


# RELIGION AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Drama—Sermons—Literature

Sabine Dorpmüller, Jan Scholz, Max Stille, Ines Weinrich
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# A Sermon on Piety by Imam ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib: How the Rhythm of the Classical Arabic Oration Tacitly Persuaded

**Abstract** Early Islamic society revered its articulate speakers, and later scholars held up their addresses as exemplars of eloquence. But wherein lay the power of the classical oration (*khuṭba*)? Did orators randomly pick and choose stylistic features, or were there certain characteristics they privileged? More importantly, what were the conscious and unconscious impetuses for their choice of aesthetic mode? It is well known that the orator employed logical argumentation based on ideas to convince his audience. I argue that in tandem with this rational argumentation, the early Arabic orator also used a stylistic mode of persuasion to sway his listeners in a subtler way, one which relied primarily on rhythm. Elsewhere, I have divided the fundamental aesthetic features of the oration into five groups: vivid imagery, audience-engagement elements, rhetorical or real questions, testimonial citation of Qurʾānic and poetic verses, dignified yet straightforward language, and most prominently, and the focus of this article, rhythm. Through a granular textual analysis of a sermon on piety by the first Shiʿa imam and fourth Sunni caliph, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), the article demonstrates how the entire piece is formulated rhythmically: rooted in parallelism, augmented by repetition and rhyme, and sharpened by antithesis, the sermon's pulsing beat contributes to its aesthetic and persuasive success.

The oratorical "*khuṭba*" texts found in the medieval sources include some of the most beautiful expressions of the Arabic literary canon.[1] Early Islamic society revered its articulate speakers, and later scholars held up their addresses as exemplars of eloquence. But wherein lay the power of the classical oration? Did orators randomly pick and choose stylistic features, or were there certain characteristics they privileged? More importantly, what were the conscious and unconscious impetuses for their choice of aesthetic mode? It is well known that the orator employed logical argumentation based on ideas to convince his audience. I argue that in tandem with this rational argumentation, the early Arabic orator also used a stylistic mode of persuasion to sway his listeners in a subtler way, one which relied primarily on rhythm. Elsewhere, I have divided the fundamental aesthetic features of the oration into five groups: vivid imagery portraying abstractions as observable, desert phenomena, which give physical form to theoretical concepts; audience-engagement elements such as direct address, emphatic structures, and rhetorical or real questions, which involve the audience in the speech act; testimonial citation of Qurʾānic and poetic verses, which anchor the orator's words in the sacred or semi-sacred literature of pre-Islamic Arabia and early Islam and bestow divine or quasi-divine authority to them; dignified yet simple language, which renders the oration formal and at the same time comprehensible to its large, public audience; and the fifth and most prominent stylistic feature of the early oration, rhythm.[2] Analyzing a sermon on piety by the first Shiʿa imam and fourth Sunni caliph, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661),[3]

1 On the *khuṭba* of the early, oral period, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function*, in the series *Handbook of Oriental Studies*, Section 1: *Near and Middle East*, series ed. Maribel Fierro et al. (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming); idem, "*Khuṭba*: The Evolution of Early Arabic Oration," in *Classical Arabic Humanities in their Own Terms*, ed. Beatrice Gruendler (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 176–273; idem, "Khoṭba," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (online edition: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kotba-sermon, 2013); idem, "Qurʾan Citation in Early Arabic Oration (*khuṭba*): Mnemonic, Liturgical and Testimonial Functions," in *The Qurʾan and* Adab*: The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam*, ed. Nuha Alshaar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 315–340; and Arabic monographs including: Iḥsān al-Nuṣṣ, *al-Khaṭāba al-ʿarabiyya fi ʿaṣrihā adh-dhahabī* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1963); Īliyā l-Ḥāwī, *Fann al-khaṭāba wa-taṭawwuruhu ʿinda l-ʿarab* (Beirut: Dār ath-Thaqāfah, n.d.); and Muḥammad Ṭāhir Darwīsh, *al-Khaṭāba fī ṣadr al-islām*, vol. 1: *al-ʿAṣr ad-dīnī ʿaṣr al-biʿtha al-islāmiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1965).

2 Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, ch. 3.

3 On ʿAlī and his literary oeuvre, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "'Ali b. Abi Talib," in *Arabic Literary Culture, 500–925*, ed. Michael Cooperson and Shawkat Toorawa (Detroit: Gale Research, 2005), 68–76; idem, "The Sermons of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib: At the Confluence of the Core Islamic Teachings of the Qur'an and the Oral, Nature-Based Cultural Ethos of Seventh Century Arabia," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, monograph vol. *La predicación medieval: sermones cristianos, judios e islámicos en el Mediterráneo,* ed. Linda G. Jones, 42/1 (2012): 201–228; idem, Introduction to *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons, and Teachings of ʿAli*, by al-Qāḍī al-Quḍāʿī, (New York: New York University Press, in the series *Library of Arabic Literature*, 2013), xiii–xxiv; idem, "Alī's Contemplations on This World and the Hereafter in the Context of His Life and Times," in *Essays in Islamic Philology, History, and Philosophy*, ed. Alireza Korangy, et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 333–353; and idem,

this article highlights the rhythm of classical Arabic oration. Analysis of ʿAlī's sermon shows that the entire piece is formulated rhythmically. Its measured flow of phrases is acoustically oriented and involves patterns of word-movement and time. Rooted in parallelism, augmented by repetition and rhyme, and sharpened by antithesis, the sermon's pulsing beat contributes to its aesthetic and persuasive success.

## Aesthetics of Orality and Persuasion

Pre-Islamic and early Islamic society was largely oral. Although writing was known in this period, it was minimally used and severely limited by, among other things, a lack of adequate tools. Until paper was introduced to the Islamic world around 132/750, the art of penning letters was rare, and the overall culture was dominated by the spoken word.

The orality of the milieu raises questions about the authenticity of the corpus, for there is no doubt that errors and fabrications made their way into the written sources. However, we should not underestimate the significance of continuous oral transmission for this culture. Many scholars have produced studies that speak to this issue. Walter Ong has shown that orally produced artistic verbal materials are anchored in mnemonic techniques that aid their memorization and transmission, and demonstrated that members of oral societies have succeeded in transmitting their verbal products effectively over long periods of time.[4] Mary Carruthers has assessed the ethical and literary values attached to memory training even in medieval culture.[5] In the early Islamic world, there was just such a system in place, in which materials were transmitted orally, without a break, over several generations. There were differences in the mode of transmission for materials of different genres, and the manner of oratorical transmission can be said to fall somewhere between the paraphrasing approach used for transmission of prosaic historical reports (*riwāya bi-l-maʿnā*), and the verbatim method used in the transmission of the artistically elevated and sacred or quasi-sacred forms of the Qurʾān and poetry (*riwāya bi-l-lafẓ*). As Gregor Schoeler has established, moreover, the oral transmission of historical and literary material in our period was supplemented by gradually increasing amounts of scholarly note-taking. What is more, the thousands of reports in the medieval Arabic sources that cite or mention speeches and sermons, point to a dynamic genre of oratory operating among the early

"Piety and Virtue in Early Islam: Two Sermons by Imam Ali," in *Self-Transcendence and Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. Jennifer Frey and Candace Vogler (London: Routledge, 2018), 125–153.

4 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), passim.

5 Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*: *A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), passim.

Muslims. For all these reasons, it is conceivable that our texts are genuine remnants—albeit imperfect ones—from that period.

The orality of the society also has implications for its verbal aesthetics, which are essentially rooted in mnemonic techniques. Leading these mnemonic techniques is rhythm. Ong has further demonstrated that verbal expression in an oral culture is essentially rhythmic.[6] He argues that to retain carefully articulated thought you have to do your thinking in cadences shaped for ready recurrence. Additionally, scholars have shown that our speech rhythms are a physiological phenomenon deriving from our breathing patterns. In the mid-1900s, the French anthropologist Marcel Jousse demonstrated the close connection between oral tempo, the breathing process, gesture, and the bilateral symmetry of the human body.[7] Because of its grounding in human physiology, rhythmic speech heightens emotional response in the audience, forming a crucial tool of oratorical persuasion. And modern neuroscientists have explained the process of memory formation (called 'neural entrainment') through the propensity of the brain to organize information in patterns.[8] Rhythm is present in many forms even in a society which communicates through writing, but in the artistic expressions of an oral society it is a fundamental characteristic. The early Muslims assiduously cultivated the art of the spoken word, and each of their major speech genres was highly rhythmic. To some degree, these genres shared rhythm-generating components, but their rhythmic loci were different: rhyme and meter for poetry, assonance for the Qurʾān, and parallelism for oratory. Although we know that ʿAlī was

6 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34–36. Ong argues further that orally based expressions also include short sentences, repetition, additive rather than subordinating phrases—that is, phrases connected with the word "and" rather than "which" or "that"; aggregative rather than analytic expositions; an agonistic, struggle-based tone; and closeness to the human lifeworld. The features he outlines are observable in Biblical psalms and sermons, Greek and Balkan epics, and Zulu panegyrics; they are prominent also in classical Arabic orations.

7 Marcel Jousse, *L'Anthropologie du geste* (Paris: Resma, 1968), passim. See also two affirmations of the physiological basis of rhythm from the *Encyclopædia Britannica* entries on "rhythm" and "dance" (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, 29 July 2007 <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-64627>): (1) "Although difficult to define, rhythm is readily discriminated by the ear and the mind, having as it does a physiological basis. It is universally agreed to involve qualities of movement, repetition, and pattern and to arise from the poem's nature as a temporal structure. . . . The presence of rhythmic patterns heightens emotional response and often affords the reader a sense of balance." (2) "Nearly all physical activity is done rhythmically, as in the beating of the heart, the flow of the breath, and the actions of walking and running. Work activities such as digging, sawing, scrubbing also tend to fall into a regular rhythm, because that is the most efficient and economical way of working the muscles and pacing the effort."

8 Aniruddh Patel, "A New Approach to the Cognitive Neuroscience of Melody," in *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Music*, ed. Isabelle Peretz and Robert Zattore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 338–342; Michael H. Thaut, *Rhythm, Music, and the Brain: Scientific Foundations and Clinical Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 4–5, 16–17, 43, 54–57; Adam Tierney and Nina Kraus, "Neural Entrainment to the Rhythmic Structure of Music," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 27:2 (2005): 405–406.

literate—he was one of the scribes of the Prophet who wrote down verses of the Qurʾān as they were revealed[9]—his use of orthographic notation would have been limited within the writing practice of the society he lived in, a society whose use of language was overwhelmingly oral.

Orality has dominated human existence for tens of thousands of years. The rhythmic nature of classical Arabic oratory is one shared by speakers from oral cultures across the globe over a multitude of languages and ethnicities through most of human history. Arabic orations did not, however, simply reproduce the set of characteristics that scholars have identified in other forms of oral discourse. Instead, we find a selective emphasis on those features most conducive to fulfilling their primary purpose of persuasion within the religious and political culture from which they sprang. In early Islamic times, oration was the primary mode of negotiating religio-political leadership. The orator spurred men to battle, legislated on civic and criminal matters, warned of the immediacy of death and exhorted his audience to lead a pious life; he called to Islam, and his sermons even formed part of its ritual worship. Some prominent characteristics of other forms of oral discourse, such as the recurring epithets of Greek epic poetry, did not figure at all in the Arabic oration. The orator was not recording history or providing entertainment by telling a story, performing an epic, or reciting an ode. Instead, he aimed to make his listeners believe in the validity of a course of action, a mode of behavior, a way of thought, or a type of doctrine. Together with rational argumentation, he achieved much of this stirring of hearts and prodding of minds through literary techniques of tacit persuasion.[10]

## Sermon on Piety by Imam ʿAlī

ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib is one of the master models of Arabic oratory. The foremost medieval litterateurs considered his speeches to be the benchmark of high style. When the preeminent Umayyad scribe ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132/750) was asked: "What enabled you to master the science of eloquence, what formed your training in it?" he replied: "Memorizing the words of ʿAlī."[11] The well-known collection of ʿAlī's words compiled by ash-Sharīf ar-Raḍī (d. 406/1015) is aptly titled *Path of Eloquence* (*Nahj al-balāgha*), from which this famous sermon on piety typifies many of

9 Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* (Beirut, Dār Iḥyāʾ at-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1999), 4:144.

10 On the case for and techniques of 'tacit persuasion,' see Richard Lanham, *Analyzing Prose* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1983), 1–12, 122–139, and passim.

11 Literally: ". . . the words of the bald one (*al-aṣlaʿ*), meaning ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib." al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-Wuzarāʾ wa-l-kuttāb*, ed. Muṣṭafā as-Saqqā et al. (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1980), 82; and following him several authors including ath-Thaʿālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb fī-l-muḍāf wa-l-mansūb* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif), 197; az-Zamakhsharī, *Rabīʿ al-abrār wa-nuṣūṣ al-akhbār*, ed. Salīm al-Nuʿaymī, (Baghdad: Wazārat al-Awqāf, 1980), 3/238; aṣ-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfī bi-l-wafayāt*, ed. Aḥmad al-Arnāʾūṭ and Turkī Muṣṭafā (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ at-Turāth, 1420/2000), 18:23.

the finest aesthetic qualities of the classical oration. The sermon is one of the most widely attested from among ʿAlī's oeuvre, and is found in at least seventeen other early sources, including the works of Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 180/797), Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim al-Minqarī (d. 202/818), Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 240/855), Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 328/940), Ibn Shuʿba al-Ḥarrānī (fl. 4/10 c.), and Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013).[12] The different versions reveal minor differences which arise from discrepancies in oral transmission as well as textual variants; yet they all display the same rhythmic patterns.

## Text and Translation

The following is the text and translation of the sermon from the *Nahj al-balāgha*.[13] A translation cannot quite capture the full beauty of the sermon, for its aesthetic effect is intrinsically connected with its language. Still, it can bring us part of the way toward understanding its stylistic mechanisms.

| | |
|---|---|
| فَإِنَّ الدُّنْيَا قَدْ أَدْبَرَتْ وَآذَنَتْ بِوَدَاعٍ وَإِنَّ الْآخِرَةَ قَدْ أَقْبَلَتْ وَأَشْرَفَتْ بِاطِّلَاعٍ أَلَا وَإِنَّ الْيَوْمَ الْمِضْمَارُ وَغَدًا السِّبَاقُ وَالسَّبَقَةُ الْجَنَّةُ وَالْغَايَةُ النَّارُ أَفَلَا تَائِبٌ مِنْ خَطِيئَتِهِ قَبْلَ مَنِيَّتِهِ أَلَا عَامِلٌ لِنَفْسِهِ قَبْلَ يَوْمِ بُؤْسِهِ أَلَا وَإِنَّكُمْ فِي أَيَّامِ أَمَلٍ مِنْ وَرَائِهِ أَجَلٌ فَمَنْ عَمِلَ فِي أَيَّامِ أَمَلِهِ قَبْلَ | The world has turned back and declared its farewell. The hereafter has approached and announced its arrival. Today is the day of training and tomorrow is the race: its goal paradise or its end hellfire. Is there one among you who would repent from his sins before his death? Is there one among you who would perform good deeds for his soul before his day of adversity? These are your days of hope—coming behind them is death. Truly, those who perform good deeds during their days of |

12 Al-Minqarī, *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn*, ed. ʿAbd as-Sallām Muḥammad Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1981), 3–4; al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa-t-tabyīn*, ed. ʿAbd as-Sallām Muḥammad Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1985), 2:52–53; Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb az-Zuhd*, ed. Ḥabīb ar-Raḥmān al-Aʿẓamī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, n.d.), 1:86; Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt (Riyadh: Maktabat ar-Rushd, 1988), 7:100; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Faḍāʾil aṣ-ṣaḥāba*, ed. Waṣī ad-Dīn Muḥammad ʿAbbās (Beirut: Muʾassasat ar-Risāla, 1983), 1:530; Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, ed. Yūsuf ʿAlī Ṭawīl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, n.d), 2:256; Ibn Abī d-Dunyā, *Qiṣar al-amal*, ed. Muḥammad Khayr Ramaḍān Yūsuf (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1997), 1:26, 50; ath-Thaqafī, *Ghārāt*, ed. Jalāl ad-Dīn al-Muḥaddith (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āthār-i Millī, 1975), 1:633; Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim, *Kitāb az-Zuhd*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Aʿẓamī (Cairo: Dār ar-Rayyān, 1987), 1:130; al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, Dār Bayrūt, 1960), 2:208–209; Ibn Shuʿba al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf al-ʿuqūl ʿan āl ar-rasūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Murtaḍā, 2007), 113; Abū Jaʿfar an-Naḥḥās, *ʿUmdat al-kātib*, ed. Bassām ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Jābī (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2004), 348–349; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, 4:65; al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj adh-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, ed. Saʿīd al-Laḥḥām (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2000), 2:414; al-Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz al-qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo, Dār al-Maʿārif, 1964), 1:146; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *at-Tadhkira al-Ḥamdūniyya*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1996), 1:63; Abū l-Muʿayyad Muwaffaq ibn Aḥmad al-Khwārizmī, *Manāqib al-Khwārizmī* (Najaf: al-Maktabah al-Ḥaydariyyah, 1965), 262.

13 Ash-Sharīf ar-Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, ed. Husayn al-Aʿlamī, comm. Muḥammad ʿAbduh (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī, 1993), 93–94.

حُضُورِ أَجَلِه فَقَدْ نَفَعَهُ عَمَلُه وَلَمْ يَضرُرْهُ أَجَلُه وَمَنْ قَصَّرَ فِي أَيَّامِ أَمَلِه قَبْلَ حُضُورِ أَجَلِه فَقَدْ خَسِرَ عَمَلُه وَضَرَّهُ أَجَلُه أَلَا فَٱعْمَلُوا فِي الرَّغْبَةِ كَمَا تَعْمَلُونَ فِي الرَّهْبَةِ أَلَا وَإِنِّي لَمْ أَرَ كَالجَنَّةِ نَامَ طَالِبُهَا وَلَا كَالنَّارِ نَامَ هَارِبُهَا أَلَا وَإِنَّهُ مَنْ لاَ يَنْفَعُهُ الحقّ يَضُرُّهُ البَاطِل وَمَنْ لا يستقمْ بِهِ الهُدٰى يَجُرُّ بِهِ الضَّلاَلُ إِلَى الرَّدٰى أَلَا وَإِنَّكُمْ قَد أُمِرْتُمْ بِالظَّعْنِ وَدُلِلْتُمْ عَلى الزَّاد وَإِنَّ أَخْوَفَ مَا أَخافُ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱتِّبَاعُ الهَوَى وَطُولُ الاْمَلِ تَزَوَّدُوا فِي الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الدُّنْيَا مَا تَحُوزُونَ بِهِ أَنْفُسَكُمْ غَدا

hope before the arrival of death will benefit from them; death will not cause them harm. Those who fall short in performing good deeds during their days of hope before the arrival of death will have squandered their chance; death will cause them harm. Perform good deeds from hope, not fear. Listen. I have never seen those who seek paradise or flee hellfire sleeping. Listen. Those whom right does not benefit are harmed by wrong. Those whom right-guidance does not put on the straight path are dragged by error to destruction. Listen. You have been given the command to begin your journey, and direction as to how you may gather provisions. Truly, I fear your pursuit of whimsical desires and lengthy yearnings. Take provisions in this world, from this world, with which you can nourish your souls tomorrow.

## Line-numbered text and literal translation

The following is the text of the sermon translated literally to show the workings of the parallel structure. The lines are numbered to facilitate referencing in the subsequent analysis

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Then truly! The world has indeed turned back and proclaimed its departure. | ١ فَإِنَّ الدُّنْيَا قَدْ أَدْبَرَتْ وَآذَنَتْ بِوَدَاع |
| 2. | And truly! The hereafter has indeed come forward, and announced its arrival. | ٢ وَإِنَّ الاْخِرَةَ قَدْ أَقْبَلَتْ وَأَشْرَفَتْ بِٱطِّلاَع |
| 3. | Listen, truly! Today is the day of training | ٣ أَلاَ وَإِنَّ اليَوْمَ المِضْمار |
| 4. | and tomorrow is the race. | ٤ وَغَدًا السِّبَاق |
| 5. | The goal is paradise | ٥ وَالسَّبَقَةُ الجَنَّة |
| 6. | and the end is hellfire! | ٦ وَالغَايَةُ النَّار |
| 7. | Is there no one who would repent from his sin before his death? | ٧ أَفَلاَ تَائِبٌ مِنْ خَطِيئَتِهِ قَبْلَ مَنِيَّتِه |
| 8. | Is there no one who would perform good deeds for his soul before his day of hardship? | ٨ أَلاَ عَامِلٌ لِنَفْسِهِ قَبْلَ يَوْمِ بُؤْسِه |
| 9. | Listen! These are your days of hope, right behind them is death. | ٩ أَلاَ وَإِنَّكُمْ فِي أَيَّامِ أَمَل مِنْ وَرَائِهِ أَجَل |
| 10. | Whosoever performs deeds during his days of hope, before the arrival of his death—his deed[s] will benefit him, and his death will not harm him. | ١٠ فَمَنْ عَمِلَ فِي أَيَّامِ أَمَلِه قَبْلَ حُضُورِ أَجَلِه فَقَدْ نَفَعَهُ عَمَلُه وَلَمْ يَضرُرْهُ أَجَلُه |
| 11. | Whosoever falls short during his days of hope, before the arrival of his death—his deeds he will lose, and his death will harm him. | ١١ وَمَنْ قَصَّرَ فِي أَيَّامِ أَمَلِه قَبْلَ حُضُورِ أَجَلِه فَقَدْ خَسِرَ عَمَلُه وَضَرَّهُ أَجَلُه |

| | |
|---|---|
| ١٢ أَلاَ فَٱعْمَلُوا فِي الرَّغْبَة كَمَا تَعْمَلُونَ فِي الرَّهْبَة | 12. Listen! Perform good deeds from fondness, as you perform them from fear. |
| ١٣ أَلاَ وَإِنِّي لَمْ أَرَ كَالجَنَّةِ نَامَ طَالِبُهَا | 13. Listen, truly! I have not seen the like of paradise, one who desires it sleeping, |
| ١٤ وَلاَ كَالنَّارِ نَامَ هَارِبُهَا | 14. nor the like of hellfire, one who flees it sleeping. |
| ١٥ أَلاَ وَإِنَّهُ مَنْ لاَ يَنْفَعْهُ الحقّ يَضُرُّهُ البَاطِل | 15. Listen truly! Whomsoever right does not benefit, wrong will harm. |
| ١٦ وَمَنْ لا يستقمْ بِهِ الهُدٰى يَجُرُّ بِهِ الضَّلاَلُ إِلَى الرَّدٰى | 16. Whomsoever guidance does not put on the straight [path], error will drag to destruction. |
| ١٧ أَلاَ وَإِنَّكُمْ قَد أُمِرْتُمْ بِالظَّعْن | 17. Listen! You have been commanded to depart |
| ١٨ وَدُلِلْتُمْ عَلى الزَّاد | 18. and directed toward provisions. |
| ١٩ وَإِنَّ أَخْوَفَ مَا أَخافُ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱتِّبَاعُ الهَوٰى وَطُولُ الاْمَل | 19. And truly! The most fearful thing I fear for you is following of desires and length of yearning. |
| ٢٠ تَزَوَّدُوا فِي الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الدُّنْيَا مَا تَحُوزُونَ بِهِ أَنْفُسَكُمْ غَدا | 20. Take provisions in the world, from the world, with which you can nourish your souls tomorrow. |

## Analysis

In this sermon, ʿAlī urges his audience to contemplate their imminent death, and to prepare for the hereafter by performing good deeds. The style of the sermon is dominated by rhythm, an intense rhythm that complements, even sustains, all its other aesthetic features.

The rhythm of the sermon is endowed most prominently by a consistent, almost relentless use of parallelism (*izdiwāj*). Except for the final line of the sermon, the entire twenty-line text is constructed of parallel pairs, where two or more adjacent lines possess identical or near-identical syntax. Their syntactical units often also display morphological equivalence. The parallel lines are configured additively, that is they are glued together with conjunctive 'and's (*wa-*), rather than subordinators. They are concise, mostly limited to two to six words—another characteristic feature of orally based expression.

In 1983, the Arabist Alfred Beeston demonstrated in a brief but illuminating study that parallelism formed a key feature of early Arabic prose, similar to the patterning of the Hebrew Bible.[14] However, he argued that the effect of parallelism in these texts is semantic and not acoustic. I contend that it achieves both these effects. Beeston downplays the role of acoustic

14 A. F. L Beeston, "The Role of Parallelism in Arabic Prose," in *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, vol. 1: *Arabic literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. Beeston et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 180–185. Beeston based his argument on Otto Eissfeldt's analysis of Hebrew Bible 'poetry' [= orations].

effect in the oration, because he limits aural effects to strict meter and rhyme, but sound patterns clearly also exist outside of poetic structure.

Parallel patterning in the classical Arabic oration creates an auditory rhythm by repeating sounds at regular intervals within the parallel phrases. The following are some of the sounds that are commonly repeated:

- the nominal case indicators; e.g. the *ḍamma* '*u*' sound in lines 5–6 *sabaqatu* and *ghāyatu*
- the definite marker *al-* ; e.g. in line 15 *al-ḥaqq, al-bāṭil*
- pronouns, such as the subject suffix '*tum*' with the perfect verb in lines 17–18 *umirtum bi-ẓ-ẓaʿn wa-duliltum ʿalā z-zād*, and
- identical sequences of long and short vowel sounds resulting from parallel placement of matching morphological forms; e.g. in lines 1–2 the identical vowel sequence in *adbarat* and *aqbalat*

All these repeated sounds arising from parallel structuring together create an acoustic rhythm.

Occurring simultaneously with this fundamental auditory aspect, the syntactical parallelism of the oration incorporates an essentially semantic element. As with the example we have just seen of *sabaqatu* and *ghāyatu* in lines five and six, repetition of sounds based on such things as case markers are dependent on the meaning. In these lines "The *goal is paradise and the end is hellfire!*" (وَالغَايَةُ النَّار وَالسَّبَقَةُ الجَنَّة) the *u* sound of the nominal marker of *sabaqatu* and *ghāyatu* comes from their being the subjects of the two sentences. Also, the parallel positioning of words in the same structural slot produces a semantic rhythm. Let's say that an orator pronounces a sentence, as seen in the sentence just cited, in this word order: subject, followed by predicate. If his next sentence repeats that word order, the arrival of the predicate after the subject—where the listener expects it to arrive based on his recent memory of the earlier line—creates a resonance in his mind. If the same word order is repeated a third time, the resonance deepens yet further.

Both acoustic and semantic resonances are apparent in the parallel patterning of lines one and two in ʿAlī's sermon: "Then truly, the world has indeed turned back and proclaimed its departure. And truly, the hereafter has indeed come forward and announced its arrival." (فَإِنَّ الدُّنْيَا قَدْ أَدْبَرَتْ وَآذَنَتْ بِوَدَاع وَإِنَّ الآخِرَةَ قَدْ أَقْبَلَتْ وَأَشْرَفَتْ بِاطِّلاَع). The table below illustrates that each of these lines is in two parallel segments: except for the initial particle *fa-* ("then"), which is replaced in the second line by the conjunction *wa-* ("and"), all the prepositions—the prepositions of emphasis *inna* ("truly") and *qad* ("indeed"), as well as the conjunction *wa-* ("and"), and the preposition *bi-* (here a transitivising preposition for the verb it follows)—are repeated in the same structural position, thus producing a recurring sound. All the substantives too are in identical syntactical positions. For example, the subjects of the two sentences, "the world" and "the hereafter," *ad-dunyā* and *al-ākhira*, are placed right after the particle of emphasis *inna* ("truly"). The verbs in both sentences, *adbarat* ("has turned

back") and *aqbalat* ("has come forward"), are placed at the end of the two sentences, and so on and so forth. The entire sermon may be analyzed for parallelism in the same manner. To explain the beat, each of the first two lines (*fa-inna d-dunyā qad adbarat and wa-inna l-ākhirata qad aqbalat*) may be rendered as follows: da-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-da-dum.

| | transliteration | text | translation | pattern |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1i. | *fa-inna d-dunyā qad adbarat* | فَإِنَّ الدُّنْيَا قَدْ أَدْبَرَتْ | Then truly, the world has indeed turned back | xyAzB |
| 2i. | *wa-inna l-ākhirata qad aqbalat* | وَإِنَّ الآخِرَةَ قَدْ أَقْبَلَتْ | And truly, the hereafter has indeed come forward | wyA'zB' |

| | transliteration | text | translation | pattern |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1ii | *wa-ādhanat bi-wadāʿ* | وَآذَنَتْ بِوَدَاع | and proclaimed its departure | wCvD |
| 2ii | *wa-ashrafat bi-ṭṭilāʿ* | وَأَشْرَفَتْ بِٱطِّلَاع | and announced its arrival | wC'vD' |

Notations:
- AA', BB', CC', DD' are repeating, antithetical syntactical units
- xyzwv are particles repeated verbatim

The parallel structure of the sermon aids in guiding the audience toward its punch line. Within the sermon, some parallel pairs are short and some are slightly longer. The alternating brevity and length build to the climax then relax it, then build it again, and relax it again until we reach the last, the twentieth line, which, after nineteen straight parallel lines, is neither short nor parallel. Being thus clearly distinguished from what leads to it, the final line crescendos in the concluding climax: "Take provisions in the world, from the world, with which you can nourish your souls tomorrow" (تَزَوَّدُوا فِي الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الدُّنْيَا مَا تَحُوزُونَ بِهِ أَنْفُسَكُمْ غَدا).

The parallelism is intensified by a further semantic element, namely antithesis (*ṭibāq*). Two adjacent phrases contain pairs of words with opposite meanings, the second phrase contrasting with the first. The text of ʿAlī's sermon contains no less than thirteen antithetical pairs, and the first two lines in the table above showcase three of these antithetical pairs: the world and the hereafter, turning back and coming forward, departure and arrival.

The parallel rhythm of ʿAlī's sermon is enhanced by sporadic consonant-rhyme (*sajʿ*). *Sajʿ* was an important, though less common, feature of

the classical oration. It was created when the last words of two or more succeeding lines ended in the same consonant (such as the L in *amal* and *ajal* in line nine): (أَلَا وَإِنَّكُمْ في أَيَّامِ أَمَل مِنْ وَرَائِهِ أَجَل). The critics tell us that the *sajʿ* rhyme word was to be pronounced in pausal (*sākin*) form, with the final consonant dropping any following vowel.[15] This pausal pronunciation preserved the acoustic effect from being diluted by differing end-vowel suffixes. It placed the vocal stress squarely on the rhyme letter, thus ensuring full auditory benefit. In most types of early orations (except for the quasi-orations of the pre-Islamic soothsayers), the full oration was never *sajʿ*-rhymed, and the irregular and unforced use of *sajʿ* kept the oration relatively unstylized. The consonant-rhyme (*sajʿ*) in ʿAlī's sermon is intermittent and keeps changing. In each of the pairs, the rhyme is limited to two words, after which another rhyme letter takes over, or a few lines follow in which there is none. The last words of lines one and two end in the letter "*ʿayn*" (*wadāʿ, iṭṭilāʿ*), and additionally the lines have an internal rhyme of T (*adbarat, ādhanat, aqbalat, ashrafat*): (فَإِنَّ الدُّنْيَا قَدْ أَدْبَرَتْ وَآذَنَتْ بِوَدَاع وَإِنَّ الآخِرَةَ قَدْ أَقْبَلَتْ وَأَشْرَفَتْ بِاطِّلَاع). Lines three through six are not rhymed. Lines seven through fourteen all contain rhymes, either internal or at the end of the phrase. For example (to pull out just a couple), line twelve rhymes in B (*raghba, rahba*), and lines thirteen and fourteen rhyme also in B, with an additional pronominal *radīf* "*hā*" (*ṭālibuhā, hāribuhā*).

Rhyme and parallelism were not mutually exclusive; the phrases which culminated in the rhyme were frequently parallel as well. Indeed, authors of medieval chancery manuals praised the combination and had a special name for it: *taṣrīʿ*.[16] Consonant-rhyme teamed with parallelism is featured in several lines of ʿAlī's sermon.

Assonance (*muwāzana*) also adds to the rhythm here, although it is not a big part of this particular sermon, which contains just one pair in lines three and four (*miḍmār* and *sibāq*), the penultimate long vowel of each of these two words is "*ā*". (أَلَا وَإِنَّ اليَوْمَ المِضْمار وَغَدًا السِّبَاق).

Further enrichment of the rhythm of ʿAlī's oration is achieved through recurrences of various kinds. Parallel lines of an oration commonly

15 Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā fī ṣināʿat al-inshāʾ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Zakkār (Damascus: Wizārat ath-Thaqāfa, 1981), 2:280. For a detailed medieval account of *sajʿ*, see al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā*, 2:279–292; Ḍiyāʾ ad-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Mathal as-sāʾir fī adab al-kātib wa-sh-shāʿir*, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥūfī and Badawī Ṭabāna (Cairo: Maktabat Nahḍat Miṣr, 1959–1962), 1:271–337; and Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī, *Kitāb aṣ-Ṣināʿatayn al-kitāba wa-sh-shiʿr*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī and Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Sidon: al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 2004), 260–265. There is significant overlap between the *sajʿ* of the early *khuṭba* and Qurʾānic *sajʿ*. A detailed analysis of the latter, based on medieval critical discussions, can be found in Devin Stewart, "*Sajʿ* in the Qurʾān: Prosody and Structure," *Journal of Arabic Literature* (1990) 21:101–139. Another analysis is provided by Rina Drory, "Rhyme in Rhymed Prose," in *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 104–121.

16 Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā*, 2:282.

included verbatim repetition of a part of the line. Repetition usually adds emphasis, but it can also serve to highlight not the repeated phrase in the following line, but rather, to throw into sharp relief the other, distinct verbiage couched within. In ʿAlī's sermon, lines thirteen and fourteen underscore the contrast between two opposite entities by repetition of surrounding phraseology. *I have not seen the like of paradise, one who desires it sleeping, nor the like of hellfire, one who flees it sleeping*. (إِنِّي لَمْ أَرَ كَالجَنَّةِ نَامَ طَالِبُهَا وَلاَ كَالنَّارِ نَامَ هَارِبُهَا). Part of the two clauses is identical—the negation, the comparative particle 'like,' the prepositions, and the verb indicating the act of sleeping. The word pairs that are different—paradise and hellfire, desire and flee—are placed within the identical verbiage in an antithetical parallel construction, drawing the listener's attention to the contrast between them.

Another kind of repetition seen in the sermon is the recurrent usage of four key terms: "deeds," "world," "death," and "hope." Each of these terms is repeated several times over the course of the sermon. Note that three of the four terms—*ʿamal*, *amal*, and *ajal*—also rhyme, doubling the acoustic effect. Moreover, the deliberate recurrence of these terms over the course of the oration not only enhances the rhythm of the piece, but it also drives home the main point of the sermon, which, putting together the four terms in a one-point sentence, may be paraphrased as follows: Perform good deeds in the world in preparation for the hereafter, before your time of hope ends with your death.

## Conclusion

Stemming from its oral nature and function of persuasion, the intense rhythm of the classical Arabic oration is a hallmark characteristic. Framed in antithetical parallelism and enriched by the rhyme and repetition of key terms, Imam ʿAlī's sermon on piety displays the essential mnemonic characteristics of orally based expression. Its parallelism brings a strong acoustic resonance into a semantic frame of antithesis. Moreover, the stylistic features of the sermon are all harnessed to serve the goal of convincing the audience to prepare for the hereafter. Concurrently with the logical content of the sermon, and alongside its vivid horse imagery, emphatic verbiage, elevated linguistic register, rhetorical questions, and evocation of Qurʾānic themes, ʿAlī's tacitly persuasive aesthetics of rhythm skillfully delineate a contrast between this world and the next, today and tomorrow, good and evil, guidance and error, leaving the audience starkly reminded of the transience of the world and the necessity for each individual to utilize his or her time in it to the fullest in order to ensure salvation in eternity.

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