquestionably literature:

> God is the light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of his light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon light; (God guides to his light whom he will.)

This is A.J. Arberry's translation of Qurʾan 24:35 (al-Nūr), known as 'the light verse'. Al-Rāghib identified the light as 'reason' (*al-ʿaql*), an elevation of the intellect that was characteristic of his contexts and oeuvre[14] but by no means inevitable.[15] He then connects this light of reason to a specific concept: the 'acquired intellect' (*al-ʿaql al-mustafād*), which was one of the two types of reason that structured his epistemology (the other was the innate intellect: *al-ʿaql al-gharīzī*). Without acquired intellect, human reason is only potential, like a child or a seed (al-Rāghib 2007: 33.9–16). Acquired intellect is the reason that enables you to put two things

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[11] *Fa-lā majda fī l-dunyā li-man qalla māluhu | wa-lā māla fī l-dunyā li-man qalla majduhū.* al-Mutanabbī (2002: 1:413.3), al-Rāghib (2007: 111.1–2).

[12] Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25.

[13] See statements at Qurʾan 21:5 (al-Anbiyāʾ), 26:224 (al-Shuʿarāʾ), 36:69 (Yā Sīn), 37:36 (al-Ṣāffāt), 52:30 (a-Ṭūr), and 69:41 (al-Ḥāqqah).

[14] *Mathalu nūrihī yaʿnī mathalu nūri l-maʿrifati fī qalbi l-muʾmini ... wa l-māʾu lladhī fī l-qindīli shubbiha bi-l-ʿilmi wa-dhihn.* Abū Layth al-Samarqandī (1993: 2:440.12–14). See also, Böwering (2001: 134, 137).

[15] al-Rāghib (2007: 69.10–12, 134.3–5). Cf. two exegetes for whom the light was just the Qurʾan itself: al-Ṭabarī (1994: 5:426.6) and Ibn Fūrak (2009: 144).

together, to say not just X but that X is Y. Al-Rāghib says it is reason that is grammatically transitive (*yataʿaddā ilā mafʿūlayn*). He also says that the phrase 'acquired intellect' is found in both revelation and in the works of the philosophers (*fī-l-sharʿi wa-fī kalāmi l-ḥukamāʾ*) (al-Rāghib 2007: 140.13–18).[16] By revelation he means the light verse in the Qurʾan, and in philosophy he may have been aware of the force of light that illuminates reason in the Arabic (and Greek) Plotinus (*al-quwwah al-nūrīyah ... tansaḥu ʿalā l-ʿaql*).[17] Al-Rāghib's engagement with the Qurʾanic text is hermeneutic and allegorical; he finds Neoplatonic cosmology and epistemology in Islamic revelation.

Avicenna's (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037) exegesis does the same thing with more detail: the niche for Avicenna was 'material intellect' (al-Rāghib had 'chest of the believer') and the glass containing the lamp was 'intellect *in habitu*' (al-Rāghib had 'heart of the believer'). The intellect *in habitu* used either 'thought' (the olive tree, which for al-Rāghib was 'religion') or the oil of 'guessing correctly' to acquire secondary intelligibles. When these intelligibles were in the soul as 'light upon light', the lamp became the 'actual intellect', perfected in the 'acquired intellect' (the intellect al-Rāghib chose to include). Avicenna then went on to say that the agent which moves the intellect through these three stages is the 'active intellect'.[18]

In both cases, Arabic scholars were using the Qurʾan to elevate and explain human reason, and they were doing so in a philhellenic philosophical tradition. We can call it Neoplatonic, and we can identify the process as allegory: just as in Greek Neoplatonism, so Arabic Neoplatonism used literature to access a realm of divine truth. The difference is simply that while the texts in Greek were the poetry of the *Rhapsodies* and *Odes*, Arabic Neoplatonists could read the language of the monotheist god himself.

2. Figure

A second form that poetics can take is the taxonomy of rhetorical figures. This was perhaps the dominant form of literary criticism in Classical Arabic in the long millennium from the 800s to the 20th century. Taxonomy of rhetorical figures is also found in Late Antiquity and European scholasticism. However, this congruence in genre across centuries and literary cultures does not mean that the figures themselves are ever exactly equivalent. Even within Arabic critical texts of the same period, different scholars give different examples and explanations for the same figure. This is no evidence of incoherence, but rather of a critical landscape in which scholars

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[16] Cf. al-Rāghib (1992: 560/1.19-561/2.1). And, for example, *Enn.* VI 7 [38] 35.24–25, A: VI 197, Plotinus (1964: 6:143–5).

[17] Badawī (1955: 6.9).

[18] *ʿAqlan hayūlānīyan* ('material intellect') ... *ʿaqlan bi-l-malakati* ('intellect *in habitu*') ... *ʿaqlan mustafādan* ('acquired intellect') ... *al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl* ('active intellect'). al-Rāghib (2007: 69.10f, 134.3–5), Ibn Sīnā & al-Ṭūsī (1983–94: 2:390–2). Translations from Gutas (1988: 186).

seeking to understand poetry through the enumeration of its techniques were each happy to reinvent the wheel. It is tempting to imagine that they did so because they felt that writing and reading taxonomies of rhetorical figures was itself a way to read poetry, an act of criticism rather than a claim on some realm of fact in which single stable conceptions of each figure applied universally. But here we are speculating.

Let us examine a paradigmatic example of this taxonomical process, a not particularly famous work edited by Geert Jan van Gelder in 1987: *Kitāb al-Maḥāsin fī-l-Naẓm wa-l-Nathr* by Abū al-Ḥasan Naṣr b. Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Marghīnānī (fl. 5th/11th century).[19] After a brief one-page introduction that justifies study of the arts of poetic innovation as necessary to understand their miraculously inimitable use in the Qur'an, al-Marghīnānī launches straight into a taxonomy of figures designed to enable readers to find the beauty in the Qur'an's language, and to argue successfully with their opponents (al-Marghīnānī & Ibn Aflaḥ 1987: 67). The nature of the projected debates is left unsaid, but the understanding of literary criticism as being connected to the literary beauty of the Qur'an (a text nearly 300 years old when al-Marghīnānī was writing) as well as the performance space of interpersonal debate is common in Classical Arabic. The first figure al-Marghīnānī addresses is the rhyming pattern within a single line (*tarṣīʿ*), and his first set of examples come from expressions in ordinary language: *kullu lisānin yadhummuhā wa-kullu insānin yaḍummuhā* ('every tongue criticizes it and every person embraces it') (al-Marghīnānī & Ibn Aflaḥ 1987: 67.19). Then comes a definition of *tarṣīʿ* as 'speech with balanced sections and a consistent structure, like the examples we have just seen'.[20] Then come a couple more examples from more ornate speech with religious content praising God, then three quotations from the Qur'an itself (al-Anʿām 6:70/Yūnus 10:4, al-Infiṭār 82:13–14, al-Ghāshiya 88:25–6). After the Qur'anic quotations are two prophetic Hadith. The language of the prophet and the language of God display the same internal rhyme as the speech of ordinary humans: **innā ilayna** *iyābahum thumma* **inna ilaynā** *ḥisābahum* (Qur'an 88:25–6 'we have their resurrection; then we have their reckoning') and *irfaʿhu fa-innahu* **atqā li-**rab**bika wa-anqā li-**thaw**bika** ('[the prophet said to someone dragging their robe in the dirt:] lift it up; it will be more pious for your lord and cleaner for your robe') (al-Marghīnānī & Ibn Aflaḥ 1987: 67.27–28, 68.1).

Al-Marghīnānī next returns to a more general literary critical evaluation of the figure of *tarṣīʿ*: it has the highest status among all the figures of eloquence because, while it is the hardest to achieve with success and clarity, it is most beloved by the audience and most subtle in its impact. It is innovative in prose, but even more so in poetry.[21] Only then, with the figure described, analysed and explained via divine

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[19] al-Marghīnānī & Ibn Aflaḥ (1987: 4–5).
[20] *Wa-maʿnā l-tarṣīʿi an taʾiya bil-kalāmi muʿtadili l-aqsāmi muttafiqi l-niẓāmi ʿalā l-ṣīghati llatī qasamnāhā wa-l-ṣanʿati llatī rasamnāhā* (al-Marghīnānī & Ibn Aflaḥ 1987: 67.23–25).
[21] *Wa-hādhā l-nawʿi min l-kalāmi arfaʿu manzilatan wa-aʿlā ratbatan min sāʾirihi ʿinda l-bulaghāʾi li-kawnihi abʿada marāman wa-aṣʿaba niẓāman ... idhā ... khalā min l-iltibāsi wa-l-ishtibāhi ... fa-huwa aḥabbu l-kalāmi ilā l-samʿi wa-akhaffuhu ʿalā l-ṭabʿi qāla l-tarṣīʿu fī l-kalami l-manthūri badīʿun wa-fī l-manẓūmi abdaʿu* (al-Marghīnānī & Ibn Aflaḥ 1987: 68.2–7).

and human examples, does al-Marghīnānī provide a set of examples that are poetry. Among the poets he cites are the famous Abū Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbbī (d. 965), Ibn Fāris (d. 1004) and al-Buḥturī (d. 897) whose couplet (I have altered the lineation) reads:[22]

> The rain flows when it beats down
> The lion protects its cubs' den
> But the flow and protection of Mustaʿīn?
> Complete blessing: overflow.

These are the opening two lines of al-Buḥturī's poem in praise of the caliph al-Mustaʿīn (reg. 862–6), whose name literally means 'someone *asking* for help', a double reference in Arabic, lost in my translation, that extends the dynamic of assistance sought and granted. Al-Marghīnānī cites both lines but says he is interested in the *tarṣīʿ* only in the first line: *mā l-ghaythu yaḥmī ʿinda asbālihi | wa-l-laythu yaḥmī khīsa ashbālihī*.

    Al-Marghīnānī is not attempting to describe how this poem locates its subject as a force of nature, nor is he concerned with the hierarchy set up in the opening couplet between caliph, rain and lion, nor with the social and political meaning of the caliph's subjects as lion cubs. Rather, he is writing literary criticism designed to answer questions about poetic technique. He uses God's own language in the Qurʾan and the ordinary language of the humans (including the prophet) whom he believed were created by God to establish an analytical frame. Qurʾan, Hadith and people's commonplace rhyming expressions all help establish a category – the figure of *tarṣīʿ* – that then helps the reader of poetry understand what is going on in particularly well-constructed lines. The genre of poetics, thus created, equips its readers to read poetry and connect poetic techniques to both God and their fellow citizens. They would then be able, one might assume, better to enjoy the canonical poetry they knew and better explain it in literary salons.[23]

    Al-Marghīnānī is himself not the most famous exponent of this genre; one might name Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 908), Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī (d. 1005) and others, but he is without question representative of an approach to poetry that flourished in Classical Arabic and then in the madrasa centuries provided the methodological basis for the great textbooks of al-Sakkākī (d. 1229), al-Qazwīnī (d. 1338) and their commentators. The taxonomy in this genre is relentless, there is no let-up in the proliferation of rhetorical figures, the development of larger categories into which they are placed, and the overwhelming sense of inconsistency: one scholar's *tarṣīʿ* is not necessarily the same as another's (this is not unique to Arabic) (Vinson 2003: 13).

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[22] *Mā l-ghaythu yaḥmī ʿinda asbālihi | wa-l-laythu yaḥmī khīsa ashbālihī || ka-l-mustaʿīni l-mustaʿāni lladhī | tammat lanā l-nuʿmā bi-ifḍālihī*. al-Buḥturī (1963: 1636, #638), al-Marghīnānī & Ibn Aflaḥ (1987: 69.4–5). The Dīwān has *ṣawba* for *ʿinda* in the first hemistich and *lahu* for *lanā* in the final hemistich.

[23] On these salons, see Ali (2010) and England (2017).

While some scholars may in the past have understood this as a critical failure,[24] I rather feel that the lively and original complexity with which each critic, including al-Marghīnānī, sets up a complete taxonomy, fully equipped with quotations of great poetry, should lead us to see this genre as composed of deliberate conversation starters. If Classical Arabic literary critical taxonomies of rhetorical figures were intended to give readers of Classical Arabic poetry something to think about and talk about, and a way to read poetry outside and alongside the collected works of poets or recitations, then they succeeded.

Was there Neoplatonism in this conversation? It seems not, for two reasons. First, that mystic poets such as al-Ḥallāj were not included in literary critical works like that of al-Marghīnānī. Second, if poetry with Neoplatonic import did appear in a work of literary criticism, its Neoplatonic aspects were not addressed. The ideas that we identified in al-Ḥallāj, Lowell and Duncan were not al-Marghīnānī's concern, and neither were the hierarchies of power probed by al-Buḥturī. It takes a critic to create Neoplatonic poetry, and in Classical Arabic the critics were busy doing something else.

3. Genre

Classical Arabic might have identified different concerns if its taxonomies were accountings of subject matter rather than technique. We can see what this might have looked like with the example of Menander Rhetor (3rd century BC, and popular in Greek for over a millennium thereafter). Menander wrote pedagogical works designed to enable readers to write better compositions on a variety of enumerated topics. He was 'a practical professor of rhetoric', and, 'too good a teacher to confine himself to [a taxonomical] skeleton' (Bremer 1995: 263–4). His text walks the reader through a taxonomy designed to enable them to write. This is different from Classical Arabic literary criticism, where we might characterise the criticism as designed to empower poetry's audience rather than the poets themselves.[25] But Menander could still have chosen to teach young authors a taxonomy of rhetorical figures. He did not; his taxonomy enumerates the subject matters of literary composition in 3rd-century Greek: it is therefore an account of genre. Whether he is describing the appropriate ways to praise a city, or the best way to write to someone from whom one is separated, Menander is eminently practical: 'If you are inviting a governor to a city which has no very grand or historic features …' (1981: 193).

Menander classifies literature as a teacher of rhetoric: according to the purpose of each piece. His structuring epistemology is genre, not technique. The first

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[24] G.E. von Grunebaum in al-Bāqillānī (1950: xxi).

[25] While this characterisation certainly works for al-Marghīnānī, we must note Ibn Rashīq's (d. *c.* 1070) al-ʿUmda, written in the Western Mediterranean for aspiring poets and containing a survey of themes and genres). And for a detailed review of generic statements in Classical Arabic, see Schoeler (2010–11).

treatise starts with the statement: 'Rhetoric as a whole is divided into three parts.' These are legal, private and epideictic. That third category is then split into two headings: praise and blame. Praise is then divided according to its target: hymns to gods (sub-divided by god) and praise of mortal objects (sub-divided into cities, countries and living creatures). Living creatures is sub-divided into rational and non-rational. Non-rational is sub-divided into land animals and water animals, and land animals are sub-divided into flying or walking. 'These then are all the divisions of the epideictic part of rhetoric taken as a whole' (Menander 1981: 4–5).

Menander's taxonomy makes it clear to us that Classical Arabic works such as al-Marghīnānī's were by no means the first in the region to organise literary knowledge through systematic enumeration.[26] But Menander makes claims on genre, not on technique (the same is true of the redactors of Classical Arabic *diwāns* studied by Gregor Schoeler [2010–11: 24–39]). If allegory is a moment in a text that is created by hermeneutics, and figure is a technique located by criticism, genre is a structuring claim about how people and institutions treat literature. This may help us locate Neoplatonic poetics. Neither al-Marghīnānī nor Menander practice criticism that could be called Neoplatonic; they do not identify content to which we could give that label. Is this because they were not talking about poetry that was itself Neoplatonic? Or is it because their criticism was itself unconcerned with Neoplatonism? In both cases the answer is to be found in genre.

The poetry of religious and political figures such as al-Ḥallāj, whether we call them Sufis, mystics, ascetics or another label less complicated than the reality of their lives, was not a formal genre in the way that the Classical Arabic qasida was a formal genre with attendant reception, documentation and criticism. Carl Ernst remarked in the course of our conference that Sufi poetry might best be regarded as an informal genre, existing on the equivalent of the back of envelopes, but no less meaningful because of that form. Sufi poetry had religious meaning, literary impact and sometimes political salience, but it did not have a contemporaneous scholarly tradition of edited collections and commentary on technique.

In his contribution to this volume, Stefan Sperl makes a successful argument for shared conceptual frameworks that exist between Sufi poetry, Plotinian cosmology and the Qur'an. We can usefully give these shared frameworks the label 'Neoplatonic', and Sperl reads them as evidence of a 'wider spiritual tradition' rather than any evidence of an intertextuality that could be recovered by philology. This is persuasive, and yet when we consider the role genre plays in this system there are some interesting conclusions to be drawn. We have already seen that Plotinus, writing Platonic philosophy, had a suspicion of the epistemological accuracy of poetry that echoed Plato's own famous remarks in the *Republic*. The Qur'an itself, self-presenting as a divine work of perfect Arabic, had a parallel suspicion of poets and their rival claims on truth and persuasion. The Qur'an expressed

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[26] For a survey of Ancient Greek scholars dealing with figures (*skhḗmata*) and technique, see Novokhatko (2013).

confidence that those who doubted the prophetic mission would be unable to replicate its language: 'Bring a *sūra* like this! And call whomever you can, apart from God!'[27] These attitudes in both Greek and Arabic served to create genre boundaries between poetry on the one hand and philosophy/revelation on the other. In Arabic, this created a productive critical tension between responses to the beautiful words of God and to the beautiful words of his creation. This tension is worked through in the scholarly genre of works on the inimitability of the Qur'an, and also in the defences of poetry advanced by both Ibn Rashīq and ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078).[28] But the poem by al-Ḥallāj with which we began sits between poetry and the Qur'an, negotiating its own religious status without access to the legitimating critical discourse of works such as al-Marghīnānī's.

Genres therefore serve to divide the shared spiritual tradition that Sperl identifies, whether genres of literary production (both human and divine) or genres of scholarly analysis. This is true even without consideration of the religious gap between Islam (or indeed Christianity) and Platonism. And yet genre is the only framework within which we can make the claim that Neoplatonism exists. We have seen that Neoplatonism does not exist within any enumeration of rhetorical figures, and that while Neoplatonic ideas are often accessed through the mechanism of allegory, Neoplatonism itself is by no means the same thing as allegory. Neoplatonism is a genre, and as such it is created by those who bring a genre into existence. In this case, it is us, in this volume, who do this work.

Genre is a set of constraints, functioning as a conversation, that people set up within institutions to negotiate any number of demands, be they rival truth claims, social dynamics or politics itself. Like any discourse, genre then exerts its own force on those who use it: the force of generic convention (in the form of his contemporaries) may have explicitly prevented al-Marghīnānī from engaging al-Ḥallāj's use of rhetorical figure, or genre may simply have silently guided him to the canon of al-Buḥturī and al-Mutanabbī instead. Neoplatonism as it exists today in our critical and scholarly practice is a genre that exerts the same kind of forces: bringing certain texts and ideas into the foreground and smoothing away others – all the while serving to make a persuasive argument rooted in our own 21st-century context for shared cosmological commitments across literary cultures. These observations should not be taken as criticism of either al-Marghīnānī, or ourselves.

I would like to end this section with a brief philological focus on one word that does different things in different Classical Arabic genres. All literary criticism, whether based on allegory, figure or genre, includes a perspective on the functioning of language. This is how Brisson (2008: 101) describes the assumptions made by Plotinus:

> Human language … is grounded in the unifying and generating power of the divinity, that is, at the level of the intellect. But between the [intellect] and matter are several levels of perception, each having a corresponding mode of discourse (*logos*) …

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[27] Qur'an 10:37–8 (Yūnis). See also Qur'an 2:23 (al-Baqara), Qur'an 11:13 (Hūd), Qur'an 52:33–4 (al-Ṭūr).
[28] al-Jurjānī (1992: 7f); Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (2009: 1:74–80).

the *logoi* … are creative emanations of the Intellect that structure the universe. This conception of language has two consequences. The divinity cannot express himself directly in human language … even though the Chaldean Oracles can at times be considered as direct revelation. Each level of the *logos* can be viewed in relation to the level below it, as a 'metalanguage' capable of explaining it, of providing its meaning. Thence, each level of language must be interpreted with the help of the language level immediately above it.[29]

The ontological assumptions made about language in Classical Arabic were quite different. There, a level of proto-linguistic content (*maʿnā*) was shared between God and man. God used the Qurʾan to communicate this content to humanity through patterns of language in which audible or written expressions (*alfāẓ*) each pointed at different mental contents (*maʿānī*). In this process, the accuracy of that pointing and the extent of human access to divine truth were central. The word used to denote moments when an expression in language pointed directly at the correct mental content was *ḥaqīqa* (I expand on this analysis elsewhere: Key 2018).

The word *ḥaqīqa* appeared in the poem by al-Ḥallāj that I translated above. There it became 'truth' and 'ontological reality' in English. Both choices reflect the fact that I read it as a word for accuracy. But accuracy is not a substance or a fixed referent, it is a quality, a judgement made about something, a decision that a connection is accurate. The word *ḥaqīqa* in Classical Arabic works in exactly this way; scholars use it to claim that a certain connection between a *maʿnā* (a mental content) and either the world, or God, or a linguistic expression (*lafẓ*), is accurate. For the philologist, the word *ḥaqīqa* is therefore an index: from its usage in a text we can divine genre. When *ḥaqīqa* appears in Classical Arabic literary criticism, it is always an accurate connection between mind and words, between mental contents and vocal forms, between *maʿānī* and *alfāẓ*. Truth is a mind-to-language connection.

For example, when Ibn Rashīq said that all language which goes beyond *ḥaqīqa* but can still be meaningfully said is *majāz*,[30] he was talking about a set of accurate connections between ideas and words that are accurate (*ḥaqīqa*). When people use words outside those connections, it is *majāz* (a concept roughly equivalent to 'non-literal' or 'metaphorical'). For example, in this line by the Abbasid court poet al-ʿAttābī (d. *c.* 835), it is not accurate to say that birds speak in the morning, or that the night itself is sleepless; an accurate account of either act would restrict it to humans. But these statements are still made, and they are *majāz*:[31]

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[29] See also Cristina D'Ancona's contribution to this volume, which focuses on how language in Dante (via Plotinus, Aquinas and others) is unable to express divine reality.

[30] *Wa mā ʿadā l-ḥaqāʾiqa min jamīʿi l-alfāẓi thumma lam yakun muḥālan maḥḍan fa-huwa majāz*. Ibn Rashīq (2009: 1:421.16–17).

[31] *Yā laylatan lī bi-jawwārīna sāhiratan | ḥattā takallama fī l-ṣubḥi l-ʿaṣāfīru || fa-jaʿala l-laylata sāhiratan ʿalā l-majāzi wa-innamā yusharu fīhā wa-jaʿala li-l-ʿaṣāfīri kalāman wa-lā kalāma lahā ʿalā l-ḥaqīqati*. Ibn Rashīq (2009: 1:422.6–8). My translation follows Yāqūt, who gives Ḥuwwārīn (a fortress near Homs in Syria) instead of Ibn Rashīq's *jawwārīn* (the farmers one works alongside). Al-Ḥamawī (1977: 2:315).

> Sleepless night in Ḥuwwārīn
> Until in the morning
> The birds speak.

Al-Ḥallāj's *ḥaqīqa* is very different. His accurate connections are not made between ideas and words, but rather between human minds and a divine, emanationist cosmology. This ontology is not unlike that described by Brisson in the quotation above. Al-Ḥallāj's accuracy is truth, not the sort of truth we get by checking accurate words in the dictionary or being 'literal' about word meanings, but the truth we get when we interact with the flame of love and light that abides in and flows down through levels of divinity emanating from the one truth: 'This is how truth works: the fire of longing flares / up out of ontological reality.'

This brief excursion into the meaning and usage of the Classical Arabic word for 'accuracy' reinforces our conclusions about genre. There are two kinds of accuracy in Classical Arabic poetry, two kinds of truth. Whether one finds a truth in which birds cannot speak, or a truth in which God's fire emanates down, the answer depends on the kind of question being asked. Both answers can be found in al-ʿAttābī and al-Ḥallāj, but actual critics have tended to choose to look for one or the other. When we look for Neoplatonism in Arabic poetry, we can find it just as we find it in English. The themes are the same despite the intervening millennium, and they are recovered – when they are recovered – in the same way: by allegory. This happens across genre: whether it is the Qur'an, or the poetry of al-Ḥallāj, or the poetry of Robert Lowell and Robert Duncan, there is a truth in the literature that is extricable as meaning by a critic. But the critic is us. Or rather, when it comes to 'Neoplatonism', the only critic who reads the genre across all contexts is us.

No one puts 3rd-century Platonists together with 11th-century Qur'anic exegetes and 20th-century English poets except us. No one calls the themes we find 'Neoplatonism' except us. Our brief investigation of Classical Arabic literary criticism reminded us of this fact. Al-Ḥallāj's poetry could easily have been read allegorically by Neoplatonists, but genre boundaries prevented Classical Arabic critics from reading him. In the poetry they did examine, their genre-specific practice led them to focus on technique rather than content; they looked for figure not allegory. And those scholars who did use allegory read the Qur'an not poetry. Avicenna and al-Rāghib worked on the Qur'an in the same allegorical mode as Greek exegetes reading the *Rhapsodies* and *Oracles*. Finally, while all this was happening, Classical Arabic poets still spoke of love, power and imagination just like Lowell and Duncan. For poetry grows in a relationship with its criticism, but can always do more than criticism explains. And after the relationship has ended, criticism is free to create new genres with old material. There is no shame in the newness of the critical endeavour, whether we are parsing the figures of poetic technique, identifying shared concerns about love and power between 9th-century Iraq and 20th-century Northern California, or looking across a millennium of tangentially connected literary genres at certain allegories we call Neoplatonic.

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