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Source: *Oriens*, Vol. 20 (1967), pp. 1-14
Published by: BRILL
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1580395
Accessed: 01/07/2013 02:41

LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

by

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Not the least significant aspect of a world religion is its role as an intellectual and emotional *lingua franca*, a storehouse of symbols, images, and turns of phrase that make possible communication across historical traditions and barriers of language, and permit effective abbreviation of complex contents. Thus it clears the way for philosophical and literary self-statement by the religious community's constituent societies, a self-statement that is true to their individual genius and communicable throughout the *umma*. Christianity, for the most part in Europe and the Americas, and Islam, for the most part in Asia and Africa, have bestowed on their adherents such "languages," comprehensive far beyond the areas of theology and ethics and whatever else the direct concerns of founder, *ṣaḥāba*, and *salaf* may have been. It is true that those languages are very largely borrowed from, or in some cases, grafted on, the heritage of the converted; but this very interdependence of continuity and innovation has contributed to raising those systems of feeling, thinking and living into representative vehicles of articulation and to assisting, as in our own time, the self-realization of as widely diverse nations as the Portuguese and the Poles within Christianity, and the nations of Arab and of Persian tongue within Islam. Islam as the common framework and property, *le génie arabe* and *le génie iranien* as creators, sustainers, and renewers of both the pre-Islamic tradition and the achievements within Islam—this is, in the most general terms, the existential situation within which not only the Arab and the Persian, but also the Turk and the medieval Andalusian, made their imperishable contribution to their own societies, to the *umma Muḥammadiyya*, to the civilized world.

It would be erroneous to maintain that this double location of their work had escaped the best minds of medieval Islam; an Avicenna, a Bīrūnī, an ʿAlī Shīr Navāʾī, even a Ḍiyāʾ ad-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, an Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and long before them a Jāḥiẓ, lent expression to their sense

of cultural differentiation within the *umma*; it remains, nevertheless, beyond dispute that the sensibility for this very differentiation, for this diversity within unity, grows ever keener as we move toward our own day. For the observer, whether he belongs within or remains without the larger universe of the *umma*, this coexistence and interaction of the national and the universal has frequently proven a source of misunderstanding by providing a strong temptation, supported by that community of word and image, of scriptural and historical reference, to overlook or underplay the local, the non-Muslim within the Islamic, and besides, to confuse the time-bound with the timeless. To identify the factors that make for such distortion would seem an inescapable precondition for an adequate determination, and hence an adequate evaluation, of the elements that constitute such intricate and multifaceted creations as, for example, Iranian literature in Persia's Muslim period.

Let me restate task and approach on a more general level. Due largely to the (often-unspoken) self-view of the particular phase of Islamic civilization under consideration—analytical confusion is apt to occur on two levels whose differentia is in their distance from the Islamic origins. On the more remote level the blurring of the distinction between the specifically Muslim traits and those considered such because of their integration into the cultural structure in a Muslim key may, with regard to literature, be presented under four heads.

1. Peculiarities resulting from the social situation of literature and the littérateur are assumed inherent in "Islam".

Thus the absence of a public whose purchasing power will, through the requisite legal provisions, support the writer financially has made the author in classical and postclassical Islam dependent on patronage, private or princely. Hence some of the verbal excesses in praise and lampoon, the high-flown prefaces, the marginality of the writer's position which he must seek to bolster by threat and blackmail, in short the ambiguity of his posture as an importunate tool and a dispenser of prestige. The obsession with hyperbole, the fulsomeness which, in certain courtly milieus, tends to thicken as the centuries pass by, and an unmistakable timidity, too, in searching out or launching new themes—they are no doubt characteristic of much of Arab Muslim, Persian Muslim, and other Muslim poetry, but they are in no sense an inevitable result of Islam as a system of beliefs or precepts. It is the atmosphere of the particular coterie from which the writer seeks his support that determines his tone. Where the French or the English patron of the seventeenth century rewards plays, novels, and philosophical and political treatises, the Persian-speaking ruler or minister of the eleventh or twelfth century

will encourage epical poems of a distinctive hue, and the Arab caliph of the ninth century will favor one genre of lyrics and discourage another, as Hārūn ar-Rashīd is reported to have punished Abū l-ʿAtāhiya (d. 828) for transferring his inspiration from convivial to ascetic songs. If a connection between those stylistic features and Islam can be established at all it is at more than one remove: the sense of what will be acceptable in literature on the one hand, and the concept of the ideal prince or patron on the other have to some extent been moulded by ideas and sentiments traceable to ideas and sentiments implied in, or derived from, the Muslim message and its sociocultural armour.

2. Traits connected with the local literary tradition or other historical circumstances are apprehended as Islamic.

In form and content a number of traits carry through the poetry of all the "Islamic" literatures: the preponderance of the rhyme, certain prosodic assumptions, dedication to maintaining the integrity of the genre, and acquiescence in loose composition with its counterpart, an emphasis on the elaboration of the individual verse or component part. In the Arabic-speaking areas there is also a predilection for the small form which, in lengthy works, asserts itself by studied distractions from the main theme. Even in the Persian-language area, where large-scale compositions on a unified plan are frequent, the superabundance of illustrative anecdote will occasionally almost nullify the exigencies of the framework, although it remains true that the Persian author may operate on a longer span of attention than the Arab. A striking illustration is the diffusion of the stereotype of the *qaṣīda* opening, appropriate though conventionalized in Bedouin lyrics, throughout Arab-Muslim and Persian-Muslim poetry which, like the stability of content sequence and imagery, tends to blot out individual differences. To connect it with the Muslim strand of Islamic civilization would, however, be justified only to the extent that it could be proven that the undeniable traditionalism and the extreme selectiveness in the admission of new motifs as well as the disregard for compositional unity are facets of Muslim religious traditionalism, of Muslim reluctance to approve of innovation, and of the decomposition by religious law of the totality of the believers' lives in discrete and separately regulated acts and actions. But even assuming this or a similar connection could be definitely established, the traits under consideration would be clearly identifiable as contributions to Muslim (or Islamic) mentality and hence literature by the pre-Islamic tradition of the Arabian Peninsula. Persian history and historical legend have been less securely lodged in the later Muslim context whereas parts of Persia's institutional heritage and, more strikingly still, her traditional

ideas of rulership and attitudes toward power have become incorporated in almost every literary statement of political theory (especially from the eleventh century onward) purporting to render explicit the correct Muslim organization of the community and its functionaries. Similarly, the reinterpretation, in law and literature, of the Byzantine market inspector, *ṣāḥib as-sūq*, as the upholder of a specifically Muslim morality, authorized by the Holy Book itself, which bids the faithful enjoin the good and prevent the bad, has rendered possible the continuance of a large variety of local customs and historical memories. And yet it should be clear that in much of the *Fürstenspiegel* literature the material with which the author works antedates Islam, that the literary process as such is in no sense Muslim, and that, in fact, the contribution of the author lies precisely in Islamizing the non-Muslim subject matter with the help of non-Muslim forms. The Persian epic *qua* epic is as little Muslim as the Arab ode *qua* ode. Brought to bear on Muslim mysticism the Persian form will be Islamicized as will the Arab ode when, as in the *Burda* of Būṣīrī (d. 1294), it is used to sing the glories of the Prophet.

3. Traits exhibited by a particular phase, in place and time, of Islamic civilization are accepted as Muslim, or Islamic, *per se*.

The didactic poem will serve as illustration. The high and declining Middle Ages witness a large number of metrical summations of the basic content of various sciences such as grammar and law. The *rajaz*, an elastic iambic verse, proves a convenient prosodical instrument for this kind of mnemonic codification. On occasion, the *Lehrgedicht* intrudes into historiography; the ninth and tenth centuries each offer (at least) one "biography" of a ruler in poetical guise, and as late as the sixteenth century the skirmishes of Portuguese and Malabaris are narrated in this form. While it has become characteristic of Muslim scholars and poets to utilize the rhymed couplet for the presentation of learned matter this propensity can hardly be connected with a specifically "Islamic" motif. It is, rather, to be tied to a cultural situation in which the memory continues to play a significant part in the preservation and transmission of knowledge while at the same time a *Handbuchkultur* is in the making. Analogous phenomena from other civilizations, notably Indian, come readily to mind.

The nature of the competing scribal cultures within Islamic civilization, however, and the peculiar impulses that have, from the tenth century onward, led to the development of an "anthological" all-round education in certain strata of Islamic society (Christians and Jews are as much promotors and victims of the movement as the Muslims themselves)—these are very nearly the outgrowth of truly Muslim assumptions and

needs. Once it is understood that, in the classical period at least, there obtained, in high society, a measure of coalescence, or overlap, of the *formation* of the lawyer-theologian, or *faqīh*, and the administrator-littérateur, or *kātib*—with a number of judges excelling as writers and every official commanding a generous minimum of scriptural and traditional information—the intellectual situation of those centuries permits the isolation of the two strands as independent in their functional and historical genesis. Rendering explicit and defending the faith, transferring revealed principle and directive into the community's life motivated the Arab sciences (and the literature developing them); the requirements of government including the need for etiquette and elegance in word and mental bearing brought to the fore *adab*, the polished, "open-ended," rather thinly spread encyclopaedic knowledge of the stylish expert (and wit). With the gradual separation of state and community the two types of *Bildung* drew apart. The playful, uncommitted virtuoso of light but artful verse and chiseled diplomatic prose and the guardian of the community's integrity with his concise yet circumstantial legal phraseology and the cumbersome apparatus of argument and authoritative evidence remained at one only in that cultivation of language to which, for different reasons, they had always been wedded. The *ʿālim*, compelled to penetrate the innermost depths of Koran and prophetic Tradition, could not avoid the study and hence the influence of pre-Islamic poetry, its grammar, lexicography and prosody, which appeared to hold the key to philological comprehension of Revelation and the texts supporting it. The *adīb*, addict to a culture of form and esprit, found in language the mainspring and the chief instrument of his success. Though the *ʿālim* would perhaps not without reason complain of the *kātib*'s half-hearted dedication to religious life and letters, the shared "classicistic" outlook on language and literature and the ubiquitousness of the Koranic text guaranteed a measure of intellectual kinship which, on Arabic-speaking soil, even the incomparably greater readiness of the *adīb* to assimilate Iranian matter in style and writings would not completely deny. Functionally, but not of course in the source and content of its *formation*, the intelligentsia of today continues the "secular" tradition of the *kātib*; once again, it is the Book and the hold of the classical language with its promise of supernational unity that maintains a slender yet compelling tie between the two "scribal castes" of our time.

4. Traits adapted or adopted into Islamic civilization are viewed as originally Islamic.

In all monotheistic religions the ethical orientation imposes on the believer and on the believing community the task of incessant self-

improvement, not to say sanctification. The command to reform is part and parcel of the doctrinal message. Method and goal of this reform are set. The structure of the community within which the individual is bidden to attain moral and credal perfection is seen decreed by Revelation and upheld by "apostolic tradition." In other words, conservatism on the institutional level comes to be considered a precondition of salutary change on the personal level. Only in this limited sense would it be justified to identify the unmistakable aversion to motivic (as opposed to verbal or variational) originality which is, for most of the Middle Ages, the prevailing attitude toward literary creativeness with an attitude inherent in the Muslim message. The authority of the classical, that is, the pre-Islamic, language and the increasingly recognized aesthetic perfection of the Koran were no doubt powerful allies of a formal and motivic conservatism which is found in many early literatures, but which is also characteristic for the maintenance of the genres throughout antiquity. The self-assurance of the cultural community in its prime and its avidity to complete its outreach led in the ninth and tenth centuries to an outburst of "originality" in literature which expressed itself in programmatic statements as well as in alterations of inherited forms, the introduction of untried themes and motifs, and a bold if somewhat precious imagery intellectualized by a rapidly developing theory of tropes and figures. The pervasive crisis of Sunni Islam which marks the tenth and the first half of the eleventh century on all "fronts"—the economic and social as much as the political and theological—crushes the spirit of enterprise. Consolidated Sunnism is extremely, perhaps excessively, tradition conscious; the best intellectual forces are drawn away from the free play of search and experimentation to community reconstruction through the elaboration of theology and law and their revivification through popular, largely mysticizing religiosity. From 1100 it is legitimate to view intellectual and artistic conservatism as in tune with Islam—as long as it is understood that what is intended is Islam as it had become by that time and not a disembodied and reified Islam supposedly reflecting the milieu of Medina in the Prophet's day, a confusion that the apologists of the twelfth as well as of the twentieth century are prepared to promote.

Were it not that the history of Arabic poetry and literary criticism alone imposes those caveats, a glance on one of the great periods of all literature should prevent a gratuitous identification. Did not La Bruyère despair of the possibility of originality ("Tout est dit et l'on vient trop tard" [*Des ouvrages de l'esprit*, I]) at a time when originality asserted itself most powerfully and inspired his contemporary La Motte (*Discours*

sur la poésie, 1707) to exclaim "Qu'on ne me dise pas qu'il n'y a plus de pensées nouvelles . . ."? Viewpoints and moods of individual writers, however great, or of coteries, or even of the public of a given generation will only rarely allow of being connected with the religious *Urgrund* of their civilization. Is it Islam or Christianity or neither that made the eighteenth century, but also the Muslims of the later Middle Ages, adopt the standpoint that to appropriate common property in an individual manner will rate as *invention*? Or is it to be ascribed to the paganism of the ancient *rhetors* whose position both Arabs and French revived? [1]

Analysis of the literature as of any cultural manifestation produced within early and earliest Islam faces the task of separating the genuinely Muslim elements from the Arab heritage. In fact, to speak of the Arab heritage is to understate and distort the part of the Arab tradition which in reality, as well as in the minds of the Prophet and the faithful of the first hour, provided not merely the vehicle of innovation but besides, in an ambivalence not restricted to that period, both the principal support and the principal antagonist of the new message. An Arab promulgating an Arab call every specific injunction of which was attuned to Arab institutions and idiosyncrasies; an Arab religion allowing the Arab tribes to coalesce and establish an Arab empire; an Arab language evicting Greek and Persian, Berber and Aramaic as the instrument of imperial communication; initial Islamization and the integrative factor for administrative, economic, and cultural elements absorbed, and growing in the process into one of the great intellectual resources of mankind, becoming independent of the political vicissitudes that after little more than a century removed Arab domination of the Muslim domain; the holiness and religious stability of the Muslim community linked to "Arabism" by the Book and the authoritative codifications of law and belief—there is, despite foreign influences on the *formation* of the Prophet and foreign contributions to content and mood of early Islam, and above all in spite of the personal contribution of Muḥammad, nothing in style and substance of the conquerors' preoccupations which could not have passed, and which did not pass, as Arab. No doubt the postulates of the new religion allowed for universalization, and no doubt, too, the number of non-Arab adherents rapidly outgrew those of the Arab. It has remained true, though, that any feature of Islam as a religion and Islam as a civilization which did attain effective acceptance throughout the Muslim domain has (if it did not originate in Arabian garb) been in some way

[1] Cf. in this context B. Munteano, "Des 'constantes' en littérature: Principes et structures rhétoriques," *Revue de littérature comparée*, XXXI (1957), 388-420, at p. 409.

Arabicized. The content of Islamic civilization as a whole has long since come to exceed horizon and scope of the *ʿurūba*; Iran and the Irano-Turkish and Irano-Indian culture areas have, in various sectors of cultural activity, surpassed what the Arab Muslim accomplished; yet universal validity within Islam retains its link with Arabism. Traditional forms of argument as much as systems of statecraft, the treatment of scientific matter as much as the technique of jurisprudence—all have had to be Arabicized to be freed from their original limitations in time and space; and to the community at least the distinction between Arabization and Islamization has always been tenuous.

Thus the pre-Islamic ode has penetrated Persian and indirectly Turkish, Urdu, Sindhi, and other literatures; as a form of artistic expression it is practically universal in classical Islam, however a-religious and local its origin. The epic narrative, on the other hand, at which the Persians (and those receiving their Islamic culture through them) excelled failed to enter the Arab bloodstream and thence to win "universality" within the *dār al-islām*. The same could be said of certain dramatic (or predramatic) genres, of the metonymic style of Persian (as against the metaphoric style of Arabic) poetry, and of the Persian *ghazal* as opposed to the Arab (*qaṣīda* and) *qiṭʿa*. There are also those instances where a feature of Arabic literature superseded the local tradition entirely as in the imposition of Arab prosody on Persian which, among other modifications, entailed the elimination of blank verse. Conversely, however, the adoption into Arab metrics of the Persian model of the (Arab meters) *mutaqārib* or *ramal* gave those meters universal range throughout the great literatures of Islamic civilization.

Nevertheless it would be totally erroneous simply to identify "Arabic" and "Islamic" (or "Muslim") traits even in Arabic literature. For one thing, certain characteristics of Arabic and the other Islamic literatures are shared with antiquity or the Western Middle Ages; they are therefore to be ascribed neither to the Arabs nor to Islam but inhere in cultural attitudes reaching past the borders of civilizations. To exemplify reference might be made to that peculiarity of medieval taste which E. de Bruyne has, with his eye on the Latin West, described by saying that "l'homme du moyen âge ne jouissait pas autant des thèmes que des variations, toutes en nuances et en subtilités, dans lesquelles les vieux lieux communs étaient représentés" [1]. It should, incidentally, be understood that this attitude makes itself felt beyond the confines of literature where it may have something to do with the commitment, the *engagement*, of the

[1] E. de Bruyne, *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale* (Bruges, 1946), II, 294; cf. H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* (Paris, 1959), I, 302.

period to a reality as a construct of verities to which time and again allegiance had to be professed. Of the greatest significance within Islamic civilization, but actually inseparable from any order that draws its living strength from a Book are the freedom with which meanings are assigned to a text and the apparent ease with which levels of interpretation are crossed and the systematized arbitrariness of *allegoresis* as a method of retaining touch with the Word. The continuity of the community under God can be maintained only by denying the historicity, that is, the confinement within the historical moment of revelation (or rather, of its "binding-ness" and validity). This is especially so when as in Islam the community must justify its own level of complexity from a document reflecting, or attuned to a simpler and in fact outgrown phase of civilization.

A comparison of pre-Islamic and Islamic literature in Arabic would seem to allow identification of certain ideas and attitudes regarding literary expression which were implicit in the original Muslim message, or at any rate accompanied it or came to the fore in its wake. It is such traits, and such traits alone, all of them differing from the pre-Islamic tradition in essence or more rarely in emphasis, which may, in the analysis of the position of literature within Islamic civilization, be designated as Islamic in the full sense of the word.

Illustrations may draw on widely separated aspects of literary creation:

1. The basic factor is the relation to language and the word as such. To say that the Word as the instrument of creation, that Arabic as the tongue of the angels and of the earthly Paradise are, or are part of, the divine would not sufficiently suggest the particularly Muslim attitude; nor would recalling the orthodox dogma of the revealed word as uncreate and hence coeval with the Lord Himself set forth the Muslim attitude in its kinship and contrast with that of the other scripturaries, Jews and Christians. The observation may be in order that the aesthetic aspects of Scripture as the supreme monument of the mother tongue never could play a major part in early Christian feeling and that centuries before Muḥammad arose the Jews had made their peace with a bilingualism of the sacred and the profane. The Arab world, on the other hand, has not done so to this day. As with the Marxist, the thought world and action of the proletariat (conditioned though they are by a definite and particular historical situation) lead, by a fortunate coincidence, to an overcoming of class confinement and historicity, so with the Muslim the language of the Koran coincides with the apex of the development of the Arabic tongue. Contrary to current sentiment the acceptance of the aesthetic uniqueness

of the Koran was rather slow. The great Juwainī (d. 1085) still insists in his *ʿAqīda niẓāmiyya* that only quibbling could produce the conclusion that the great Arab poets were stylistically inferior to the Holy Book and he mentions specifically representatives of the postclassical Umayyad era such as Nābigha Jaʿdī and Aʿshà Bāhila together with the classical Imruʾulqais as being on the same aesthetic level with revelation [1]. To speak of the development of the Arabic tongue may in our context be somewhat out of place. For there is no realization that the speech of the Koran is grafted on a previous phase of Arab expression; the language of the great heathen poets partakes somehow of the perfection of the language of the Book and has even received retroactively a measure of sacredness. The coming into the world of Islam is the summit of history: its inseparable, its necessary connection with this moment has lifted the Arabic language for all times out of the sphere of the profane making it the "trait d'union entre l'homme et son Seigneur." [2] The hour when men communicated in the tongue of God—if ever there was such an hour; for the Koran exhibits many traits of a literary language—passed soon; but the sacralizing power of the divine speech grew and participation in it was a tangible aspect of membership in His best community. The steeper the gulf between the vernacular of the day and the classical model the greater would the authority of the model become, the greater its aesthetic domination, the greater the sensibility to its fascination, the willingness to surrender to its charm, to yield self-expression in the vernacular to mastery of the language of the past. Its associative content grew in complexity as each passing generation deposited its religious experience between its syllables and the sparkling richness of its lexicographical potential came ever closer to activation albeit at the expense of that conceptual precision by which we seek to protect our thinking. Thus a certain "classicism"—the acceptance of a moral obligation to reproduce a model of past perfection—is built into Muslim civilization as is a certain temptation to caress the word rather than discipline it, to drift on the crest of language rather than subdue it and escape its intoxication.

2. In His Revelation God's primary concern is with Himself; the experience and realization of His omnipotence is to form, educate and save man through insight and obedience. Where man seems to act on his own initiative he does so on the level of appearances only; creativeness is God's alone who allows man to appropriate the preordained by assenting

[1] Trans. H. Klopfer, *Das Dogma des Imâm al-Ḥaramain al-Djuwainî und sein Werk al-ʿAqîdat an-niẓâmîya* (Cairo and Wiesbaden, 1958), pp. 88-91.

[2] R. Habachi, *Une philosophie pour notre temps* (Beirut, 1960), p. 131.

to it and thus acquiring responsibility for actions not of his devising.[1] The world is discontinuous; in every successive moment God recreates the universe changing the position of its constituent parts as He pleases, usually following His "custom" in maintaining what man interprets as cause and effect. But He is not bound by His own ordinances; this explains the "miracle" but precludes a "natural law." There is no room for secondary causes and hence for genuine human decision. Man obeys or disobeys; but disobedience is not an option for an autonomous order of values but merely the breach of a primordial, unilaterally imposed covenant, a rebellion without dignity and metaphysical objective. Where man's choice is unimportant it cannot become a literary theme. Human conflict is strangely absent from Muslim and especially Arab-Muslim literature. A drama has become possible only in Shī'ite Islam with its conception of Ḥusain's voluntary (though necessary) martyrdom and his fate as the *skandalon* which compels man to take sides for or against his *imām*, for or against his own salvation. Thus "standard" Islam has not known the drama nor the narrative depicting the conflicting claims on man of opposing moral laws; and its literature has refused to be concerned with conflicts that contrasting obligations toward his own fate in the Hereafter and toward his community on earth have imposed on many a hero of the faith: the tortured conscience of the judge-elect, of which history and anecdote have so much to tell, has never once been made the theme of literary treatment in our sense of the word. The unconcern with (or the nonacceptance of) development as contained in the pointillistic view of time must be registered as a contributory factor limiting the literary presentation of human conflict and its resolution.

3. The same applies unquestionably to an aspect of Islam's outlook on man which is perhaps best described with the Arabic word *ḥayā'* (literally: *pudor*), the discretion which the individual and his society are expected to observe when it comes to expressing and recapturing personal, private sentiment. The word itself is not Koranic but the injunction not to embarrass the fellow Muslim and not to cause embarrassment by baring one's own feelings is frequently encountered and the attitude has entered the style of religious as well as of "secular" behaviour. Confessional statements are allowable only *in spiritualibus*; the believer's progress on the mystical path, his search for religious truth may be disclosed. But

[1] Professor Abulais Siddiqi, University of Karachi, draws my attention to the fact that some recent comment interprets the Koranic phrase describing God as *aḥsan al-khāliqīn*, the best of creators, as an indication of (limited) creativity on the part of man (cf. Koran 23:14 and 37:125). (Oral communication of August 26, 1963).

even in this sector of experience one often wonders whether the relative monotony of the self-statements is attributable to the nature of the experience itself or to a stylization which the system of beliefs and the expectations of taste impose. Religio-philosophical self-statements have become admissible in poetry and prose; discussion of love, in poetry alone—a very few exceptions notwithstanding (among which the best and subtlest analysis of love in the Arabic tongue, *The Dove's Neckring* by the Spanish jurist and heresiologist, Ibn Ḥazm [d. 1064]). It is impossible not to link the comparative paleness or sameness of lyrical poetry and of descriptions of human sentiment and character with the deep-seated inhibition that protects the believer as it does the person *per se* from his own as from others' indelicacy. (The obscenities so frequent in satire and erotic verse do not contradict this diagnosis; they merely reflect a different set of clichés and, for the most part, involve no claim to literal veracity.) If to our mind this attitude bespeaks a certain impoverishment of literary creation and, particularly, looms as an obstacle to a fuller representation of man, the stricture may be justified, but only from the double point of view which has been ours since the seventeenth century—that literature is in the service of self-expression and that man's task is the progressive understanding of man.

4. Pre-Islamic poetry is almost completely without any mythological reference; in fact, it is only scant traces of star myths that can be assumed as known in the last centuries of the pagan period. Islam has not added any mythological element. The nearest kin to a mythology, the hagiographic image of the Prophet, was evolved without affecting the belles lettres of the classical Islamic age to any significant extent unless one wishes to identify the biography of Muḥammad written by Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767) and edited by Ibn Hishām (d. 834) as "literature" which would hardly be in accordance with the authors' intent. Only some centuries later could one argue that lives of the saints, the life of the caliph ʿAlī, and the life of the Prophet as it appears in popular consciousness exhibit "mythological" traits and are allowed to enter literature—although hardly ever in a form that would qualify them as "standard" writing. It must be remembered that myth will frequently serve as a substitute for history either by permitting it to trail off into the past and connect recorded man with his divine ancestors or other point of origin, or by allowing the present to be understood and accepted as a repetition or a *décalque* of the ancestors' deeds. Islam, however, is by the nature of its message oriented to history. Prophets as warners have been sent frequently; but each prophetic episode was a unique event whatever the similarity, or even identity, of their message. Nothing could be less

compatible with (Sunnite) Islam than any concept of an eternal return. The world's course is a single occurrence; mankind as individual man walks the earth just once. The brief moment of the individual's existence is of supreme importance as a perpetual *krisis*, and the eternal fate of mankind is being decided in the anguishingly short space of some seven thousand years. The coming of the Prophet is the climax of history—an unrepeatable event that together with the appearance of his harbingers and the reaction of men to his call gives its rhythm to the sequence of events. A keen sense of man's historicity underlies the depersonalizing resignation to transitoriness and futility, and secures the valuation of life by setting it against an eschatological catastrophe. Held against the Greeks the classical (Sunnite) Muslim had less concern with character, much less with interpretative myth, and one may remain in doubt whether he attained to the methodological precision of a Thucydides or a Polybios; but his realization of being in history, of living by a tradition that needed to be followed through time to its concrete (super-) human source and transmitted onward to the sequence of generations that would make visible the passing of what years remained to the coming of the end, was never obscured by cyclical speculations. He was not immune to anachronism; in fact, his knowledge that there was change was devoid of that imagination that could preserve or would reconstruct the past as it was or might have been; but he was haunted by history and by the obligation to maintain and spread the faith and widen the community of the faithful against the inroads of that time the dangerous opaqueness and unpredictability of which had darkened the days of his heathen forebears and which its transformation to God's predestination had barely tamed.

There is no branch of Muslim literature in which this obsession with time and the end has not made itself felt.

5. I have left to the last that which, though obvious, needs to be stated, to wit, the incalculable influence of the Koran on Arabic and through it on literature in all languages spoken by Muslims. There is no need to expatiate on the theme that in prose even more than in poetry ideas and phraseology of the Holy Book have left an indelible mark. Koranic sayings, allusions to diction and content of Revelation, developments of its imagery and doctrine are to be encountered with increasing frequency as the centuries move by. The influence of the Book, however, is not confined to citations and echoes. More important than its verbal omnipresence is the fact that the presuppositions held in common with, and thus the possibility for an author to expect understanding from, a Muslim audience are very largely based on that audience's permeation with

Koranic reminiscences. Communication within the *dār al-islām* has hinged to a large extent on a shared familiarity with the Koranic text; together with a shared familiarity with (the style of) prophetic Tradition or *ḥadīth* and with a modicum of the Law, the Koran provides that "communauté des évidences" [1] that makes the concept of a Muslim literature —as opposed to literature within an Islamic context—viable or even possible. The relative simplicity of the Koranic diction, not to be confused with easy comprehensibility, and the conviction of a thousand years of the Book's aesthetic uniqueness and inimitability have established it as one of the foundation stones of any and all "Muslim" literatures. Except for the relatively small number of narrative motifs it contains its thematic influence would equal that of the Bible.

Scholarly analysis sets out to describe but never without the half-admitted intent to explain as well. When confronted with a theme like ours, ambition is limited to tracing the preliminary map of a conceptual maze. One must hope that an explanation is implied or brought closer. But it is well to remember the words written by A. A. Cournot in 1872: "L'art d'expliquer, comme l'art de négocier, n'est souvent que l'art de transposer les difficultés . . . On dirait qu'il y a dans certaines choses un fonds d'obscurité que les combinaisons de l'intelligence humaine ne peuvent ni supprimer ni amoindrir, mais seulement répartir diversement". [2]

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[1] To use the expression proposed by R. Escarpit, *Sociologie de la littérature* (3d ed.; Paris, 1960), p. 103.

[2] *Considérations sur la marche des idées et des événements dans les temps modernes*; quoted by H. Peyre, *Les générations littéraires* (Paris, 1948), p. 83.