

## Intelligence versus Power

### *Rhetorical Dynamics in Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Qur'ān*

Literature begins where history ends. This statement is not necessarily a claim for the supremacy of one discipline over another. Rather, it allows us the opportunity to engage a tradition that includes volumes of Arabic literature prior to the Qur'ān. Examination of this tradition does not necessarily imply that reading ancient Arabic literary texts has to be exclusively literary. Nor does it proclaim that the basis of the difference between the treatment of Western and non-Western texts is only an institutional one in which some texts deserve more aesthetic appreciation than others. By studying the Arabic prehistory of the Qur'ān as well as the Qur'ān in relation to its cognate literature, one is bound to better understand their linguistic and aesthetic specificities. In this chapter I seek to investigate the shared characteristics of pre-Islamic literature and the Qur'ān. In pre-Islamic poetry, as well as the Qur'ān, these specificities are measured through a highly aesthetic language that represents deeply held communal values. The link between aesthetics and ethics will be the subject of a separate chapter, but it is worth introducing the connection here as I begin to contextualize the sociolinguistic dynamics between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān. The basic argument of this chapter is that if one is seeking to understand the context in which the Qur'ān came forth, how could one not study contemporaneous and pre-Islamic Arabic poetry? The question of the relationship between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān still feels fraught to many given the complexity of the topic. In this chapter, while I argue for a connection between the two, lexically, syntactically, and imagistically, I do so while cautioning against derivativeness, precisely because of the discursive distinction of each. While the idea that the Qur'ān is "the most beautiful of speech" may fall flat to non-Arabic speakers and even appear to be merely self-flattery to non-Muslims,

who rarely take this claim seriously, it is important to note that the power of the Qur'ān does not consist solely in that speech.

To begin with, the Qur'ān consists of the same language that constitutes the very source of its value, the same language ancient Arab poets used to express their emotions, describe their surroundings, exalt their tribes, and lampoon their enemies. The nexus between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān received heated critical attention in the last century, which witnessed the emergence of a now long-retracted presumption that pre-Islamic poetry did not precede the Qur'ān but appeared after it. The English orientalist David Samuel Margoliouth (1858–1940) was the first to propose the hypothesis in 1925, followed by the Egyptian intellectual Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in 1926, who was exposed to Margoliouth's work during his graduate studies in Europe. But the argument that poems of pre-Islamic Arab peninsula were forgeries of later times has long been defeated to the point that is now absurd to hold on to such a notion.<sup>1</sup> In the last century, Theodor Nöldeke confirmed that Arabs lived in the Arabian Peninsula and composed poetry at least several centuries before the advent of Islam. Nöldeke treated pre-Islamic poems as authentic relics of the pre-Islamic past and referenced them in his research.<sup>2</sup> Even Margoliouth rescinded his own "inauthenticity thesis" years later.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar yet less sophisticated fashion, Ḥusayn, who harbored immense fascination with *fin de siècle* orientalist scholarship on the Qur'ān, read Margoliouth's postulate and applied it uncritically to his own work in the mid-1920s. To a fault, Ḥusayn admired theories of historical determinism without understanding that such theories are already based on false postulates, especially the postulate that pre-Islamic poetry may not have been produced in the historical era in which it is supposedly set. Here is Ḥusayn's thesis:

The first thing in this study that you will find shocking is that I have come to doubt the value of pre-Islamic poetry as a verifiable historical document and persist in my doubts, or say my doubts persist. I started to research, examine, read, and think until I concluded with near certitude that the larger majority of what we call pre-Islamic poetry has nothing to do with pre-Islamic times. Those poems were counterfeited in the aftermath of Islam. Those poems are more Islamic than they are pre-Islamic, representing the lives, attitudes and dispositions of Muslim communities more than any other time prior to it. I have almost no doubt that what is left of pre-Islamic poetry is an insignificant sum which does not amount to much and which cannot be deemed reliable in portraying a correct and complete picture of the pre-Islamic era.<sup>4</sup>

Ḥusayn's rationale is based on a Margoliouth-inspired conclusion that "it is inconceivable that Judaism and Christianity, two great religions of pre-Islamic Arabia, would exist and spread among the Arabs without any major references to them in pre-Islamic poetry."<sup>5</sup> While it is not accurate to assume that there was no monotheistic poetry in pre-Islamic Arabia,<sup>6</sup> it is likely that much of this poetry may not

have survived the fierce and mundane competitions of Sūq 'Ukāz poetry contests, where poets had to be absolutely original and where the emphasis was primarily on worldly and secular themes. Additionally, Judaism and Christianity were minority religions in a predominantly polytheistic society. Composing poetry in devotion to Judaism or Christianity in these notable *mufākharāt* (contests) may have looked like bringing a sword to a gun fight. Even a brief reading demonstrates how the agency of pre-Islamic poetry in the Meccan community was almost exclusively secular, celebrating tribal and ancestral supremacy, worldly gains, power, pride, sexual exploits, and other godless themes.<sup>7</sup>

Repulsed by Margoliouth's postulates, A. J. Arberry condemns them as an act of sophistry: "the sophistry—I hesitate to say dishonesty—of certain Professor Margoliouth's arguments is only too apparent, quite unworthy of a man who was undoubtedly one of the greatest erudites of his generation."<sup>8</sup> In a similar fashion, H. A. R. Gibb dismisses Margoliouth's thesis, and subsequently Ḥusayn's, on the account of its improbability. "It would be as impossible to 'reconstruct' the poetry of *Jahiliyya* from the poetry of the Umayyad period," contends Gibb, "as it would be to 'reconstruct' Elizabethan from Caroline drama."<sup>9</sup> Since then, few scholars have engaged pre-Islamic poetry more methodically. Jaroslav Stetkevych's magisterial work, *Muhammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth*, studies the rich relationship between the Qur'ān and the tradition of ancient Arabic. Stetkevych reconstructs the story of the destruction of Thamūd, the ancient Arab tribe of North Arabia mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'ān. He connects the narrative and the non-Qur'ānic story of the Prophet Muḥammad's discovery of a golden bough at the site the people of Thamūd thought had been demolished by an act of divine wrath.

This textual interviewing of ancient Arabic tradition shows the extent to which the relationship between the Qur'ān and pre-Islamic narratives opens up new and much needed horizons for critical, philological, and mythological insights into the intricate connections between the literary and the social in the fabrics of pre- and post-Qur'ānic Arab communities.<sup>10</sup> In this context, Suzanne Stetkevych brings fresh structuralist analysis and meaningfulness to the understanding of the pre-Islamic Arabic *qaṣīda*, especially its major motifs and their relationship to the Qur'ān. In her path-breaking work, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual*, S. Stetkevych investigates local elements that carry Arabic poetics to superior aesthetic horizons. For example, the she-camel, who plays an essential role in the motif of *raḥīl* (passage, departure) in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, is, for S. Stetkevych, "the preeminent symbol of culture, the 'staff of life.' The she-camel provided not only transport for men and goods but also hair for tents and food in the form of meat, milk, and blood (drunk from a slit vein in times of dearth)."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, camels were the barometer of wealth, measuring the value of human life, blood price or bride price, and so on. S. Stetkevych, who has successfully redefined our understanding of the pre-Islamic ode, brilliantly

links the social value of camels, with their germane and innately rich symbolism of “fecundity and prosperity, a sign of divine blessing,” to the narrative of the prophet Ṣālīḥ and the she-camel in the Qur’ān, as a proof of his prophecy, thus deepening the innate ties between the text and context of the Qur’ān, on the one hand, and the indigenous social prehistory of the Arabian Peninsula, on the other.<sup>12</sup>

Outside this small circle of literary Arabists, however, the relationship between pre-Islamic literature and the Qur’ān continues to be a neglected topic.<sup>13</sup> An obvious and important reason for this negligence is *linguistic incompetence*, a term that can serve to remind us of the inherent difficulty of the Arabic language. Both native and nonnative learners of Arabic know that it takes decades, if not one’s entire life, to master classical Arabic, the only veritable access to any reliable scholarship on the Qur’ān in its original language. When we speak of the Arabic language of the Qur’ān, we also speak of the way in which its grammatologies, phonology, homophonies, ambiguities, polysemes, synonymies, antinomies, denotations, connotations, and associations work within the text: in short, a whole material galaxy of this immaterial space we call *Arabic*. And this is just one component. While meaningfully high in significations, the Arabic words of the Qur’ān do not alone make basic units of meaning. Arabic syntax and sentences do. But again, they do not do so in or for themselves; rather, as ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d.1078/1081) emphasizes, they do so as *naẓm*—namely, as elements in a more complex signifying system, whose multiple mechanisms, including binary oppositions and figurations, come together to organize *relationally* that cluster of themes we call *ma‘nā* (meaning/signification).<sup>14</sup>

The linguistic difficulty of Arabic might explain why the push to situate the Qur’ān within the historical context of late antiquity has remained peculiarly dismissive of ancient Arabic literature. It simply does not make sense to dismiss a corpus that lends deep and direct insight into understanding the Qur’ān, not just aesthetically or sociolinguistically, but also thematically. This dismissal is ironic given the fact that close readings of antique literary texts have consistently been applied to the Hebrew Bible. Popular publication venues, such as the series *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments* (Texts from the World of the Old Testament) are dedicated exactly for that purpose. “Given the degree to which Western scholars value a critical historical approach,” writes Bauer, “it seems odd that so much of contemporary research into the history of the Qur’ān seems to be able to get by without any real or serious critical consideration of the texts contemporary with it.”<sup>15</sup> In exposing the inexplicable neglect of ancient Arabic literature as a primary source for studying the Qur’ān, Bauer maintains that understanding pre-Islamic Arabic poetry not only leads to more responsible and nuanced translations of the Qur’ān into European languages, but is bound to correct methodological approaches toward the Qur’ān and its formative tradition.<sup>16</sup>

The practice of excluding ancient Arabic literature or Arabic sources in general still remains a sore source of discomfort for the field, especially when it is no longer disputable that the tradition of Arabic poetry has its roots in the

pre-Islamic era and has to a large extent accurately survived in the available written Muslim sources.<sup>17</sup> In an essay on “The Nature of Arab Unity Before Islam,” von Grunebaum relies on pre-Islamic literary works to make an important distinction between pre-Islamic ‘*Arab al-Shamāl* (Northern Arabs) and *al-Badw* (Bedouin), one in which “the Northern Arabs constituted a *Kulturnation* rather than a *Staatsnation*.”<sup>18</sup> These two terms, which von Grunebaum borrows from Friedrich Meinecke’s early examinations of nationalism in Germany,<sup>19</sup> in reality differentiate between two forms of European nation-states. It is difficult to agree that pre-Islamic Bedouins were a *Staatsnation avant la lettre*, even though some South Arabian communities, such as the Ghassanid and the Lakhmid principalities, which were sometimes referred to as ‘Arab al-Furs wa- ‘Arab al-Yūnān (Arabs of Persia and Arabs of Greece), grew as dependencies of larger non-Arab political structures surrounding them. If we agree with this anachronistic adoption of the term “nations” to describe pre-Islamic tribal communities, or even see these communities as microcosmic variations on Meinecke’s categories, then von Grunebaum may be drawing a meaningful analogy in classifying pre-Islamic urban settlements like Mecca, al-Ṭā’if, and Yathrib as a *Kulturnation*. A “cultural nation,” in the sense von Grunebaum applies the term, characterizes elusive large communities with a social structure unaffected by political shifts and unidentifiable by one single individual tribe or a specific political unit, though still subscribing to “a concept of the ideal Arab.”<sup>20</sup> This ideal Arab, and its adjective “Arabic,” argues von Grunebaum, is traceable to the Qur’ān and pre-Islamic prose, but not articulated much in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.<sup>21</sup>

Von Grunebaum’s keen interest in classical Arabic stems from his preoccupation with universal facts, and in particular with how pre-Islamic poetry offers its vocabulary and textual content “a description of the mental structure, or in other ways, psychological truth” of pre-Islamic Arabs.<sup>22</sup>

The reference to poetry is a key discovery in von Grunebaum’s argument that has allowed him to make a strong case for preventing a misunderstanding that pre-Islamic Arabs constituted a holistic “Arabic” unity.<sup>23</sup> When pre-Islamic Northern Arabs distinguished themselves from the Southern Arabs,<sup>24</sup> they did so in terms of differences in habitat, language varieties, and social and religious practices. “The notorious antagonism between the Northern and Southern Arabs, Qays and Kalb, Muḍar and Qaḥṭān,” argues von Grunebaum, “occurred within the ‘Northern’ area of pre-Islamic history and cultural integration.”<sup>25</sup>

In a more focused study of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as a document of early Christian figurations of creation, Kirill Dmitriev discovers in a poem by the Christian pre-Islamic poet ‘Adi Ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī significant affinities with the Qur’ān text.<sup>26</sup> Dmitriev concludes that despite the lexical affinities between ‘Adi ibn Zayd’s poem and the Qur’ān, “the Qur’ān is very selective in its adoption of biblical tradition” and “unlike the Bible, the Qur’ānic stories of creation and paradise are not comprehensive chronological reports, but are evoked in a number of separate passages with clear hermeneutical implications.”<sup>27</sup> What is remarkable for

our purposes in Dmitriev's argument is not the affirmation that the Qur'ān has a "striking admonitory intention"<sup>28</sup> or that it is "less concerned with the narration of history than with presenting its ethically relevant message,"<sup>29</sup> but the Qur'ān's conscious communicative tone. "The Qur'ānic message," emphasizes Dmitriev, "does not unfold in a silent vacuum . . . it does not explain something absolutely new to its audience but tries instead to draw out the moral of something already known."<sup>30</sup> This heightened dialogical attentiveness to its intended listeners makes it indispensable, even for proponents of the historical-critical method, to understand the Qur'ān without studying pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.<sup>31</sup>

Yet despite all this, classical Arabic literature has remained peripheral to Western historians of the Qur'ān, even Western historians of the Bible. It could well be argued that the historians of the Qur'ān are not the same as the historians of the Bible, but what is at stake is the determining forces of historical categories when it comes to the inclusion or exclusion of literature. As we have seen from the examples above, the field of Arabic literature does not have a "problem" with the classical sources of Arabic literature. On the contrary, classical Arabic literature, which includes the pre-Islamic, is a cornerstone in the foundation of Arabic *belles lettres*. Since the early decade of the twentieth century, classical Arabic literature has received pointed attention from scholars of Arabic all over the world, in the Arabic speaking world (especially in Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq), in Europe, and in the Americas. Even today, classical Arabic poetry is approached in terms of its biographical, historical, socio-economic, phonological, semantic, aesthetic, and psychoanalytical significations. Our engagement with it thus comes from a strong position of responsibility toward it, and more so toward its future status in world history and literature, in order to create a space for de-othering pre-Islamic Arabic literature so it can transform what we understand or what we think we understand about its history and our own.

When it comes to the relationship between pre-Islamic Arabic literature and the Qur'ān, the literary and linguistic manifestations of these texts not only furnish the ground for understanding the Qur'ān, but they are what makes this understanding possible. Pre-Islamic Arabic literature is not an oral emblem or an enclosed hermetic space. True, all poems are governed by a structure of musicality, meter, and rhyme scheme, but they also differ in style, tone, manner, emphasis, argument, and signature. Above all, they are unique in that they respond to a particular situation—to celebrations, calamities, or even other poems. In so doing, they call for other responses and intimately remind us of what is literary about the practice we call literature.

To understand this level of rhetoric in the pre-Islamic Arabic literary tradition, one must see that the logic of *balāgha* rests on the harmony between the multiple possibilities that an utterance in-classical Arabic could afford to offer and the distinct articulations of this utterance, say, in the Qur'ān. And this is just on the semantic level of lexicons, which, in this case, unravels the depths of morphological signification in the language of pre-Islamic poetry *vis-a-vis* the language of the Qur'ān. In this context, Bauer is right. The language of the Qur'ān must

establish itself as unique and distinct from the language of poetry. "Any attempt to make the language more like that of contemporary poetic expression," writes Bauer convincingly, "would have blurred the differences between poetic and prophetic speech."<sup>32</sup> However, it is difficult to accept Bauer's statement that "the Quran is the complete antithesis of contemporary poetry."<sup>33</sup> It is true that a balance has to be established between the two discourses. One must emphasize, however, that the distinction between the aesthetics of poetry and that of the Qur'ān is by no means antithetical. It is much more complex and much more intricate than mere antithesis and therefore entails patient linguistic exegesis to reflect on the two discourses and to carefully explain the juxtaposition.

I argue that the Qur'ān is an opening after the tropological discourse of pre-Islamic poetry had already triumphantly tested the limits of the rhetorical brilliance of the Arabic language. I further argue that the language of the Qur'ān creates a portal that opens a passage from one level of rhetoric to another, or even a pushing of rhetorical language to a completely different horizon. It would therefore be hard to embrace views that position both pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān as one wholistic discourse. Richard Serrano, for instance, argues that the Qur'ān and poetry "are two sides of a single intertextured Qur'āno-Arabic discourse."<sup>34</sup> Linguistically and rhetorically, this is a difficult case to make as such; it is an even more difficult case to make for pre-Islamic poetry. But, to Serrano's point, both the Qur'ān and poetry lexically draw on a sociolinguistic and literary heritage of *Ayyām al-ʿArab* (chronicles of the Arabs), which explains why there is a certain continuity of the pre-Arabic poetic tradition well into the Umayyad and even ʿAbbasid dynasties, as well as a substantial reliance of postclassical *tafsīr* and commentary on the latter in order to explain the former.

Despite its obvious doctrinal biases, we learn to learn from the tradition of *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*. While it is undeniable that the tradition of *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* carries inherent doctrinal biases, it is important to acknowledge that we can still glean valuable insights from it. Moreover, when we shift our focus to postclassical Arabic literary *Iʿjāz* theorists and critics, we find that they have a wealth of knowledge and perspectives to enrich the field of literary aesthetics. Postclassical Arabic literary theorists and critics have much to offer the field of literary aesthetics. At their hands, Arabic literary criticism became one of the earliest world traditions to establish a sophisticated system of tropes and literary terms to highlight the affinities between poetry, prose, and the Qur'ān. This is how Abū al-Ḥasan al-Rummānī (909–94), one of the earliest scholars to categorize and theorize aesthetic imagery, arrives at the conclusion that the Qur'ān is *nāqīḍ lil-ʿāda* (that which interrupts/contradicts existing norms).<sup>35</sup> The linguistic and rhetorical relationship between pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and the Qur'ān is exactly that: a relationship of interruption. I define this relationship or rather juxtaposition as a passage from rhetorical intelligence to rhetorical power. Let me explain this further: intelligence and power are not antithetical to each other. There is a power of intelligence, since intelligence has its own power. But there is also power that is not commanded by



intelligence, so they are not polar opposites, nor should they exclude one another. Nor is this relationship even “a negation of poetry” as Bauer claims,<sup>36</sup> since neither is a progression or a regression from the other. While there are clear thematic divergences, the relationship is simply one of transformation, which can be explained by juxtaposing some examples of the use of the term *layl* (night) in both pre-Islamic Arabic and the Qur’ān. The night is indeed a perversive motif in classical Arabic.<sup>37</sup> It would be easy to find hundreds of poetic passages describing *layl* in pre-Islamic poetry as well as manifold references to it in the Qur’ān. In comparing the function of the night in *Jāhili* poetry and the Qur’ān, I would therefore limit myself to a few illuminating examples from Imru’ al-Qays and al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī.

In pre-Islamic classical Arabic, ليل denotes “night” or “evening.” The classical lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr defines ليل as follows:

الليل عقيب النهار، ومبدؤه من غروب الشمس . . . ، الليل ضد النهار، والليل ظلام والنهار ضياء . . . ،  
والليل اسم لكل ليلة . . . ، وليلة ليلاء وليلى طويلة، شديدة، صعبة، قيل هي أشد ليالي الشهر ظلمة . . . ،  
وليل أليك ولائل ومليل . . . أرادوا به الكثرة<sup>38</sup>

The night is that which immediately follows daytime. It begins at sunset . . . the night is the opposite of the day. The night is darkness and the day is light. The night is the name for every *layla*, *laylā’*, *laylā* (evening, night). These names refer to long and harsh nights, said to be the darkest night in a month . . . adjectives like *layl mulayyil*, *lā’il*, or *alīl* are meant to indicate plenitude of night.

In pre-Islamic poetic parlance, significations of *layl* turn the term into a fierce competition in aesthetic virtuosity among poets. Regardless of the authenticity of feelings, the aesthetic of the night is lodged in the form of the ode, even though that form shields itself against the monotony of symmetry through prosodic meters. In this metered contest, two poets, Imru’ al-Qays (d. 500) and al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī (d. 604), stand out at the top of this aesthetic ladder. Imru’ al-Qays’s celebrated lines of *layl* are perhaps some of the earliest and most pioneering examples of pathetic fallacy known to world literature.<sup>39</sup> In this fallacy of natural subjectivity, *layl* participates in a complex simile. The poet sees the night as waves of a sea that have accumulated a darkness:

وَلَيْلٌ كَمَوْجِ الْبَحْرِ أَرَحَى سُدُولَهُ	عَلَيَّ بِأَنْوَاعِ الْهُمُومِ لِيَبْتَلِي
فَقُلْتُ لَهُ لَمَّا تَمَطَّى بِصُلْبِهِ	وَأَرَدَفَ أَعْجَازًا وَنَاءَ بِكُلِّكِلِي
أَلَا أَيُّهَا اللَّيْلُ الطَّوِيلُ أَلَا أَنْجَلِي	بَصْبِحْ وَمَا الْإِصْبَاحُ مِنْكَ بِأَمْتَلِ
فِيَا لَكَ مِنْ لَيْلٍ كَأَنَّ نَجْوَمَهُ	بِكُلِّ مَغَارِ الْفَتْلِ شَدَّتْ بِيذْبِلِ <sup>40</sup>

A night like waves of the sea laid its drapes on me/with sorts of sorrow to test me.  
I said to it, when it stretched its spine/ stressed its buttocks, and pressed its chest,



“O lingering night, dissipate/with a morning, a morning which won’t be any better  
O what a night whose stars are hauled/with all tight ropes to mount Yadhbul.”

Imru’ al-Qays paints a portrait of his personal affliction, one in which the night becomes the objective correlative of a general mood of despondency. In this complex image, the night resembles the accumulated waves of the sea that keep flowing darkness mixed with sadness in his direction. The night is as motionless as a picture with painted waves on a painted ocean. The stars are tied to rocks in an image of reverse anchorage where they act like ships on a sea. The implication is that the night is long and not going anywhere. The poet/persona is no longer able to speak directly about his sadness and has thus cast it onto the elements—speaking his pain through nature, through a painfully unending night. The poem’s pathetic fallacy is itself an element of intention. In Imru’ al-Qays’s ode, meaning is constituted by the relation to the night as the most effective means for the aesthetic articulation of suffering.

Al-Nābigha must have known of al-Qays’s ode and must have marveled at this unrivaled depiction of the night. Poets who come after other poets have achieved the highest degree of rhetorical brilliance are always haunted by this after-ness. Afraid of being derivative in contests of originality, they possess a vaulting desire to equal or surpass the previous work. Al-Nābigha lived affluently at the court of the Lakhmid Arab kings of al-Ḥira. Known for his poetic genius (from which the Arabic word *nābigha* derives), he was pursued by many kings in order that he commemorate their heroic exploits in his poetry, an assignment not unfamiliar to most classical Arabic poets of pre-Islam and classical Islam. Soon, al-Nābigha got himself caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of two rival kings, ‘Amr ibn al-Ḥārith, king of the Ghassanids, and al-Nu‘mān, king of the Lakhmids. When al-Nābigha’s tribe lost a battle to the Ghassanids, he rushed to compose a “night” poem in praise of ‘Amr ibn al-Ḥārith and his soldiers in order to seek refuge in Shām and prevent more bloodshed:

وليل أقاسيه بطني الكواكب	كليني لهم يا أميمة ناصب
وليس الذي يرعى النجوم بأيب	تطاول حتى قلت ليس بمنقوص
تضاعف فيه الحزن من كل جانب	بصدري أراح الليل عازب همه
.....	.....
كتائب من غسان غير أشائب	وتفت له بالنصر إذ قيل قد غزت
وتوقد بالصفا نارا الخبايب <sup>41</sup>	تقد السلوقي المضاعف نسجه

let me attend to a sadness, Umayma / And suffer a night of slow-moving stars  
persisting till I thought it were unending / and the shepherd of the stars is sleepless  
A chest, which the night should distance from daily cares / holds a sadness swelling  
from all sides.

.....  
 I was certain he would win once it was said / pure-blooded forces of Ghassan invaded  
 [their swords] shattered the double layers of their Seleucid armor / and lightened—  
 when they stroke their enemy's helmets—the taillights of fireflies.

The antithesis between the gloomy opening of the *qaṣīda* (where the sluggishness of a starry night in the manner of Imru' al-Qays evokes pain in the poet's heart) and the exciting sword blazes in the Ghassanid-led battlefield scene creates a powerful dramatic shift. To be sure, the lines on the night at the beginning of the poem is conventional in *nasīb* and other love poetry and may not necessarily form a thematic correlation with the battle scene. Still, the semantic associations of the night in the poem connotes a symbiotic relationship hard to ignore. Poetry often connotes more than it denotes. The light of the fireflies is only visible at night, and while the references to lightning bugs is figurative—namely, as a *tashbīh* (simile/comparison) for the sparks made by the swords, it still creates an antithesis to the idleness of the starry night at the opening of the poem. Even though there is no direct reference to the battle taking place at night, the light of the “night” fireflies suggests a nocturnal warfare. Moreover, the contrast between stasis and movement—that is, the heavy-hearted condition of the poet in a static night versus the action on the battlefield, not only signifies a palpable praise of the Ghassanid soldiers, but it also suggests an incomparable and superior military quality in warfare. In a unique hyperbole, we see the flashings of Ghassanid swords—when they tear through the chain mail armor and clash with the helmets of their enemy—flickering across the battlefield like fireflies dancing in the night sky. The implication, and the praise attached to it, is far from vague: al-Nābigha invests in a remarkably exaggerated figurations of a “night” trope to hail 'Amr ibn al-Hārith and his squad of Ghassanid soldiers as superior and unrivaled masters of warfare.

Yet, when the poem reached the ears of the Lakhmid king al-Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir, the archenemy of the Ghassanids, who also happened to be a generous patron for al-Nābigha, it did not take long for the poet to fall out of grace. When al-Nābigha finally decided to return to al-Ḥira, he knew he must have offended King al-Nu'mān too grievously to warrant a pardon. The only way out, the only way a poet of al-Nābigha's caliber would know how to dig himself out of this poetic mishap, was poetry itself. But this time, not only his poetry, but the trope of *layl* had to be different from itself. What this meant was that the poet had to rival not only the poetic brilliance of al-Qays but his own poeticity; he had to engineer a life-saving poem that would dwarf his own hyperbolic trope in his panegyric to 'Amr ibn al-Hārith and his Ghassanid soldiers. This was one of the rare occasions in the tradition of Arabic poetry where a poet's life hinged on the aesthetic, indeed on a specific “re-aestheticization” of his own poetic trope of the night. Just as Odysseus was able to clad himself in lofty words to cover his nakedness when

he washed up onto the island of Skheria and faced King Alkinoos's daughter, Nausicaa, so too did al-Nābigha have to find the right image to win back his life and regain amnesty from a wrathful king. This is when the signification of *layl* reaches a new height. In this "forgive-me-please" poem, al-Nābigha brings back the night trope, uses it against itself, cancels his own image of triumphant Ghassanids and delineates a poetic mood that mixes fear with desire and power with hope and regret. Al-Nābigha's poetry, it seems, is a free art that does not need to defend itself against the rebuke that it causes to others; it simply meets this rebuke with another as it affirms its subsidiary relation to power. Certainly this holds true for the production of all pre-Islamic poetry, where a poet could start a poem that he might or might not complete, allowing it to survive as a fragment, or, as is the case with al-Nābigha, could compose a poem that is blatantly dialectical with another of his own making, either because he is frightened and bored, or because he detests being accused of repetition or lack of originality. Unlike the Qur'ān, pre-Islamic poetry has the power to compliment mortal enemies and harbor its own opposite without losing the value of its aesthetic imagination:

فإنَّكَ كالليل الذي هو مُدْرِكِي      وإنْ خَلْتُ أَنَّ المُنْتَأَى عَنْكَ وَاسِعُ  
خَطَاطِيفُ حُجْنٍ فِي حَبَالٍ مَتِينَةٍ      تَمُدُّ بِهَا أَيْدِي إِلَيْكَ نَوَازِعُ<sup>42</sup>

You are like the night that will overtake me / and I thought the distance from you  
was vast enough  
Curved hooks in strong ropes/ extended by hands drawing toward you.

Interestingly enough, al-Nābigha describes himself as if caught in a deep well, like a bucket to be hauled up. The power dynamic in these poetic lines highlights a deep antithesis between a helpless and chased persona (the poet) and an all-mighty king whose domain is the night, who *is* the night, thus portraying a state of helplessness and inescapability. The sense of fear that overwhelms the poet reflects panic and anxiety, especially in the certainty that the king will eventually capture him. The inevitability evoked in the predicate *mudriki* sinks deep in pre-Islamic poetry but also in Qur'ānic diction, where the word is associated with dismay, defenselessness, and surrender, as in the moment when the Israelites reached the end of the shore and could see the pharaoh closing in on them with no way out, just before Moses applies his staff to split open the Red Sea:

فَلَمَّا تَرَأَى الْجَمْعَانِ قَالَ أَصْحَابُ مُوسَى إِنَّا لَمُدْرَكُونَ<sup>43</sup>

When the two groups could see one another, the companions of Moses said, "We are certainly captured."

Or with “death,”<sup>44</sup> as when the pharaoh becomes certain that the water will overtake him and he is soon to drown:

حَتَّى إِذَا أَدْرَكَهُ الْغَرَقُ قَالَ ءَامَنْتُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا الَّذِي ءَامَنْتُ بِهِ بَنُو إِسْرَءِيلَ وَأَنَا مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ<sup>45</sup>

When drowning began to overtake him, he said, “I believe that there is no god except the one whom the children of Israel believe in, and I am among the submitters.”

In recasting the night trope, the mighty king al-Nu‘mān, who has a reputation for slaying poets in cold blood, is likened to the night that is sure to come and overtake the poet no matter where he might be hiding. This pathetic fallacy points to the ineluctability of capture but also to the supernatural power of the king. It is as if al-Nābigha’s poetry is in dialogue with itself: if he has previously praised ‘Amr ibn al-Hārith and his Ghassanid soldiers as the masters of the night combat, he is now praising king al-Nu‘mān as the night incarnate, the night whose power and dominion are unavoidable. In this well-thought apologetics, *layl* is at once a vehicle for the king’s supernatural authority and the poet’s vulnerability, enveloped in deep hope that the poem is aesthetically intelligent enough to please the king and merit his pardon.

*Layl* then as a signifier in pre-Islamic poetry becomes a sign of history, not the progressive or influential “history” in the periodizational or late antiquarian sense, but history in a materialist sense, a textual history—that is, where semantic significations mark an event in language. There is history from the moment poets like al-Qays and al-Nābigha created tropes from words like *layl* and compelled the emergence of a language of *balāgha* out of a language of everyday use. Thanks to pre-Islamic poetry, *layl* will simply never be the same since its denotative continuity is disrupted with a new discourse of rhetorical intelligence. This disruption does not mean that *layl* would not continue to be used to refer to a common “night,” but that the tropological “night” in pre-Islamic poetry has now added to our cognition of *layl* a new dimension that, while not negating the performative use of *layl* in everyday language, would still demand to be recognized as the highest achievement in the tropological system of pre-Islamic Arabic aesthetics, an achievement that would make it difficult, if not impossible, to improve on. These figurations are unequaled not because the voice of the poet speaks “the night,” but because, through their language, the poems impersonate what is unspeakable in the language of nature.

The aesthetics of *layl* in the Qur’ān carry the same significations we find in Imru’ al-Qays and al-Nābigha but are also markedly different from their figurations in pre-Islamic poetry. In the Qur’ān, *layl* transforms from a rhetoric of intelligence to a rhetoric of power. It is true that the semantic interconnections between *layl* and *mudrikī* invoked in al-Nābigha continue to retain their same performative functions in the Qur’ān, as in the following example from Qur’ān 36:

لَا السَّمْسُ يَنْبَغِي لَهَا أَنْ تُدْرِكَ الْقَمَرَ وَلَا اللَّيْلُ سَابِقُ النَّهَارِ ۚ وَكُلٌّ فِي فَلَكٍ يَسْبَحُونَ

Neither it is for the sun to overtake the moon nor is it for the night to surpass the day.  
Each swims in an orbit of its own. (36:40)

But the Qur'ān comes into its own by distinguishing the significations of its language from that of the preexisting discourse, a discourse that also claims for itself the right to be highly rhetorical. As we see in the examples of al-Qays and al-Nābigha, the rhetoric of pre-Islamic poetry avows a self-affirming mortal human nature. Depictions of mortality in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, which I address in more detail shortly, demonstrate that the two discourses of poetry and the Qur'ān are separated by an unsurpassable void. At the very moment when the Qur'ān reaches a fulfillment of itself, it lays out a totality of an incommensurable mode of object perception. The reference to *layl* in the Qur'ān confirms this discursive separability.

Take, for instance, the *layl* in Qur'ān 36:40, which indicates the common understanding of the night—namely, as a recurring period of darkness enveloping the earth every twenty-four hours. Yet the Qur'ānic night is also a negative aesthetic, a personification without agency, always passivized, constantly controlled. Or, if there is agency, it is a divine and creationist one. The night in Qur'ān 36:40 is not a projection of sadness, or a scene for military prowess, or even an image of a terrifying king. The Qur'ān *owns* the night. Suddenly, we are witnessing a figurative metamorphosis whereby *layl* transforms into a phenomenon functioning within an orbit that owes its existence to a metaphysical being. In the Qur'ān, *layl* becomes a manifestation of divine order and a sign of a preordained creation that cannot act on its own. What thus marks the discontinuity between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān is not an “antithesis” between two conceptual understandings of the night. The positionality of the Qur'ānic *layl* does not emerge from a discourse of poetic talent keen on the use of a word to project sadness or fear, or to create a mythical simile of a mighty king. It is, rather, a difference between rhetorical intelligence and rhetorical power. Whereas poetic intelligence functions from within gifted yet anthropologically determined limits, the rhetorical power of Qur'ānic language renounces the overshadowing motive of self-assertion. It conceives of referents like *layl* in a completely different relationship, one that severs all tropological projections with human life. This does not mean that the Qur'ān does not compare humans to elements of nature, but it is always a figuration predicated on deeds. Al-Rummānī identifies this type of comparison in terms of *tashbih balāgha* (rhetorical simile), where the deeds of unbelievers are likened to a mirage in Qur'ān 24: 39:

فتشبيه البلاغة كتشبيه أعمال الكفار بالسراب . . . فمن ذلك قوله تعالى {والذين كفروا أعمالهم كسراب بقيعة يحسبه الظمآن ماء حتى إذا جاءه لم يجده شيئاً}. فهذا بيان قد أخرج مالا تقع عليه الحاسة إلى ما تقع عليه، وقد اجتمع في بطلان المتوهم مع شدة الحاجة وعظم الفاقة.<sup>46</sup>

An example of a rhetorical simile is when the deeds of unbelievers are likened to a mirage, as when God says, may He be exalted, says: “those who disbelieve, their deeds are like a mirage in a vast desert which a thirsty man would mistake for water but when he reaches it, he will find nothing.” This type of rhetorical eloquence likens what is not perceived by the senses to what the senses can indeed perceive, thus

bringing the two parts of the simile together to portray the falsehood of the presumption despite the dire need and the great lack.

But it turns out, even though al-Rummānī stops shy of including the following verse, that 24:39 and 24:40 are interlocked in a dual allegorical act of two similes of the wasted deeds of unbelievers. The second simile that follows the mirage simile further intensifies the allegorical relationship between unbelievers and their zero-sum deeds. The trope of deeds thus moves from desert to sea, complementing the trope of a false vision of water (mirage) with another of blindness in a dark night at sea, thus doubling its depiction of unbelievers as having sight without insight and as living in blindness without light:

أَوْ كَظُلُمَاتٍ فِي بَحْرٍ لُجِّيٍّ يَغْشَاهُ مَوْجٌ مِّنْ فَوْقِهِ مَوْجٌ مِّنْ فَوْقِهِ سَحَابٌ ۚ ظُلُمَاتٌ بَعْضُهَا فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ إِذَا أَخْرَجَ يَدَهُ لَمْ يَكُنْ يَرَاهَا ۗ وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ مِن نُّورٍ

Or [their deeds are] like layers of darkness in a deep sea, with waves piling on top of waves, topped by dark clouds. Darkness upon darkness! If he stretches out his hand, he can hardly see it. And whoever God does not bless with light shall have no light! (24:40).

Here the night is not mentioned by name but is implied in the atmospheric spirit of the verse. Readers of Imru' al-Qays's poetry would sense a similar piling and accumulation of darkness in this verse, except that the absent night is not likened to the waves of the sea. Instead, the night collaborates with the sea and the clouds to produce a condition of pitch blackness. The darkness [of the night] in Qur'an 24:40 is juxtaposed to the brightness of the day in the preceding verse (24:39). In other words, the extended rhetorical simile, as al-Rummānī calls it, brings together an optimal degree of visibility that leads to a false form of seeing and an ultimate darkness that makes such seeing impossible. Deep water makes it difficult for the light to penetrate it, thus resulting in darkness. This darkness is not only already enhanced by night but also intensified by accumulated waves and thick clouds. This powerful comparative simile, according to which the deeds of unbelievers are just as misguided as those following illusionary mirages in the desert or vainly trying to make their way through impenetrable darkness in the sea as portrayed in 24:39–40, produces a shattering depiction of loss and blindness. Neither can a desert mirage slake an unbeliever's thirst nor can a condition of pitch blackness allow one to find the light in a sea darkly. The allegorical, inter-verse oscillation between two illusions, the illusion of seeing and the illusion of blindness, is not brought forth to evoke an emotional state of sadness or dejection, but to drive home an eschatological trope that doubly approximates the total failing of the unethical deeds of unbelievers. In other words, there is no pathetic

fallacy in the Qur'ān, no room for nature that mimics human emotions. The night does not embody our cares, nor does it incarnate the worst of our fears. This abandonment is itself a radical break, a discontinuity based on the belief that there is something else to the night, something more serious than bemoaning the departure of the beloved's encampment and something worse than being captured or killed by a livid king. This thematic distance from mortal life fundamentally distinguishes the Qur'ān from poetry. Not only this. On the level of form, while both pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān are historically conditioned to manifest an aesthetic inherently oral in nature—another complex and immense issue difficult to get into here—the Qur'ān does not think of itself as poetry; nor is it thought of as poetry by the learned community of its contemporary audience.<sup>47</sup> Nor again is aesthetic appreciation of language limited to the poetic. This is certainly not the case with the Arabic tradition. While some, as the Qur'ān mentions, may have hurriedly called it “poetry” and labeled Muḥammad as a “poet” to play down the text's communal appeal, this labeling was conceived of in contempt and ridicule. Al-Jurjānī reminds us that the contemporary community of Muḥammad knew quite well that he was not a poet and that the Qur'ān was not poetry:

أما دلالة الأقوال فكثيرة منها حديث ابن المغيرة روي أنه جاء حتى أتى قريشاً فقال: إن الناس يجتمعون غداً بالموسم، وقد فشا أمر هذا الرجل في الناس فهم سائلوكم عنه فماذا تردون عليهم؟ فقالوا مجنون يخرق، فقال: يأتيه فيكلمونه فيجدونه صحيحاً عادلاً فيكذبونكم! قالوا: نقول هو شاعر. قال: هم العرب، وقد روى الشعر، وفيهم الشعراء، وقوله ليس يشبه الشعر، فيكذبونكم.<sup>48</sup>

Narrative evidence [of the Qur'ān's inimitability] abounds. Among the stories is the account of Ibn al-Mughīra. It was narrated that he went to the tribe of Quraysh and informed them that there would be a gathering of people at the [pilgrimage] festival the next day, while news of this man [Muḥammad] had spread fast. He told them that people would ask about him, and inquired what they would see when people asked about him. They said, “we would say he is mad and manic.” “But they would come and talk to him,” he replied, “and when they would judge him to be sound and fair, then they would call you liars.” They said, “we would say then that he is a poet.” “They are the Arabs,” he answered, “they recite poetry and they have poets living among them. Whatever he says does not resemble poetry, and then they would call you liars.”

Unlike al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 996/998) and al-Jurjānī, al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) polarizes the relationship between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān, rendering the former antithetical to the latter.<sup>49</sup> Over the last one hundred years of literary theory, we have seen radicalism like that of al-Bāqillānī's occur over and again—that is, when a new school of thought delegitimizes the older one, which it thoroughly interrupts. Al-Bāqillānī's mistake is similar in that he tried to open a space for the aesthetics of the Qur'ān in the Arabic canon, but thought to do so at the expense of denigrating pre-Islamic poetry. Criticizing pre-Islamic poetry puts al-Bāqillānī in the same paradoxical situation occupied by his own critique, a position by which radicals take on the presumption that they are somehow against the



mundane, whereas it is the concept of the mundane as an aesthetic category and a poetic choice that is thereby under discussion. Still, the flare of religious fanaticism in al-Bāqillānī's criticism of Imru' al-Qays and of pre-Islamic poetry *writ large* is useful for understanding radical theology's strategies of containment. Exposing this logic will at least help deconstruct the concepts that seek to demonize a literary aesthetics without which any appreciation of the Qur'ān's own aesthetics is inconceivable.

It is therefore crucial to emphasize that the Qur'ān does not necessarily trivialize poetry, but it aestheticizes language in a different discourse. When experiencing the reference to *layl* in Imru' al-Qays and al-Nābigha, the audience can sense the pathetic fallacy in the element of nature. But the Qur'ān invites its contemporary audience to engage with the statement, "there is more to life and death than a king chasing a prodigal poet in the desert." Al-Nābigha's plight may merit one's *ta'āţuf* (empathy) and may instill some sense of *shafaqa* (pity) and *rajā'* (hope), but it does not instill *khawf* (fear) or *rahba* (terror) in the reader's mind or heart. A reader of Imru' al-Qays will marvel at his poetic genius, identify with his sufferings, and sympathize with the loss of his beloved and his kingship. The same reader will see in the Qur'ān a different use of language, a calling for abandonment, a ridicule of self-preservation, and a redefinition of survival. In other words, the Qur'ān asks its audience to be unconditionally pious and to consider that much more is at stake, that one's whole existence hangs in the balance, whereas a loss of *ḥabība* (beloved) or *diyār* (dwelling/encampment) or even fortune and status can always be reconciled somehow. The discourse of power in the Qur'ān is all-encompassing and is also terrifying, whereas the loss of the lover, or the disruption of happiness, evokes sadness and empathy that are a part of our human existence. What distinguishes a rhetoric of power from a rhetoric of intelligence (or poetic talent) is the sense of awe the former instills in its receiver.

There is, to be sure, a noticeable absence of transcendental anxiety in pre-Islamic poetry. Neither infinity nor eternity—in the sense of infinite or endless time after death—seems to bother the poets. In the Qur'ān, however, the entire *rahba*, the unease that accompanies its enveloping awe, arises not necessarily from the failure to stand up to the direct rhetorical *taḥaddī* (challenge) it poses to its audience, or even from the *ṣarfa* or rather *ṣarf al-himam 'an al-mu'āraḍa* (turning their ambitions away, or distracting them, from emulation),<sup>50</sup> but rather from the incapacity of the classical poetic mind, with all its imaginative talent, to tap into a mimetic poetics that rivals the magnitude of this Qur'ānic *rahba*. The closest English equivalent to *rahba* that I could think of is fear, or terror, or something in between, which is reminiscent of what Edmund Burke describes as a state where the pleasurable experience of the "beautiful" comes into stark opposition with the fearful experience of the "sublime," causing pain at the same time that it causes pleasure:

But if the sublime is built on terror, or some passion like it, which has pain for its object, it is previously proper to inquire how any species of delight can be derived from a cause so apparently contrary to it. I say delight, because, as I have often remarked, it is very evidently different in its cause, and in its own nature, from actual and positive pleasure.<sup>51</sup>

Pleasure and fear are the signatures of the Qur'ān, a text that strikes a perfect balance between *wa'd wa wa'id* (promise and warning). In fact, the Arabic language of pre-Islam instilled a strong sense of poetic imagination, one that prepared the Qur'ān's first audience to grasp the enormity of its figurative power. Take, for instance, a verse from *Sūra-t- al-A'rāf* (7:46), which depicts a futuristic purgatory scene unmatched in any language. In this bone-chilling scene, some unidentified people are standing on *al-A'rāf* (mounts, or a purgatory of sorts) at the boundary between heaven and hell; their eschatological destiny remains undecided. But they are still temporarily able to see both the spaces of heaven and hell (separated by a seal) from a high vintage point, and to view with awe both the pleasures of the people of heaven and the unimaginable torture of the people of hell:

وَيَنْتَهُمَا حِجَابٌ وَعَلَى الْأَعْرَافِ رِجَالٌ يَعْرِفُونَ كُلًّا بِسِيمَاهُمْ ۖ وَنَادَوْا أَصْحَابَ الْجَنَّةِ أَنْ سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ لَمْ يَدْخُلُوهَا وَهُمْ يَطْمَعُونَ

There is a barrier between them. And on the mounts there are men who recognize the people of both abodes by their appearances. They would call for the people of heaven and say, "Peace be upon you!" They had not entered it [heaven], but they so desperately desire to. (7:46)

Readers of this verse could only ponder on this "imaginative visualization" in all its beauty and terror. Knowledge in the form of recognition heightens the desire for salvation. But the language of the Qur'ān makes the contrast startling. Knowledge or recognition is primarily linguistic and from this world, but the entire scene is eerily eschatological. This knowledge in *ya'rifun* (they know) is a future in the past, a representation of something that is yet to come, a belated "aha" moment after death. The implication is that knowledge acts as a transit between two worlds, and only through linguistic imagination can such a recognition be made possible: an imagination of a future moment that could still be saved by whoever reads or listens to the verses in the present tense before it is too late. Whereas self-preservation in its pre-Islamic representations is of the order of the real, its concreteness is shattered by the *terrifying* recognition emphasized in the Qur'ān:

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا مَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ تَرَى أَعْيُنُهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ الدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُوا مِنَ الْحَقِّ

When they heard what was revealed to the messenger, you would see their eyes overflowing with tears for recognizing the truth. (5:83)

This is a landmark in the aesthetic transformation from the “before” to the “after” in the language of the Qur’ān. Even though what the Qur’ān presents is purely structural and purely tropological, because it is an act of language after all, its language is so familiar yet so aesthetically defamiliarized that it substitutes for a tangible reality a highly evocative imaginary scene. As we see in this example, salvation must always be imaginary instead of being real, and the knowledge of it, that is, the knowing by way of “seeing” and facially recognizing and distinguishing between the people of hell and the people of heaven, in the end relates solely to a linguistic reality with a careful, yet highly haunting, economy of words. The result is a chiasmus of embedded sentences and pronouns (7:46), an inversed grammatical enmeshment of a verse that oscillates between two spaces and between third- and second-person pronouns, yet still holds a powerful linguistic imaginary that bridges a yet-to-come “real” experience. This linguistic passage to imagination, this link to the afterworld, is what allows the audience of the Qur’ān to conceptualize the dangers and calamities of what is now depicted as a transient world by recognizing, through imagination, that death may not be the end. But this imaginative leap into a metaphysical anagnorisis, so to speak, could not be possible without the linguistic preparedness in the background of the secular poetic world like that of Imru’ al-Qays and al-Nābigha.

The stylistic visuals of *al-A’rāf* setting begin with portraying a *mise en scene* of separation, an impenetrable barrier set between heaven and hell, then move to show the yet to be accounted for, the people lost in between heaven and hell, the ones who have now come to know and *recognize* what the people of heaven and the people of hell look like. The verse ends with the *al-A’rāf* people stranded on the mount between heaven and hell, while offering a yearning peace-greeting to the dwellers of heaven, and expressing a deep wish to join them. There is nothing “poetic” here in the pre-Islamic sense of the word, just a fearful and symmetrical aesthetics expressing a most terrifying uncertainty.

*I’jāz*, or the defiantly incapacitating quality of the Qur’ān, thus lends itself to this oscillation between the beautiful and the sublime as a discourse of rhetorical power *aware* of a preexisting discourse of poetic talent. The psychology of *rahba* depicted in Qur’ān 7:46 allows the reader/listener to exquisitely imagine how terrifying it would be to be on the *A’rāf*, to witness both pain and pleasure without experiencing either of them, and without knowing his or her own destiny. Evidently, there is always the choice to eschew this interpolating rhetoric altogether and dismiss it as imaginary (8:29). After all, not all the Arabs of Muḥammad’s time became Muslims, but all the people who lived around him were Arabs who spoke and understood classical Arabic. For the first Muslim community, an Arabic-speaking community, this *rahba* brings about a sense of self-preservation and produces *in the body* something analogous to what the experience could be. The Qur’ān describes this affect eloquently in 39:23. In this verse the fearful pious would start to shudder and tremble with *rahba* as the language transports them to

that terrifying space without actually being there. And for a brief while, in the act of reading or listening, the imagination of terror is replaced with a feeling of real terror, and the trope becomes tangible:

اللَّهُ نَزَلَ أَحْسَنَ الْحَدِيثِ كِتَابًا مُتَشَابِهًا مَثَابَى تَقْشَعِرُّ مِنْهُ جُلُودُ الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ ثُمَّ تَلِينُ جُلُودُهُمْ وَقُلُوبُهُمْ إِلَى ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ

God has revealed the best/the most beautiful of speech—a book of perfect consistency—which causes the skins of those who fear their lord to shudder and then their skin and their hearts will soften for the mention of God. (39:23)

*Aḥsan al-ḥadīth* (the best/most beautiful of speech) in Qurʾān 39:23 takes us back full circle to that discourse of difference. As I point out in the following chapter, not only is the Qurʾān aware of pre-Islamic poetry, but its relationship to language—as well as to listeners/readers through that very language—is always determined by a competition in expressiveness. *Aḥsan* means best and most beautiful at the same time. It is a comparative that brings an awareness of something else other than the Qurʾān, something that is linguistically “good” and “beautiful,” but it is also something that the Qurʾān *has to* transcend and surpass in matchless betterment and beauty, in order to be worthy of asserting itself as God’s eternal words. This competition is not just on the level of language, but on the level of scriptures as well. In fact, the Qurʾān intentionally utilizes *prolepsis* in many of its sūras, most notably in 12:3 and 29:48. It is as if the Qurʾān knows that the accusation of plagiarism will be leveled against it, and insists that this is an Arabic revelation to a prophet who previously didn’t know *aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ* “the best of stories.” One can also see this in 29:48, as I will show in chapter six. It matters for the Qurʾān to outperform both Judaism and Christianity in depicting heaven in terms far more attractive and hell in terms far more graphic than its parent scriptures.<sup>52</sup>

In this declaration of transcendence, the Qurʾān points to the limits of language. Language characterizes the Qurʾān as a discourse of rhetorical power par excellence, one that cannot come second to or fall beneath any other possible rhetorical representations in the Arabic language. The Qurʾān declares that it not only speaks well, but does so better than any other possibilities of speech available in the effable world of classical Arabic. This competitiveness is a defining characteristic of the Qurʾān. In addition to its scriptural implications, the idea of *aḥsan al-ḥadīth*, contrary to the desire for creating a startling rhetorical image, radically distinguishes the Qurʾān from the use of language in the poetic sense. This distinction is what creates a status of absolutely irreducible difference, a difference between a concern with the totality of the world and a concern with a particular human experience and condition. But it is also a difference predicated on a distinction from all preceding poetry and scripture,<sup>53</sup> without which one may never come to know or even appreciate that difference. In other words, if the Qurʾān is rooted in difference, one must safely assume that, especially in the case of poetry, it would demand that its reader face its difference

from such discourse through a rigorous practice of linguistic comparison and conceptual philological distinction. This is itself the demand al-Jurjānī would advance in his defense of poetry, leading to the birth of the discipline of rhetoric in the field of Arabic literary criticism.

The literary tradition that preceded the Qur'ān, Ibn Qutayba tells us, was poetry of the loftiest sense. Ibn Qutayba reminds us that the word *ḥasan* was already used to describe the poetic talent of the pre-Islamic poet Ṭarafa ibn al-ʿAbd (543–69), who was renowned for his *shiʿr ḥasan* (good/beautiful poetry). Ṭarafa did not live long, but his poetry left everlasting imprints on searching for meaning in life and articulating a human existential crisis. His ode brings together all the usual themes of pre-Islamic times. It begins with the patterned convention of *al-wuqūf ʿalā al-aḡlāl wa bukāʿ al-diyār*:

لِخَوْلَةٍ أَطْلَالَ بِرُقَّةٍ تَهْمَدِ      تَلَوُّحُ كِبَاقِي الْوَشْمِ فِي ظَاهِرِ الْيَدِ  
وَقُوفًا بِهَا صَنْجَبِي عَلَى مَطِيئِهِمْ      يَقُولُونَ لَا تَهْلِكْ أَسَى وَتَجَلَدِ<sup>54</sup>

There are traces of Khawla on the pebbled lands of Thahmad / They appear like the fading tattoo on the back of a hand.

There, my friends halted their mounts to look after me / Saying “don’t let grief kill you; have some fortitude.”

By now, we are familiar with the formulaic structure of the pre-Islamic ode. It starts with a memory of a lost beloved whose departure breaks the poet’s heart and prompts his friends to console him. Nonetheless, the patterned aesthetic of the *qaṣīda* excels in matching the meaning to its empirical manifestation. We are meant to feel and sympathize with the poet’s dejected condition despite the formulaic nature of the poem. Poetic talent, as well as its rhetoric of intelligence, is, above all, a contract between meaning and comprehending this meaning through the linguistic vehicle that carries it in its totality: the language that speaks loss, nostalgia, anxiety, doubt, love—and speaks them all *beautifully*. Ṭarafa writes poetry about the tribe that excised him, poetry that questions existence and the meaning of life. His poetry is not seeking an answer to resolve a crisis. It is, rather, a poetry that knows the answer and is aware of the impossibility of eternity and the unavoidable tragedy of death. Tarafa’s ode tells us that death is not something chosen by us; we are thrown into it, that to fear death is to live a life of cowardice. In a strong and uncanny Heideggerian moment *avant la lettre*, Tarafa reconciles that death is “freedom towards death,”<sup>55</sup> that *there is* freedom in holding on to the idea that we are best at “being” in embracing “not being,” and that to be fully alive we would want to exit from life willingly:

وَأَنْ أَشْهَدَ اللَّذَاتِ هَلْ أَنْتَ مَخْلُودِي؟      أَلَا أُيْهِدَا الزَّاجِرِي أَحْضَرَ الْوَعَى  
فَدَعْنِي أَبَادِرُهَا بِمَا مَلَكَتْ يَدِي<sup>56</sup>      فَإِنْ كُنْتُ لَا تَسْتَطِيعُ دَفْعَ مَنِيئِي

Hey you, who blame me for going to war / and indulging in pleasures, can you  
make me live forever?  
If you cannot stop my death / then let me advance to it with all that I have.

The Qur'ān addresses the question of eternity and resurrection in many of its verses. Here are a few examples from 6:29 and 45:24, respectively:

وَقَالُوا إِن هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَبْعُوثِينَ

And they said this is the only life we have and we won't be resurrected.

وَقَالُوا مَا هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا وَمَا يُهْلِكُنَا إِلَّا الدَّهْرُ وَمَا لَهُم بِذَلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ

And they said this is the only life we have, we die and we live and only time makes us perish, but they have no knowledge, they are just taking a guess.

These verses suggest that it is only after the linguistic mediation of pre-Islamic poetry that a deeper contextual understanding of the Qur'ān becomes possible. The Qur'ān knows, and Ṭarafa's poem confirms, that it speaks to a community headstrong in its belief that no resurrection awaits the dead and there is nothing beyond this worldly life. Ṭarafa's image thus reignites a classical distinction between pre- and post-Qur'ānic concepts of death and resurrection, which is of value in understanding the dialogical tension in the early Muslim community prevalent in the Qur'ān.<sup>57</sup> After all, Ṭarafa may not be alone. The positioning of the biological subject in an environment to which he remains irrevocably bound is, in Ṭarafa's poetic imagination, opposed to a realm of metaphysical knowledge. There was, to be sure, a certain belief in resurrection in pre-Islamic Arabia, a belief that, as Jawād 'Alī reminds us, was never positioned as paramount or significant.<sup>58</sup> Semantically, *al-mawt* (death) implies *sukūn* (silence) in classical Arabic. To say someone is dead is to say someone has become silent.<sup>59</sup> This understanding should not contradict the widespread motif of "living" after death as *ḥadīth*/*aḥādīth* (story/stories), which Geert Jan van Gelder excellently examines,<sup>60</sup> and which the Qur'ān references as a moral lesson for posterity. Rather, pre-Islamic Arabs believed in the immortality of memory but not the resurrection of the body. Death is thus the silence of the body after *al-rūḥ* (spirit/soul) has departed it, a phenomenon that bewildered pre-Islamic Arabs—hence the burning question to Muḥammad, "*wa yas'alūnaka 'ani al-rūḥi*" (they ask you about the spirit/soul) (17:85). Quoting Shaddād ibn al-Aswad in the aftermath of the Battle of Badr as he mocks the prophet's talk on resurrection, the nineteenth-century Iraqi exegete Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī (1802–54) states that pre-Islamic Arabs considered it absurd to believe humans returned from the dead:

وماذا بالقلوب قليب بذر	من الشئذي تزين بالسنام
وماذا بالقلوب قليب بذر	من القينات والشرب الكرام

فهل لي بعد قومي من سلام      تحيينا السلامة أم بكر  
وكيف حياة أصداء وهام<sup>61</sup>      يحدثنا الرسول بأن سنحيا

What of the Qalib, well of Badr / of the platters of Shizá wood-holding camel-hump fat?  
What of the Qalib, well of Badr / of singing women and noble drinkers?  
Umm Bakr bids us a peace greeting / How can I have peace after my people (were killed)?  
The messenger tells us we would live / But how can ghosts and wraiths live again?<sup>62</sup>

In crude anthropological terms, pre-Islamic Arabs positioned their own subjectivity against the knowledge of the unknown. They were *le sujet supposé savoir* of their own time, “the subject [who] is supposed to know,” who is the bearer and generator of the knowledge of his own existence and who was disinclined to take a step into the abstract. Pre-Islamic Arabs accepted *inkār al-ba‘th* (the denial of resurrection) and even mocked folkloric and fairytales that men turn into birds when they die.<sup>63</sup> What Ṭarafa’s ode affirms is not that he lacks knowledge of the world and its abstract totality—the Qur’ān provides such a totality and does so in a manner that claims knowledge to itself: “*qāla in labithtum illā qalīlan law annakum kuntum ta‘lamūn*” (23:114) (He said you had been [on earth] but for a brief time, if only you had knowledge). The Ṭarafian poetic formula, by contrast, articulates a gap between experience and abstraction, a gap that the poet is disinclined to even attempt to bridge. The ironic question Ṭarafa poses is therefore profoundly disheartening yet deeply rhetorical. It seeks no answer. The empirical moment that materializes itself in facing danger and “initiating” an advance toward death is nowhere present in the Qur’ān. And the appearance of figurative language in the Qur’ān, as we have seen it in the extended rhetorical simile of 23:39–40, has to do with a completely different act, the act of juxtaposing the empirical and the conceptual. In the tender tropes of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*, there is no place for the conceptual. The poet speaks as one among the tested and experienced few, and poetry is the only theology there is.

Conventional aesthetics would commend the poem for its well-kept archetypal features. What has been lost since that time—and what does not come back in the Qur’ān, at least not explicitly—is the suppressed ethos of the human condition. The total alienation we hear in somber lines such as “*ufridtu ifrāda al-ba‘iri al-mu‘abbadi*” (I was excised [from my clan] like tainted camel, coated in tar) represents this human condition in which the second person’s voice (*anta*) of a nomadic desert community whispers counsel to a persona that feels as discarded as a diseased camel. To Ṭarafa, there is no meaning in a life that is constantly threatened by death. As the heart of a poet has fully hardened, the counsel from his fellow man becomes absurd. The double interjection “*alā ayyuhādhā*” (Hey, you) does not have an equivalent in English. Its untranslatability signifies a determined rebellion against conceptual knowledge, a rebellion raised by a poet who



defiantly translates his own repression and alienation into the truth claim of an artistic medium. The pre-Islamic ode genre, whose aesthetic structure compels it to observe and celebrate communal values, becomes in Ṭarafa the opposite of itself, an epitome of singularity and human alienation. The poem challenges tribal wisdom because, in representing a state of utter isolation, it eclipses the compliance this conventional wisdom expects from a supposedly conforming member of the tribe. There is an unresolved dialectic in the relationship between form and content in Ṭarafa's poem. Although he cannot abandon the ode's technical and formal conventionality, he still sacrifices its thematic conformity for the sake of a different kind of aesthetic sensibility—that is, the power to own one's own fate.

At other moments, this sensibility bears witness to a hedonistic content through a powerful forcing of pleasure. The nihilistic meaning of life in these lines is enhanced in the very moment of disavowing life. To speak of the issue in a manner reminiscent of Roland Barthes, all art is enveloped in sadness and death. The more Ṭarafa's ode touches the core of the human condition, the more heightened the dejection that emanates from it. Ṭarafa's suppressed feeling of "Oh, if only we do not perish" brings to the fore the most painful and unresolved existential dilemma. Compared to this melancholy, the Qur'ān is a hopeful text, hopeful in the sense that it opens up a heavenly possibility, or rather a realm of eternity and a felicity relegated to a future promise, a reverse image of longing for a pleasure yet to come. But what radiates woefully in Ṭarafa is this vulnerable element of a pragmatic universal truth, a secular revelation of mortality where living in absolute danger and in absolute pleasure looks death in the eye and makes it appear as if life were preying on death, and not vice versa. There is nothing in these lines that does not belong to this world and nothing that could not be taken away from this world at a price less than death.