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## Poetic Conventions as Fossilized Cognitive Devices The Case of Mediaeval and Renaissance Poetics

### Some Fundamental Questions

Dr. Ratna Roshida Abd Razak's paper highlights the question, Can we read a poet's personality through the works, and, in particular, can we do so with mediaeval or Renaissance poetry? I believe that Ratna Roshida Abd Razak's attempt to apply Maslow's theory to Mediaeval poetry is an important event, and has significant implications for literary research. The dominant (and sometimes militant) view among scholars of Mediaeval poetries is that one may not apply to Mediaeval poets and poetry modern psychological theories that were not shared by the poets themselves. Such a conception is not unlike the claim that one may not assume that blood circulated in the poets' body before 1628, when William Harvey published his research on the circulation of blood.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Abd Razak's violation of the prevalent professional taboo is, therefore, more than welcome. I also believe, however, that we should not take for granted what it is that we have explained by the application of some psychological theory, and should scrutinize its implications in light of research done on poetic conventions. That's what I am going to explore in the present essay.

First, a disclaimer: I don't know Arabic, and know al-Mutanabbi's poems only through quotations by scholars who do know Arabic. So, this is an improvisation *apropos* Dr. Abd Razak's article rather than a straightforward response to it. Consequently, I will make no statements about al-Mutanabbi's poetry, only ask questions, and then will offer a generalized discussion on the nature of poetic conventions in Mediaeval and Renaissance poetry (about which I do know one or two things), and about the psychological foundations of poetic conventions in general. So, I will proceed in four steps. First I will ask some questions regarding Dr. Abd Razak's conception of al-Mutanabbi's poetry; then I will give a caveat against regarding Mediaeval and Renaissance poetry as a clue to the poet's personality; then I will offer an alternative conception of the application of

<sup>1</sup> That's what I learned at the university: that it was William Harvey who discovered the circulation of blood in the human body. The Wikipedia, however, tells us that the circulation of blood had been discovered as early as 1242 by the Arabian physician, Ibn al-Nafis. So we may credit at least Arab poets and Hebrew poets in Moslem Spain with blood circulation from the thirteenth century on. This, however, would still leave al-Mutanabbi and the Hebrew poets of the Golden Age without blood circulation.

psychological theories to poetic conventions; finally, I will apply the conception to be put forward to one wide-spread poetic convention.

Among other things, Dr. Abd Razak argues:

In order to please patrons, poets had to compose panegyrics (love poems [sic]) that satisfied their patrons by showing mastery of the language. The poet would be conferred prestige after giving praise for his patron's accomplishments.

The recital of a panegyric was an important formal occasion and provided an opportunity for the sovereign to demonstrate his generosity publicly by handsomely rewarding the poet, who, if he genuinely, but secretly admired his patron, could be inspired to produce truly excellent work.

Al-Mutanabbi was able to feel safe and secure in the company of Sayf al-Dawlah, who became his intimate friend and comrade in arms. As a result, al-Mutanabbi was better able to appraise the heroism of the prince wholeheartedly.

Having gained intimate knowledge of Sayf al-Dawlah, we can presume al-Mutanabbi then grew to love him as his patron.

Dr. Abd Razak uses indicative statements about the social and literary formalities related to panegyrics: "poets *had to* compose panegyrics", that "the recital of a panegyric was an important formal occasion". As to the warm personal relationship between al-Mutanabbi and his patron she uses the conditional form "*if* he genuinely, but secretly admired his patron"; carefully emphasizes affordances rather than facts, as in "*was able to* feel safe and secure in the company of Sayf al-Dawlah" and "*was better able to* appraise the heroism of the prince wholeheartedly"; and uses such a hypothetical construction as "*we can presume* al-Mutanabbi then grew to love him as his patron". Linguistically, at least, certain things are presented as what is known, and certain things — as conjectures. Briefly, the social constellation as well as the requirements of the genre prescribed the praises and the emotions to be expressed in these poems, irrespective of what the poets felt. Is there any evidence that, in some instances at least, poets did indeed experience the emotions which conventions of the occasion and the genre prescribed for their poems? Furthermore, what kind of evidence would be deemed satisfactory? Or is this merely a post-romantic assumption that poets attempt to express their genuine feelings?

### **Genre Conventions and the Biographical Fallacy**

Tenth and eleventh-century Hebrew poets in Spain explicitly adopted the aesthetic conceptions as well as the conventions of Arabic poetry regarding the thematic

genres (love poetry, panegyric, garden descriptions, drinking poems, boasting poems, etc.), figurative language, and even prosody. In prosody, for instance, they imported the *qassida* (mono-rhymed verse) and the *muwwashah* (girdle poems), and adapted the Arab quantitative metre (based on long and short syllables) to the constraints of the Hebrew language. Hebrew poets of the era put forward explicitly their poetics in treatises written in Arabic (!). Though I have admitted that I know no Arabic, and am not familiar with al-Mutanabbi's poetry, I am tolerably knowledgeable regarding the Hebrew corpus and the relevant conventions. So, I will make a few comments on eleventh-century Hebrew poetics in Spain, assuming that some of them may apply to ninth-century Arabic poetry as well (there is, as I said, evidence that the aesthetic conceptions of Arabic poetry were imported to Hebrew poetry).

One problem concerning the personal element in this poetry is that even when a poet says "I", in certain genres he does not necessarily refer to his subjective self, but it is what I would call an "exemplary I". Take the genre "Poems of Contemplation". In this genre, poets contemplate Man's fate and his place in the universe. In one of his contemplative poems, Moses Ibn Ezra wrote

ואיך מוֹרָר נְתַנּוּנֵי קְרוֹבֵי,      וְאוֹתֵי חֲשָׁבוּ אֲחֵי לְנִכְרֵי?  
 וְכֵהֶם זָנְחוּ אוֹתֵי יְלָדֵי – וְכֵן זָדְתִי וְשָׁכַחְתִּי לְהוֹרֵי!

How did my relatives render me strange  
 and how did my brethren regard me a stranger  
 And just like them my children have forgotten me  
 And similarly I have wilfully forgotten my parents

Based on such lines, some critics (e.g., Shim'on Bernstein) came to grim conclusions as to the personal relationships in the Ibn Ezra family. I call this the "biographical fallacy". The great Hebrew scholar and poet, the late Dan Pagis, however, compared the use of the first person singular in this genre (both in Arabic and Hebrew poetry of the period) to the use in the genre of "Poems of Complaints". In the latter it is a personal "I", whereas in the former it is an exemplary "I"; it is an example of the *condition humaine*, that is, of how each newer generation forgets the older generation, and has nothing to do with what happens in the Ibn Ezra family.

In elegies, as in the elegy on the death of al-Mutanabbi's grandmother, authentic autobiographical elements do occasionally occur. But one may not make inferences based on this genre regarding authenticity of experiences in the panegyric genre, for instance. Furthermore, the elegy itself abounds in conventional hyperboles, even when we have good reasons to suppose that the poet experienced a genuine shock at the death of the deceased. Thus, for instance, the great eleventh-century Hebrew poet, Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, writes a long elegy on the murder (or execution?) of his friend and Maecenas Yekutiel Ibn Hassan, beginning as follows:

בִּימֵי יְקוּתִיֵּאל אֲשֶׁר נִגְמְרוּ      אֹת כִּי שָׁחֲקִים לְחֶלֶף יִצְרוּ

In the days of Yekutiel which are over  
(It's a sign that the skies are doomed to pass away)

As to “panegyrics”, poets were expected to express great praise. That is what both the genre and the social occasion demanded, irrespective of what the poet felt toward the object of praise. It would be misleading to conclude that extreme expressions of love indicate the poet's great love to the addressee. Do such lines of al-Mutanabbi's as the following sound like expressions of heartfelt love or conventional hyperboles?

Every life you don't grace is death  
every sun that you are not is darkness

Probably, the more exaggerated the praise and the expression of love, the less credible it appears. Poets as well as the targets of praise were well aware of a certain discrepancy between what the poet thinks and what he says in this genre. Discussing the genre of “Panegyric” in his treatise on Poetics (written in Arabic), Moses Ibn Ezra makes the following remark: “Once a poet went into excesses in praising one of the high state officials [...]. But the extolled one resented this, and answered: I am less than what you say, but more than what you think of me”. The question then arises: “How can we know whether the poet did or did not feel the sentiments he expressed?” Let me state at once: I don't know the answer.

In sixteenth and seventeenth century English poetry we encounter similar problems. Consider the following very well-known couplet from Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII:

As long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

At one point of my literary education I was told that these lines indicate (or prove?) that Shakespeare had already been aware of the immortality of his poetry. Such studies as J. Lever's *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet* have amply demonstrated that almost every image or idea found in Shakespeare's Sonnets could be found in numberless additional sonnets of the time, but Shakespeare made much better poetry of them than the others.<sup>2</sup> Countless poets promised immortality to their beloved

<sup>2</sup> The same thing has been demonstrated regarding Villon by Italo Siciliano in his monumental *Villon et Les Themes Poétiques Du Moyen Age*. About sixty-seven years later this became a commonplace of Villon studies: “[The naïve reader] is captivated by Georges Brassens singing *La ballade des dames du temps jadis*, only to find that Villon wrote two other poems on precisely the same theme, and that every second poet of the later Middle Ages had made use of the same well-tried cliché” (Taylor, 2001: 6). Siciliano demonstrates that *La ballade des dames du temps jadis* is simply

through their verse, but most of them have long been forgotten, and rightly so. Mediaeval Arabic and Hebrew boasting poems differ from this only in the degree of exaggeration, not in the degree of the authenticity of experience.

Elizabethan poets and editors seem to have been aware that the passions conveyed in their lyric poems were exemplary rather than authentic personal experience; poets use such linguistic devices as metaphors or the first person singular for rhetorical purposes: to make the passions described *seem* “pathetical”. “My paines in suffering them [are] but supposed”.

In his admirable study of Elizabethan poetry, Hallett Smith collected some illuminating comments to that effect from the *Mirror for Magistrates*, both by an anonymous annotator on Watson’s poetry, and by Watson himself. “Watson observes to the friendly reader in his preface that he hopes the reader will excuse any faults escaped, ‘in respect of my trauaile in penning these loue passions, or for pitie of my paines in suffering them (although but supposed)’” (Smith 1968: 138). Elsewhere the annotator comments “In this Passion is effectually set downe, in how straunge a case he liueth that is in loue, and in how contrary an estate to all other men, which are at defiaunce with the like follie. And this the Author expresseth here in his owne person” (ibid.). Smith construes this as follows: “The ‘I’ in the sonnets is then a role for effectiveness; it is to make the sonnet more ‘pathetical’”. “The last two lines of No. 22 are added by Watson, says the annotator, “to make the rest to seeme the more pathetical’”. “The commentator points out that the interest of the poem lies in the fact that ‘certaine contrarieties, whiche are incident to him that loueth extremelye, are liuely expressed by a Metaphore’” (ibid., 136). Again, the contrarieties are not about the poet’s personal experieces, but about “him that loueth extremelye”.

In my 1974 paper, “Poem, Prayer, and Meditation”, I explore the nature of “I” in eleventh, sixteenth, and seventeenth century devotional poetry—Hebrew and English. In these traditions there are texts that could be read as poems, prayers or meditations at different times. In my paper I explore the changing relationships between the textual “I” and the flesh-and-blood person who utters it. Consider the following problem. When I utter an interjection, say, “ouch”, or “alas”, I may indicate that I have certain emotions or feelings. If I do have these emotions, that is, if there is a corresponding fact in the extra-linguistic context, the indicated emotions or feelings are *genuine*. If there are no corresponding extra-linguistic facts, the emotions and feelings are feigned. When we say that a person is saying his prayers with devotion (or, in Hebrew, with *kawwana*), we mean that (1) he asserts all its explicit and implicit statements, (2) that heightened mental activities are indicated, and (3) that these heightened activities are genuine. In my 1969 book on Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry I make an additional, related distinction: the text may or may not arouse the illusion of an authentic experience—irrespective of whether the flesh-and-

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more euphonious than the other poems of this genre. To this one might add that the *ubi sunt* motive was widespread in eleventh-century Hebrew poetry too.

blood poet did or did not undergo the suggested experience. This does not necessarily make one of the poems better; it is, rather, a stylistic difference.

When one utters a text as a prayer, s/he asserts its statements, and does his best to live up to the emotions and attitudes indicated in it. When one reads a poem, one need not assert its statements, nor live up to the emotions and attitudes indicated in it. As Philip Sidney wrote in his *Apology*, the poet “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth”. The reader need not assert the statements of a poem; s/he only must accept that the speaker in the poem asserts them. A reader of Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* need not believe in Jesus, just as a person attending a performance of *Oedipus Rex* need not believe in Zeus.

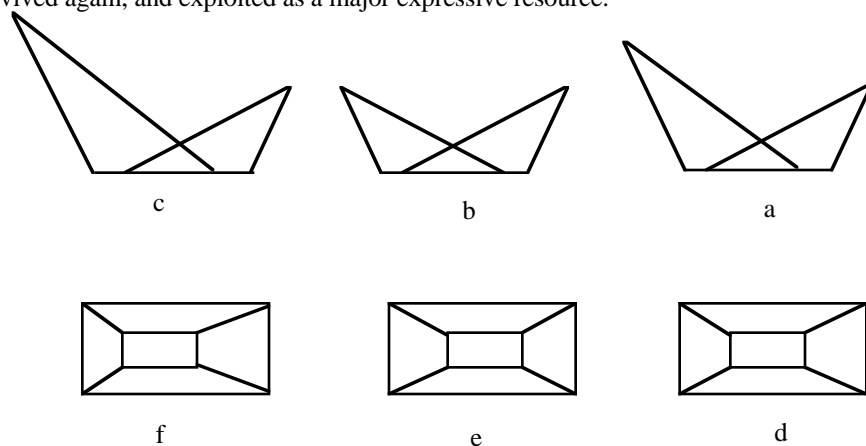
### Poetic Conventions as Fossilized Cognitive Devices

Having said all this, the reader may ask me why do I consider, then, the publication of a paper applying Maslovian theory to al-Mutanabbi’s poetry an important event. I also said, however, that we should be careful about what it is that we have explained by the application of some psychological theory. The psychological theory *may* explain something that has great poetic significance, but not necessarily the poet’s subjective experience.

We should remember that this poetry is not merely highly conventional, but also ornamental. In several of my publications I discuss the question how do poetic conventions and ornaments arise. My answer to this question is based on a psychoanalytic conception adopted from Ehrenzweig, and a “Darwinian” conception adopted from Roy d’Andrade’s *Cognitive Anthropology*. Briefly, my conception is that poetic conventions are psychological processes fossilized into verbal devices. In what follows, I propose to consider at some length a process of great psychological interest, that tends to *reduce* the expressive force of highly affective devices: one of the assumptions of cognitive poetics is that ornaments are highly affective devices in which cognitive activity has fossilized.

“There is in the human mind a strong reluctance”, says Wilson Knight, the great Shakespearean critic (1965: XI), “to face, with full consciousness, the products of poetic genius”. Much literary scholarship, he says, is intended to reduce the threat rather than illuminate the masterpieces. A similar conception was put forward by Anton Ehrenzweig (1965) in relation to music and the visual arts. Ehrenzweig elaborates at great length on the defense mechanisms with the help of which human society protects itself against the expressive force of artistic devices and turns them into style, that is, harmless ornament. Ehrenzweig speaks of three stages of the development of artistic devices: The first one is a stage when artistic devices are perceived subliminally, so that they can strongly affect what he calls the “depth mind”. The more emphatic these devices, the stronger their emotional appeal, provided that they don’t become consciously perceptible. When they become semi-consciously perceptible, they are considered to be in bad taste, cheaply emotional. This is the second stage. At the third stage, these devices are turned into ornaments, with dras-

tically reduced emotional appeal. As long as the “inarticulate” glissandos and vibratos of singers and the great masters of the violin are not consciously audible, they have a strong and valued emotional appeal. When second-rate singers and violinists exaggerate them so that they become semi-consciously audible, such devices are considered “offensive”, or “in bad taste”. In the third stage, this offensive emotional force is eliminated, when these devices of ambiguous status are “sharpened” into fully conscious, but rigid and lifeless ornaments. A fourth stage may be added: this is when such “dead” ornaments are revived through poetic manipulation. In my book (Tsur 1992 Chapter 13; 2008 Chapter 14) I demonstrated how such highly expressive devices as repetition and the vocative are turned into *style* in the popular ballad “Edward”, and also how the restricted formula of these fossilized devices is revived again, and exploited as a major expressive resource.



*Figure 1* “Leveling” and “sharpening”: When a stimulus pattern shows a slight deviation from some symmetrical pattern (as in *a* and *d*), subjects tend to restore symmetry (as in *b* and *e*), or exaggerate the asymmetry (as in *c* and *f*), so as to avoid ambiguity.

To account for the transition from Ehrenzweig’s second to his third stage, we must appeal to a conspicuous cognitive device that effectively serves a wide variety of literary purposes: *Leveling-and-Sharpening*. When a stimulus pattern contains certain kinds of ambiguity (such as a slight deviation from some symmetrical pattern), simplification and strong shape may be achieved, according to Arnheim (1957: 57), “by changing a figure in which two structural patterns compete for dominance into another that shows clear dominance of one of them”. This tendency is called “sharpening”. The opposite tendency is called “leveling”. “Leveling” attempts to minimize or even eliminate the unfitting detail. In *Figure 1*, both *a* and *d* deviate slightly from symmetrical patterns.

When such figures are presented under conditions that keep the stimulus control weak enough to leave the observer with a margin of freedom, two

types of reaction follow. Some persons perfect the symmetry of the model (*b, e*) whereas others exaggerate the asymmetry (*c, f*). (Arnheim, 1957: 57)

I am arguing that such ambiguous percepts as semiconsciously-audible expressive devices “sandwiched” between the tones are *sharpened* into consciously perceived, formal ornaments.

My second assumption is derived from Sir James Frazer (1922) and Roy D’Andrade (1980).

An important assumption of cognitive anthropology is that in the process of repeated social transmission, cultural programs come to take forms which have a good fit to the natural capacities of the human brain. Thus, when similar cultural programs are found in most societies around the world, there is reason to search for psychological factors which could account for these similarities (D’Andrade, 1980).

When we encounter similar cultural or literary conventions in different societies, we may account for them in several ways. The least interesting (and perhaps the least plausible) possibility is that one society adopts, in a servile manner, the conventions and institutions of another society with an authoritative status. At the opposite pole there is the possibility suggested by Sir James Frazer (1922) that, in similar circumstances, the human mind functions in similar ways; the similar cultural or literary conventions may be invented more than once. An interesting variant of Frazer’s conception is suggested above by Roy D’Andrade, namely, “that in the process of repeated social transmission, cultural programs come to take forms which have a good fit to the natural capacities of the human brain”, and thus become similar, even if at the beginning of the process they were very different. In between these two poles there is a third possibility: that cultures may “borrow” cultural programs from neighboring societies to help the cognitive accommodation of tensions arising within its given social and cultural structures. The conception underlying the present argument is nearest to this third possibility.

So, what light does this theoretical model throw on the application of Maslow’s psychological theory to al-Mutanabbi’s poetry? It will not necessarily explain the individual poet’s actual experiences and personal emotional development. But it may, perhaps, illuminate the psychological processes the expressions of which have fossilized in such highly ornamental poetic conventions as boasting poetry, love poetry, panegyric, and so forth.

Let us have, then, a look at Dr. Abd Razak’s argument from this point of view. “Maslow’s theory is primarily concerned with that part of human motivation and behavior which is based on the higher needs”. Take, for instance, “The Need for Self Esteem”, as applied to al-Mutanabbi’s poetry.



Assuming that at this point the first three levels of the hierarchy of al-Mutanabbi's needs were adequately satisfied, we would expect him to be concerned with the needs for esteem. Maslow distinguishes two types of esteem needs. The first is esteem from others. This involves the desire for reputation, status, recognition, fame and a feeling of being useful and necessary. Individuals need to feel respected and valued by others for their accomplishments and contribution. Self-esteem, on the other hand, involves a personal desire for feelings of competence, mastery, confidence and capability.

Self-esteem is therefore closely linked to the desire for superiority and respect from others

Consider the following utterance by al-Mutanabbi:

If I am conceited, it is the conceit of an amazing man who has never found any surpassing himself..

Is this, indeed, what he thinks of himself, or is he using a conventional hyperbole, whatever he thinks of himself? My point is that having recourse to the genre of boasting poetry does not necessarily indicate that the first three levels of the poet's need for security have been satisfied, in accordance with Maslow's model. Indeed, I strongly suspect that a very different dynamics is involved in the choice of genres a poet has recourse to. But, one could make out a convincing case for the assumption that Maslow's model accounts for the personality dynamics that in the beginning originated certain boastful expressions which, in turn, in the process of repeated social transmission, eventually fossilized in the conventions of boasting poetry. I have not yet explored this possibility; it is merely a suggestion which I hope to pursue some day. In the meantime, I propose to illustrate the process propounded here by elaborating on another poetic convention which I have elsewhere discussed more briefly (Tsur, 1992 [2008]; 2006).

### **Test Case: Catalogues of Contradictions (a)**

#### **Petrarch, Wyatt and Ronsard**

Finally, let us consider briefly the processes by which highly effective expressive resources are turned into conventions or ornaments. Leveling-and-sharpening may play an important role in these processes. A conspicuous case in point may be the venerable thematic convention of "the contrarious passions in a lover". The most famous example is Petrarch's sonnet "*Pace non trovo*":

Canzoniere CXXXIV

Pace non trovo e non ho da far guerra  
e temo, e spero; e ardo e sono un ghiaccio;

e volo sopra 'l cielo, e giaccio in terra;  
e nulla stringo, e tutto il mondo abbraccio.

Tal m'ha in pregion, che non m'apre nè sera,  
nè per suo mi riten nè scioglie il laccio;  
e non m'ancide Amore, e non mi sferra,  
nè mi vuol vivo, nè mi trae d'impaccio.

Veggio senz'occhi, e non ho lingua, e grido;  
e bramo di perire, e chieggo aita;  
e ho in odio me stesso, e amo altrui.

Pascomi di dolor, piangendo rido;  
egualmente mi spiace morte e vita:  
in questo stato son, donna, per voi.

This sonnet was imitated and translated by poets throughout the Renaissance, among others by Wyatt:

DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTRARIOUS  
PASSIONS IN A LOVER

I FIND no peace, and all my war is done;  
I fear and hope, I burn, and freeze like ice;  
I fly aloft, yet can I not arise;  
And nought I have, and all the world I seize on,  
That locks nor loseth, holdeth me in prison,  
And holds me not, yet can I scape no wise:  
Nor lets me live, nor die, at my devise,  
And yet of death it giveth me occasion.  
Without eye I see; without tongue I plain:  
I wish to perish, yet I ask for health;  
I love another, and thus I hate myself;  
I feed me in sorrow, and laugh in all my pain.  
Lo, thus displeaseth me both death and life,  
And my delight is causer of this strife.

This poetic convention has a long history, and goes back at least to Catullus (circa 84–circa 54 B.C.):

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?  
nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

I hate and I love. Why do I do it, perchance you might ask?  
I don't know, but it is a fact, I feel it, and it excruciates me.

The same convention appears in Ronsard's original sonnet No. XII of his *Amours*:

J'Espère et crains, je me tais et supplie,  
 Or' je suis glace, et ores un feu chaud,  
 J'admire tout, et de rien ne me chaut,  
 Je me délace, et puis je me relie.  
 Rien ne me plaît sinon ce qui m'ennuie:  
 Je suis vaillant, et le cœur me défaut,  
 J'ai l'espoir bas, j'ai le courage haut  
 Je doute Amour, et si je le défie  
 Plus je me pique, et plus je suis rétif  
 J'aime être libre, et veux être captif  
 Cent fois je meurs, cent fois je prends naissance  
 Un Prométhée en passions je suis  
 Et pour aimer perdant toute puissance  
 Ne pouvant rien je fais ce que je puis.

This convention reflects two psychological phenomena: *ambivalence* and the defence mechanisms against expressive devices in art, pointed out by Ehrenzweg (1965). *Ambivalence* is a state of conflicting attitudes or feelings, as when a mother causes pain to her child by vigorously pressing it to her bosom. According to Freud, much love is characterized by such ambivalence. *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* makes the following comment on literature in its *ambivalence* entry: "Whereas, in general, ambivalence is a potential source of undesirable stress [...], in a writer it is widely regarded as a source of strength and desirable tension, and in a fictional character as evidence of subtlety in his or her creator."

We may point out in these poems two conspicuous cognitive devices that tone down the disturbing element of ambivalence. The process of *sharpening* enhances in these poems (as in patterns *c* and *f* in Figure 1 above) the discordance between the conflicting attitudes, presenting them as clearly perceptible symmetrical opposites, thus taking out the potential source of undesirable stress, the uncertainty and the disquieting element from an unpleasantly ambiguous feeling. This process is not unlike the process that, in dreams and fairytales, eliminates ambivalence toward one's mother by splitting the mother figure into a good mother and a stepmother.

Since "ambivalence is a potential source of undesirable stress", readers of poetry may have sought for mental performances that reduce "undesirable stress", and may have discovered, independently from one another, that in certain poetic situations of considerable emotional strain, sharpening proves to be an exceptionally effective means to render those "contrarious passions" harmless. In this way, *one possible* mental performance of certain highly emotional, disquieting, ambivalent texts may have fossilized into a solid convention, reinforced through repeated social transmission. My point is that in light of D'Andrade's comment, ambivalence, leveling-and-

sharpening, and the need for defence against too strong expressive resources seem to have a good fit to the natural capacities and constraints of the human brain.

Now notice this: by eliminating the disturbing element of ambivalence, we have created another one: the baffling quality of asserted logical contradictions. The need to eliminate this may suggest an explanation for the typical presence (in all these instances) of another technique that is prone to take out the disquieting quality from a unique emotion: the ‘catalogue technique’. *Catalogue Verse* is a term “to describe lists of persons, places, things, or ideas which have a common denominator” (*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*). Lengthy catalogues are difficult to remember. One means our cognitive system has to alleviate the load on memory is to abstract a common denominator of all the items. When attention is directed to the “memory aid” at the expense of the items memorized, it may be turned, in certain circumstances, to aesthetic end—into the emotional quality of a poem.

When you encounter some absurdity, you may laugh it off (the comic is, indeed, defence against threat), or may admit the authority of the threat and try to resolve it. In the former case the effect will be frivolous, delightful; in the latter—disquieting. Alternatively, you may succeed to resolve it, in which case it will yield great satisfaction. Such satisfaction would be particularly significant in light of Maslow’s model as quoted by Dr. Abd Razak, with reference to “self-esteem”: it “involves a personal desire for feelings of competence, mastery, confidence and capability”.

When the absurdities occur in close succession, you are unlikely to be able to work out the details of the resolutions. This leaves you with several possible strategies. If the succession of absurdities occurs in a situation that is relevant to your well-being, you will experience disorientation, discomfort, distress. If they occur apart from any concrete realities, specified object, or actual instance, there are no clues for resolving the absurdity, so that the most convenient way to cope with it will be to laugh it off. A third possibility is to direct attention away from the contradictions to the common elements of the items in the list.

There is in the human mind a tendency to impute coherence on what is incoherent. If it can organize disconnected elements into a coherent story or state of affairs (i.e., into some schema), it will do so. If not—it will search for common elements (i.e., generate a category). This is what typically happens in catalogues: attention is directed away from the discontinuous items (in this case the baffling logical contradictions) to a category that includes them, thus reducing the force of bafflement. Suppose the common denominator of the catalogue is “The Contrarious Passions in a Lover”. Then, the reader may attend away from the baffling contradictions to a unitary abstraction: love. Such an abstraction is active in the back of one’s mind, without preempting everything else, just like emotions—generating an emotional quality attributed to the poem. This tendency to abstract a common denominator is enhanced by the rhythmic quality of the poem, the recurrence of the verse line as a versification unit, and the rhyme pattern reinforcing a sense of parallelism between the items.

Now notice this. Scholars of the source-hunting tradition have claimed that Petrarch’s sonnet grew out from Provençal riddles the solution to which was “love”.

One of the conventions of the genre “riddles” is to propose an intellectual problem embodied in a paradoxical statement, to which one must find a solution. The expected solution is a state of affairs in which the incompatible elements may co-exist—in this case, love (Smith, 1968: 138).

At some variance with Smith I suggest, then, that in certain circumstances a catalogue of paradoxes may be used as *either* a riddle *or* a poem with emotional overtones. Both options are based on the need to keep the list of paradoxes in an active state in one’s processing space. To aid this, the common denominator (e.g., love) must be abstracted from the catalogue. In the riddle, the common denominator must be intensified (Freud would say “loaded with cathexis), so as to reach full consciousness and replace the paradoxes as a solution considered to be of greater value and priority than the paradoxes themselves. In the poem, the activity of the common denominator is increased, with the restriction that it still remains in the background, while the paradoxes themselves are active in the foreground.

We may, of course, regard these riddles too as sharpened and fossilized versions of the ambivalence implicit in love. The riddle, however, demands to focus attention on an intellectual solution of a logical problem, involving such mental processes as thought and reasoning rather than perceptions and emotions. In the sonnets by Petrarch, Wyatt and Ronsard, by contrast, the lack of explicit problem-setting, the descriptive tone and the first person, singular, may induce the reader to treat the catalogue of paradoxes as a mental state rather than an intellectual assignment (As our later examples will suggest, personal or impersonal grammatic constructions may substantially affect the outcome). The catalogue technique has here, as I said, a double function. It alleviates the load on the cognitive system; and alleviates the disquieting feeling induced by the logical contradictions, by directing attention away from the contradictions to their common denominator, love. This, as I suggested, seems to have a good fit to the natural capacities and constraints of the human brain. It is demanded by the natural constraints of memory. As a memory aid, such category names or intellectual abstractions are typically active in the back of one’s mind, so as to prevent usurping the place of the items to be remembered. As a solution to a riddle, on the contrary, they are meant to *replace* the items to be remembered. In a poem, the rhythmical recurrence of ten- or eleven-syllable-long versification units effects the diffusion of the conceptual abstraction “love” so as to appear to awareness as the emotional quality “love”. We have come now a full circle. We started with a disquieting state of emotional ambivalence; through sharpening into explicit logical contradiction and toning down its baffling effect through the catalogue technique, we have reached a poetic structure that evokes a less disquieting emotional quality of love—perceived in the poem rather than experienced.

As we have seen, the need to impute coherence may force the reader to attend away from the individual contradictions to a common superordinate that may settle the conflicting statements and account for the co-occurrence of the various “contrarities”—in this case, “love”. There are, however, instances in which no such superordinates are available. Then, the human mind searching for coherence may

settle for a formal common denominator, the category “contradictions”. In such cases, since the incongruities cannot be resolved by *meanings*, the only way to cope with the succession of absurdities remains to “laugh it off”, to treat them as frivolous trifling. At this point, having recourse to personal or impersonal grammatic constructions may make a substantial difference.

### **Test Case: Catalogues of Contradictions (b)**

#### **Villon and Drayton**

Now, what happens when the catalogue of paradoxes cannot be traced back to conspicuous ambivalent feelings sharpened and fossilized? When the meanings suggested by the various logical contradictions cannot be settled in a superordinate category or a state of affairs, the brain, eager to impute coherence upon the disconnected contraries, still will not give up, but may abstract the formal category “contradictions” which, then, is repeated throughout the series. Such a poem would, quite plausibly be perceived as frivolous playing around. But sometimes something happens to the frivolous trifling, and the poem may emerge as somehow more serious. Consider, for instance, the following two poems:

## Idea

### LXII.

WHEN first I ended, then I first began,  
 The more I travelled, further from my rest,  
 Where most I lost, there most of all I wan,  
 Pinèd with hunger rising from a feast.  
 Methinks I fly, yet want I legs to go,  
 Wise in conceit, in act a very sot,  
 Ravished with joy amid a hell of woe;  
 What most I seem, that surest am I not.  
 I build my hopes a world above the sky,  
 Yet with the mole I creep into the earth,  
 In plenty I am starved with penury,  
 And yet I surfeit in the greatest dearth;  
 I have, I want, despair and yet desire,  
 Burned in a sea of ice and drowned amidst a fire.

Michael Drayton

## Ballade du concours de Blois

<p>Je meurs de seuf auprès de la fontaine,            Chault comme feu et tremble dent a dent,            En mon pays suis en terre loingtaine,            Lez ung brasier frisonne tout ardent,            Nu comme ung ver, vestu en president,            Je riz en pleurs et attens sans espoir,            Confort reprens en triste desespoir,            Je m'esjoys et n'ay plasir aucun,            Puissant je suis sans force et sans pouoir,            Bien recueully, debouté de chascun.</p>	<p>I die of thirst beside the fountain            I'm hot as fire, I'm shaking tooth on tooth            In my own country I'm in a distant land            Beside the blaze I'm shivering in flames            Naked as a worm, dressed like a president            I laugh in tears and hope in despair            I cheer up in sad hopelessness            I'm joyful and no pleasure's anywhere            I'm powerful and lack all force and strength            Warmly welcomed, always turned away.</p>
<p>Riens ne m'est seur que la chose incertaine,            Obscur fors ce qui est tout evident,            Doubte ne fais fors en chose certaine,            Science tiens a soudain accident,            Je gaigne tout et demeure perdent,            Au point du jour diz «Dieu vous doint bon soir»            Gisant envers j'ay grand paeur de chëoir,            J'ay bien de quoy et si n'en ay pas ung,            Eschoicte actens et d'omme ne suis hoir,            Bien recueully, debouté de chascun.</p>	<p>I'm sure of nothing but what is uncertain            Find nothing obscure but the obvious            Doubt nothing but the certainties            Knowledge to me is mere accident            I keep winning and remain the loser            At dawn I say "I bid you good night"            Lying down I'm afraid of falling            I'm so rich I haven't a penny            I await an inheritance and am no one's heir            Warmly welcomed, always turned away.</p>
<p>De rien n'ay soing, si mectz toute m'atayne            D'acquerir biens et n'y suis pretendent,            Qui mieulx me dit, c'est cil qui plus m'actaine            Et qui plus vray, lors plus me va bourdent,            Mon ami est qui me faict entendent            D'ung cigne blanc que c'est ung corbeau noir,            Et qui me nuyst, croy qu'i m'ayde a pourvoir,            Bourde, verté, au jour d'uy m'est tout ung,            Je retiens tout, rien ne sçay concepvoir,            Bien recueully, debouté de chascun.</p>	<p>I never work and yet I labor            To acquire goods I don't even want            Kind words irritate me most            He who speaks true deceives me worst            A friend is someone who makes me think            A white swan is a black crow            The people who harm me think they help            Lies and truth today I see they're one            I remember everything, my mind's a blank            Warmly welcomed, always turned away.</p>
<p>Prince clement, or vous plaise sçavoir            Que j'entens moult et n'ay sens ne sçavoir;            Parcïal suis, a toutes loys commun.            Que sais je plus ? Quoy ! les gaiges ravoir,            Bien recueully, debouté de chascun</p>	<p>Merciful Prince may it please you to know            I understand much and have no wit or learning            I'm biased against all laws impartially            What's next to do? Redeem my pawned goods again!            Warmly welcomed, always turned away.</p>

by François Villon

Translated by Galway Kinnell

Ballade [I die of thirst beside the fountain]

From *The Poems of François Villon* translated by Galway Kinnell, published by Houghton Mifflin, © 1965.



*Figure 2* “Nu comme ung ver, vestu en president”  
David Kleinman’s illustration to Reuven Tsur’s Hebrew translation of François Villon’s poems *Danse Macabre*.

One conspicuous characteristic of Drayton’s catalogue of paradoxes will become obvious when contrasted to his most famous (and perhaps best) sonnet.

*Farewell to Love*

Since there’s no help, come let us kiss and part;  
Nay I have done, you get no more of me;



And I am glad, yea, glad, with all my heart,  
 That thus so cleanly I myself can free;  
 Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,  
 And when we meet at any time again,  
 Be it not seen in either of our brows  
 That we one jot of former love retain.  
 Now at the last gasp of loves latest breath,  
 When his pulse failing, passion speechless lies,  
 When faith is kneeling by his bed of death,  
 And innocence is closing up his eyes,  
     Now if thou would'st, when all have given him over,  
     From death to life thou might'st him yet recover.

While "Farewell to Love" is placed in a concrete dramatic situation defined here and now, Drayton's catalogue of paradoxes is enumerated "in the abstract", detached from any concrete situation.

Let us compare now the first lines of Drayton's and Villon's catalogues of paradoxes. Consider Drayton's "When first I ended, then I first began". This line contains a straightforward logical contradiction between two incompatible statements that occurs apart from any concrete realities, specified object, or actual instance. Consequently, there are no clues for, or constraints on, its interpretation. There is no sufficient information to decide whether they are relevant to the speaker's well-being. The line "I die of thirst beside the fountain", by contrast, contains an indirect, or empirical opposition. It is, in fact, the inferences from being "beside the fountain" and from "dying of thirst" that conflict. The opposing terms are actually compatible; and they occur within a concrete situation. It could be literally true as, for instance, in

Water, water everywhere,  
 And not a drop to drink.

Or, it may suggest another tragic situation, as when one reaches the fountain but dies before being able to drink; and so forth. This situation is clearly relevant to the speaker's well-being, and suggests a tragic flavour. The effect is not dependent on Villon's personal disposition. The line was given to him by Charles Duke of Orléans, himself a fine poet, at a poetry contest, where eleven contestants began their entries with this line.<sup>3</sup> Having set the tone, the next three paradoxes too can be construed such as to conform with a tragic experience.

<sup>3</sup> Charles d'Orleans's own entry went thus (in a literal translation):

I die of thirst beside the fountain

Though Robert Louis Stevenson regarded this as one of Villon's poorest poems, Charles d'Orléans is reported to have admired it very much. And today it has exceptionally great appeal; some readers feel it particularly modern. This is most remarkable, in view of the relative obscurity of Drayton's sonnet. I myself too have come under the spell of Villon's Ballade, while I feel Drayton's sonnet as a successful exercise of a major poet, but far from a masterpiece. I said above that the first line of Drayton's poem contains a straightforward logical contradiction between two incompatible statements that occurs apart from any concrete realities, or actual instances. The subsequent lines, however, abound in visual imagery and concrete instances. Though I have no method to demonstrate this, I have the impression that the poet deliberately chose as diverse images as possible, so as to render his catalogue as incoherent as possible. The unity of the poem comes from the "punch line", an exceptionally forceful closing couplet. At a closer look, however, Villon's poem too abounds in conspicuously disconnected images.

So, what is the process of making sense of these two poems? There is a possibility to read both poems as unresolved paradoxes, yielding a frivolous, trifling reading. As such, they would be entirely satisfactory. It would, however, be quite difficult to exclude a reading that reads a certain kind of complex personality into the series of contradictions. Again, I have the feeling that it would be more difficult to exclude it regarding Villon's ballade than regarding Drayton's sonnet.

Consider Drayton's line "The more I travelled, further from my rest". It is not really paradoxical, and could be literally true. But the reader, eager to render the speaker consistent, even if not meaningful, readily assumes that the aim of the travel is to end one's travails and reach a state of tranquillity. But even so, he may construe this paradoxical statement as, for instance, being confronted with a particular inquisitive spirit. So, the image of a complex personality begins to emerge. Then one may attempt to relate to this emerging personality such statements as "Wise in conceit, in act a very sot" which, again, could be literally true.

Villon's ballade begins with a line "I die of thirst beside the fountain", where the contradiction is not between two abstract statements, but between a scene term and the speaker's action. This can be construed as suggesting a tragic situation, followed by three lines in which the paradoxes can be construed as suggesting some intense

---

Shaking from cold and the fire of love;  
I am blind and yet guide the others;  
I am weak of mind, a man of wisdom;  
Too negligent, often cautious in vain,  
I have been made a spirit,  
Led by fortune for better or for worse

While Villon's shivering with cold and heat of fire are both literal, Charles d'Orléans has "Shaking from cold and the fire of love", choosing the Petrarchan solution for his contrarities. This may bestow some figurative meaning on the first line, e.g., I am near the object of my yearning, but I cannot reach her.

physical or psychological anguish. This sets the scene for the emergence of an intense and coherent human experience suggesting, in turn, a complex human personality. Within this framework, from such lines as “I keep winning and remain the loser” a sophisticated but plausible character may be construed. To this one may add the grotesque image of “Naked as a worm, dressed like a president”, or the self-sarcasm of the misfit: “At dawn I say ‘I bid you good night’”. The better the integration of these features into a unified character, the more credible the character emerges. The more diversified the feature suggested by the paradoxes—assuming that unity is taken care of—the more complex the emerging character.

Is there any evidence that readers go such a long way to integrate such a diversity of features? And if yes, is there anything in the texts themselves that would advance or obstruct such an integration?

Meir Sternberg (1976) quotes a series of experiments by Luchins and others on the primacy and recency effects, that may illuminate two aspects of the issue. The experimenters composed two diametrically opposed passages describing a hypothetical person, Jim. One passage described him as friendly and extroverted, another as unfriendly and introverted. Then they combined the two passages in two different ways: the friendly paragraph first, and the unfriendly paragraph first. Subjects, who had to give their impression of the person, were assigned to two groups, one which received the friendly-paragraph-first version, and one that received the unfriendly-paragraph-first version. The results displayed a strong primacy effect. Subjects tended to interpret the first part of the description as the real character of the person described.<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly enough, in the interviews, subjects in both conditions reported that they had not noticed the discrepancy in the description. Sternberg accounts for this curious fact as follows.

Due to the successive order of presentation, the first block was read with an open mind, while the interpretation of the second—in itself as weighty—was decisively conditioned and colored by the anterior, homogeneous primacy effect. In other words, the leading block established a perceptual set serving as a frame of reference to which subsequent information was subordinated as far as possible.

In each case, accordingly, the leading block was taken to represent the “real” Jim, the “essential nature” of Jim, while the second was taken to describe exceptional behavior, which is to be explained away in terms of temporary variations in mood or circumstances—in short, as a mere qualific-

<sup>4</sup> Recently I served as the chairperson of a promotion committee. One referee wrote a two-paragraph letter. In the first paragraph he pointed out a long list of flaws in the candidate’s work. The second paragraph began with “If, in spite all I recommend the candidate for promotion, it is because...” and here came a long list of praises. I phoned to the referee and asked him to write exactly the same things, but in a reverse order. He did so, but added a short, innocent-looking clause, which he knew would fail the candidate.

ation of the previously established conception of character. (Sternberg, 1976: 298)

This paragraph suggests that yes, readers would go a long way to impute coherence not only on inconsistent but even on diametrically opposite information. This would suggest, however, that Drayton's sonnet and Villon's ballade ought to be perceived as suggesting equally integrated characters. I can think of three ways to point out factors that would be conducive to integration. First, one could meticulously analyze (which I have not done yet) the particular contrarities in Villon's and Drayton's poems, and see whether there is something in them that would be more or less conducive to integration. Second, one might look at the beginning of the poems for elements whose primacy effect would be to abet or not to abet integration of the traits. In the present case we have found that Drayton's first line contains a straightforward logical contradiction between two incompatible statements that occurs apart from any concrete realities, with no clues for its interpretation. Nor is there sufficient information to decide whether they are relevant to the speaker's well-being. Villon's poem, by contrast, begins with four consecutive lines that may suggest an emotionally-loaded tragic situation strongly relevant to the speaker's well-being. Thus, the primacy effect strongly favours the construal of a coherent situation of great human interest in Villon's ballade, while it seems to discourage it in the case of Drayton's sonnet.

Finally, euphony and other prosodic and syntactic features may be very effective here. In his monumental study, *François Villon et les thèmes poétiques du moyen âge* (1934) Italo Siciliano points out that sometimes Villon's conventional catalogues are poetically superior to other such catalogues of the time mainly because they are simply more euphonic (cf. note 2 above). Let me add my own examples of the euphony of Villon's poetry. Consider the first two lines of the ballade for the Blois contest. In "Je meurs de seuf" the vowel *-eu* is repeated. *Feu* in the second line contains the last two phonemes of *seuf*, in a reverse order. *Fontaine* too contains the consonant *f*. Repetition of the sounds of *dent* is entailed by the repetition of the word, demanded by the figurative language. The nasal vowel of *dent* is foreshadowed by the first vowel of *tremble* on the one hand, and another nasal vowel in the first syllable of *fontaine*.

A word must be said about Villon's rhymes. As the romantic poets argued, rhyme is unity in diversity. The more similar the sounds and the more different the meaning structure of the rhyming words, the more effective the rhyme is. The ballade form has a sophisticated rhyme pattern. In the present instance, the *a* and *d* rhymes of the stanza have two members; the *b* and *c* rhymes have three. To make things more difficult, all the later stanzas rhyme with the rhymes set by the first stanza. As a result, poets take the liberty to rhyme similar grammatic structures (what Jakobson calls "grammatic rhymes"), or even have recourse to the same words with different prefixes. A similar problem arises in the *quassida* of Mediaeval Hebrew and Arabic poetry, where the mono-rhyme demands to rhyme an indefinite number of similar-ended words. As to rhyme quality, Mediaeval Hebrew poets

explicitly distinguished between “passing”, “becoming” and “excellent” rhymes, according to the number of shared phonemes in the rhyme-words. Consider the following rhymes in this ballade: *espoir–desespoir*, *aucun–chacun*, *incertaine–certaine*. In view of such monotony, the more salient will be the complexity of the *a* and *b* rhymes in the first stanza, for instance. *Fontaine* is a noun, whereas *lointaine* is an adjective, displaying a contrast on the part-of-speech level. At the same time, the two words have four consecutive speech sounds in common. I have already mentioned that the sequence *dent a dent* necessarily repeats the same speech sounds, and that the nasal feature of the vowels is foreshadowed in *tremble* and *fontaine*. Moreover, the alternating a-b-a-b rhymes have a special phonetic relationship, what Kenneth Burke called “colliteration”. The *t* of *fountain* and the *d* of *dent* are cognate: *d* is a voiced *t*. While *fountain* ends with a full consonant, a (nasal) *n*, the nasal vowel *ẽ* is generated by an attenuated *n*. Thus, in the a-b-a-b rhyme, two sets of cognate but different speech sounds alternate, yielding a particularly euphonious effect. The three *b* rhyme words, *dent–ardent–président* rhyme a nasal vowel preceded by a *d*. *Dent* is a unitary word, a noun; *ardent* and *président* end with the formative *–ent*, which derives a noun or an adjective from a verb. In this case, *ardent* is an adjective, *président* a noun. What is more, as far as I can judge as a foreigner, and from another century, *président* too is perceived as a unitary word. The adjective *ardent* intervenes between the two nouns in the rhyme pattern. What is more, the rhymed syllables of both the *a* and *b* rhymes (*–taine* and *–dent*) preserve all their speech sounds throughout the three stanzas. This is not necessarily so in the poetry of the period.

Below I quote from Jane Taylor, side by side, the opening stanza of Alain Chartier’s ballade of proverbs, and the opening stanza of Villon’s parody of that poem. Taylor points out significant similarities between them, among others the identical rhyme patterns. By identical rhyme patterns, I suppose, she also means identical specific rhyme endings. At this point, however, I want to point out the difference in the *quality* of the rhymes. In both stanzas, the *a* rhymes (*villain–plain*; *fain–faing*) are unitary, suffixless words (but Villon happens to rhyme here a pair of homonyms with very different meanings). The *d* rhymes (including the refrain) are not very exciting: both poets rhyme here the grammatical suffix *–eux*. This is not very respectable or euphonious. But while Chartier rhymes a single phoneme (*d’amoureux→joieux*), Villon adds a common preceding consonant: *r* (*peureux→qu’amoureux*). This *r* persists throughout Villon’s poem. The *b* rhymes in these two poems consist of masculine /i/ rhymes, the *c* rhymes of a pair of feminine endings (/i/ plus “e” muet). But while in Chartier’s stanza a different consonant precedes the vowels in each member (*enrichi→amy→jalousie→seignori*), in Villon’s stanza in all members the vowels are preceded by a nasal consonant (in the *b*-rhyme by /m/, in the *c*-rhyme by an /n/ and a palatalized /n/: *d’ennemy→endormy→félonnie→regnie*). In the ensuing stanzas, too, Villon assiduously inserts pairs of supporting consonants before the final vowel. In the third stanza and the “Envoi” there are six *c*-rhymes, in all of which there is a supporting /d/. In thast three paragraphs I wanted to demonstrate that subtle euphony has a substantial part in the appeal of some of

Villon's ballades, and that this degree of euphony should by no means be taken for granted in the poetry of the period.

### **Catalogues of Contradictions (c): Trifling/Parody**

Returning to meanings, a very different specimen we find in Villon's other catalogue of contradictions, "Ballade des contre-vérités" (Ballade of counter-truths). Here any possible personal element is drastically eliminated. The statements are highly generalized in an "all-exclusive but one" format. Not only the first person singular pronoun is meticulously avoided in this ballade; there are only two finite verbs before the "Envoi", both the same impersonal construction: "Il n'est". All the rest is a lengthy elaboration of the negation, of the form: "No *a* but *b* / No *c* but *d*", and so forth. The contradictions are, conspicuously, not to be resolved. When the Bible, for instance, says "He who spares his rod hates his son" (that is, he who does not beat his son hates him), the resolution of the paradox is almost self-evident. "The rod" is a metonymy for punishment; "hates"—for wishing or doing wrong to someone; that is, he who does not punish his son when he deserves it, does him wrong in the long run. If we take a comparable paradox from Villon's ballade, e.g., "No service but from an enemy", no such construal is readily available. The paradox "There is no conceiving but in the bathtub" is conspicuously untrue, and makes fun of the girls who claim that they became pregnant from the sperm in the water. What is more, the rigid formula "No *a* but *b*", repeated throughout the ballade, emphasizes that the common denominator here is not a notion that may resolve the paradox, but a logical structure, focusing on, rather than attending away from, the baffling contradictions. So, the only course left for the reader is to read the catalogue for the fun of it.

## Ballade des contre-vérités

Il n'est soin que quand on a faim  
 Ne service que d'ennemi,  
 Ne mâcher qu'un botel de fain,  
 Ne fort guet que d'homme endormi,  
 Ne clémence que félonie,  
 N'assurance que de peureux,  
 Ne foi que d'homme qui renie,  
 Ne bien conseillé qu'amoureux.

Il n'est engendrement qu'en boin  
 Ne bon bruit que d'homme banni,  
 Ne ris qu'après un coup de poing,  
 Ne lotz que dettes mettre en ni,  
 Ne vraie amour qu'en flatterie,  
 N'encontre que de malheureux,  
 Ne vrai rapport que menterie,  
 Ne bien conseillé qu'amoureux.

Ne tel repos que vivre en soin,  
 N'honneur porter que dire: "Fi!",  
 Ne soi vanter que de faux coin,  
 Ne santé que d'homme bouffi,  
 Ne haut vouloir que couardie,  
 Ne conseil que de furieux,  
 Ne douceur qu'en femme étourdie,  
 Ne bien conseillé qu'amoureux.

Voulez-vous que verté vous dire?  
 Il n'est jouer qu'en maladie,  
 Lettre vraie qu'en tragédie,  
 Lâche homme que chevalereux,  
 Orrible son que mélodie,  
 Ne bien conseillé qu'amoureux.

## Ballade of counter-truths

There is no care but hunger  
 No service but from an enemy  
 Nothing chewy but a bale of hay  
 No reliable watchman but a man asleep  
 No clemency but felony  
 No confidence but in the frightened  
 No good faith but in forswearing  
 No well-advised but the enamoured

There is no conceiving but in the bathtub  
 No good reputation but that of an exile  
 No laughter but after receiving a punch  
 No merit but denial of debts  
 No true love but flattery  
 No meetings but unhappy ones  
 No true rapport but in lies  
 No well-advised but the enamoured

No rest like a life of worry  
 No respect but saying "fie!"  
 No showing off but with false coins  
 No good health but of a man with dropsy  
 No high resolve but cowardice  
 No good advice but from the furious  
 No sweetness as in a vociferous wife  
 No well-advised but the enamoured

Verity, are you ready to hear?  
 In sickness alone is there joy  
 Literal truth only in tragedy  
 Lack of courage only in braveness  
 Offensive sound only in melody  
 No well-advised but the enamoured

I used to think that this ballade demanded a frivolously trifling reading. However, it turned out that this fun is subordinated to a fun of a higher order. Villon scholars claim that this ballade is a parody of a ballade with catalogues of proverbs, by Alain Chartier. (see, e.g., Jane H. M. Taylor, 2001: 146; Pinkernell, online). By putting the two poems side by side, Taylor demonstrates their unmistakable similarity (and, by the same token, difference). The identical rhyme pattern, per se, of the two poems is not very remarkable in my mind, because this is one of the most wide-spread rhyme patterns prevalent in the ballade form; but the identical specific rhyme endings, by contrast, are. Likewise, the endlessly repeated formula “No *a* but *b*” is more than telling. Moreover, consider Alain’s line “Ne hault vouloir que d’amoureux”. Its second half recurs in Villon’s refrain “Ne bien conseillé qu’amoureux”. Its first part occurs in Villon’s line “Ne haut vouloir que couardie”, amplifying the ironic twist.

## Alain Chartier

Il n’est danger que de villain,  
N’orgueil que de povre enrichi,  
Ne si seur chemin que le plain,  
Ne secours que de vray amy,  
Ne desespoir que jalousie,  
Ne hault vouloir que d’amoureux,  
Ne paistre qu’en grant seignorie,  
Ne chere que d’omme joieux.

*Villon*

Il n’est soing que quant on a fain  
Ne service que d’ennemy,  
Ne mascher qu’un botel de faing,  
Ne fort guet que d’homme endormy,  
Ne clémence que félonnie,  
N’assurance que de peureux,  
Ne foy que d’homme qui regnie,  
Ne bien conseillé qu’amoureux.

Villon’s ‘proverbs’, she says, “though just as lapidary, just as respectable-looking as Alain’s, are pseudo-proverbs whose sense is, to a moment’s thought, patently absurd: they replace the irritating predictability of Chartier’s poem with proverbs which are not trite—but not ‘true’. What he demonstrates, in other words, is the sheer fatuity of Alaine’s exercise” (ibid.). “But a string of proverbs like Alaine’s”, she says, “by definition has no function; a poem consisting solely of proverbs subordinates universal wisdom to the adventitious constraints of rhyme and metre” (ibid.).<sup>5</sup> Taylor ignores here the fact that Villon himself wrote two ballades

<sup>5</sup> In a Marcelo Mastroiani film there is an anecdote going in the family about an old winemaker who, on his deathbed, reveals a professional secret to his sons: wine can be made of grapes too, and then it has a special flavour. In the same vein I want to reveal that sometimes people write poetry not to instruct, but for fun. People write and read ballades that contain catalogues of proverbs not in order to make the reader wiser, but to cause him to have fun. Presumably, the reader knows all those proverbs by heart. The ballade form has such a complicated rhyme scheme, but may be, in spite of all, very euphonious. The reader, on his part, may derive pleasure from the fact that everything falls into place. The more rigorous the formal constraints, the greater the pleasure when they are overcome. That is how I propose to (mis)read Taylor’s



of proverbs just as “irritatingly predictable” as Chartier’s, as well as that in his “Ballade du concours de Blois” he used the technique of catalogues of contradictions to a very different purpose and effect. Nevertheless, her conception of this parody is well-taken. I would add that Villon does not explicitly *criticise* Chartier’s platitudes and complacent values of “respectable” people, as he does in his parody on the pastoral values of the “Franc Gontier” poems. But if you put the two poems side by side, this intertextual relationship throws an ironic light on Chartier’s ballade, and renders it ridiculous (very much in the manner in which Louis Carroll’s “Father William” renders Robert Southy’s “Father William” ridiculous).<sup>6</sup>

### Summary and Conclusions

This paper is an improvisation apropos Ratna Roshida Abd Razak’s paper “Arabic Poet Al-Mutanabbi: A Maslovian Humanistic Approach”, not a straightforward response to it. My argument concerns certain issues in a wider perspective of Mediaeval and Renaissance poetry in general. My argument had three stages. First, I argued that in a highly conventional kind of poetry it is dangerous to make inferences from what the poet writes to what the poet feels (or thinks). In this respect, I spoke of the “Biographical Fallacy”, (mis)applied to Moses Ibn Ezra’s and François Villon’s poetry alike. I warned against applying psychological hypotheses to the poet’s empirical personality *via* his use of poetic conventions. In this respect, in many genres, when a poet says “I”, he does not even necessarily mean himself, but a certain exemplary “I”, Everyman. In this case, the first person singular is meant to induce his audience to activate certain processing strategies, to generate certain kinds of effect. Impersonal constructions serve to induce different processing strategies, with different effects.

Second, this does not imply that psychological theories are irrelevant to literary research. We only must carefully scrutinize what it is that we have explained by the

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comment: “a poem consisting solely of proverbs subordinates universal wisdom to the adventitious constraints of rhyme and metre”. Alain Chartier’s ballade is inferior to Villon’s not in that he “subordinates universal wisdom to the adventitious constraints of rhyme and metre”, but in that “the adventitious constraints of rhyme” are less rigorous in it than in Villon’s ballades, and the solution of the problem is, therefore, less pleasurable.

<sup>6</sup> In what appears to be a Villon entry in an online encyclopedia, Professor Gert Pinkernell writes: “Besides, V. apparently had a love affair at that time, because the refrain of the ballade repeats ‘No well-advised but the enamoured’”. This is a fine example of the biographical fallacy refuted above by Dan Pagis, of mistaking the exemplary nature of the genre for personal experience. This refrain is based on the reversal of a commonplace of the time, and is conspicuously in line with the other conter-truths of the list, and does not indicate an actual love affair anymore than his refrain “But where are the snows of yester year?” would indicate that Villon went on a ski holiday the preceding year. <http://www.pinkernell.de/villon/>

psychological theories. In a highly conventional kind of poetry one may learn very little about the empirical personality of the poet. I strongly suspect that in this period, a poet's recourse to this or that genre reflects vogue rather than stages in the development of his personality. But we may learn a lot about the origin of conventions. With reference to such genres as poetry of boast and panegyric, for instance, Maslow's theory, for instance, may describe the psychological processes that have fossilized into these genre conventions.

Following Ehrenzweig and Roy D'Andrade, I tried to explore the nature of poetic conventions and their evolution. As Mao said, every journey, even the longest one, must begin with one step. Likewise, every poetic tradition, even the longest and widest one, must begin with one poet composing one poem, or one verse line, for one particular audience; or, perhaps, several poets, each composing one poem for the same audience, or several different audiences. How, from such humble beginnings, did large poetic traditions grow out? In a world in which there is no radio-television, no internet, no air plains, only horses, camels, and sailboats? I am not proposing an actual historic process, but a hypothesis that must be verified against a wide variety of actual processes.

On this issue I have adopted Roy D'Andrade's position: "in the process of repeated social transmission, cultural programs come to take forms which have a good fit to the natural capacities [and constraints] of the human brain". One promising beginning for such a study would be, with the necessary changes, Sir Frederick Bartlett's classical experiment with the Eskimo story "The War of the Ghosts". Bartlett's purpose in this study was slightly different. He tried to find out how a story for which we have no mental schemata assumes, through repeated transmission, a good fit to the mental schemata we do entertain. When the story achieved a good fit to a mental schema prevalent in Western culture, the story stopped changing in subsequent transmissions.

I take up the process at a relatively late stage, when defense mechanisms are used against expressive devices which are turned, according to Ehrenzweig, into *style*. In this respect, I claim, artistic conventions and ornaments are fossilized psychological processes.

Third, I have illustrated this model at great length with reference to a widespread convention, prevalent in Mediaeval and Renaissance poetry; catalogues of incongruous or incompatible statements. I have started at a point well-known to psychoanalytic theory: ambivalence. Ambivalence is a potential source of undesirable stress. Dreams and fairytales handle ambivalence by splitting the object of ambivalent attitudes into two opposing figures, e.g., a good mother, and a wicked stepmother. It would appear that a straightforward wicked stepmother is less threatening than an ambivalent attitude. The poetic convention of contradictions originates not in a *split* of the ambivalent attitude, but in applying to it the cognitive mechanism of sharpening, generating explicit contrarities. Again, baffling contradictions seem to be less distressing than ambivalent attitudes, but are, still, threatening. One way to take out the disquieting element from contradictions is to generate a *catalogue* of contradictions. The constraints of human memory induce

the mind to abstract a common category from parallel items. At the same time, this allows to attend away from the contradictions to their common element or superordinate category. The most widespread variety of this convention is that in which the common superordinate category is “love”, which is active in the back of the mind, without preempting everything else. At the same time, the repetition of parallel items generates a rhythm that amplifies and diffuses the superordinate category “love” and, by interaction with other poetic devices, such as the use of the first person singular, the memory aid is turned into an emotional quality of the poem. It is claimed that the ambivalence of love and the need to take out the disquieting element from it has a good fit to the capacities and constraints of the human brain. I suggest that even catalogues of contradictions that historically do not originate in the ambivalent emotions of love, may eventually be accommodated in this tradition and thus assume a good fit to the natural capacities of the human brain. There are, however, instances in which the “love” solution simply does not work. Then, to get rid of the disturbing element of the unresolved contradictions, the human mind may try other strategies: to construe some complex personality roughly compatible with the list of paradoxes. And if this fails too, there remains the option to laugh it off, to treat it as frivolous trifling, making fun. We have seen one instance, in which this solution is subordinated to a higher degree of making fun, parody.

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