

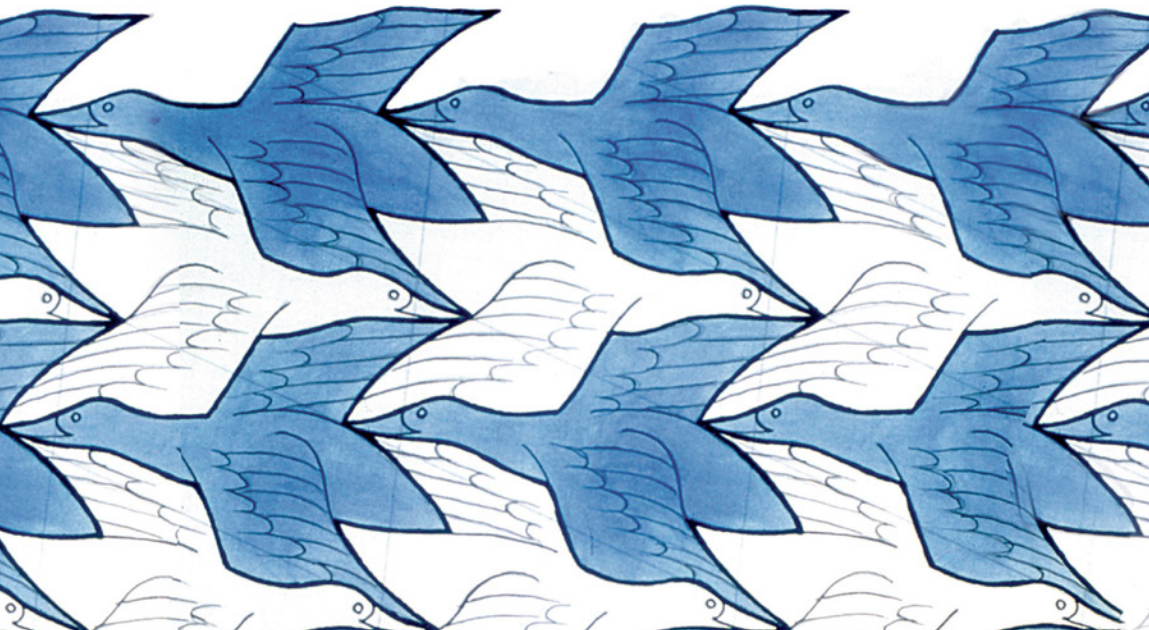
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THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

NAVID KERMANI

Between Quran & Kafka

West-Eastern Affinities



BETWEEN QURAN AND KAFKA

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West–Eastern Affinities

NAVID KERMANI

TRANSLATED BY TONY CRAWFORD

polity

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PREFACE

A Personal Note

After the speech I gave in the German parliament, which is appended at the end of this book, a friend of mine e-mailed me to say I had combined a poetic political correctness with the pathos of the socialist prophets in a tone, she wrote, that no one but I am capable of today – the same tone that the Jewish cosmopolitans of the nineteenth century had used in speaking of Lessing, Heine and the social idea of the prophets. ‘Of course they can no longer speak today (and, if they could, they would not be allowed to do so)’, my friend added, closing with the impassioned remark that I was – I will quote her again, although it will seem vain to do so in my own preface – ‘the most prodigious representative’ of the nineteenth-century Jewish cosmopolitans. ‘That is a mighty lineage you’re putting me in,’ I replied to my friend, ‘but to take up the idea you raise of representation of advocacy, there is probably something to it after all: what needs to be done in Germany is to fill, to the extent possible, with our limited means, experience and words, the space that became so vacant in the twentieth century.’

Since then, I have been mulling over our brief correspondence. Not that I would claim title to the inspiration, much less the superlative, that my friend had bestowed on me – she is not only a good friend but also, by her whole nature, an extraordinarily enthusiastic one, invariably exuberant in her sympathy, reliably overstated in her praise. But wasn’t my answer, hastily written and promptly sent, presumptuous? I affirmed the relation in which I had placed us – but who was I thinking of besides myself? – to the Jewish thinkers and writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the sense that I felt not an identity, a relationship, or even an equality with them, but a legacy, with the authority and the responsibility that arise from it.

Even before receiving my friend’s e-mail, I had noticed a pathos

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creeping into my texts at times, and even more into my public speeches, which not everyone immediately felt to be false; at times I had also noticed my audience's surprise when, without much hesitation, I connected academic or current political issues with fundamental human experiences and needs, with humanness itself, and even with the superhuman. I couldn't describe it more precisely if I wanted to; it is little more than a vague feeling that, if I were the reader and listener, I might not let another author or speaker get away so easily with what I sometimes permit myself, and what I ought to continue to permit myself, since it constitutes – for good or ill – the essence of what I have to say. That pathos is all the more remarkable since, in day-to-day life and in encounters with other people – even the people I love – I often find myself all too sober, unemotional; I seldom mention in private the primal needs and experiences that I speak of in public – too seldom, according to the occasional reproaches of the people I love. Voluntarily or not, in daily life I seem to restrain the emotionality and urgency that sometimes surprises me in my own essays and speeches. Why is that, I wondered again, and what is the source of the tone my friend was referring to, a tone that no doubt has something to do with the metaphysical orientation of my reflections?

As distasteful as I find all those interpretations that pin an author to the culture of his ancestors, for lack of a better explanation I might at one time have linked that emotionality and urgency to my Middle Eastern background. But nowadays I believe – and my friend's e-mail points in precisely this direction, which is why I only qualified her comparison rather than rejecting it outright – my tone has a different source, a thoroughly German one. I grew up with German literature and the history of German thought – that much is true – yet only sporadically with those of the present. The lineage I followed ends with the Second World War, or at the latest with the Frankfurt School, which of course was still identified in relation to the war. The tone that my friend referred to – an unusually lofty, you might say preachy, to some ears perhaps importunately existential tone in which I sometimes talk about world affairs – does it not have, rather, the sound of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than of some Middle Eastern ancestry? I know of no contemporary Persian or Arab author who speaks or writes that way, but of a great many German-language authors, down to Stefan Zweig, Walter Benjamin and Thomas Mann, who without a doubt wrote more elegantly, thought more profoundly, lived more vulnerably, but demonstrated the necessity of universal political ideals (whose very universality should perhaps worry us after all) by poetically translating them into concrete terms. Yes, I place Thomas Mann in this line, and

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I could just as well have named Lessing or Goethe, because I am concerned here not with a specifically Jewish impetus in German literature but with a cosmopolitanism that the Jewish authors merely emphasized more often than other Germans. As a young reader I not only absorbed their ideals but evidently adopted, too, some of the pathos that my friend associated with the prophets, hence with the religious sphere.

To be sure, the religious references of my books and speeches often point to Islamic motifs and sources (but to the Bible almost as often), and the Muslim family I grew up in surely had its unconscious influence on me: my mother who veiled herself in a white chador for prayers, and only for prayers; my father who prostrated himself before God, even in the presence of my friends or at rest areas beside the motorway during long holiday drives; the perplexed looks of my friends or the other motorists. Those were experiences of foreignness, by all means, although not negative ones. None of my friends ever shunned me on account of my praying parents, and my experience of bilingualism was every bit as natural – although I learned this only many years later – as that of many other Germans up to the Second World War. In our house there was what you might indeed call a simple cosmopolitanism, one which, like that of the Jews, was rooted in religious tradition: in the quranic teaching that to each people a prophet is sent in that people's language – which is why I somehow imagined Jesus as a German, or at least associated him with Germany – and in the incessantly quoted sentence of the Prophet – who was somehow Persian to me, although actually an Arab – that the paths to God are as numerous as the breaths a man draws. While the child's concept of revelation may not have conformed to the consensus of Islamic studies, he was nonetheless greatly relieved that his friends would still be able to enter Paradise, even though their parents did not prostrate themselves before God at motorway service stations, and that at the Last Judgement it was good deeds that would count, not the exact wording of the profession of faith.

The deepest impressions on my disposition, as on any other, are those made by the images, actions and words of my early childhood. But is that why I became an Orientalist and a writer? My literary awakening was the result of the books I read, and those were, in my formative years of discovery and study, the German literature and ideas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And that German literature is not just any literature: it has specific traits, and up to the middle of the twentieth century it was steeped more than any other in transcendental matters and biblical motifs – not only God and Jesus but also death and resurrection, rapture and sacrifice; steeped in suffering both as a social and, almost to a greater extent, as a religious incrimination; and steeped

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in an earnestness that is itself almost holy, a seriousness that no one could deride as heartily as certain Germans themselves, since arguing with oneself has always been rather a German pursuit. Heinrich Heine for one might have skewered my books:

A living German is already a sufficiently serious creature, but a *dead* German! A Frenchman has absolutely no idea how very serious we Germans are when dead; our faces then become much longer still, and the worms that dine off us wax melancholy if they look at us while eating.¹

The fact that the French and the English don't bother to translate a word such as *Weltschmerz* says a great deal about their perception of the Germans, but it very probably says something about the Germans too. For my part, I loved Büchner for the metaphysical desperation that he wrote into Danton, waiting in his cell for execution, and even in matters of ethics and morals in the strict sense – that is, the issues that are proper to religion – I learned more from Adorno's *Minima Moralia* than from Muhammad.

While a remarkable number of French, English-speaking and Scandinavian authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries described social conditions or related psychological states with an utterly incredible realism, the best-known German poets always directed their gaze higher – the growing vacancy of Heaven notwithstanding. The Jewish cosmopolitan Heine – to him at least I will appeal in this preface because he is the most sorely missed in the rest of the book – Heine himself expressed that gaze in his inimitable way in contrasting the materialism that had come to dominate France with German philosophy, which explains all matter as just a modification of spirit (when it admits the existence of matter at all): 'It seemed almost as if, across the Rhine, the spirit sought revenge for the insult done it on this side.'² Contrary to Heine's prediction, however, Germany's metaphysical grounding did not dissolve until the mid-twentieth century, when the totalitarian ideology of Nazism seemed to have discredited all overarching projects and all concepts of the collective. Broadly, German post-war literature refers demonstratively to the individual in society; it sees the human being more as a social than as an ontological entity. That was and is magnificent in many instances, and I am an admirer of it. But it was not what set me on my path.

'Dry with thirst, oh let my tongue cleave
To my palate – let my right hand
Wither off, if I forget thee
Ever, O Jerusalem –'

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Heine begins his poem 'Jehuda ben Halevy' with an allusion to the archetypal song of the Jewish people's exile, Psalm 137, verse 6. Heine's engagement with the Andalusian philosopher and poet ben Halevy is the most important signpost of his – not *return*; we cannot call it that, for Heine had not grown up religious; he seemed to be a child of the Enlightenment through and through – of his connection to the Jewish tradition, a connection by a writer formally converted to Protestantism; a connection which colours all of his late works and, at the same time, is a turn towards God the Creator of the Hebrew Bible.

'By the Babylonian waters
There we sat and wept – our harps were
Hung upon the weeping willow . . .'
That old song – do you still know it?

The second part of the poem also begins with a quotation from Psalm 137 – the first two verses – before comparing the poet's Jewish origins with a kettle that has long been boiling inside him, a thousand years long: a black sorrow!

That old tune – do you still know it? –
How it starts with elegiac
Whining, humming like a kettle
That is seething on the hearth?
Long has it been seething in me –
For a thousand years. Black sorrow!
And my wounds are licked by time
Just as Job's dog licked his boils.
Dog, I thank you for your spittle,
But its coolness merely soothes me –
Only death can really heal me,
But, alas, I am immortal!³

There is nothing cheerful about this – all right, we'll call it a return; it is almost two horrifying centuries, if not light years, away from the bright colours of today's migration literature. Heine bringing the Jews into his poetry is like Aeneas carrying his invalid father out of the burning city – yet with the twist that Heine himself had to fall deathly ill before his ancestors' faith appeared plausible to him. In his first public expression of his 'great transformation', a response in the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* to a report on his illness, Heine wrote:

Very often, especially during severe convulsions of the vertebral column, a doubt comes over me whether man is indeed a two-legged god, as the late Professor Hegel assured me in Berlin twenty-five years ago. In May

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of last year I had to take to my bed, and I have never risen from it since. In the meanwhile I confess that a great revolution has taken place in me. I am no longer a godlike biped; I am no longer 'the freest German since Goethe,' as Ruge called me in better days; I am no longer the Great Pagan No. II, who was likened to the vine-crowned Bacchus, while men called my colleague No. I the Grand-ducal Jupiter of Weimar; I am no longer a comfortably stout Hellene, rejoicing in life, gayly looking down with a smile on the serious Nazarenes; I am now only a poor, dying Jew, a wasted figure of woe, a wretched being!⁴

As I reflected further on my brief correspondence with my friend, the question became more and more detached from my own writings: weren't the cosmopolitans she was referring to themselves merely representatives? They, or perhaps their parents, had left the ancestral Jewish milieu, the ghetto, and had attained both a high degree of emancipation and a higher position in society, at least in their own literary and academic circles. But if we remember that, as recently as Ludwig Börne's childhood in late eighteenth-century Frankfurt, even the oldest and most respected Jews had to step off the pavement and bow deeply before an approaching Christian, regardless of his age and standing – even before Christian children and beggars – then we can form some idea of the images, sensations and words that made the deepest impression on their minds. And Heinrich Heine, who, as the nephew of a wealthy banker, had experienced only comparatively subtle forms of discrimination, was always conscious of his background. Addressing a friend in the summer of 1850, he said:

A strange people – for thousands of years constantly beaten, constantly crying, constantly suffering, perpetually forgotten by God yet still cleaving to him, more tenaciously and loyally than any other people in the whole world! If martyrdom, patience and loyalty, endurance in calamity, if all this is ennobling, then these people are nobler than a lot of others. The history of the Middle Ages . . . shows us not a single year that is not marked for the Jews by tortures, autos-da-fé, beheadings, extortions, massacres. The Jews suffered more from the followers of Christ . . . than ever under the most brutal and primitive Poles and Hungarians, Bedouins, Iazyges and Mongols! Oh, how lovely is the religion of love! You probably know that in Rome, the Metropolis of the Faith, for two hundred years . . . the Jews were forced to run races on the last day of the Carnival, naked, in a loin-cloth, for the delectation of the mob.⁵

Heine's experiences of foreignness, which unlike mine were decidedly negative, engendered more of course than a responsibility for his people's tradition and a mandate to represent his people. That Jewish scholars advanced the Enlightenment by their very resistance

to assimilation was in part an act of loyalty towards the Enlightenment itself, against the narrow Protestant version of it, against the practice of ascribing character to nations and against hypertrophic rationalism. Consequently, before the Holocaust, their pathos, if we bear in mind the word's literal sense of 'suffering, pain, disease', was rarely related only to the discrimination, the oppression, of their own people. It was the suffering, the pain, the disease of all creatures that drove them; it was their cry for redemption and justice that made them successors of the biblical prophets. None other than Heinrich Heine, in his disturbingly religious late poems, thematically and stylistically encompassing Orient and Occident – for all its injustice towards his earlier poems, there is a grain of truth in Karl Kraus's famous remark that Heine had to fall mortally ill to become a poet – none other than Heine introduced the perspective of the oppressed, the vanquished, in German literature. Yet he did not become the voice of his people in that field; rather, Heine testifies to the disasters of other, foreign peoples: the Moors and their last ruler, Boabdil of Granada, in 'King of the Moors'; the Mexican Indians who fell victim to the Spanish conquistador Cortez in 'Vitzliputzli'; and the sub-Saharan African slaves in 'The Slave Ship'. That means, to return to our own vantage point, that we do not have to have experienced comparable discrimination and oppression to become pathetic in the literal sense. In this respect, perhaps the Jewish cosmopolitans even advocated – as representatives of the Enlightenment project – the universal love of Jesus, secularized in the idea of equality. Then every poet would belong to the tribe of the Asra, 'they who perish when they love', as Heine says of the Sultan's beautiful daughter in his still more beautiful poem.⁶ In any case, however, along with the Judaeo-Arabic heritage of the Enlightenment, Heine and scholars of Judaism after him felt a duty to uncover its Islamic heritage as well. And it would be a good thing if Muslim authors today, whether religious or not, would reciprocate by standing up for Europe's Jewish.

Suddenly this book's title, *Between Quran and Kafka*, took on a new meaning. Of course we had chosen it for its alliteration, which the publisher thought was catchy. But, at the same time, the Quran and Kafka really did designate two poles between which my writing oscillates: revelation and literature; religious and aesthetic experience; the history of the Islamic and the German-speaking cultures; the Orient and the Occident. But the Quran in particular, and Kafka's works in particular, were important points of reference to me for many years: unique and exemplary, neither imitable nor surpassable. Reflecting on the representative role my friend had ascribed to me, I suddenly discovered that 'Kafka' could also stand for something entirely different from what

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I had had in mind and, likewise, that ‘Quran’ was not limited to the metonymic sense of ‘Islam’ or ‘the Orient’. Kafka can also mean a way of participating in German literature, upholding it all the more resolutely for being ever uncertain of one’s social and political affiliation. Kafka signifies something foreign, marginal, never quite belonging – something which is genuinely European and yet which transcends Europe. And the Quran – and the religion and the culture of Islam along with it – has a meaning, in my writing and my life, like that of the Torah to the Jewish thinkers and writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it means a forthright affirmation of difference, of the facet of permanent exile, if you will, in my situation; an insistence, religious or not, on the continuing relevance of metaphysical questions in a radically secularized environment; and it also means, all my contemporaneity notwithstanding, a loyalty to my parents’ and grandparents’ canon and, hence, to pre-modern, non-European narratives and modes of narration.

Yes, I say affirmation, I say insistence and loyalty, and I am talking about conscious, almost demonstrative choices. Not unlike Kafka, who grew up reading Goethe and Stifter and appropriated the Jewish traditions as a student might – only gradually, relatively late, and then very avidly – I partook of German literature as my own and was an especially motivated student of it, perhaps not in spite but because of my origins. Although the culture and religion of Islam, which were taken very seriously in the home in which I grew up, in my Iranian family – but the young seem to have a reflex that repels what is important to their parents, as we learn when we become parents in our turn, if not before – I appropriated Islam only gradually, relatively late, and then very avidly, as a student. If the title were taken as indicating a temporal sequence, meaning that I started at one pole and then arrived at the other, this book would have to be called the reverse – ‘Between Kafka and Quran’ – for, when I think about it, it was via Kafka that I arrived at the Quran. It was originally an aesthetic interest, formed by my literary and essentially German reading, that drew me to Islam, and onward from there to all aspects of religion. But then the title would not have ended on the long, open vowel, and that was more important to me than a biographical logic which no one would have noticed anyway.

The friend who sent me the e-mail is named Almut Shulamit Bruckstein Çoruh, and she is herself the model of a Jewish cosmopolitan. In her new book *House of Taswir* she records a gesture that is paradigmatic of the spokesman’s role. In old Herbert Stein’s bookstore in Jerusalem, Almut found the Quran translation by the rabbinical

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scholar Lazarus Goldschmidt in its first edition of 1916. It begins with the words:

AL-QURAN
that is
THE READING
The revelation of
Muhammad ibn Abdullah
the Prophet of God
put into writing by
Abdulkaaba Abdullah Abu-Bakr
translated by
Lazarus Goldschmidt
in the year 1334 of the Flight, or 1916
of the Incarnation.

‘The Flight’ is of course Muhammad’s emigration from Mecca, the beginning of the Islamic calendar. ‘The Incarnation’ denotes the Christian calendar, not simply by its pragmatic abbreviation ‘AD’, but by explicit reference to the substance of Christian dogma. What a beautiful, surprising gesture on the part of a great rabbi to use the two neighbouring calendars – simultaneously and with equal rank, while omitting that of his own tradition – and to take their theology seriously!⁷

Almut wrote to me that she, too, would elaborate on the idea in her e-mail, which had been just as hastily written as my answer. In the meantime, readers will judge for themselves whether there is anything to the notion of the writer as a representative, which would be an honour but much more a responsibility. Whatever the judgement may be, that role in Germany is appallingly vacant.

DON'T FOLLOW THE POETS!

The Quran and Poetry

Muhammad lived from 570 to 632. When he was about forty, his visions and, more importantly, his auditory revelations began, and they would continue until his death, a period of some twenty-two years. He recited the revelations to his compatriots, addressing his neighbours in Mecca directly, but at the same time speaking to all Arabs. He delivered to them ‘an Arabic recitation’, *qurʿānan ʿarabīyan*; the word ‘quran’ means nothing other than ‘recitation’ or ‘that which is to be recited’, and in the early surahs it is often used without the definite article – it had not yet become a proper noun. Over and over again, the Quran distinguishes between an ‘Arabic’ and a possible ‘foreign-language’ (*aʿjami*) revelation, one not addressed to the Arabs in particular; indeed, in the history of religion there is no other text that so often and so emphatically points out and reflects on the obvious fact that it is composed in a particular language. Thus in surah 41, verse 44:

And if we had made it
a non-Arabic *qurʿān* (*qurʿānan aʿjamīyan*),
They would have said,
‘Why are its verses not clear?
What does it mean: a
Non-Arabic *qurʿān*
And an Arab speaker!’

Thus Muhammad appeared as the ‘Arab’ speaker of a message that God sent to all peoples.

We have sent no Messenger
Save with the tongue of his people, that he might make all clear to
them.¹

To hold such a concept of revelation, the Arabs must have felt themselves to be a community, in contrast to other communities and peoples, the non-Arabs. Although today that may go without saying, it was by no means self-evident in the seventh century in view of the political situation, the geographical conditions, and the tribal structure of society on the Arabian peninsula. The Arabs of the *Jahiliyyah*, the pre-Islamic period, were not united by any alliance or common political platform. On the contrary: clans raided one another; blood feuds tore the country apart. The most important form of organization by far, dominating the individual's world view and personal attachments, was the tribe. Yet the countless clans, socially and culturally highly diverse, regularly at war with one another, considered themselves a single people: the Arabic language was, in spite of all conflicts, the unifying element on the Arabian peninsula in the early seventh century. Although each tribe spoke its own dialect, which was difficult for members of other tribes to understand, the formal language of Arabic poetry, the *'arabīya*, reigned over all the tribal dialects. Poetry was the foundation of a shared identity; it bore the roots of a unified memory that defied disintegration.

The situation might be compared with that of Germany in the late eighteenth century, when literature helped the small and tiny states to develop a common, specifically 'German' identity. And yet the Arabs' situation was different. In the early seventh century they were desert dwellers, living at oases, interconnected only by the merchants' caravans and the regular wars between the tribes, which were an economic activity in their own right (the word 'razzia', descended from Arabic and still current in German, recalls those plundering raids). There were few other contacts between the individual tribes and practically no means of communication. Only the rudiments of writing were generally known; almost everyone was illiterate; and the various dialects were so different at that time that communication between one native tongue and another was difficult at best. And yet, in a territory as big as a third of all Europe, from Yemen in the south to Syria in the north, from the fringes of modern-day Iraq to the borders of Egypt, ancient Arabic poetry, with its ceremonial language, its sophisticated techniques and its very strict norms and standards, was a constant. 'How this was achieved we do not know and most probably shall never learn', the Israeli Orientalist Shlomo D. Goitein wrote of this astounding circumstance.²

Ancient Arabic poetry is a highly complex edifice. Its vocabulary, its grammatical peculiarities and its detailed norms were passed down from generation to generation, and only the greatest of the time mastered all its subtleties. No one dared call himself a poet until he had studied under one for years or decades. Muhammad grew up in a world

in which the poetic word was revered almost religiously, and he had not learned the difficult craft of poetry before he began reciting verses to his contemporaries. Initially, the Quran was not a text written down from beginning to end but consisted of separate recitable units, which only later coalesced into a whole text. The earliest surahs were dominated by dramatic scenarios of disaster and damnation, calls for spiritual and ethical repentance, and appeals for equality and responsibility among people. Their wording was insistent and forceful, and they fascinated the listeners of the time by their pulsating rhythms, their poignant onomatopoeia, their fantastic array of images. And yet Muhammad's preaching was different from poetry, and also from the rhymed prose of the soothsayers, the second form of inspired, structured oratory at that time. It strangely violated the norms of ancient Arabic poetry: its narratives went a different way; it suspended metre; the themes, the metaphors, the whole ideological thrust of the early Quran, unlike the conservative, affirmative poetry of that time – all of it was new to Muhammad's contemporaries and amounted to a revolutionary change in the world they lived in. At the same time, the application of the verses almost always conformed to the rules of ancient Arabic poetry. What was still more important, however, was that the Quran was composed in *‘arabīya*, the code of poetry at that time. That was the reason why, in spite of the differences in form and content between his recitation and poetry, many Meccans initially took Muhammad for a poet.

No other revealed text documents its own reception as the Quran does: it records the reactions of the faithful and the unbelievers, quoting them and commenting on them. We learn from the Quran itself that no other reproach troubled the Prophet as much as the assertion that he was 'just' a poet. In the later surahs, the rebuttal to that accusation becomes formulaic, but the thoroughness of the early instances is evidence that the danger was genuine. We must conclude that Muhammad found himself compelled, especially in the initial phase of his prophecy, to struggle against being mistaken for a poet because of certain of his acts, behaviours or speeches. If there had been nothing in his ministry to suggest that identification, his opponents would never have thought of calling him one in the first place. They would have found other arguments to challenge his claim to divine revelation. They could have said, for example, that he was a liar, a thief or a charlatan. 'But they said: He is just making up verse; he is a poet' (21:5).

Muhammad's opponents' assertion that the Quran was poetry cannot have been merely polemical: it must have reflected many people's actual impressions – not because the Quran was identical with poetry

in the minds of the community that received it, but because poetry (and the other genres of inspired oratory) was the only point of reference they could compare it with; it was the thing that was least different from the Quran. The Muslim tradition documents this, reporting again and again that the Meccans went to poets and other masters of the literary language and asked them what to call Muhammad's recitations. In answering – with fascination and amazement – that the Quran was neither poetry nor rhymed prose, they outlined the horizon of their expectations. 'I know all kinds of *qasidas* and the *rajaz*; I am familiar even with the poems of the jinn. But, by God, his recitation is like none of them', Muhammad's famous contemporary Walid ibn al-Mughira confessed – to quote just one of many similar opinions.³ And in its consistent reports that the poets and rhetoricians were aware of the Quran's stylistic uniqueness, the tradition mentions conversely that it was not easy for simple people to distinguish clearly between poetry and the revelation. The story is told, for example, of one of the Prophet's followers, the poet Abdullah ibn Rawaha, that his wife surprised him leaving a concubine's chamber and demanded an explanation. She had long suspected him of having secret affairs. Knowing that Abdullah had once sworn an oath never to recite the Quran except in a state of ritual purity – and, if he had lain with the concubine, he would have been unclean – she challenged him to recite something from the Quran as a way of exposing him. The poet immediately recited three lines of a poem that sounded so similar to the Quran that his wife was persuaded of his innocence: she 'thought it was a *qur'ān*'.⁴

Since it was in danger of being confused with poetry, the Quran was compelled to repudiate poetry: 'And the poets – the perverse follow them.'⁵ Only the awareness of these circumstances allows us to understand the polemics against poets contained in the Quran, especially in the 26th surah. The Quran was not taking part in a literary competition. Poets might vie for the leadership of a single tribe, but the Quran radically challenged the whole tribal structure of Arab society and its polytheism by proclaiming the principle of unity – both the unity of God and that of the community. The poets meanwhile, more than any other group in that society, were protagonists of the tribal order of the *Jahiliyyah*. To read into the Quran a blanket condemnation of poetry, as people often do, is not defensible. The Quran criticizes the poets only where they cling to their leadership role and take inspiration from devils, and it makes an explicit exception for those poets 'who believe, do good, and are mindful of God' (26:227).

Evidently the Prophet was victorious in his conflict with the poets, otherwise Islam would not have spread so rapidly. The Quran itself

only hints at the reasons for that success. Although it reflects the situation at the time of the revelation, referring to specific events and developments, it does so for an audience that is already familiar with those events. It does not recount, as a history book would, what happened on this or that specific day, but instead alludes to the events by isolated cues that stimulated the memories of its immediate audience. To understand the historical context, later readers often have to rely on secondary sources such as the biographies, the history books and the traditional texts on the 'occasions of the revelations' (*asbāb an-nuzūl*).

In the European view of Islam's early history, Muhammad's success is attributed to social, ideological, propagandistic or military factors; writers emphasize the Prophet's charisma or his egalitarian message. Muslim sources draw a different picture. According to them, Islam triumphed primarily by the verbal force of the Quran, by the sheer aesthetic power of its melodic recitation. Only here, in the history books, biographies and theological compendia, in the Muslim community's retrospection on its salvation history, Muhammad's conflict with the poets coalesces into a struggle with a literary aspect, fought, to a certain extent, after the model of the ancient poets' duels, as in the anecdote about the greatest of Arabia's poets, Labid ibn Rabia. The pages of his poems were hung on the doors of the Kaaba as a symbol of his supremacy. None of his fellow poets dared accept the challenge by hanging his own verses beside Labid's. One day, however, there came some followers of Muhammad, who at that time was reviled by the heathen Arabs as an obscure sorcerer and a mad poet. They hung an excerpt from the second surah of the Quran on the door and challenged Labid to read it aloud. The prince of poets laughed at their presumption. To pass the time, or perhaps in derision, he acquiesced and began to declaim the verses. He was overpowered by their beauty and professed Islam on the spot.

Conversions of this kind are one of the most frequent topoi in Islamic salvation history. The tale is also told, for example, of a scout who came to Mecca from Yathrib, the future Medina, to investigate the mysterious rumours about the appearance of a new prophet. Sternly warned against the prophet's magic tricks, the man had been urged to plug his ears before encountering people who recited his prophecy. So the investigator walked along the streets of Mecca and encountered a group of the faithful listening to a Quran recitation. He thought to himself, 'I am a man of reason and experience. Why make a fool of myself by plugging my ears just because someone is reciting something?' He took the wadding out of his ears, heard the sound of the Quran, and professed Islam then and there. The famous sirens in book twelve of Homer's *Odyssey* cannot have been more enticing.

These conversion stories, which always have the same structure, reveal their unique character when we look for an analogous theme in other religions. The phenomenon of a conversion effected by an aesthetic cause, which is frequently claimed in Islam even in later centuries, is scarcely attested in Christianity, for example. Neither in the Gospels nor anywhere else are there corresponding accounts in any comparable density. The great conversions and initiation experiences in Christian history – those of St Paul, St Augustine, Pascal and Martin Luther, to name just a few – were triggered, as far as we know from the autobiographical testimony, by experiences which, while no less remarkable to the onlooker or the reader, are not primarily aesthetic: it is not the beauty of the divine revelation that stands out in the subject's consciousness but its moral and ethical message to the individual. That does not mean that the development and the religious practice of Christianity, or any other religion, would be conceivable without the aesthetic fascination of certain spaces, texts, chants, shapes, smells, acts, gestures, vestments – or that Protestantism, for example, would have spread so rapidly in the German-speaking countries without the verbal power of the Luther Bible. Yet, in the picture that the Christian or, more specifically, the Protestant community forms of its own past, the aesthetic impulse, however relevant it may be to religious practice, has only secondary importance. Few Christians would claim that Jesus' disciples were drawn to him because he seemed particularly handsome or because his oratory struck them as formally perfect, and no Christian catechism teaches the linguistic perfection of the Gospels as a cause of the triumph of Christianity.

While there are conversions to Christianity that are caused by the beauty of the scripture, accounts of such conversions do not make up any significant part of the total corpus of Christian documents on the spread of the religion; they are not a recurring motif in the literature of Christian salvation history or part of Christians' cultural memory. In the Muslim identity, however, the aesthetic fascination that the Quran exerts is a fundamental part of the religious tradition. It is not the experience of beauty per se, but this act of collective awareness and interpretation that is specific to the religious world of Islam. Only in Islam has the rationalization of aesthetic experience produced a theological-poetological doctrine, namely the doctrine of *i'jāz*, the unsurpassability and inimitability of the Quran. To a Christian, the argumentation of *i'jāz* could hardly be more strange: I believe in the Quran because its language is too perfect to have been composed by a human being. Indeed, the doctrine amounts to an aesthetic proof of God, or of truth. Nothing analogous in the religious sphere is found in any Western cul-

ture. At best, one might think of the subjective impressions that some musical compositions, by Bach or Mozart perhaps, can produce. It is no coincidence that listeners tend to call them ‘divine’.

The relationship between the revelation and poetry in the history of Arab culture could hardly be closer. Arabic literary scholarship, for example, owes its development to the study of the Quran. If the miracle of Islam was the language of the revelation, then scholars had to analyse that language to prove its primacy – and hence had to compare the Quran with poetry. Thus the study of literature was an early spin-off from theology. In the ninth century, Muslim scholars began to collect exemplary passages of Arabic poetry to contrast them with the Quran. The primary goal was to develop a poetics, to define criteria that could be used to identify a verse as excellent, exemplary, effective and beautiful. Their motivation was at first apologetic, but their literary interest increasingly became detached from its theological agenda. For Arabic literary scholarship, the Quran is more than just a central text: the discipline originated in large part in efforts to analyse, and not merely describe, the experience of the Quran’s beauty and poignancy on the basis of understandable, empirical evidence. From the tenth to the twelfth century, great works on Arabic poetics were written which anticipated numerous insights of modern linguistics and literary studies – for example, by transcending the ancient dichotomy of form and content with the concept of *nazm*, the ‘order’ or ‘structure’ in which a poetic idea is expressed. The Arab rhetoricians discussed the Quran and poetry in the same breath, yet without playing one against the other. A high-ranking theologian of the eleventh century, the Iranian Abdalqaher al-Jurjani, who was also, quite naturally one might say, the most important scholar of poetics of his time, was persistently concerned with the specific quality that constitutes the excellence of a line of verse, whether from the Quran or written by a poet. And he analysed that specific quality with constant comparisons between the Quran and poetry – an interleaving of theology and literary study that could not be taken for granted in the Arab world of today.

While literary scholarship was first brought into being with the Quran and became an autonomous discipline soon afterwards, the Quran, paradoxically, also had a certain secularizing effect on poetry. With the triumph of Islam, poetry at first gave up its metaphysical pretensions and concentrated on secular motifs: love; courtly and urban life; the virtues. Later, in the eighth and ninth centuries, poets at the Abbasid courts and cities repositioned themselves, setting themselves apart from Islam. In deliberate competition with the prophetic revelation, they invoked other sources of inspiration besides the One God, including the jinn and the

satans. The most famous satanic verses are those of Abu Nuwas, perhaps the best-known poet in the history of Arabic literature. As in the modern period in Europe, the invocation of supernatural powers is more a literary motif than a reference to real experience. The important thing was to break Islam's monopoly on inspiration. The poets were in competition with the Quran, striving to surpass it as a stylistic monument. In the eighth century, poets and men of letters who met in literary circles told one another, 'Your poem is more beautiful than this or that verse of the Quran', and, 'That line is more beautiful than this Quran verse.' Intellectuals such as al-Mutanabbi and al-Ma'arri disputed the unsurpassability of the quranic language far into the eleventh century. But, at the same time, the Quran remained the paragon and the standard even to those who sought to disprove the miraculous nature of its language. When Bashar ibn Burd, a free-thinking poet of the time, called one of his favourite poems more beautiful than the 59th surah, he must have thought the surah was not bad.

As a direct competitor to the Quran, poetry was in a way much more dangerous than other religions, which were accorded their place in the world of Muslim faith. Even today, the relationship between the Quran and poetry is in some ways highly ambivalent: in the Arab tradition, poetry was the only medium besides the revelation – and, later, mysticism – to which was ascribed, and which claimed for itself, a connection, however limited, to a transcendental reality, an access to supernatural inspiration. Even those who reject poetry do so because they recognize that connection and consider it dangerous – otherwise they could ignore poetry as meaningless. The conception of the poetic act as one of rivalry with God, and hence as potentially sacrilegious, became a fundamental theme of Arabic literature. As long as it remained secular, literature in Muslim cultures was subject to few restrictions, or at most to political and moral ones. But where the poets competed directly with religion, whether by referring to a celestial source of inspiration or by trying to imitate and surpass the style of the Quran, they faced religiously motivated criticism and occasionally persecution. From a contemporary point of view, Arabic literature combines the contestation of orthodoxy, or even of simply traditional faith, with 'the Promethean thrust of modern poetry', which Octavio Paz has outlined as the 'will to create a new "sacred," in contradistinction to the one that churches offer us today.'⁶

Among those in the Arab world who are committed to this old and new endeavour, the Syrian poet Adonis holds a special position. His work can be read as an impassioned struggle, sometimes violent, sometimes bordering on tender, with his own intellectual and aesthetic tradi-

tion. The religious streak that permeates his writing makes it impious. For the poetry with which Adonis has made his mark is not religious in the sense that it serves religion; it is a poetry that vies to supplant religion. Adonis harks back to the role of the poet in the *Jahiliyyah*, whose prophetic aspirations were rejected by Islam, and he also refers to the mystic poets of the tenth century, such as al-Hallaj and an-Niffari: after the victory of Islam had virtually secularized poetry, leaving its invocations of demons, angels or Satan more formulaic than expressive, the mystics had once again given it metaphysical weight. Their poetry became prophetic. They also broke with the Arabic poets' traditional canon of rules to create their own verbal and spiritual reality – just as the Quran had done before, in Adonis's interpretation, and as he now does in turn in his own poetry. Unlike the mystic poets, who saw themselves as Muslims, with a religious justification for their violations of aesthetic and religious norms, Adonis refuses Islamic associations. He casts off religion; he does not ignore it, as most poets of his time do, but directly addresses this process of moulting.

Today I burned up the mirage of Saturday,
 The mirage of Friday.
 Today, I cast off the house's mask.
 I exchanged the god of blind stone,
 And the god of the seven days,
 for a dead one.⁷

In Adonis the ambivalent relation between the Quran and poetry is ideally clear. He replaces the God of the seven days with a dead God, yet he is the same poet who praises the Quran as the source of the modern in Arabic poetry. And in fact the Quran has enriched Arabic poetry as no other text. It liberated poetry from the narrow confines of the known genres and revealed new ways of treating language, metaphor and themes. There were no written standards, no theoretical study of language and literature, until they arose from quranic hermeneutics. Just as theologians referred, as if instinctively, to poetry in analysing the language of the Quran, the inverse took place and continues to take place again and again: poets and literary scholars refer to the Quran in making statements about poetry. An example is the movement in Arabic poetry known as the 'moderns' (*muḥdathūn*), who dominated the discussion of literature in the eighth and ninth centuries. The 'moderns' felt motivated and authorized by the imagery of the Quran and its stylistic deviations from the strict formal rules of poetry to incorporate ever new rhetorical figures in poetry, and so to modernize the norms that had been handed down. In their purely literary-aesthetic discussion

of modern poetry, the Quran as a poetically structured text was the natural and central point of reference.

Adonis himself is, moreover, an example of the literary productive power of the Quran. The language of his poetry has assimilated that of the Quran to transform it again in turn – to demolish it from the inside out. And that language is none other than the *‘arabīya*, the 1500-year-old literary language of the Arabs. It is both a curse and a blessing: crystallized in pre-Islamic times into a structure of breathtaking complexity, regularity and semantic density that differed substantially from the colloquial language in its dozens of dialects, classical Arabic has changed little in its morphology since then, and its ancient metrical principles are still taught today. Its permanence is due primarily to the Quran, which, composed in the idiom of ancient Arabic poetry, gave that idiom a unique normative power. Arabic is probably the only language besides Sanskrit whose grammatical rules were historically devised, not on the basis of current linguistic practice, but – in principle and to a high degree in practice – on the basis of a single book whose grammatical reality was, regardless of day-to-day communication, enshrined as a standard and made, in the truest sense of the word, absolute.

Roman Jakobson once asked, ‘How would the norms of the Russian literary language ever have been relaxed had it not been for the Ukrainian Gogol and his imperfect Russian?’⁸ The Arab world could have had a Gogol too, but, faced with the existence of a divine paradigm, it would have been harder for him to provoke a shift in the norms. In other cultures, the grammar rules and the aesthetic norms adapt to the inevitable changes of the times, but, in Arabic, education, literature, science, religion and politics have remained bound for centuries to a historic manifestation of the language as a fixed ideal which grammarians only study and describe in ever greater depth and detail. Although it is considered unattainable, that ideal is nonetheless prescribed as the model which every writer and orator must emulate. Arabic illustrates in the extreme the tendency to keep sacred languages intentionally static: although they do not bring the natural evolution of language to a complete standstill, sacred texts can slow it considerably.

Yet, at the same time, the colloquial language of Arabs continues to change, like that of any other people, by incorporating outside influences, for example, and because otherwise its speakers’ faculties of perception and representation would stagnate as the world continues to change. This situation, in which a formal language is considered the real, true language even though it has less and less in common with day-to-day linguistic practice, and has to be learned almost as a foreign language, has been called a ‘linguistic schizophrenia’.⁹ None

of the dialects has been able to develop into a formally autonomous language, as Italian did, and even where the dialects are practically separate languages, as in the Maghreb, they are not accorded that status. Although the idioms spoken in the Maghreb are more different from classical Arabic than Italian is from Latin, they are designated as dialects, because the Arabs – Muslim, Christian and, until the mid-twentieth century, Jewish Arabs alike – identify themselves as a community, a community defined by nothing but a common language, namely the language of pre-Islamic poetry and of the Quran. In the Arab *nahḍa*, the early modern movement of secular awakening, it was the non-Muslim intellectuals who stressed the standard language as the one bond uniting Arab society: in defining Arab culture by its language rather than by Islam, the religious minorities asserted their claim to equal participation. To that end, paradoxically, the secular powers resorted – often quite explicitly – to the Quran as the highest manifestation of the Arabic language.

In this way, classical Arabic has remained, unlike Latin, a living language to the present day, and it continues to be spoken alongside the dialects. It is the language of all public occasions, of learning and of poetry – and one is seldom aware that the standard language of today is by no means congruent with the language of the Quran, but much simpler, grammatically, morphologically and phonetically. In the listener's mind, modern standard Arabic is perceived as an old, venerable language and is instinctively equated with *ʿarabīya*. Consequently, an Arab poet who masters classical Arabic and can recite it skilfully can easily conjure up a mythic aura. What is much more difficult is to imbue the language with a contemporary spirit. Modern Arabic poetry has taken up this challenge again and again, with magnificent success in quite a few of its texts.

There has always been poetry in dialect as well, of course, by poets and singers who often compose their verses spontaneously, in performance, and have a tremendous impact in broad segments of the population, including those with little education. These poets have always been ascribed to the folk cultures of their respective countries, however, which are relatively strictly segregated from the high culture. Only in recent years have younger poets appeared who use a more colloquial, contemporary language. Rather than consciously violating the classical standards, they simply ignore them. As an intellectual position and a cultural policy, that is innovative and frank; aesthetically, however, I perceive it – perhaps because I am not familiar enough with contemporary Arabic poetry – mostly as a loss. Many younger poets seem not to care about the rules and the phonetic diversity of literary Arabic, which

one would have to master if one would transcend them. Their poems are closer to the colloquial language; their recitation is as expressionless and interchangeable as the poetry readings we are familiar with here in Germany. The young poets' flippant attitude could be appreciated as candour in a linguistic context in which false pathos is a particularly frequent annoyance, but often what promises directness turns out to be simply shallow. It has neither the immediacy of folk poetry, which responds spontaneously to an audience, nor the aura, the phonetic range and the rhythm of the classical literary language.

The Arabic language has a certain magic: the mere sound of its precisely accentuated words can create a strangely solemn, almost sacred and, at the same time, energetic atmosphere, which is communicated over and above the semantic meaning, as listeners can experience both in Quran recitation and in the recitation of a great contemporary poet. Both preserve the wealth of nuances in phonetic articulation and the sometimes extravagant length of the vowels; both are concerts of sound and rhythm. The fascination they exert even on listeners who do not understand Arabic can be explained, to a certain extent: it lies, among other things, in the alternation of very demanding, often strained consonants formed deep in the chest and extremely long, almost sung vowels that erupt in semantic-acoustic bursts. Both the sophistication of the consonants and the melody of the vowels are alien; they are not heard in everyday Arabic. The varieties of colloquial Arabic have levelled out the rich nuances of the classical sounds and trimmed the vowels to a normal length, which is natural. The full phonetic range of Arabic has been preserved only in poetry and, still more completely, in recitations of the Quran, which are among the great artistic events of traditional Arab societies and are attended by Muslims and Christians, believers and aesthetes alike. The best Quran singers win honours in competitions and are admired throughout the land. They even have their own fan clubs, whose members often include Arab Christians who revere the Quran not as revelation, but as the poetic touchstone of Arabic culture. I asked Egyptian taxi drivers why, in the middle of a traffic jam in sweltering heat, they put on a cassette of Quran recitation, and their answers always amazed me. The reasons they gave did not include the text's inspiring words or its profound meaning, nor did they profess fervent faith; instead, the answer I heard again and again was: 'It's so beautiful!'

But this fascination that the Quran has exerted for centuries also brings with it a danger. Because, according to the Muslim conception, God addressed humanity in marvellous Arabic – chose Arabic among all languages – that language took on a status which many speakers down