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The place of marthiya in literary and religious tradition, with translations of some examples of elegies on Imam Husayn (a).

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Elegy (Marthiya) on Husayn: Arabic and Persian

I propose to give here an account neither of the development, nor of the themes, of the elegy on Husayn, in Arabic or Persian, nor of the outstanding poets of elegy, the literature in both these languages is too vast for that, and spread out over too great a period. Rather, I would like to give some idea of the place of these *marathi* in literary and religious tradition, while giving in translation some examples of elegy on Husayn which should serve for those unfamiliar with these languages to form an idea of the beauty and effectiveness of this type of poetry.

I should warn English-speakers that my translations, in one essential respect, do not bear much resemblance to the originals. The Arabic and Persian poetical traditions, at least until very recently (only a few decades ago), required adherence to strict rhyme patterns, often monorhyme, and a strict quantitative meter.

These things are not only nearly impossible to reproduce in our English language, but also undesirable. It is necessary to imagine that the examples I give had in their original a very regular rhythm, a rhythm which could also be important for ritual purposes, for instance, in religious processions. If the conceits used are sometimes also a little difficult for us to understand immediately, the ideas expressed, and the

effect, are, I think, universal.

The tradition of elegiac poetry known in Arabic as *marthiya* had its roots, as regards themes as well as form, in pre-Islamic times.

The Arabic elegy, in the sometimes lengthy monorhyme *qasida* form, was like all pre-Islamic poetry highly conventionalized. The virtues of the deceased and the loss of the mourner are described, which then provides an opportunity to dwell on the pathos of this transitory life in the face of fate, always unalterable. Often the mourner curses the enemy and calls for vengeance. While the pre-Islamic elegy was conventionalized, it was also highly specific, or occasional: reflections on mortality only serve to frame a threnodic tribute to a specified personality.

If we express '*marthiya*' as 'elegy', then it should be kept in mind that what we mean is not the elegy of Western tradition, which may designate any poem of a subjective kind, and one quite generally connected with the question of mortality. Most of even the earliest forms of the Greek elegiac couplet (from which the Latin and then Western languages take the genre and the name) do not display exclusively themes of death or loss.

If I bring up this point – which may seem somewhat distant from the question of elegy on Husayn in Arabic and Persian – it is to emphasize that the literature of *marathi* has but weak parallels in Western tradition. More particularly, it is not paralleled in Western Christian tradition, despite an extensive martyrology. Some of the social and attendant historical factors in this contrasting development may be surmised: for one thing, the influence of poetic tradition has been comparatively much stronger among the Arab-speaking peoples and among the once much wider circle of Persian speakers than in the West.

What is of relevance here is that it has clearly been the event of Karbala¹ which allowed this pre-Islamic Arabic tradition to continue into Islamic times and take its central place in the languages of the Islamic tradition. Any elegy (in the restricted sense in which we are speaking here) may strike a universal note; in fact that is one of the requirements of an elegy, but very few examples tend to survive as poetry or as something which would continue to evoke deep emotion. Practically our whole tradition of funeral elegy in English, for example, seems to be quite dead, in the poetical sense.

In contrast to this, we have the tradition of Husayn and those martyred with him: the sacrifice of Husayn has provided a vital and meaningful subject for authors (both Shia and Sunni) for all of fourteen centuries (and into the future, God willing). Thus we see that even in Arabic, although the strong tradition of secular elegy continued into this century, that too has declined with other forms and themes considered 'artificial' by modern movements, while *marthiya* on Husayn and the other martyrs of Karbala¹ continues in both formal and popular language.

Alongside this, the event of Karbala¹ has provided a continuing ritual context for elegiac poetry. The *marthiya* in pre-Islamic times has a ritual function as a lamentation (*nawh*), often recited by women (and

the best of its earliest practitioners known to us were women). Not only would the listener be invited to dwell in the virtues of the deceased, but the pathos of the situation was also revealed, and it may be assumed that those present were then moved to weep. Some of the earliest examples we have of *marthiya* on Husayn are in fact simple poems of this type: lamentations by his wives and daughters. This piece attributed to Rabab, beloved wife of Husayn, is particularly moving. Rabab said:

He who was a light, shining, is murdered;

Murdered in Karbala¹, and unburied.

Descendant of the Prophet, may God reward you well;

May you be spared judgement on the day when deeds are weighed:

For you were to me as a mountain, solid, in which I could take refuge;

And you treated us always with kindness,¹ and according to religion.

O who shall speak now for the orphans, for the petitioners;

By whom shall all these wretched be protected, in whom shall they take refuge?

I swear by God, never will I wish to exchange marriage with you for another;

No, not until I am covered; covered in the grave.

And on another occasion Rabab said:

O Husayn! Never shall I forget Husayn!

Pierced by the spears of his enemies,

He whom they abandoned, in Karbala¹.

May God now never water the plains of Karbala!²

And regardless of how well attested these pieces of elegy are as literary remains, I think we would have to say that the beauty and deep feeling here has something of the force of memory to testify to their authenticity. In many later elegies on Husayn, the lament is put into the mouths of females of his family, Fatima, for instance, or Zaynab, and this recalls the pre-Islamic elegy.

In the Umayyad period poets were invited to compose laudations (*madh*) and *marathi* for the rituals of the gatherings (majalis) of the noble members of the family of the Prophet. This narration concerning the sixth Imam shows the place of *marathi* in these gatherings:

Jafar b. 'Affan came to al-Sadiq's residence and seated himself next to him, upon which the Imam said, Ja'far, I have been told that you recite poetry for Husayn, peace be upon him, and that you do it well.' 'Yes, and may God make me a sacrifice for you!' replied the poet. 'Recite, then', said al-Sadiq, and Jafar recited these verses:

He who weeps for Husayn might well weep for Islam itself,

For the principles of Islam have been destroyed, and used unlawfully:

On the day when Husayn became the target of spears,

When swords drank from him, busy with their work.

And corpses, scattered, were abandoned in the desert.

Great birds hovering over by night and by day ...

And the Imam Sadiq wept and those around him with him, until his face and beard were covered with tears. Then he said, 'By God, Jafar, the angels closest to God are witness here and they hear your words; they have wept as we have, and more ... [3](#)

At the end of the 'Abbasid period, the reciter in these commemorative sessions was still known as a *na'ih*, a lamenter, or mourner.[4](#)

These *marathi*, then, provided the germ for early gatherings of partisans of the House of the Prophet; they may also then be seen as the origin or earliest form of the *ta'ziya* as it is known today among Shi'i peoples. The literary forms known as *ta'ziya* and *marthiya* in Arabic are related, the *ta'ziya* being a kind of extended lamentation which is also intended to comfort the hearer in the face calamity, as the root meaning of the Arabic – 'comforting' – suggests.[5](#) The 'ritual context' for elegy on Husayn continues to be provided today not only by the developed *ta'ziya*, but also by various other gatherings within the ten days of Muharram in which *marathi* are recited. In the Shi'i area of Lebanon, for instance, there are many such gatherings held, and in both the Arabic- and Persian-speaking world gatherings are held exclusively for women.[6](#)

It was inevitable that once the force of memory receded, themes had to be introduced into elegy on Husayn which would have the desired effect on the hearer by bringing forward the significance of his martyrdom; thus the elegy is linked with the issues surrounding his martyrdom. In the example we have already given by the poet Ja'far ibn 'Affan al-Ta'i (d. 150), Islam itself is put in the position of a martyr. This *marthiya* of the *imam* al-Shafi'i introduces, after protestations of personal sorrow, and the image of the martyr, his declaration of love for the House of the Prophet overall. The *imam* Shafi'i said:

My heart sighed, for my innermost being was in dejection;

Sleep no longer came, and sleeplessness was bewildering.

O who shall be the bearer of a message from me to Husayn,

(Though the hearts and minds of some may disapprove!)

Slaughtered, though without sin himself,

His shirt as if dyed through with crimson.

Now the sword itself wails, and the spear shrieks,

And the horse which once only whinnied, laments.

The world quaked for the sake of the Family of Muhammad;

For their sake, the solid mountains might have melted away.

Heavenly bodies sunk, the stars trembled,

Oh veils were torn, and breasts were rent!

He who asks blessing for the one sent from the Tribe of Hashim,

But attacks his sons; truly, that is strange!

And if my sin is love of the Family of Muhammad:

Then that is a sin which I do not repent.⁷

This *qasida* of the *imam* Shafi'i is also notable in that it is, of course, a Sunni production; the fact that he composed other such elegies is well attested, and apparently many other Shafi'ites (and Hanafites) in this early period did the same.⁸ However, even the attestation by such a person as the *imam* Shafi'i of his love for the Family of the Prophet left him open in those dangerous times to accusations of 'unorthodoxy', as the following lines attributed to him suggest. The *imam* Shafi'i said:

They said, 'You are a Rafidi!', and I said, 'But no,

Nor is my religion nor are my beliefs of that kind ...

'But if love of the viceregent of God be Rafidism,

Then I am the most Rafidi of the servants of God!⁹

Continuing on the subject of 'Sunni' or perhaps we should say 'non-Shi'i', elegy about Husayn, here is a strong piece from the *Hadiqat al-Haqiqah* or 'Garden of Truth' of Sana'i, as a Persian example from the

early twelfth century. I have abridged it in translation by about half; it is given the title 'Concerning Karbala', and the fragrant air of that most glorious place of martyrdom'. Sana'i says:

How excellent Karbala' ! and that honour it received,

Which brought to mankind the odour of Paradise as if on a breeze;

And that body, headless, lying in clay and dust,

And those precious ones, hearts rent by the sword.

And that elect of all the world, murdered,

His body smeared with earth and blood;

And those great oppressors, those doers of evil,

Persistent in the evil they do.

The sanctity of religion and the Family of the Prophet

Are both borne away, both by ignorance and inanity;

Swords are red like precious ruby with the blood of Husayn,

What disgrace in the world worse than this!

And Mustafa, his garments all torn,

And 'Ali, tears of blood raining from his eyes.

A whole world has become insolent in its cruelty;

The cunning fox has become a roaring lion.

But still unbelievers at the start of the battle,

Were reminded of the stroke of Dhu'l-Fiqar.

Yes, from Husayn they sought satisfaction for their rancour, but that was not to be;

They had to be content with their own malice and disgrace.

And know that any who speak ill of those dogs [those murderers of Husayn]

Will be kings in the world to come! [10](#)

In Arabic poems on Husayn, the elegy, the *marthiya* proper, becomes very soon only part of a larger developed narrative in which the deeds and nobility of the martyrs of Karbala' are described. This development of narrative can be seen already in the poetry of Di'bil b. 'Ali al-Khuzai' (d. 246) and in the large body of poetry composed by Ibn Hammad al-'Abdi (end of the 4th cent.). However, the *marthiya* form can still be seen intact within these longer *qasidas*, and the lament for Husayn still provides the emotional high point; it is often placed at the beginning of the composition.

As another example from this early period we give a part of this well known elegy by al-Sharif al-Murtada (d. 406), which he is said to have extemporized on the spot at Karbala'. In this *qasida* al-Sharif al-Murtada pictures Husayn calling out to his ancestors for aid, but they do not respond; the poet even seems to reproach God for the deaths of the martyrs. In fact, the 'reproach' is a common theme in elegy on Husayn, of the hearer, of the dead relatives of the martyr, or even of God. The elegy for Husayn then turns into a lament for all the Imams supposed to have been martyred, and ends with a call for revenge from the Prophet himself.

O Karbala! Ever is your name sorrow (*karb*) and tragedy (*bala*)!

O what you brought upon the family of Mustafa!

How much blood flowed upon your soil when they fell,

And how many tears were shed there!

And how many a noble horse there was, weeping, its tears coursing,

Its cheek next to one perished of thirst,

Wiping the dust off its hooves

On the stain of a throat covered in blood!

These guests came to a barren plain,

And there was no food to be served them;

Nor did they taste water, until they gathered

At the edge of the sword, and the spring of death.

O murdered one, who struggled with death,

Without uttering an insult, without killing anyone!

And they washed him only with his own blood, shed by spears:

Shrouded him only with a shroud of dust.

Exhausted, he calls, while there is no help for him,

In the name of his beneficent father, and his grandfather Mustafa,

And in the name of a mother for whom God has raised a standard,

Not found among all the women of humankind.

And what father, what grandfather does he call!

O grandfather, grandfather, help me, O father!

O Messenger of God, O Fatima,

O Prince of the Faithful, 'Ali, Murtada!

How would God not hasten for their sakes,

To cause the earth to heave, the sky to rain stones!

And O Imams, mountains of the earth, most great, most high;

O moons of this earth, shining, brilliant!

The disaster which befell you

Brought to us deep grief and weeping, never ending.

I know that sorrow for you is not to be forgotten, nor grief for your sake comforted,

Though ages may pass;

For much time has passed since your deaths, and continues to pass,

Yet neither has grief abated, nor tears.

How far are you, O Imams, from him who hoped to achieve by you,

With the Apostle of God, victory and salvation;

On the day of the Great Encounter, when the Apostle Will turn his face from those gathered, and say:

(Speaking to God against them, And how could a generation thus accused prosper?)

'O Lord, on this day I am enemy to them;

I come as one wronged, and this is the day to judge.¹¹

The great impetus for the vast literature of elegy and dirge for Husayn in the Persian language, a literature which is now much larger than the Arabic, which includes a much greater element of elegy on the other martyrs of Karbala', and which has many more forms and recognized ritual uses than in the Arabic tradition, came with the establishment of the Safavid dynasty and the consequent consolidation for Shi'ism of the larger part of the Persian-speaking world.

Here as an example from the beginning of the Safavid period, is an elegiac *qasida* (abridged in translation) by Muhtasham-i Kashani, a favourite court poet. It shows some of the typical themes and imagery of the Persian genre, as well as imaginative expressions of the favourite elegiac theme of what later came to be known in Europe as 'pathetic fallacy'. Kasham says:

The name of this land full of tragedy (*bala'*) is Karbala'.

O pitiless heart, where is your sigh of burning sorrow to burn the heavens?

This desert is the place of the murder of a lord who died athirst.

O tongue. it is the time for lamentation; O eye, it is time to weep!

This space still bears the mark of the sighs of ones wronged,

So if the sky is become black through the smoke of our sighs, it is fitting

This spot which today is covered by the canopies of the bubbles of our tears,

Was once the place where the tents of the People of the House were set up

Here the ship of Husayn's life foundered in disaster;

Then why is the ocean of our tears, in such a maelstrom, stormless?

Behold that dome filled with light from near and far;

Its world-illuminating rays show the way to those gone astray

Behold a grave most illumined, before which

The casket of the horizons with its hundred thousand petals and precious stones is as without value.

Behold beneath the earth, the cypress of the garden of the Prophet,

For sorrow of whom the sky is arched, bent over.¹²

Behold, one clotted with blood, the tree of roses in the garden of Fatima, a woman pure.

For whose defeat of whom the garments of the houris are rent like the rose.

This is the lamp to the eyes of mankind, and now by the sword of oppression,

Extinguished, as though merely a candle – a naked body, the head separated from the rest.

This is the joy of Zahra's breast, and now by horses' hooves

His breast so full of wisdom trampled from all sides by tragedy (*bala*)

This is Husayn, son of 'Ali, beloved of the Prophet,

Now pierced through by the blade of oppression at the hand of his murderer Sinan. [13](#)

Set foot with reverence in this place of martyrdom, for its carpet most illumed,

Is anemone colour with blood from the head of him who was the light of the eyes of 'Ali, Murtada.

And even if the eye of a friend should not weep bitterly with sorrow,

Still the cry 'O sorrow!' would be upon the tongues of enemies, a cry of regret!

Now night appears from the setting of the sun, for on the roof of the horizons,

The black standard of the People of the Cloak falls from the shoulder of ever-revolving time,

O viceregent of God, I, Muhtasham, the beggar at your threshold,

Stand at the door of helplessness, empty, and empty-handed.

O how long since I tore my heart from my homeland for your sake!

And now after the long road it has taken, it enters in this palace.

Now the suppliant hand of my heart is raised in wretchedness to the sky,

And that which it seeks depends on your favour.

And though, O Husayn, through the desires of the self, that lover of sin,

My heart sits at the banquet of sin, and astride the horse of error,

Yet since the plain of Karbala' is become covered with dust, it would be fit

If you were to take away from this heart, the dust of sin. [14](#)

Muhtasham's *tarkib-band*, a long strophic poem of twelve parts, is much more well known than any other

of his numerous elegies on Husayn, and was imitated for centuries after him. Each strophe ends with a refrain, which is particularly effective in elegy. As an example of a modern *tarkib-band*, here is one strophe taken from a piece by a very popular contemporary poet, Ansari, 'Poet of the House of the Prophet'. It seems that the poet may have been inspired not only by the differing circumstances surrounding the martyrdoms of 'Ali and Husayn, but by the contrast between Najaf and Karbala' as well (Najaf is fairly well watered, but Karbala' is like a desert).

O breeze of morning, take to 'Ali these words of the poet Ansari;

Say: Husayn is fallen. Rise, then, go and see:

To Karbala' from Najaf where you lie,

His body in a hundred pieces pierced by the lance, the dagger, the sword.

O 'Ali! See who was once the light of your eyes,

Now the enemy around him like eyelashes around the eye;

And here you lie, in pleasant repose with Adam and Noah, at rest

While Husayn has as his resting place the burning sand of Karbala'!

Although you were made stranger to yourself by the stroke of the sword,

Around you were both stranger and kin, with refreshment and sweets;

While the body of your Husayn is rent the whole length with wounds.

And would you know the number of those wounds?

They are as many as the stars!

Wherever you turned your gaze, there stood a friend to see,

While Husayn's eye falls only on the enemy.

'Ali. when you gave your life, your family was there beside,

But there on a desert plain far from daughter or sister Husayn dies.

For you the Faithful Spirit, Gabriel, brought a shroud from heaven,

But Husayn fell there on the earth without ablution, without shroud!

'Ali, since Husayn in the last hour took your head on his lap to lie,

As kindness in return, then, lay his head on your lap 'til he dies. [15](#)

As an example of modern Arabic elegy in the traditional style, here is a piece from the great Lebanese Shi'i scholar Muhsin al-Amin al-'Amili, taken from a collection of elegies he has made of his own and others' poems. Al-Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin died only recently; it should be mentioned that he was active not only in Shi'i scholarship and especially biography, but also in Sunn'i – Shi'i taqrib or rapprochement. This *qasida*, in a lightweight meter and a simple style, was composed in 1353/1934–5 while the author was travelling in Iraq and Iran, and it might not be too much to see some allusions to the political situation of those areas in certain lines. Al-Sayyid al-Amin says:

O Karbala', you have brought upon us great sorrow;

You have excited sadness and grief.

Now the eye must let its tears flow

To water the grave of one who died thirsty in al-Taff.

Glory, O Abu Fadl, brother of Husayn, for your ways have become

A lesson to the courageous; an example to the brave.

Your way, yes *this* is the way of brothers

(May the one not live who betrays his brother!)

Glory to you, O tribe of Hashim, for you offered your lives freely

And your lives were sacrifice for the religion of God.

On that day you bought glory dearly:

Your precious lives were the price of glory!

You gave your lives for little for the sake of the religion of Mustafa, and by this

The measure of your lives is become more precious still – and who can equal your deeds after this?

You left your family and your children, despite your love for them;

And you exchanged them for the maidens and the youths of Paradise.

Though kings set on their heads crowns of gold,

Yet it is glory which you wear as your crown.

No sword or spear is truly unsheathed, after you;

No, after your deeds, no weapon has found a hand worthy!

Glory itself submitted to your loftiness, it dared not come near;

And others never attained your station: they did not even approach it.

In excellence all mankind is below you, without exception,

And they who called you low, have ended in shame. [16](#)

Elegy for Husayn continues in Arabic in popular or dialect form as well, proof of the power of the martyr to enter into and affect the life of the common people. The popular strophic form in Lebanese dialect known as *zajal* is used for many subjects, including political and nationalistic themes. Most villages (Muslim and non-Muslim) have their own *zajal* poet. A collection of some *zajal* compositions on the subject of the martyrdom of Husayn has been made by the Shi'i publishing house 'Irfan', but unfortunately I was unable to get the use of the book for this essay. Instead I offer this freely translated part of a piece by the Iraqi folk poet 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Umawi, entitled 'The Revolution of Husayn'. This modern folk poetry is particularly moving in its simplicity (sometimes naivety), and its closeness to the concerns of everyday and political life. As folk poetry often does, it has a great topicality. The poet says:

The revolution you made is holy, O Husayn,

Illuminating political thought, O Husayn;

Through it mankind is liberated;

Through it the earth is illuminated.

O Husayn, religion is a pearl, O Husayn

A precious pearl, and you protect it well, O Husayn.

All men honest and men of good will follow your way

Each philosopher is fascinated by your mysteries;

Even Jesus the Christ spoke of you.

And we are proud of our allegiance to you, O Husayn.

And famous Christian writers have recorded

The glory of your days and of your life, O Husayn.

Your uprising is glory and nobility for Islam,
And the greatest school of religion, O Husayn!
O Husayn, all the stagnation, the apathy,
With which our society is afflicted, O Husayn,
Came from the laws of the Umayyads, those despots
It is that which has brought us low, O Husayn.
And when you saw corruption victorious
The law was brought to life again through your devotion,
The goals of the Qur'an were realized through your determination,
And your blood watered the garden of compassion ...
And we are in awe of your deeds, O Husayn,
Because of these Islam is spread
Spread as far as any modern advanced science.
Then after your partisans had all died,
You offered up the beloved of your heart.
And your heart shook to its very depths
From the perfidious arrow which pierced it, Husayn.
And when you saw the mutilated body of 'Abd Allah,
The tears of your love flowed forth, O Husayn
His death overcame you with grief.
And your heart burst forth with hears,
The word, once wide, seemed as of it had become narrow:
O Husayn, O Husayn![17](#)

[1.](#) bi-'l-rahm: also, 'as one related to you'.

[2.](#) Muhammad Jawad Maghniya, Adab al-Taff aw Shu'ara' al-Husayn (Beirut, 1388/1969), I, 61.

- [3.](#) Hibat al-Din al-Husayni al-Shahristani, *Nahdat al-Husayn* (Karbala, 1388/1969), p. 154.
- [4.](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 159–160
- [5.](#) The K. al-Ta'azi wa al-Marathi of Muhammad h. Yazid al-Mubarrad (d. 282) explains the meaning of ta'ziya and gives examples (ed. Muhammad al-Dibaji [Damascus, 1396/1976], pp. 4ff).
- [6.](#) Waddah Sharara, *Transformations d'une manifestation religieuse dans un village du Liban-Sud* (Beirut, 1968), pp. 43ff, As to the Arab Ashura representation or ta'ziya, it seems that it has until now received too little attention. It may be that the actual dramatic form owes much to Iranian, and largely Safavid, origins, for instance, it is received knowledge among the inhabitants of the chiefly Shi'i town of Nabatiya in South Lebanon that it was Iranian immigrants at the beginning of the century who gave the ta'ziya there (the mere playing of which recently caused the occupying forces to fire on the participants) its present form. However, since the commemorative session itself began, of course, as an Arabic tradition, it would seem worthwhile to examine Arabic language ta'ziya separately for Arabic antecedents to the Persian.
- [7.](#) *Adab al-Taff*, I, 214
- [8.](#) Dhabih Allah Safa, *Tarikh-i Adabiyat dar Iran* (Tehran, 2536), II, 195.
- [9.](#) *Adab al-Taff*, I, 217.
- [10.](#) Hadiqat al-Haqiqa ed. Mudarrisi Razavi (Tehran, 1950), pp. 270 271.
- [11.](#) *Adab al-Taff*, II, 206–208.
- [12.](#) The cypress in Persian poetry is thought of metaphorically as a possessor of fair stature. Here the tall-standing and erect cypress is brought down below the ground, and is also in contrast to the sky, bent over in sorrow (the sky is thought of as an arc or dome).
- [13.](#) Or: 'the spear of the son of mans, apparently implying the guilt of all humankind. Sinan b. Anos al-Nakhi, according to some accounts, was the murderer of Husayn.
- [14.](#) *Divan-i Muhtasham*, ed. M. Gurgani (Tehran, 1344/ 1965), pp. 299–300.
- [15.](#) *Divan-i Ansari*, ed. A. Usuli (Qum, 1342/1963), pp. 343–344.
- [16.](#) *Al-Durr al-Nadid fi Marathi al-Sibt al-Shahid* (Karbala', n.d.), pp. 339–340.
- [17.](#) Anatoly Kova;enko, *Le Martyre de Husayn dans la poesie populaire d'Iraq* (Geneve, 1979), pp. 220–222

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