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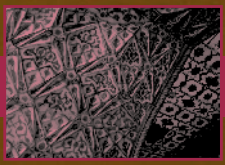

The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose

Sarah R. bin Tyeer

Foreword by Angelika Neuwirth

Literatures and Cultures of the Islamic World

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Literatures and Cultures of the Islamic World
ISBN 978-1-137-59988-9 ISBN 978-1-137-59875-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-59875-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016941864

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. London

For my students: past, present, and future

Foreword

This important and beautifully written book is about processes of enchantment and mutations of empirical reality achieved by rhetorical means. Although what is ultimately at stake is the aesthetics of pre-modern Arabic prose, the author, Sarah bin Tyeer, anchors the discourse of aesthetics in the text of the Qur'an. This in itself is a commendable achievement, in view of the fact that the connection between literary discourses and their Qur'anic predecessors is usually bypassed in present scholarly works on profane Arabic literature. There is still a reluctance to involve the Qur'an in literary debates—too remote is the field of Qur'anic Studies from Literary Studies. Or more precisely: the Qur'an is still being considered something apart from literature, be it as a sacred text, or a text whose origins are considered precarious. It is true that this attitude already was challenged years ago (1999) by a comprehensive study of the aesthetical dimensions of the Qur'an: Navid Kermani's *Gott is schön. Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran*. Kermani's path-breaking work has however, only recently (2014) appeared in English translation (*God is beautiful: The aesthetic experience of the Qur'an*). It is to be hoped that its reception will induce a re-thinking of the relation between the Qur'an and Classical Arabic Literature—an objective that is also pursued in Sarah bin Tyeer's diligent study.

Indeed, the Qur'an is the 'natural' point of departure from where to start any reflection about the significance of figurative speech in Arabic literature. Not only is prophetic speech closely related to poetry—a fact whose implications James Kugel has lucidly unfolded and which Navid Kermani has discussed again—it is moreover the discovery of figurative speech as a paramount textual strategy that takes place in the Qur'anic

debates between the Prophet Muhammad and his opponents. The effectiveness of figurative speech is a central point of dispute in the Qur'an. It is striking to see that the hermeneutic impacts of the Qur'anic message about an imaginary, transcendent world believed to be overarching the empirical world were clearly distinguished by the Prophet Muhammad's opponents. They logically accused him of magically manipulating their word, to be a sorcerer, *sāḥir*. They diagnosed exactly what they observed as occurring under their eyes: an utterly profound refashioning of the world which was turned from an empirically perceivable reality into a highly ambiguous structure made up by both 'real' and imagined elements or 'signs'.

For example, the dispute about the transformations of reality brought about by the Qur'anic message is traditionally connected to the event of the splitting of the moon in *sūrat al-Qamar*. Q 54 which starts with the exclamation: *Iqtarabati l-sā`atu wa-nshaqqa l-qamar*, 'The Hour has drawn near and the moon is split'. This cosmic evidence—which was to receive paramount attention in hadith literature and even in figurative art—seems to affirm a number of earlier pronounced predictions that the Hour, the Day of Judgment, will be heralded by the distortion of the heavenly bodies. In *sūrat al-Infiṭār,* Q 82 it says: 'When the heaven is split open and the stars are scattered', and similarly in *surat al-Takwīr,* Q 81 'When the sun shall be darkened, when the stars shall be thrown down'. This is in tune with late antique annunciations of the end of time, thus Matthew 24:29–31 says: 'Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven… Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven…' Yet, *sūrat al-Qamar* goes an important step further than the earlier predictions, asserting the factual occurrence of such a cosmic sign. The Prophet's audience, empirically minded as they were, had demanded time and again that he should present the apocalyptic signs physically. Many of them were unacquainted with the Bible as a binding reference text through which the world can be read in a messianic sense, as pointing to an imminent apocalypse. They thus remained deaf vis-à-vis the new theology of signs. The phenomenon of the splitting of the moon which appeared significant to the Prophet as a miracle to affirm his eschatological message was rejected. The text goes on: 'Yet, if they see a sign they turn away and say: "A continuous sorcery!"' (*siḥrun mustamirr*)

'Sorcery' magic in their response is not to be understood as a miracle that he should have worked to mutilate the moon, but is meant in a more comprehensive sense: The Prophet is charged with the manipulation of

the world as such—through the magic of speech, *siḥr al-bayān*, since he reads the empirically perceived phenomenon as something different from what it is, i.e. an eschatological sign. Any shimming of reality with transcendent meanings appears to them as a manipulation, as magic, as a phantasm fabricated with rhetorical means. What we see here is a glimpse of the struggle between the two major lines of interpretation in Late Antiquity: the reading of texts and of the world in the literal sense vis-à-vis their reading in a figurative sense, through typology and allegory.

According to *sūrat al-Qamar* this struggle between the two world views in Mecca left the pagan literal reading victorious. The pagans did not accept the sign character of the split moon. It is amazing that the episode of the splitting of the moon all the same survived as a miraculous incident related to the Prophet. In non-canonical tradition, the splitting of the moon was interpreted not only as theologically relevant but even as a miracle worked by the Prophet himself. His close association with the image of the moon became a topos of prophetical panegyrics. 'The moon has risen above us' is a ubiquitously current hymn which according to al-Ghazali had already been chanted by the women of Mecca when Muhammad re-captured the city.

It is interesting to note that the reception story of the Qur'anic episode about *siḥr al-bayān* does not end here. In later Ottoman court art, it is the second part of the Qur'anic argument, the opponents' perception of his verbal magic, 'But they say: "a continuous sorcery!"' (*siḥrun mustamirr*) that comes to the fore. It is in the end the pagans' verdict from *sūrat al-Qamar*, the verdict of his *siḥr al-bayān*, his transformation of the world into a sign system transcending empirical reality, that is allowed to epitomize the Qur'an's hermeneutical achievement. When Ottoman art which had conceded to the mundane manifestation of the heavenly writing—the art of calligraphy—a primary rank in artistic representation, conceived of a portrait of the Prophet, this had to be made up of scriptural 'signs', which according to the Qur'anic proclamation point to the transcendent writing as the most sublime authority. Through the new purely calligraphic, purely sign-informed portrait of the Prophet, his *ḥilya*, his earlier figural representation could be 'rectified'.

But not only in popular piety and court art was the defeat in argument from *sūrat al-Qamar* turned into a spiritual triumph. History itself asserted the triumph. In the end of the Qur'an's proclamation, the *siḥr al-bayān*, the enchantment of the world, achieved through speech, communicated

by the Prophet, his figurative reading of the world—his embedding of the empirical realm into a primordially founded sign system—was to prevail. With the Qur'an a sacred text was canonized that is strongly imbued with figurative thinking.

The concept of the 'Verzauberung der Welt', the enchantment of the world, has more recently been rediscovered, though it is usually focused from the reverse angle, from Max Weber's concept of the 'disenchantment of the world' through the impact of science. But enchantment precedes disenchantment. What is being taken up in Church historical studies today as a fruitful approach has not been probed for the Qur'an yet: its revolutionary mutation of the inherited world view through *siḥr al-bayān* has still been introduced into the historical discussion about the emergence of the monotheist religions. It will prove the Qur'an and the earliest Muslim community not only as contemporaries but as active players in the culture of debate of Late Antiquity. It will equally prove the Qur'an's immense impact on the aesthetics of classical Islamic culture.

Sarah R. bin Tyeer's study is a most challenging new beginning in Arabic studies which clearly demonstrates the fruitfulness of the synopsis of Qur'an and classical literature.

Angelika Neuwirth
Berlin, Germany

Acknowledgments

Parts of this book are based on a thesis submitted to fulfil the requirement of a PhD degree for the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, University of London), defended in November 2010. The process of writing and editing went through many phases, stages, and across many countries. My deepest gratitude goes to Stefan Sperl, my thesis supervisor, for his kind and supportive guidance through some of the gloomiest moments in the course of the thesis and most importantly for his confidence that are the building blocks of this project throughout the research period and beyond: I am forever grateful. I also would like to thank M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (SOAS) for his encouraging words and Geert Jan van Gelder (Oxford) for his comments on the thesis that contributed to the fine-tuning of some ideas. Omar Alí de-Unzaga at the Institute of Ismaili Studies and Nuha al-Shaʿar invited me to the conference on the *Qur'an and Adab* and subsequently welcomed a chapter (not included in this book) in the edited volume proceeding from the conference: *Qur'an and Adab*: *The Shaping of Classical Literary Tradition*—thank you. Thank you Angelika Neuwirth and Devin Stewart for their comments and friendly conversation on the chapter during the conference in 2012 in London.

I thank the department of the Near and Middle East studies at the Faculty of Languages and Cultures at SOAS, Hugh Kennedy, Wen-Chin Ouyang, and Stefan Sperl for hosting me as a Research Associate since 2010. I also express gratitude to the Arts and Humanities Initiative at the American University of Beirut for my wonderful time in Beirut as an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in 2012–2013 and the stimulating teaching and discussions as well as the academic privileges that come with the

fellowship that facilitated finishing parts of this book. I thank Nadia Maria el-Cheikh for her generous spirit and support, Bilal Orfali for his wit, humour, coffee, and his chivalric *muruwwa* in helping me with settling in when I first arrived; I shared an office with Karim Sadek during the fellowship—I thank him for his occasional philosophical humour and for his genuine efforts to improve my sense of direction as I got lost in Beirut—I believe it worked in the end. Ahmad Dallal, Maher Jarrar, Nader el Bizri, Rita Bassil, and Rima Iskandarani—thank you. I am grateful for my time at SOAS and AUB. I am fortunate to have spent time at these exceptional institutions learning, teaching, and researching with some unique and wonderful people. My brilliant students in classes I taught in London and Beirut often reminded me of the importance of the work we all do; it is an organic path and it is never over—thank you for showing genuine interest and passion through conversations and questions.

The final writing stages of this book including the introduction, conclusion, and the chapter on al-Maʿarrī were written in Cairo. I thank the American University in Cairo library and its staff, especially at the circulation and document delivery for their cordiality and support; it is good to return to my *alma mater* and be virtually eighteen again.

I express deep appreciation to the wonderful people at Palgrave Macmillan behind the scenes in the production process, the copyeditor, and the people at the design team. I want to especially thank Ryan Jenkins, Commissioning Editor at Palgrave Macmillan New York, for his patience and thoughtfulness throughout.

Writing is an arduous, demanding, and a very lonely enterprise. None of this would have been possible without the support of my mother; all the 'thank you's' in the cosmos go to you. Thank you for patiently listening to my endless stories on the adventures of fictitious charlatans, my recounting what I think is a funny *sukhf* couplet while preparing lunch, and for unwearyingly listening about al-Maʿarrī's poets in Hell and Heaven and his critics—and mostly thank you for your unconditional love and unflinching support.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

Bulletin of SOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
EAL	The Encyclopaedia of Arabic Literature
EI2	The Encyclopaedia of Islam (second edition)
EI3	The Encyclopaedia of Islam (third edition)
EQ	The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an
JAL	Journal of Arabic Literature
RAHW	Rabelais and His World
StOr	Studia Orientalia

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

What role does the Qur'an's aesthetics play in *adab?* And accordingly, how does one read pre-modern Arabic *adab?* What methodologies do we use? Could one read *The Thousand and One Nights* as a reflection of *real* societal customs and practices and use it credulously as a 'literary ethnography' of the Arab-Islamic world? Or should one use Western literary paradigms and theories, such as Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque, for instance, to read *sukhf*, *mujūn,* and roguery in light of the carnivalesque? How does one read the technique of the *maqāma* genre sparked by al-Hamadhānī in the eleventh century and later emulated by al-Ḥarīrī in the twelfth century and many others? In what respect are they in dialogue with their milieu and *adab* as both an institution and a literary system? Is the evocation of the sacred in pre-modern *adab* always 'blasphemous' and an attempt to 'mock' the establishment to vent and release or 'assault Islam' as some have maintained with respect to the *maqāmāt* and al-Maʿarrī's *Risālat al-Ghufrān* [*The Epistle of Forgiveness*]?[1] Or is the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, even the vulgar, in a work such as *Ḥikāyat Abī'l Qāsim* al-Baghdādī points to a more nuanced creative process?[2] What are the ramifications of this one-way traffic in reading *adab?* The aforementioned questions are the focus of this book. This introduction will address the building blocks of this book referred to in the title as the Qur'an, *adab,* aesthetics, as well as the meaning of ugliness between the lexicons and the Qur'an.

The problem of reading pre-modern Arab-Islamic *adab* in light of the binaries of the sacred and the profane, godly and godless and how the two rarely meet, or are in conflict, results in an either/or situation where

S.R. bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose*, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-59875-2_1

the literary work is often interpreted as either a positive or a negative response to religion proper. But this conflict has its origins in European history and not in Arab-Islamic history. Since the Enlightenment in Europe, when the arts stopped regarding the sacred as part of the sublime and the beautiful, the definition of the Arts ceased to point to anything outside itself. This explains *l'art pour l'art*, formalism, and the 'aesthetic form' as part of the developments that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century.[3] This has eventually led to the Arts' independence from the sacred in what Van der Leeuw calls 'the secularization of art.'[4] This interpretive framework operates within a dichotomy of conflict between the creative expression seen as profane or secular and the sacred, not harmony. The same could not be held true to Arab-Islamic literary and artistic endeavours where pre-modern, and to some degree modern and contemporary literary expressions, show a continuum of influence with the sacred, in this case the Qur'an, and its influence on the creative process. This should not be understood as 'religious art' or 'sacred art' or that Arab-Islamic literary expression could only be read as a function of or in religion. Rather, it is an attempt to situate the Qur'an in the history of *adab* and investigate its influence on the system of *adab*, its artistic language, vocabulary, and the intricacies of its mechanics. An influence so powerful, that to ignore it and relegate its stature in literary and scholarly discussions to how the author is a 'good Muslim/bad Muslim', 'Shi'ite or Sunni', 'Ismaili or Druze' or fish for clues to determine the 'faith-o-meter' and 'real' sect of the author because his word and history are not good enough is tantamount to a deliberate and prejudiced obfuscating of its role in the thriving of *adab* and the institution of *adab* at large. This aforementioned approach is also a dehumanising act that reduces all human activity in the Arab-Islamic heritage into religious labels with no history, literary legacy, or human agency. It is a reading that erases all history in favour of a label. Ultimately, this approach clears itself of the obligation to understand or properly read this literature or its people. Carl W. Ernst argues against these dominant attitudes and views with respect to regarding Muslims and their activities as driven solely by religion:

> To assume that Muslims, and Muslims alone, are driven to act exclusively by religion, apart from any other factors that shape our lives, is more than absurd. It dehumanizes Muslims […] It means that Muslims have no history, and therefore others have no obligation to understand them.[5]

With respect to *adab,* this dehumanising attitude situates the Qur'an in a stark dichotomy to creative expressions in Arab-Islamic culture whereby alternative views and approaches are eclipsed. This fabricated conflict therefore reads all cultural products as an expression against religion and/or an expression measured against an imagined and essentialised religious model. This could be seen as either a misunderstanding born out of the projection of an Anglo-European dichotomy between the arts and the sacred traced to the Enlightenment—which reads other people and their creative expressions through its own image—or a misunderstanding that treats Arab-Islamic literature and its people as objects with no history or human agency. In both cases, the denying and obliteration of 'history' from literary history is practiced.

As the title of this book proposes: the Qur'an and pre-modern Arabic prose, as part of *adab,* is an argument for the consideration of the role of the former in the interpretation of the latter away from clichés and Pavlovian reactions to the presence of the sacred in *adab*. A look at the components of the title to map out the book's terminology is due before proceeding further.

The Qur'an: Paradigm Shift

In 1962, Thomas Kuhn coined the popular term 'paradigm shift' in reference to scientific progress. The concept became appropriated in all aspects of life and disciplines as a way of explaining the transformation from one way or model of thinking to another through an agent of change. Besides the Qur'an's introduction of new moral and metaphysical concepts in seventh century Arabia, it also introduced a new way of *thinking* and *expressing* life as it '…imaginatively and linguistically… broke away from [Arab] traditions.'[6] It possesses an evident demarcating shift between pre-Islamic and Islamic conceptual thought in the Arab-Islamic civilisation; this is eventually translated in language, as the conventional carrier of concepts,[7] and as a result cultural creative expressions (*belles-lettres*, art, and so on) in the creative process itself and ultimately the artistic language. While there '[…] is clearly recognizable a certain continuity between the Qur'anic outlook and the old Arab world view, […] there is a wide cleavage between them.'[8] The Qur'an itself, since the earliest process of its revelation at the beginning, created a literary paradigm shift, a rupture. It is neither the prose Arabs were used to, nor is it poetry either. It broke traditional and conventional genres known to people.[9] The Qur'an calls itself The Book,

and it became The Book, or what Ebrahim Moosa calls the 'master-Text', '…the yardstick of literary and rhetorical excellence[.]'[10] As Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd summarises Amin al-Khūlī's views (1895–1966) on the inimitability of the Qur'an (*iʿjāz*), pointing out that that was chiefly responsible for its positive reception amongst Arabs, al-Khūlī thinks, '… the acceptance of Islam by the Arabs, was based on recognizing its absolute supremacy compared to human texts.'[11] In a similar vein, Navid Kermani also examined this 'absolute supremacy' in his study on the aesthetics of the aural reception of the Qur'an and its role in what Kermani refers to in the parameters of *Kunstreligion* (a religion of art or Art as Religion).[12] The Qur'an's reception was marked by what Syrian poet ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd (Adūnis) calls 'the linguistic awe' (*dahsha lughawiyya*).[13] Kamal Abu-Deeb explains this further and argues that '[…] some of the Qur'ānic metaphors are truly astonishing: they border on the surreal.'[14] An example would be Q. 2:93 '*wa ushribū fī qulūbihumu l-ʿijla*' (they were made to drink [the love of] the calf deep into their hearts). The metaphor depicts the intensification of love for the calf, in reference to the story of the golden calf and Moses, that it has been drunk deep into the peoples' hearts, as anything pleasurable and enjoyable sinks into one's heart, fuses with it, and overwhelms it.[15] 'It is in the face of such wonderful metaphors', Abu-Deeb maintains, 'whereby a boundless imagination breaks away from all conventions and restrictions, cultural or linguistic, and roams freely in the world, connecting what cannot be connected and inventing linguistic and imaginative structures never before contemplated[.]'[16] The Qur'an is its own genre, or a unique genre as pre-modern scholar al-Bāqillānī (d. 404/1013) maintains.[17] In like manner, Arab modern writers agree with their predecessors. Taha Hussein (1889–1973) stresses the aesthetic aspect of the Qur'an and its literary supremacy, known as *iʿjāz* (inimitability); he maintains that it is neither poetry nor prose: it is Qur'an.[18] Hussein stresses that the Qur'an was innovative in its stylistics and aesthetics (*jadīdan fi uslūbihi*).[19]

This is why, Adūnis maintains, there cannot be a separation between Islam and Arabic language, on any level.[20] This is also a view expressed earlier by the philologist Aḥmad b. Fāris (d. 395/1004) who is very likely the first to have used and coined the term '*fiqh al-lugha'* (lit. the profound understanding of language) in linguistic study as his book *al-Ṣāḥibī fī fiqh al-lugha* attests,[21] which inspired many an offspring later on. Ibn Fāris stressed the distinctive features of Arabic; this is evident in his adamant belief in the salient role grammar and language play in maintaining Islamic values.[22]

As the Qur'an created this paradigm shift on the intellectual, artistic, and religious levels, it also created a paradigm shift on both the literary and cultural levels. To quote Abu Zayd, '[…] the Qur'an has become the producer of a new culture.'[23] In addition to the 'the linguistic awe' and its genre breaking, it created a new type of reader, a new critic, and a new taste.[24] 'The Qur'an's mode of expression', Adūnis maintains, 'cancels all traditional differences between philosophy and *adab*, between science and politics, between ethics and aesthetics: its style permeates genres, with respect to its form, and methodologically, it permeates conventional epistemic approaches (*al-muqārabāt al-maʿrifiyya*).'[25]

The Qur'an has been described as a text that does *not* imitate life (*ḥikāyat al-ḥayāt)* but instead offers life because of its artistic dynamicity and unique style.[26] If art is the imitation (*mimesis*) of life, it should not be surprising that the Qur'an, as the dynamic text that instead offers life, inspires the Arts and *adab*, an influence that goes beyond the stylistics of the Qur'an, its formulaic structures, and idioms, as well as an influence on the thematic, conceptual, and categorical levels. It is precisely this quality that explains why *adab* is literary but also ethical or at other times philosophical. And it is precisely this quality of the Qur'an that has opened what Adūnis calls 'another horizon of writing' (*khāṣṣiyya taftaḥu li-l-kitābati ufuqan ākhar*).[27]

The multidisciplinary quality of the Qur'an was also noted in Jacques Berque's commentary in his French translation of the Qur'an. Berque compares the Qur'an to a surface set out in space, but only this surface is a 'verbal flux in time' (un flux verbal dans le temps) where its themes and motifs return and intersect with each other.[28] This literary rupture the Qur'an created, an expression that in our modern parlance is often associated with experimentation and the presumption of eradicating what came before it, is a generous rupture. Literary forms that existed before it (poetry and *khaṭāba*) not only continued but also developed and thrived around it;[29] it inspired new literary devices, new forms of writing, and other epistemic repositories.

In this respect, the culture that formed around the Qur'an represents what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls the *applicatio*. The Qur'an does not simply become a passive text awaiting clarification and explanation; it is an active text in its dynamicity and practical application. It is a '[…]highly interactive text', its 'rhetorical affectivity', Jane Dammen McAuliffe argues, challenges even the casually acquainted reader from receptive passivity of the text.[30] The Qur'an's role in Arab-Islamic culture and *adab* was/is not to be understood

just historically. Rather, it should be understood in terms of how it becomes valid for us. By valid, I do not mean that one either believes in it or one does not, or either observes its guidelines or one does not. This is certainly part of its validity for the believers but it is not all there is to it. As Sheldon Pollock maintains, validity need not always be thought of as 'authoritative' all the time, but validity extends itself to 'usefulness': *applicatio*.[31]

Part of this *applicatio* in *adab* is its recognised role in developing the prose style of many *belle-lettrists* and court scribes, such as ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132/750), for instance.[32] Far removed from a period often associated with being closer to the Qur'anic event, the validity and meaningfulness in inspiring modern and contemporary Arab writers like Naguib Mahfouz and Ṭāhir al-Waṭṭār, for instance, to come up with new aesthetics, techniques, and problem-solving methods, 'new horizons' as Adūnis would say, for the proposed themes they wish to treat are also noted.[33] Or as Ziad elMarsafy argues, were it not for the translations of the Qur'an during the Enlightenment: from Ludovico Marracci's Latin Qur'an, George Sale's English Qur'an to Claude Savary's French Qur'an, and consequently Rousseau, Voltaire, and Napoleon and their diverse reception of it and many uses of it, '…Goethe's—and consequently our –ideas about literature would have taken on a markedly different inflection.'[34] The Qur'an as a 'paradigm shift' and its 'validity', '*applicatio*' and, 'worldliness' are not restricted to the 'event' and 'place' of revelation.

> The uses to which the Qur'ān was put during the eighteenth century—describing the legislator, situating Europe in the context of global history, defining world literature—attest to its continuing importance and centrality even before the establishment of Orientalism as an academic discipline with all of the institutional trappings that accrue during the nineteenth century.[35]

In this regard, Humberto Garcia reminds us of 'Islamic republicanism' in early modern Europe and how '…the radical Enlightenment was in constant dialectical engagement with Islam.'[36] Garcia places Islam at the heart of the works of Edmund Burke, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, and Percy and Mary Shelley. For them, according to Garcia, a dialogue with Islam assisted in questioning and redefining British concepts of liberty. Equally, this '*applicatio*' complements what Edward Said calls the 'worldly text':

> A text in its actually *being* a text is also a being in the world; it therefore addresses anyone who reads… Texts have ways of existing, both theoretical

> and practical, that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstances, time, place and society—in short they are in the world, and hence worldly.[37]

Oleg Grabar's call for 'the hermeneutics of the Qur'an for the arts' aptly summarises the argument above as it understands the Qur'an's role in the culture it inspires as a 'worldly text' and its inspiration of the Arts. Grabar's call is motivated by a need to explain, define, and justify attitudes where the visual arts are concerned to provide '[…] a deeper understanding of whatever constitutes the particular genius and the many facets of Islamic Art.'[38] By extension, if the Qur'an is recognised at the centre of most Arab-Islamic intellectual and artistic endeavours, as the 'worldly' text it is, should not a hermeneutics of the Qur'an for *adab* be therefore necessary to understand *adab* and its intricacies beyond trite clichés.

Adab: Holistic, Cosmic, and Humane

A writer under the influence of the Qur'an, writing in the 'horizon', Adūnis argues, is one who has a 'cosmic or holistic and humane' vision (*kawniyya wa insāniyya*).[39] The holistic and humane vision, as an extension of the influence of the Qur'anic 'horizon of writing' in *adab*, is traceable in the definition of *adab* which was expectedly derived from its *ipso facto* influence, role, and aesthetics. In light of this, it appears that some types of scholarship on *adab* that treat it as 'literature' may only warrant criticism. The definition of *adab* may not be the only issue that modern scholarship sometimes does not see eye for an eye with pre-modern scholars, which may have certainly affected the way in which *adab* is occasionally treated, rather narrowly, as 'literature.' In defence of this distinction, Abdelfattah Kilito criticises the attitude that regards *adab* as 'literature.' 'Literature' as such, he maintains, began in the eighteenth century with German Romanticism: Novalis, Schelling, and the brother Schlegel, to mention a few.[40] *Adab*, as known to pre-modernists, was 'a type of discourse': one that was concerned with ethics and virtues (*al-akhlāq wa l-faḍā'il*).[41] *Adab*, it could be argued, is a type of discourse that saw to the thriving of decorum, observing civility, erudition and scholarship, and being a well-rounded human being. Kilito asks a telling question, as he plays his own devil's advocate; he asks, 'so was the concept of "literature" as such unknown to Europeans prior to German Romanticism?' [42] And one could extend the question by asking if it was unknown to pre-modern Arabs. He

indirectly answers the question by saying that every book (*kitāb*) is either an explicit answer to certain dictated circumstances surrounding its birth or an implicit answer to some issues hanging in the air. Pre-modernists also differentiated between those texts that are born to careful 'rumination' (*rawiyya*) and those born to 'improvisation and wit' (*al-badīha wa l-irtijāl*).[43] By treating *adab* as literature only, what are we foregoing aside from a deeper and sensitive understanding of the text? When pre-modern Arabic literary products are treated as atoms in a void, they become divorced from their (a) Arabic literary history, (b) literary milieu, and (c) linguistic history and significance in favour of ready-made straitjacket interpretations facilitated by restrictive literary theories and techniques. Accordingly, this attitude does not build on the poetics of the field or offer a sensitive language for literary criticism from inside the discipline, which leaves the field methodologically impoverished.

Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer speaks of the text as an answer to a question, and that the interpreter must seek 'the horizon of the question' to understand the text. The 'horizon of the questions' of *adab* does not extend in modern and contemporary literary theory and techniques and paradigms that are sometimes imposed on the works of *adab*. This is what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls interpretation based on 'prejudice' and prejudgment, stemming from one's own previous hermeneutical position. On prejudices he says, '[t]hey constitute, then, the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that which beyond it is impossible to see.'[44] Naturally, this comes as a result of hermeneutically operating form a single horizon. This horizon, Gadamer defines, as '[…]the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.'[45]

Since reading is primarily concerned with understanding, the horizon works as the vantage point from which a text is approached and meaning is made. Understanding happens when the present understanding or horizon is moved to a new understanding or horizon by an encounter (an encounter with the text in this case), which does not necessarily presuppose agreement but only understanding.[46] But if while approaching a text, a pre-modern Arabic literary work for instance, a critic is unable to leave their 'prejudices', as they should, to see past their own horizons, there are bound to be misunderstandings. To understand a text, it is thus mandatory to negotiate with the text in what Gadamer calls 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*), as a measure underlying the process of understanding.[47] The fusion between two horizons thus entails leaving the 'prejudiced' hermeneutical horizon to that of the text where the

reader meets the text rather than simply projecting it through the distorting mirror of a 'prejudiced' horizon.

It is therefore important to note, that considering the 'horizon of *adab*' within *adab* itself should offer insightful answers to the questions the texts pose. The centrality of the Qur'an to the system of pre-modern *adab* offers an enhanced understanding of pre-modern literary texts and often dispels some of the interpretative conventional habits that enshroud them. Geert Jan van Gelder argues, '[the] Koran, a work *sui generis* by an Author *sui generis* may be *hors concours* but stands at the centre of any canon, religious or literary.'[48] The relationship between the centrality of the Qur'an and the literary canon, and *adab's* non-equivalency to 'literature' should be further clarified in light of Wolfhart Heinrichs' definition of *adab*. He maintains,

> […] when Islamic culture reached maturity in the fourth/tenth century, *adab* had three major acceptations that were categorically different from each other: (1) 'good, correct, polite behaviour', (2) 'a genre of anecdotal and anthological literature which serves as a quarry of quotable materials (*muḥāḍarāt*) for the bel-esprit', and (3) 'a body of knowledge in the linguistic and literary field which comprises the genre of literature just mentioned, but include further ancillary disciplines like grammar etc.' [49]

Adab, therefore, does not readily translate into 'literature' nor should an approach to *adab* then, i.e. literary criticism, be one that treats it separately from its componential meanings. These meanings are not alternative to the definition of *adab*. Rather, they are constituents in the institution of *adab*. In other words, an approach to *adab* should not be divorced from *adab* as a moral institution encompassing its inclusion of 'politesse' and 'moral behaviour' nor should it either be divorced from its meaning as a body of works concerned with the ancillary disciplines such as grammar, rhetoric, and philology, to mention a few.

In a 1997 article bearing the title of *ʿajāʾib* in The Thousand and One Nights, Roy Mottahedeh discussed the category of *ʿajāʾib* (lit. wonders) in *The Thousand and One Nights*.[50] I want to briefly draw attention to two things: the title of the article and the important concluding thoughts of Mottahedeh that also frame his use of the title for reasons that I will explain in due course. Mottahedeh uses the word *ʿajaʾib* to point to the conceptual category of *ʿajāʾibī* literature that is part of a long history in the Arab-Islamic literary tradition.[51] One only stresses on something when other options or alternatives are available, in this case, a

comparative category as 'fantasy' or a mode as 'the fantastic', or perhaps Jungian mythological archetypes. These modes, genres, and categories are often borrowed to read Arab-Islamic literary works, pre-modern and modern, equally. Alternatively, a title may have been 'Fantasy' or 'The Fantastic in the *Arabian Nights*' and so one proceeds to do a reading of the selected tales within the framework and the literary tools provided by Tzvetan Todorov or Carl Jung, for instance. The process of reading the tales, *literary criticism*, thus rests on literary tools and terminologies that are not only *alien* to the Arab-Islamic literary history and tradition but also are not part of its cultural experience or literary history. More importantly, it does not contribute to Arab-Islamic poetics or studies as such by providing a meaningful methodology that could be used for subsequent literary criticism, literary tools for subsequent literary analysis, or analytical tools and terms. These one-way-traffic processes simply import modes, genres, and categories across literary, linguistic, cultural, historical, and time contexts as well. The literary text in this case becomes an orphaned literary text bastardised of its history, literary milieu, and linguistic and cultural contexts.

Mottahedeh's concluding thoughts to the aforementioned article are of importance to this discussion. He maintains:

> [w]hen I argue that a moral vocabulary is used in *The Thousand and One Nights* to explain its own mechanics and that this vocabulary offers us useful language for literary criticism of the *Nights*, I do not mean a moralistic or moralizing vocabulary. It is important to remember that Arabic literature has several genres which began as overtly homiletic literature and subsequently became profane. […] the *maqāmāt* started as a homiletic genre but are not so in Badīʿ al-Zamān or Ḥarīrī. In both these genres I think one can argue that a moral though not a moralistic vocabulary is used to describe the dynamics of character and suggest a dynamic between reader and text.[52]

Mottahedeh's astute observation on the existence of a moral vocabulary that should offer useful tools in literary criticism offers a key towards not only understanding the literary works' internal mechanics but also in viewing literary works as part of a collective whole: *adab* as an institution, a system with internal mechanics.

What, one might ask, is the difference between morality and moralism? 'To grasp morality', Terry Eagleton asserts, 'is to see it as an intricately woven texture of nuances, qualities and fine gradation.'[53] In other words, '[s]ome ways of behaving are so vital to the flourishing of human life, all

around, or alternatively so injurious to it, that we hedge them around with laws, principles and obligations.'[54] Morality is different from moralism in its concern with the idea of human thriving.[55] This should not be reduced to the notion that morality is just an imposition or obligation. For '[…] it is also imposing in the sense of being sublime, edifying, high-minded.'[56] Does this not then resemble a succinct definition of *adab*? It seems accurate then to offer a method of conceptualising tools of literary criticism through a moral vocabulary, with *adab* as the art of human thriving.

Adab's concern with the moral, with which Qur'an-inspired ethics are concerned, should help in understanding the intricacies of narrative resolution and why it 'feels right', plot devices, and literary techniques. In this respect, *adab*'s concern with the moral is translated in the literary works' own sense of *mizān* or balance and equilibrium.

Adab, like anything in the world, functions in harmony with certain internal mechanics and order. This is how we, as readers, are able to make sense of it. If *adab* is a system, then there must be a set of inherent relationships and mechanisms of order and by extension disorder, relating to its activity. The system of *adab* could then be defined as *adab*'s or the literary system's own aesthetic, moral, and linguistic mechanics that contribute to its sense of order and equilibrium, hence meaning.[57] Depending on the context, Stefan Sperl argues, *iʿtidāl* (equilibrium) '…maybe rendered as harmony, symmetry or balance. Generally speaking, it may be said that *iʿtidāl* is the manifestation in the physical sphere of *ʿadl*, or "justice", in the abstract, spiritual sphere.'[58] This concept of *ʿadl* is also articulated in the Qur'an as *mizān* (lit. balance, scales). Mustansir Mir maintains that this concept has four meanings in the Qur'an: the balance and symmetry inherent in the universe (Q. 55:7); and 'the criterion for distinguishing truth from falsehood and telling right from wrong.' In Q. 42:17, the word is used in this sense for the Qur'an as well as previous scriptures in Q. 57:25, the scales in reference to judging the moral actions in the Hereafter (Q. 7:8–9; 21:47; 23:102–103; 101:6, 8), and finally *mizān* as giving of full measure in weight, trade, and so on. (Q. 6:152; 7:85; 11:84–85; 55:9).[59] *Adab* and *iʿtidāl* (equilibrium) are not strangers. With respect to *adab* and narrative, how does *iʿtidāl* function, being a manifestation of 'justice' in the Here and Hereafter? A look at how early Muslim exegetes analyse the reasons behind the story of Joseph's qualification as the 'best' of stories, as Q.12:3 maintains, should assist in understanding this point as well as highlighting the meaning of 'narrative.'

A narrative (*al-qaṣaṣ*), theologian Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) says, is the succession of events coherently. A story is called a narrative because its events are unravelled bit by bit as they are narrated.[60] He explains that the 'best' (*aḥsan*; root: *ḥ.s.n*, lit. beauty) in this case refers to the stylistics (*ḥusn al-bayān*) not the story itself. He explains that the main point (*al-murād*) of this 'beauty' is the extreme eloquence of vocabulary to the point of inimitability (*kawn hādhi al-alfāẓ faṣīḥa bāliġha fī l-faṣāḥa ḥadd al-iʿjāz*). He argues for this point by saying that the story is related in history books but none of these stories match this sura in clarity (*faṣāḥa*) and eloquence (*balāġha*).[61] Al-Rāzī further explains that *aḥsan* also refers to the lessons, morals, and wonders derived from the story that are not to be found in another.[62] He therefore points to the readers' own sense of pleasure whether it is purely aesthetic on the level of language from the stylistic beauty or an intellectual pleasure derived on the level of meaning, pointing to moral satisfaction from the stories.

Al-Baghdādī al-Khāzin (d. 741/1340) adds that a story (*ḥikāya*) is called narrative (*qiṣṣa*) because the narrator relates the story bit by bit (*shayʾan fa shayʾan*).[63] Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) similarly explains *al-qaṣaṣ* like al-Rāzī as a succession of events although less eloquently than the latter.[64] Sufi mystic and exegete al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) explains 'the best of stories' (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*) in Q. 12:3 as the best/most beautiful narrative because it lacks 'commanding' and 'forbidding' (*al-amr wa l-nahī*) which induces feelings that insinuate shortcomings (*yuʿarriḍ li-wuqūʿ al-taqṣīr*). Al-Qushayrī tells us that the best story is not explicitly didactic (command/forbid) but at the same time, the story should contain morality and noble, even ideal behaviour that is inspiring and maybe even imitated. A good story also has a mention of 'the beloved', in the context of al-Qushayrī's career and explanation, this may be a reference to the divine, prophets, and messengers in the story of Joseph; in a human story, this may refer to 'likeable' or 'noble' characters. Finally, the title 'the best of stories' will remain divine and as al-Qushayrī implies, the rest will have imperfections. Al-Qushayrī has the most insights, especially when it comes to how stories should veer away from the command/forbid as it makes people aware of their shortcomings. The function of stories in the Qur'an, al-Qushayrī maintains, is 'reflection' (*fa-qṣuṣ al-qaṣaṣ laʿallahum yatafakkarūn*). By extension, the story then should raise questions for thought and reflection as al-Qushayrī intimates. [65]

Al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1036) gives multiple reasons for this. He relates that it is 'the best of stories' because of the extension of narrated time *(imtidād al-awqāt fī-ma bayna mubtadāha ilā muntahāha*), which he reports according to a consensus as 40 years between Joseph's dream as a young boy and his reunion with his father and brothers. Al-Thaʿlabī adds that what makes it 'best' is Joseph's noble manners in the face of his brothers' harm and his forgiving them at the end. He also adds that the plethora and richness of characters in the story is part of what makes it 'best', because there is a mention of 'prophets, good people (*ṣāliḥīn*), … biography of kings and kingdoms (*siyyar al-mulūk wa l-mamālik*), merchants, scholars, and fools (*juhhāl*), men and women and their wiles and guiles.' Al-Thaʿlabī adds further reasons as monotheism, self-restraint (*ʿiffa*), dream interpretation, politics and diplomacy (*siyāsa*), and making a living (*tadbīr al-maʿīsha*). It is these reasons, he argues, that make it the best of stories; the abundant meanings *(al-maʿānī al-jazīla)* and great benefits (*al-fawāʾid al-jalīla*) are applicable in religion as well as life (*tuṣliḥ li-l-dīn wa l-dunyā*). Finally, he relates one of the explanations of 'best' (*aḥsan*) as *aʿjab* (lit: inspiring a feeling of wonder and awe).[66]

So far, exegetes and scholars focus on what makes the story 'best' in itself as a structure with little emphasis on the reader or reception explicitly, except for al-Rāzī who emphasises pleasure. It was not until the fourteenth century that we find the jurist and Sufi mystic Ibn ʿAtāʾ al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309) maintaining that part of being 'the best of stories' is that the story of Joseph has a therapeutic effect. He argues that no one distressed (*maḥzūn*) listens/reads the story of Joseph except that it soothes them (*istrāḥa ilayha*).[67] Similarly, 500 years later, we find the same line of thought albeit focused on the internal structure of the story as the Yemeni scholar al-Shawkānī (d. 1834) rephrases al-Iskandarī's conclusion that everyone mentioned in the story (protagonists) had a happy ending (*kān maʾālahu al-saʿādata*).[68] The manifestation of *ʿadl* on the level of the narrative is evident where everyone is rewarded justly; this is the 'happy ending' exegetes spoke about. In the Qur'an, this is divine justice. In literature proper, this is poetic justice.

Exegetes accentuated the function, importance, and power of stories as a purely literary enterprise. In doing so, they compared it to human stories; the 'best of stories' is a model story, a divine literary prototype. It should be noted that various literary forms and devices in the Qur'an were unheard of and were not in literary circulation previously.[69] Exegetes maintain that human-made stories are not able to compete. The aim here

is not to compete but to understand the value and power of stories from literary models, which raises the question of how the understanding of the 'best' in the 'best of stories' applied in the institution of pre-modern Arabic literature or *adab*. In other words, how, if we may ask, did the efforts of exegetes, their insights, and the centrality of the Qur'an at the heart of the literary canon affect the literary institution in terms of definition and function? As the Qur'an created this paradigm shift on the intellectual and religious levels, it also created a paradigm shift on the literary, artistic, and cultural levels.

The inexhaustible views exegetes gave to explain why 'it is the best of stories' varied and they are all valid despite their differences. However, when we closely examine these opinions, they all point to one factor: equilibrium (*iʿtidāl*). Some exegetes spoke about an internal equilibrium pertaining the story itself: eloquence in expression and stylistics matching the events narrated. Some spoke about the richness and diversity of characters and their closeness to the human condition (the balance between the representation of positive and negative forces in the characters, and the balance of these forces and their equivalence in the paradoxical nature of the human psyche as well). Some spoke about equilibrium in the form of divine justice, or literary poetic justice. Others spoke about an external equilibrium (external to the text): the therapeutic effect of a story and its restorative effect pointed out as emotional equilibrium on the reader's part.

Thus, the answer to the aforementioned question of equilibrium in *adab* was sought in its horizon. But, this remains an answer to the theoretical value of the literary. Is there an applied or a useful value of the literary: the '*applicatio*' or the 'validity' of the literary as well? It could be argued that the institution of *adab* and *adab* grew as a type of discourse that saw to the thriving of the human as it emphasised on equilibrium through the practice of what is known as *tawfiyat al-ʿadl* (granting justice in full measure) which is central to the functioning of any system at all levels.[70] The literary institution, *adab,* promoted this balance by granting equilibrium through its very definition, promoting equilibrium through interpersonal relations by seeing to decorum and observing civility: equilibrium in knowledge through erudition, exposure, and diverse scholarship, equilibrium in knowledge of one's own culture and other cultures—in short, being a well-rounded individual.

The therapeutic effect or external equilibrium that Ibn ʿAṭāʾ al-Iskandarī spoke about was also recognised and practiced in some of the biggest