
Poetic Paganism and the Monotheistic Aesthetic

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Qur'ān is not antithetical to pre-Islamic poetry. Rather, pre-Islamic Arabic is the linguistic native vehicle of the Qur'ān. In this chapter, I further elaborate the argument that a rhetorical literary analysis of the Qur'ān is neither reductionist nor peripheral. The Qur'ān not only includes literary aesthetics, but it also offers a social aesthetic that manifests itself in literary forms, content, contextual settings germane to the historical, political, and socioeconomic values leading up to the first Muslim community. In other words, the Qur'ān is a value-transforming and value-creating text. Rhetorical examination of the Qur'ān involves an investigation of the dialogic tension inherent in the linguistic expressions that represent modes, conflicts, alliances, and oppositions at the literary as well as social and political levels of the Meccan and Medinan societies in seventh-century Arabia.

Interrogation of the Qur'ān's content and rhetoric thus has a bearing on the philosophical views as well as the economic structure and social values of seventh-century Arabia. For example, in the early Meccan period (e.g., 83; 102; 104; 107), the Qur'ān explicitly condemns greed, trade fraud, money-mongering, avarice, apathy to the poor, and mockery of the deprived, among other forms of social injustices. Such injustices were the common law of the Meccan society. But the Qur'ān does this using rhetorical language and syntax familiar to its intended audience. The Qur'ān critiques the economic structure of its own society as well as its religious and social habits.¹ These accepted elements of the society created the ways in which people lived and the literature that mirrored their way of life. As we see in the examples of Ṭarafa and al-Nābigha, as well as the Qur'ān, the ideology of pre-Islamic Mecca represents a complex relationship of individuals to the practical conditions of their existence. The Qur'ān's historical value as a seventh-century

scripture lies not in its relationship to former monotheistic scriptures, although it does refer to biblical narratives and events knowable to the collective consciousness of the time, sometimes in endorsement and sometimes in disagreement. But the very heart of the Qur'ān is a rhetoric of Arabicity—that is, a rhetoric that adheres to the linguistic rules of the Arabic language and is in intertextual dialogue with its own tradition of ancient Arabic poetry. This rhetoric engenders a critique of what it perceives as false views of the world not only in terms of divinity but also in terms of social relationships between the rich and the poor and the rulers and the ruled. Examining the rhetorical properties in the works of poets like Ṭarafa and al-Nābigha, among many others, allows us to see how their poetry, despite its discursive difference from the Qur'ān, is tied to the rhetorical forms and themes of the Qur'ān. After all, the task of pre-Islamic poets, no matter how agonized or dejected they might be, was primarily aesthetic. They sought to be concrete and imagistic in their poetical works and to make sure that their respective poems would stand tall, that the lines would have no broken meters, and that the imagery would be creative. For example, we have seen how the “rhetoric of death” in Ṭarafa gives perpetuity to a passing life, not by wanting to save it from death, but by wanting to crush it under its wheels. Understating how al-Nābigha had to excel in his own poetic talent to save his life and how Ṭarafa rushed into a fated pattern of mortal heroism is crucial for understanding the Qur'ān. Investigating how pre-Islamic poets depict the malaise of their harshly led lives through a carefully structured and metered ode, a hedonistic aesthetics of sorts, makes the understanding of the relationship between poetry, the community, and the Qur'ān even more compelling.

Likewise, the real and the concrete of the Qur'ān's text is its own language. In fact, the Qur'ān does not have any material reality outside the Arabic language, and more specifically outside the orality of the Arabic language. For the sake of all pre-Qur'ānic poets who took Arabic aesthetics to heights envied by their successors, it is important here not to eschew altogether the historical engagement with the Qur'ān, but rather to slow it down, to take it all the way in, to immerse it in this rhetorical “materiality” of pre-Qur'ānic and Qur'ānic Arabia so thoroughly that when we emerge on the other side, we would have a material history, especially for the literary and cultural historian, that we can debate, and with which we can generally agree. Reading pre-Islamic poets and examining the aesthetic properties of the Arabic language of the Qur'ān does not mean one has to replace one discipline with another or jettison the historian for the literary critic. But instead of suspending the relative autonomy of specialized disciplines, it is crucial for the study of the Qur'ān to arrive at a transformational ethical space where disciplines transcend their specializations and converge on the material ground of the Qur'ān text itself.

Above all, the Qur'ān is an oral text,² one that is meant not just to be *read* but to be *heard*, and to be heard *with* others.³ This fundamental oral/aural anchorage means that the Qur'ān is always already part of a community of readers and

listeners—hence its ethical authority, its ability to engage current values and create future values. To be able to hear the Qurʾān properly requires superior proficiency and knowledge not only of classical Arabic, but also and more importantly, of ancient pre-Islamic Arabic.⁴ This grim conclusion also means that a great majority of Muslims today are not able to hear the Qurʾān properly, and that only a small number of specialized Arabists, whether Arab or non-Arab, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, will qualify as proper hearers of the Qurʾān. This “proper hearing” models a kind of ethics, especially for the Western historian, where one does not need to feel the need to sacrifice the acoustic encounter with aesthetic orality for the sake of applying a calculated disciplinary methodology to “study” the Qurʾān while bypassing a language and a history that are not his own.

To be sure, there are no parallel texts that have the same aesthetic condition of the Qurʾān as an oral text in the Western canon, nor are there parallel intertextualities like the ones between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān’s oral rhythm is of such substantive importance that attempts to examine it under scripted models of European aesthetics is already a doomed project.

The source of the Qurʾān’s resistance to such normative scriptural aesthetics is that materialized scripted approaches tend to lead to the dismissal and denigration of the written text meant to transcribe its orality. The Qurʾān itself makes this admonition against the rushed perseveration of it explicitly clear:

وَلَا تَعْجَلْ بِالْقُرْآنِ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يُقْضَىٰ إِلَيْكَ وَحْيُهُ
لَا تُحْرِكْ بِهِ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِ . إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا جَمْعَهُ وَقُرْآنَهُ . فَإِذَا قَرَأْتَهُ فَاتَّبِعْ قُرْآنَهُ . ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا بَيَانَهُ

Do not rush the Qurʾān before its completely delivered to you
Do not move your tongue with it to rush it. It is upon Us to make it whole and
recitable. So once We have recited it, you must adhere to its recitation. Then it is
upon Us to make it clear.

In the case of Arabic, and especially the Qurʾān, Euro-American understandings of aesthetics as a theory of the beautiful can be unproductive and limited precisely because the normative characteristics of the concept of beauty remain inadequate to the full content of Arabic aesthetics, especially its orality. Hegel’s famous claim that beauty is “the sensuous appearance [or manifestation] of the idea”⁷ makes it difficult to locate this appearance or manifestation in ancient languages or even in nature.⁸ There is no place for oral aesthetics in Hegel’s figure-focused conception of beauty, even though in Western tradition the dialectical relationship between beauty and *phone* (voice) is as old as the *Odyssey*. One should not forget that we are dealing with an oral tradition, not with the *figura*, or the written or scripted system that has become its correlate. Incidentally, this is exactly the argument van Gelder makes for all of classical Arabic poetry in *Sound and Sense*—that is, its oral/aural dimension is too often ignored and neglected.⁹ Even the writing of the Qurʾān

suggests that it is only after the mediation of *I'jāz* that a certain appreciation of the acoustic becomes possible, but that mediation itself involves orality, as any transcription of the Qur'ān in essence has no existence without voice.

However, this has been the problem Europe has always had with Arabic: its difficulty, its untranslatability, its unassimilability, indeed its “un-aesthetic-ness.” But absence of parallelism does not mean that literary tools could not be used to approach the text. Yet, a tool is not a method and there is no one universal or global standard to assess the aesthetics of texts. Take, for instance, the remarks of Thomas Babington Macaulay, who was a member of the British Parliament and a renowned historian in the nineteenth century. Macaulay served on the British Supreme Council for India between 1834 and 1838. In a debate on allocating government funds in the colonies, Macaulay has the following to say about Arabic and Sanskrit languages:

The whole question seems to me to be, which language is the best worth knowing? I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education . . . It is said that the Sanskrit and Arabic are the languages in which the sacred books of a hundred millions of people are written, and that they are, on that account, entitled to peculiar encouragement. Assuredly it is the duty of the British government in India to be not only tolerant, but neutral on all religious questions. But to encourage the study of a literature admitted to be of small intrinsic value only because that literature inculcates the most serious errors on the most important subjects, is a course hardly reconcilable with reason, with morality, or even with that very neutrality which ought, as we all agree, to be sacredly preserved. It is confessed that a language is barren of useful knowledge. We are told to teach it because it is fruitful of monstrous superstitions. We are to teach false history, false astronomy, false medicine, because we find them in company with a false religion.¹⁰

There is in Macaulay's address a clear Eurocentric antipathy toward Sanskrit and Arabic. But why this resurrection of a nineteenth-century orientalist account now? Because the roots of the anti-aesthetic are deep and far-reaching in historical discourses and, in particular, in the scholarship of the Euro-American academy on the Qur'ān, which is characteristically undergirded by these anti-aesthetic accounts as they have developed since colonial times.¹¹ This is the same epistemic space that informs Reynold Nicholson's approach to classical Arabic, which resulted in a book that became the core required text for training generations of specialists in the field of Arabic literature in the English-speaking world in the twentieth century. But if Nicholson fails in his assessment of classical Arabic poetry,¹² then one

cannot expect him to have any meaningful understanding of the Qur'ān.¹³ In *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Nicholson writes:

European scholars, with the exception of von Hammer, have been far from sharing this enthusiasm [for al-Mutanabbi], as may be seen by referring to what has been said on the subject by Reiske, De Sacy, Bohlen, Brockelmann, and others. No doubt, according to our canons of taste, Mutanabbi stands immeasurably below the famous Pre-Islamic bards, and in a later age must yield the palm to Abu Nuwas and Abu 'l-Atahiya. Lovers of poetry, as the term is understood in Europe, cannot derive much aesthetic pleasure from his writings, but, on the contrary, will be disgusted by the beauties hardly less than by the faults which Arabian critics attribute to him.¹⁴

To his credit, Nicholson, perhaps with tongue firmly in cheek, ameliorates his “disgust” by deferring to the judgment of the native speaker when it comes to the assessment of Arabic aesthetics. Nicholson refers to the native speaker of Arabic as the “born oriental” who “is able to appreciate Mutanabbi at his full worth,” counseling his camp of European lovers of poetry to “try to realize the oriental point of view and put aside, as far as possible, our preconceptions of what constitutes good poetry and good taste.”¹⁵ Not only does the work of many remarkable Western scholars of Arabic and Islam belie Nicholson’s prejudiced statement, but Nicholson’s framing of aesthetics is itself epistemologically peripheral. He surrenders without reservation to the sensibilities of his European audiences. His book is peppered with comparative aesthetics, a framework in which “the longest of the *mu‘allaqāt*, the so-called ‘Long Poems,’ is considerably shorter than Gray’s *Elegy*, and an Arabian Homer or Chaucer must have condescended to prose.”¹⁶ Though condescending in tone, this critical exercise is itself enriching, except that Nicholson’s comparative thought process is hierarchical rather than deferential, a prisoner of its own norms of poetic aesthetics “as the term is understood in Europe.”¹⁷ Clearly some “outlandish” classical Arabic gibberish like that of al-Mutanabbi’s poetry would appear “disgusting” through Nicholson’s Eurocentric lenses. Al-Mutanabbī (d. 965 AD) lived and composed poetry in the tenth century, that is, three hundred years after the Qur’ān. To pit al-Mutanabbī against “pre-Islamic bards” in an aesthetical context, as does Nicholson, is to pretend that the Qur’ān never happened and to fail to see the change in the socioeconomic conditions in post- Qur’ānic communities and the enormity of the task of composing poetry after the Qur’ān. This “afterness” is crucial for understanding the quantum leap in Arabic aesthetics in the aftermath of the Qur’ān. It opens up further historical and literary inquiries about what it means for a literary genre to “precede” or “follow” a discourse of rhetorical power and whether or not the Qur’ān in the aftermath of pre-Islamic poetry or even poetry in the aftermath of the Qur’ān signifies a sharp severance, or, subliminally, recasts its precursor in further enhancement of the aesthetics of that very tradition.

The examples from Macaulay and Nicholson are not isolated incidents or exceptional oddities but signs of a more serious problem and a confirmation of an irreparably condescending Eurocentric approach toward the aesthetical tradition of the other, an approach that has continued to characterize contemporary Euro-American thought on the status of Arabic in world literature. Both Macaulay's imperialistic hubris and Nicholson's aesthetic bias manufactured, in their own respective categorizations, bizarrely paradoxical views to bear on Arabic (and, in Macaulay's case, Sanskrit) literatures to Euro-American universities: on the one hand, they assume that all Arabic literature must be valued according to a universal code of rational thought, and must be paraphrased, argued with, and quickly situated in a hierarchy based on a European "ideal" of aesthetic judgement. Their views carry within them the deadly epistemological germs of the discourses that shaped them and the discourses they inspired.

For the sake of clarity, let us take a quick detour and offer an example of the Qur'an's influence on the late classical poet of the 'Abbasid era, Ḥabīb ibn Aws al-Ṭā'ī (known as Abū Tammām). This example will help illustrate the point and shed light on some of the aesthetic complexities involved in the making of classical Arabic poetry *after* the Qur'an. One of the most celebrated poets of the Arabic language, Abū Tammām (d. 845–46) was a Syrian-born Christian who converted to Islam and reached the pinnacle of his poetic career under the rule of the al-Mu'taṣim (833–42). An unforeseeable event at the height of Abū Tammām's fame almost cost his career. As he was giving a panegyric in honor of the caliph's son, Prince Aḥmad Ibn al-Mu'taṣim, the Kufa-born philosopher and polymath Yūsuf Ya'qūb Ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, who happened to be among the audience, did not seem to appreciate the "praise similes" he heard in the poem. Abū Tammām began to liken Prince Aḥmad to remarkable figures in Arab-Islamic history:

أَبْلَيْتَ هَذَا الْمَجْدَ أَبْعَدَ غَايَةٍ فِيهِ وَأَكْرَمَ شَيْمَةٍ وَنِحَاسٍ
 إِقْدَامَ عَمْرٍو فِي سَمَاحَةِ حَاتِمٍ فِي جِلْمٍ أَحْنَفٍ فِي ذِكَاةِ إِيَّاسٍ¹⁸

You have accomplished this glory at its highest reach / its noblest quality and its purity.
 The mettle of 'Amr, the tolerance of Ḥātim / the equanimity of Aḥnaf and the acumen of Iyās.

At this moment al-Kindī insultingly interrupted him, objecting that "The prince is above those whom you liken him to."¹⁹ Taken aback by the unexpected insult, Abū Tammām remained silent for a moment, but then ventured the following two verses on the spot, which had not been part of his prepared ode:

لَا تَنْتَكِرُوا ضَرْبِي لَهُ مِنْ دُونِهِ مِثْلًا شَرُودًا فِي النَّدَى وَالْبَاسِ
 فَإِنَّهُ قَدْ ضَرَبَ الْأَقْلَّ لِلنُّورِ مِثْلًا مِنَ الْمَشْكَاةِ وَالنَّبْرَاسِ²⁰

Do not reproach me for citing exemplars / that are less than him, who is matchless
 in bounty and mettle.
 For God has given less for his own light / an example of the niche and the lantern.

This poetic act of quick wittedness won Abū Tammām the immediate commendation of his audience, including al-Kindī. On this particular occasion, Abū Tammām would not have been able to compose brilliant poetic lines on the spot without committing the language and imagery of the Qurʾān to heart. Al-Kindī was so moved by Abū Tammām's immediate response that he demanded the poet be granted whatever reward he asked for, because, according to al-Kindī, a poet with such an extraordinary aesthetic talent like Abū Tammām's "won't live long . . . he is a man whose intellect is rapidly consuming his body."²¹

Very few poems in the Arabic tradition bring together such great poetic talent with the architectural employment of the Qurʾān. The allegorical complexity of the lines alone makes them one of the most eccentric and impressive improvisations in the history of Arabic literature. This improvisation invites the larger question of the connections between Arabic literature, Qurʾānic authority, and the limits of rhetorical language. In particular, this improvisation invites a deeper interrogation of the relationship between oral tradition and individual talent, as well as the depths, influences, and commanding presence of the Qurʾān in Arabic poetics. If what we call *al-qarīḥa al-shiʿriyya* (poetic talent/afflatus) is the "raw" gift a poet enjoys, in the manner in which such a gift gets "cooked" and molded into poetic expressions and cultural themes, these expressions will always be linked to an unspoken aesthetics of intelligence. Before the Qurʾān, this unspoken aesthetics of intelligence was itself the tradition of the classical Arabic *qaṣīda*, especially its glorious examples in the Golden Odes. After the Qurʾān, Arabic poetry continued to be enhanced, or impeded, by the former's textual authority as a sublime discourse of rhetorical power.

It is impossible to know what could have taken place in Abū Tammām's mind during this moment of awkward silence following al-Kindī's insult, what scores of poetic tropes he could envisaged, or what hundreds of Qurʾānic verses could have run through his mind. Whatever it was, he was able find an escape in these two Qurʾān-inspired lines. He performed three acts of poetic intelligence simultaneously: he evoked the most fitting Qurʾānic verse to the occasion; he employed it in a manner that did not reduce him to a mere imitator; and he managed to mold the freshly composed tropes into *baḥr al-kāmil* (*al-kāmil* metre) of his panegyric, with a poetic talent "as natural as the pattern that was made by the dust on a butterfly's wings," to quote Ernest Hemingway's description of F. Scott Fitzgerald.²²

If the most accomplished of classical Arabic authors are those whose poetic intelligence is tested to the point of delivering striking lines, *on the spot*, from the looming disgrace of mediocrity, it is safe to argue that intimate oral knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabic and the Qurʾān is a fundamental prerequisite for Arabic poetic

genius post-Islam. In this particular case, the spontaneous recall of the Qurʾān not only offers the potential to bring about poetry interconnected with sacred language but also to *transform* it by this interconnection. To be sure, almost every post-Islamic Arab poet either committed the Qurʾān to memory or had a deep familiarity with its verses and imagery. The Qurʾān includes a rhythmic quality and aesthetic beauty in its *sajʿ* (rhyme and rhythmic assonance) that makes it easy to memorize with regular practice. Yet learning the Qurʾān by heart and being sufficiently quick-witted to produce powerful and compelling lines on the spot a la Abū Tammām is almost an impossible task, not to mention putting those lines in sync with the poem's main theme and rhyme scheme. The verse that Abū Tammām beckons in his poem comes from the Qurʾānic chapter *al-Nūr* (The Light), named after the verses that describe the light of God:

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ
يُبْرِقُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي
اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

God is the light of heavens and earth. The example of his light is like a niche inside of which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as if it were a bright planet lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither easterly nor western, whose oil almost glows even when untouched by fire. Light upon light. God guides to his light whom he wills. And God gives examples to people. And God knows everything. (24:35)

Abū Tammām must have known that offering what his fellow Muslim audience believed to be the inimitable words of God would silence his detractors. And he chose the perfect example for it: a verse from the Qurʾān that presents an extended simile of God, lesser than himself, to approximate the magnitude of his divine light to humans; a simile of a simile, so to speak, one that could only capture a fracture or a glimpse of divine light, so humans could come to understand, though not completely comprehend, the incomparable light that is divinity itself. The association is clear. If the Qurʾān brings in a reduced simile to approximate the brightness of God's light, then certainly a poet can use archetypal models of Arab bravery, lenience, and charity to approximate the magnificence of Prince Aḥmad. Abū Tammām, who understands the supreme authority of the Qurʾān text, knows that al-Kindī cannot dispute this level of poetic intelligence.

Nor does the poetic intelligence of Abū Tammām stop there. The genius of this particular Qurʾān-inspired moment remains unrivalled. In the "afterness" of the Qurʾān, it would be impossible for an Arab poet to imitate or steal from it without being caught, given the authority and popularity of the text. We see this inspiration represented in many instances of post-Qurʾānic classical Arabic. Little did Nicholson know that al-Mutanabbī in this context would fall under the rubric of the "mature poets" who must enhance their poetic talent in the afterness of the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān has thus been a dialectical presence for all poets who came after it precisely because it cannot be ignored at the same time it cannot

be matched. Mainly because of the quality of its *balāgha* as well as the religious authority it has acquired, the gravitational pull of the Qurʾān's aesthetic power makes it comparable to none, enveloping content and form in a manner that could only astound and overwhelm anyone who listens to it. The following lines from one of al-Mutanabbī's poem are an excellent example of this type of dialectical relationship to the Qurʾān. Al-Mutanabbī refers to prophetic figures from the Qurʾān economically and imagistically (because he knows that his listeners know who he is talking about) to express his deep sense of distress, loss, and emotional alienation from the people around him:²³

ما مقامي بأرض نَحْلَةَ . . . إلا كمقام المسيح بين اليهود

 أنا في أُمَّةٍ تداركها الله . . . غريبٌ كصالحٍ في ثَمُود²⁴

My stay in the land of Nahla / Is very much like the stay of the messiah among the Jews.

 I live among a people, may God handle them / as an outsider like Ṣāliḥ among
 Thamūd.

This pregnant example of Qurʾān-inspired poeticity is meant to show that there is an ethical imperative to rethink the canonicity of the aesthetic in Western scholarship on the Qurʾān, an imperative that should not only be premised on counterbalancing the othering of the text's Arabicity but on exposing the causes of this othering. The insistence on a Eurocentric marginalization of Arabic aesthetics is still widespread in the Euro-American academy. It remains questionable in its attribution bias to the origins of the Qurʾān. To judge from recent publications, the wind of Qurʾānic Studies is not blowing in the direction of the Arabicity and rhetoricity of the Qurʾān. We do not read much about the Qurʾān's literary connection to pre-Islamic poetry or the social aesthetics of the time, but we keep hearing a great deal about the "external" context and influence—that is, late antiquity—to which the Qurʾān's language refers. The emphasis now is not on the structural analysis or the linguistic or verbal status of the Qurʾān, a property that is so easily dismissible, but on the "inter-texts" between the language of the Qurʾān and these grand categories that are said to constitute it. One of the most controversial among these categories coincides with the new approach to late antiquity. This approach does not ask what Arabic words of the Qurʾān mean or even how they mean, but rather what existing late antique epistemic categories the text must have drawn from, thus emboldening the historical-critical discourse to bypass the literary dimensions and aesthetic significations of the Arabic language. In this approach, what we call aesthetics is screened through specific geographical and institutional settings that translate the other into tailored perceptions and judgements.

In what follows, I would like to provide a few further examples of these aesthetic moments that materialize in the Qur'ān's rhetorical power in its dialogic interaction with the social context we see represented in pre-Islamic poetry. The relationship between the world and the text of the Qur'ān is an ever-inclusive category involving religious and cultural practices, economy, politics, law, gender, ethnicity, sex, marriage, divorce, death, inheritance, and so on. This category is enveloped in a specific rhetoric of Arabicity that reflects the totality of how one understands the first Muslim community and interprets the Qur'ān. Even the stories of prophets from centuries past are brought in with such rhetorical authority to teach a moral lesson to the present community—or, as the Qur'ān puts it:

لَقَدْ كَانَ فِي قَصَصِهِمْ عِبْرَةٌ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ ۗ مَا كَانَ حَدِيثًا يُفْتَرَىٰ وَلَٰكِن تَصَدِيقَ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَتَفْصِيلَ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ
وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ²⁵

In their stories there is a lesson for the mindful ones. This narrative is not a myth, but a validation of previous revelations, an explication of everything, in guidance and mercy for those who believe.

In the Qur'ānic accounts of Moses, for example, one hears a story of resistance to a despotic regime signified by defiance and exodus. In another example, a clear message of gender, ethnicity, morality, and class emerges from the story of Mary (Maryam). Mary is seen as an outsider in her community, with her honor and chastity questionable by her people.²⁶ Even though the Qur'ān blesses and exonerates Mary, granting her a voice and the status of being the only woman whose name is mentioned in the Qur'ān with a full *sūra* (*Sūra-t-Maryam* [19]) dedicated to her, her vocal agency practically disappears from its narrative after giving birth to Jesus.²⁷ Other passing references to Mary in the Qur'ān emphasize her chastity (e.g., 66:12), denounce in the strongest terms the false accusations leveled against her (e.g., 4:156), and present her legacy and that of Jesus as a sign and a miracle from God (23:50). If anything, references to biblical figures and prophets serve to provide a thought space for readers of and listeners to the Qur'ān to reflect on the totality that the text brings forward. But stories of prophets are just one aspect of the Qur'ān. In fact, a considerable part of the Qur'ān highlights tensions between established tribal customs and the nascent allegiances to Muḥammad. The more one reads the Qur'ān, the more it appears deconstructive of the textual authority and customary practices of seventh-century Arabia.

In its communal address, the Qur'ān represents what James Joyce would call “the most commonplace, the deadest among the living,”²⁸ even nameless victims, such as a female child killed alive (81:8), a blind man seeking learning (80:2), and a poor divorced wife pleading for counsel (58:1). These examples show how the Qur'ān enmeshes itself in the fabric of its constitutive social reality and becomes a historical sign of the socioeconomic conditions in which it appeared. Compared to the language pre-Islamic poets used, especially in its philosophical musings and

ecological depictions of nomad life, the language of the Qur'ān oscillates between apocalyptic and quotidian, and it does so in a manner that is not incomprehensible to its contemporary listeners and readers. This audience lived at times that oddly combined tribal solidarity with secular individualism; we see this especially clearly in the environmental depictions of nomadic life we see in pre-Islamic poetry.²⁹ This is why the move from tribal and blood solidarity to social solidarity is at the core of the Qur'ān's sociolinguistic aesthetics. Pre-Islamic poets gained their distinction through the abandonment of hackneyed language and speech as particular attributes of common language among their own people. But what does this abandonment of hackneyed language and speech consist of, and, more importantly, what does it signify for our understanding of the relationship between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān?

Precisely because aesthetics is concerned with what Ibn Qutayba describes as *husn al-lafz wa jawda-t-al-ma'na* (the beauty of wording/expression in language and the quality of meaning),³⁰ there are irreducible distinctions and expectations from poetry as art, namely, as a rhymed and perfected expression of human thought and feelings. In Arabic, the contrast of *lafz* with *ma'na* is more or less equivalent to that between form and content. Poetry's relationship to its object, sometimes fateful if the poet is directed to lampoon an enemy of the tribe or praise a tribesman, is always determined by the challenges of linguistic expression and always pushed to avoid the triteness we have seen al-Kindī accuse Abū Tammām of. Ibn Qutayba's definition reminds us why from its incipiency, pre-Islamic poetry is concerned with uniqueness, newness, and the possibilities and limits of language. Reflection on its own language has been an integral part of the self-understanding and self-evaluation of pre-Islamic poetry. This reflection characterizes the poetic enterprise as one that cannot be subjected to any of the possible types of redundancies or repetitions that characterize prose or ordinary speech. Composed in a language whose etymological infrastructure makes it quite symmetrical and balanced, pre-Islamic odes owe their existence to the unique system of tri-consonantal roots of Arabic.

For instance, the opening line of 'Antara's ode includes the verb *ghādara*, which I cite below, a verb that means "to leave behind" or "to abandon." The word is derived from the Arabic root Gh/D/R, where Gh sound is only one consonant in Arabic. Many Arabic words and variations on the same root could still be formed, following a specific pattern of analogical derivation, and they would still retain the same or a similar denotation. For instance, *mughādara* means departure; *ghadr* means treachery—that is, departure from loyalty/abandonment of morals; *ghadīr* means "stream," that is, departing or running water, and so on. The ancient Arabic ode runs from fifteen to one hundred lines, consisting of highly rhythmic patterns that follow specific meters. Each poetic verse includes two evenly metered half-lines (hemistichs) and maintains a single meter throughout, with every line ending in the same sound. Highly organized, with a measured thematic and acoustic unity throughout, the ode both accomplishes and exhibits an aesthetics. It is a museum of words, itself a powerful poetical and communal force.

In fact, there is a unique Arabic verb specified for composing poetry: *yuqarrīd al-shiʿr*. Form I in Arabic verbs is used with the same meaning: *qaraḍa yaqriḍu, qarḍ al-shiʿr*. The basic sense of the root *Q/ R/ D* is “cutting, gnawing, trimming,” and *qarīd* means “cut to shape,” which is an apt description of composing metrical rhymed verse. In *Asās al-balāgha*, al-Zamakhsharī defines the root *Q/ R/ D* as follows: *qaraḍa l-shāʿir wa-lahū qarīd ḥasan, li-anna al-shiʿr kalām dhū taqāīf*.³¹ The complexity and talent involved in *taqriḍ al-shiʿr*³² (i.e., the mental effort of cutting, trimming, and polishing poetry in one’s mind) makes it almost impossible to compose a classical ode today. Even the most erudite of Arabic readers might miss the subtleties and brilliant imagery at work in these pre-Islamic odes. The ode of ʿAntara ibn Shaddād, for instance, imperceptibly critiques the reversal of values, slavery, and racial discrimination at the same time that it beautifully contrasts blackness with whiteness, brokenness with wholeness, outsiders with tribe members, and wandering with rootedness. ʿAntara is at once a lover and a warrior, a man of fierce action and beautiful words who uses all elements in his surrounding environment, including sound imagery, animal imagery (e.g., horses, camels, and ostriches), and place symbolism to create new and fresh figures of speech. The goal is for the ode to pass the test of originality and gain fame among contemporaries by making itself rhetorically incomparable.

ʿAntara’s ode, which begins with the anguished statement of poetic anxiety revealing his concern that his predecessors left nothing rhetorically startling or new for him to say, reminds us of the fierceness of these poetic contests and the constant strife for uniqueness and originality:

هل غادر الشعراء من متردّم أم هل عرفت الدار بعد توهم³³

Have the poets left any speech to patch / Or have you recognized the home after much doubt?

It is the search for something new that irks the mind of the pre-Islamic poet, and all artists for that reason. Theodor Adorno describes this quest for newness as a desire for something already there but not yet revealed. “The relation to the new is modeled on a child at the piano,” writes Adorno, “searching for a chord never previously heard.”³⁴ Knowing that the chord has always been there, “given in the keyboard,” is the best image one could conjure for the composition of poetry. This constant search for the chord of a new poem, then, a chord that never ceases to exist, makes the new, in Adorno’s language, “a longing for the new, not the new itself.”³⁵ This is what makes the new worth searching for. There is no alternative for this quest if the goal is to achieve poetic glory. Poets risk losing everything when they borrow from or echo other poets, or when they “patch” metaphors or images that have already been used before. That is why in composing an ode, a poet must be fiercely prepared, committing to memory every possible line of poetry that has been said before and managing, not only to avoid it, but to surpass it in talent and beauty. The fear is always that of derivativeness and banality, of

striking a familiar chord and of saying what has been said before, a fear of failing to be original, as Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr warns:

ما أَرَانَا نَقُولُ إِلَّا مَعَارَا أَوْ مَعَادَا مِنْ لَفْظِنَا مَكْرُورَا³⁶

I do not see us say anything but borrowed utterances / Or retold copies of our speech.

It is also a fear of replicating emotions verbatim in the same manner of former poets, as Imru‘ al-Qays concedes:

عَوَجَا عَلَى الطَّلَالِ الْمُحِيلِ لِأَنَّنَا نَبْكِي الدِّيَارَ كَمَا بَكَى ابْنُ خِذَامِ³⁷

Turning towards the year-old ruin because we // bemoan the homes as did Ibn Khidhām.

In the above example, Imru‘ al-Qays acknowledges the formulaic nature of pre-Islamic poetry, submitting that there is nothing necessarily wrong in crying over deserted ruins like those left by the obscure poet Ibn Khidhām. In fact, the tradition is rife with echoing and borrowing among other forms of “friendly emulation.” Yet, if themes and emotions are part and parcel of classical Arabic poetry, it is “how” these emotions are expressed that marks the difference between poets. Such lyrical anxieties and obsession with “newness” in formal expressions prompted many pre-Islamic poets to strive to be the voices of their community. They were the ones who recorded, aesthetically through the art of poetry, the heritages of their respective tribes we have today. They had critical social roles to fill, such as singing the praises of their warriors and chieftains, lampooning their enemies, and supporting their allies. Their poetry spoke of wars and divided tribalisms, and their works explored various subgenres like *hijā’* (invective and ridicule), *fakhr* (vaunting or boasting [tribal] pride), *rithā’* (elegy), and *ḥamāsa* (zeal, fervor, valor, bravery, fighting spirit, heroism). Their poems thrived on themes of love, longing, and dejection, but also on those of hunting, irreverent masculinities, erotic pauses, self-laudations, tribal vanities, and ancestral pomposity. Like the entire corpus of ancient Arabic literature, the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* was an offspring of an intrepid way of life, a tribal desert society that settled in with or carried along its own ethos and values wherever it went. Poetry came into life to document and commemorate these values, and by its ceremonial role to allow the pre-Islamic Arabs of those distant epochs to feel love and to confront conflicts and death in a desert geography that was constantly unforgiving.

Challenging indigenous Arab perspectives, Peter Brown has once provocatively called the desert a “myth” and even labeled it as “one of the most abiding creations of late antiquity, a myth of liberating precision.”³⁸ In Brown’s view, the desert of late antiquity was “a clear ecological frontier, delimit-[ing] the towering presence of the ‘the world’ from which the Christians must be set free . . . a brutally clear boundary, already heavy with immemorial associations.”³⁹ Understandably, Brown is making a reference here to the Desert Fathers and their expressions

of sexual renunciation and asceticism in the late Roman (early Christian) world. But the desert of pre-Islamic Arabic and the Qur'ān is the complete opposite. It is neither metropolis nor a town. The desert is the competing and punitive *real* pre-Islamic Arabs had to grapple with. It is the harsh *Ṣaḥrā' al-Lubayn*⁴⁰ of dried wells that haunts the opening lines of Zuhayr Abi Sulma's elegy, the great flood that devastates Imru' al-Qays's world, engulfing everything in its path (*wa Taymā'a lam yatrūk bi-hā jidh 'i nakhlatin*),⁴¹ and the scorching *sarābin biqī 'atin* of the Qur'ān. The desert, as it permeates the space of pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān, is not simply the extra-epistemic space of Brown's late antique times. Beyond being a mere backdrop for divine encounters, like those in the Old Testament with Abraham and Moses or the New Testament's depiction of Jesus being tempted by the devil, it holds a richer, more complex identity. It is neither the "imaginary space" beyond the metropolis nor the nonworldly and uninhabitable vastness that late antiquity imagined it to be. The desert in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and the Qur'ān is, in every sense, the competing space of the "other." It stands as the space that Western articulations of late antiquity overlooked or covered over. This is a fragment that versions of late Antiquity could not subsume, particularly in Brown's interpretation, which painted the desert as an imaginary place and overlooked its reality as a tangible, inhabited region. Here, real people cultivated profound, human-all-too-human traditions, encompassing not only ideas of transcendence and received divinity but also a tapestry of life experiences and cultural narratives. It's a realm where the human and the divine coalesce, offering a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the desert's role and significance in these ancient texts.

All these characteristics bring to life a landscape and a map that extends from tents and seasonal encampments vulnerable to the caprices of a harsh desert weather, tribal rivalries, and fierce battlefields, with detailed references to the topographies, meteorologies, and social customs of the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. Poets portray nomadic ways of life and itinerant travels for sources of water and cultivable lands. The emotional trigger that often characterizes pre-Islamic odes is the nostalgia the poet has for the beloved who moved away with her tribe from her encampment to inhabit a new one in distant lands. Just like the ancient Japanese *haiku*, a deep sense of sadness is often associated with a radical change in seasons in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. The desert landscape, as well as elements such as rain, thunder, floodings, clouds, the vegetation of the otherwise barren landscape, and even the passage of day and night in the single revolution of the sun all come together to project a mood of dejection and chagrin in the pre-Islamic Arabic *قصيدة*. The poets describe both domesticated animals such as horses, donkeys, camels, and dogs, and untamed creatures like ostriches, lions, snakes, wolves, hyenas, and birds of prey.

In the same context, we have come to see how pre-Islamic poets engage in deep philosophical questions about the meaning of life. Pre-Islamic Arabia developed a strong resignation to chance, randomness, and acts of fate while harboring a

refusal to see a purpose of life, though not necessarily a purpose *in* life. The poetry of Maymūn Ibn Qays al-A‘shá (570–625) provides perhaps the best verses that depict these musings on chance and life’s absurdities when reflecting on his own personal relationship to his beloved, Hurayra:

عَلَّقْتُهَا عَرَضًا وَعَلَّقْتَ رَجُلًا	غَيْرِي وَعَلَّقَ غَيْرَهَا الرَّجُلُ
وَعَلَّقْتَهُ فَتَاءً مَا يَحَاوِلُهَا	وَمَنْ بَنَى عَمَّهَا مَيْتٌ بِهَا وَهَلْ
وَعَلَّقْتَنِي أُخَيْرِي مَا تُلَانِمُنِي	فَاجْتَمَعَ الْحُبُّ حُبُّ كُلِّهِ نَبَلٌ
فَكَلْنَا مَغْرَمٌ يَهْدِي بِصَاحِبِهِ	نَاءً وَدَانَ وَمَخْبِرٌ وَمَخْتَبِلٌ ⁴²

I fell for her by accident, but she fell for another man / the man fell for another woman.

Another woman fell for the man, but he was not interested / though her cousin was madly in love with her.

A woman fell for me, but she did not suit me / love comes wholesale, love-madness. Each of us in pain raving about his beloved / distant, close, lovesick, crazed.

Al-A‘shá’s lines reflect on unrequited love and disintegrated personal relationships, resulting in emotional inference that there could be no meaning to life and that human existence is a painful absurdity. In other words, accident and chance are the basis for human connections, resulting in a corporal community lacking mutual love and emotional balance. We have already seen a glimpse of this in Ṭarafa’s ode, whose striking line on the defiance of death offers less of a rhetorical question about “eternity” than an anagnorisis of the futility and randomness of life. This realization is expressed in Ṭarafa’s powerful use of the word *manūn* (pl. *manāyā*) in its poignant attributive genitive case of *maniyyatī*, enveloped in a rhetorical question, a question which refuses to say what it is really questioning. The word *maniyyatī* does not exactly translate as “death,” but as the random acts of fate that might cause it, the haphazard events or vicissitudes of fortune that bring about a sense of deep anxiety about the uncertainty of it all. Or, as the *mukhaḍram* (a poet whose lifetime straddled the *Jāhiliyya* and the Islamic age) knight/poet Abū Dhu‘ayb al-Hudhalī (d. 649) puts it:

فَتِلْكَ خَطُوبٌ قَدْ تَمَلَّتْ شَبَابَنَا	قَدِيمًا فُتِّلِينَا الْمَنُونَ وَمَا نُبَلِي
مَنَايَا يُقَرَّبْنَ الْخُتُوفَ لِأَهْلِهَا	جَهَارًا، وَيَسْتَمْتَعْنَ بِالْأَنْسِ الْجَبَلِ ⁴³

These are vicissitudes that have taken our adolescence / Acts of fate that finish us when we can’t fight back.

Acts of fate advancing deaths to its people / Openly, and enjoying taking the lives of mortals.

The Qur'ān uses the same root to convey a similar meaning in a negative “death wish” Muḥammad’s detractors inflict upon him:

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٌ نَّتَرَبَّصُ بِهِ رَبِّبَ الْمُتُونِ

Or they would say: “[He is] a poet; we shall wait and see what fate’s uncertainty/vicissitude does with him.” (52:30)

In this Meccan verse, which represents Muḥammad’s early call of Islam, the wish (by his detractors) for random acts of death to overtake him before his message prevails is linked to his supposed poethood. The idea, since they are convinced he is a “deluded mortal,” is to humiliate him by reducing him to a poet and by waiting out his so-called “prophetic affectations” until death, under whatever circumstances, overtakes him and blasts him into oblivion:

إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا قَوْلُ الْبَشَرِ

This is nothing but the saying of mortals. (74:25)

In other words, in the logic of poetic Arabia, poeticity equals secularity and mortality, and if Muḥammad is merely mortal, it must follow that what he is saying would be nothing other than poetry or, at best poetic, and there is nothing divine about it. In all these examples, death is depicted by pre-Islamic Arabs as always a matter of chance: References to *manūn/manāyā* exemplify a preoccupation with death or with a death-anxiety syndrome that brings not just the end of life but a pragmatic philosophy of the world we inhabit. Sixth- and seventh-century Arabia saw death, then, as a matter of fact, a lurking inevitability masked in chance, a game played by those mischievous acts of fate. Ṭarafa knows the game so well that he opted to take the lead and happen upon death instead of waiting for death to happen upon him. Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmá (520–609) turns *manāyā* into a Russian Roulette *avant la lettre*, a lethal game of chance and a matter of hit and miss:

رَأَيْتُ الْمَنَايَا حَبِطَ عَشْوَاءَ مَنْ تُصِيبُ تُمِئْتُهُ وَمَنْ تُخْطِئُ يُعَمَّرُ فَيَهْرَمُ⁴⁴

I saw the clumsy randomness of the acts of fate, whoever they hit dies / and whoever they miss lives and grows old.

Zuhayr’s line relays a form of personification, which, far from being prearranged and methodical, is depicted as an inevitably recurrent event and unmediated by any poetic anesthetization. Death not only comes randomly, irrespective of one’s age or status, but it also appears as a performance of luck on a ground of sheer indifference, one that promises no resolution to any of life’s unsettling inconsistencies. Zuhayr’s metaphor of death is so commanding that it not only showcases the aesthetic superiority of the poetic over the commonplace in this fearful depiction of death as an arbitrary hitman, but it also almost makes it blasphemous to question

its authority. The reason for this command is because its claim is a powerful one, precisely because it envisions death as it appears to be: random and indiscriminate in its occurrence. This claim is achieved by a basic logic of observation and deduction that forms the phenomenological ground of the linguistic system that allows for the aesthetic to evolve as a category of the beautiful. Zuhayr's trope brings about a disquieting feeling of the constant proximity of death and of life itself as an exercise in ceaseless peril. However, as is the case with Ṭarafa, Zuhayr's understanding of the perils of death, his imaginative poeticization of its unpredictability, and his use of a figure of speech to personify it, is what allows the listener/reader to cope with this constant threat. The personification of the haphazard and blind blows of death (*khabṭ 'ashwā'*), a Beethovenian "fate knocking at the door," so to speak, does not in any way mitigate the empirical moment of undergoing or surviving death. What it does, however, is depict the vulnerability of our collective humanity in the face of death, in the coming into life itself as a material signification of a random *suqūṭ/saqt* (loss or fall), as Imru' al-Qays puts it exquisitely in the opening line of his ode:

بَسَقِطِ اللَّوَى بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْمَلِ قَفَا نَبِكَ مِنْ ذِكْرِي حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزَلِ

Stop, you two, so we could mourn the memory of a beloved and an abode / at the
tip of the coiled sands between al-Dakhūl and Ḥawmal.

It would be impossible to understand, explicate, interpret, or even translate the Qur'ān without this fundamental context of pre-Islamic poetry. The Qur'ān comes into the world of the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula aware of itself as a metaphysical category of rhetorical power interrogating a phenomenological category of rhetorical intelligence. It is rare to see metaphysics deconstruct phenomenology, but this is the aesthetic pattern that exactly corresponds to the Qur'ān's dialogic critique of pre-Islamic Arabia's poetic philosophy, including that of life and death. It is exemplified in the poetical works that predate the text by a hundred years.⁴⁶ The key to this critique of pre-Islamic reason, which is itself a recurrent motif throughout the Qur'ān,⁴⁷ is the aesthetic mode of delivering "new" and differing news, especially about the predictability and deliberateness of death,⁴⁸ of faith, and of the promise of paradise.⁴⁹ The insistence that there is something worse, or better, that lies beyond corporeal death, and the aesthetic elaboration of this "beyond," radically distinguishes the Qur'ān from poetry and allows it to establish its own authoritative difference. This insistence makes of the Qur'ān, to recall Adorno's piano metaphor, the very utopia of the Arabic language. "What takes itself to be utopian," contends Adorno, "remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it."⁵⁰ The Qur'ān's continuity of the linguistic pattern we see exemplified in Ṭarafa's ironic question, "*hal anta mukhallidī?*" (can you make me live forever) is indicative of its "obedience" to the rules of classical Arabic already established in pre-Islamic poetry. This continuity also explains the insistence of

the Qur'ān, *in the very context of its relationship to the language of poetry in the chapter of the Poets*, that it is revealed *bi-lisānin 'arabiyyin mubīnin* (in a clear/clarifying Arabic tongue).⁵¹ More importantly, this continuity is indicative of the Qur'ān's awareness of a common audience deeply immersed in understanding the difference between a syntax that allows Ṭarafa to ask his yes-or-no question and a rhetoric that negates the very prospect of expecting an answer to his question. After all, we are dealing with a community and a world, as Walid Saleh reminds us, "in which the reality of death was the only certitude and the only predictable element in human life."⁵²

But Saleh's topic is not merely about death and dying; it is resurrection and after-world existence as such. Expectedly, when it comes to notions of death and resurrection in the Qur'ān, there is always the question of the sources. Saleh solves this source problem—which concerns notions of mortality, accountability, and immortality (such as heaven and hell)—by stating that they do not come from one source. Perhaps because he is not working closely with the same historico-philosophical Arabic poetic corpus that preceded the Qur'ān,⁵³ Saleh chooses to focus on the Qur'ān text⁵⁴ and to regard those sources as universally "shattered" (to use a Foucauldian term) in the multiplicity of religio-ideological customs and "collective heritage from late antiquity," while still cautioning that "on its own, this world is coherent and constructed according to the Qur'ān's internal logic."⁵⁵ Indeed, Saleh, who predicates his discussion of the Qur'ān's paradise and hell verses on "a summation of late antiquity's world"⁵⁶ identifies clear points of departure from traditional societies of late antiquity in the Arabic depiction of mortality as a definition of humanity, which he considers "a gulf that truly separated the pagan Arabs and any society of late antiquity, whether Christian or Jewish."⁵⁷ On the level of rhetoric alone, the mockery embedded in Ṭarafa's question about the certainty and predictability of his own death speaks forcefully to Saleh's point. Ṭarafa provides a precise example of using the structure of Arabic grammar to generate a sentence with a double-entendre, one that simultaneously declares and negates its own speech act.⁵⁸ This rhetorical mode of questioning only works and is *only identifiable* where there is a familiar and recognizable extratextuality behind the crude linguistic field of classical Arabic. Otherwise, it will be impossible to determine grammatically or rhetorically which of the two meanings is intended in Ṭarafa's lines and, subsequently, in the Qur'ān.

To see how this rhetorical question functions in the Qur'ān, let us consider the following Meccan verses that utilize the same rhetorical mode, but only in deconstructing the dominant pre-Islamic belief in chance and the randomness of death. What we have here is a questioning *of* the rhetorical questioning:

وَقَالُوا أَإِذَا كُنَّا عِظْمًا وَرُفَاتًا أَعْنَا لَمُبْعُوثُونَ خَلْقًا جَدِيدًا؟⁵⁹

They said, "If we were to turn into bones and ashes, would we really be resurrected anew?"

وَيَقُولُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَإِذَا مَا مِتُّ لَسَوْفَ أُخْرَجُ حَيًّا؟⁶⁰

A human would ask, “If I were I to die, would I really be raised alive again?”

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَى هَذَا الْوَعْدُ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ⁶¹

They would say, “When would this promise ever come to pass, if you were truthful?”

In these examples we see how the Qur’ān “obeys” to the letter the structure and intentions of its preceding corpus, showing how a well-established syntactic pattern generates a sentence that has at least two meanings. One is not talking here about the realm of metaphor where one meaning is literal and the other figurative, but about a question that is and is not a question at the same time, and, more importantly, about a question that is not suspended or unresolved. In other words, the “disbelievers” in 17:49 are not genuinely asking, questioning, or seeking a confirmation about their resurrection after death. The very sarcasm they display in what al-Jurjānī refers to as *hamza-t-al-taqrīr wa-al-inkār wā-al-tawbikh* (the interrogative particle for affirmation, negation, and reproach) cancels and mocks the question. The syntactic use of the interrogative particle ؤ is already indicative of their sarcastic *inkār* mode of disapproval and denial. This is an excellent example of how rhetoric suspends logic in classical Arabic. This rhetorical suspension is not something the Qur’ān invented or imported from late antiquity. When its language concomitantly confirms and denies the power of its own rhetorical mode, the Qur’ān enters into a superior rhetorical dialogue with the very community of its constitutive language:

واعلم أن “الهمزة” فيما ذكرنا تقريرٌ بفعل قد كان، وإنكار له لم كان، وتوبيخ لفاعله عليه. ولها مذهب آخر، وهو أن يكون إنكار الفعل من أصله. ومثاله قوله تعالى (أَفَأَصْفُكُمْ رَبُّكُم بِالْبَنِينَ وَاتَّخَذَ مِنَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنثًا إِنَّكُمْ لَتَقُولُونَ قَوْلًا عَظِيمًا) وقوله عز وجل (أَصْطَفَى الْبَنَاتِ عَلَى الْبَنِينَ. مَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ). فهذا ردٌ على المشركين وتكذيب لهم في قولهم ما يؤدي إلى هذا الجهل العظيم. وإذا قُدِّمَ الاسم في هذا صار الإنكار في الفاعل. ومثاله قولك للرجل قد انتحل شعرأ: “أأنت قلت هذا الشعر؟ كذبت، لست ممن يحسن مثله”، أنكرت أن يكون الفاعل ولم تنكر الشعر.⁶²

Know that the hamza in the aforementioned is an affirmation of an action that took place and a denial of it for what it was, and at the same time a reproach for its agent. It has another usage, that is, the denial of the action itself, as in when God, may he be exalted, says, “Has your lord favored you with sons and taken angels as his females? Verily, you are saying something grievous.” or when he, in all his magnificence and glory, says, “Has he favored daughters over sons? What is wrong with you and with how you judge?” This is a response to the associators and a denial of what they say, which reflects great ignorance. If the noun/agent precedes the verb in this mode, then the denial is of agency. An example of this is when you say to a man who falsely attributes poetry to himself, “Did you really compose this poetry? You are a liar. This poetry is too good to be composed by you,” thus denying his agency as the author of said poetry but not the poetry itself.

In this context, al-Jurjānī positions *both* pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾān in a rhetorical and grammatical continuum, with a deep conviction that the language of ancient Arabic constitutes the text of the Qurʾān in the first place. He is aware that the language of the Qurʾān may differ discursively, and in degree, from pre-Islamic poetry, but it is not a difference in kind:

وذاك أنا إذا كنا نعلم أن الجهة التي منها قامت الحجة بالقرآن وظهرت، وبانت وبهرت، هي أن كان على حد
من الفصاحة تقصر عنه قوى البشر، ومنتها إلى غاية لا يُطَمَّح إليها بالفكر، وكان محالا أن يعرف كونه
كذلك، إلا من عرّف الشعر الذي هو ديوان العرب وعنوان الأدب. . . . وقد استشهد العلماء لغريب القرآن
وإعرايه بأبيات فيها الفحش، وفيها ذكر الفعل القبيح، ثم لم يعيهم ذلك.⁶³

This is because the position from which the Qurʾān distinguishes and demonstrates its mesmerizing authority comes from a degree of eloquence inimitable by humans and arriving at a telos unthinkable to their minds. It is impossible for anyone to understand the Qurʾān's power unless this person is versed in poetry, the *Dīwān* of the Arabs and the discourse of their literary heritage.

A linguistic utopia, to echo Adorno, is predicated on a dialectic of adherence (or obedience) and negation. The Qurʾān's adherence to the grammar and rhetoric of Arabic for the sake of communicability and clarity of its message, which I address in fuller details in a following chapter, dialectically forces "the negation of what exists," a negation that combines a shock of "newness" and a challenge for imitability, simultaneously. Not only does the Qurʾān establish itself as something new and different from poetry, but, in what is known as *Āyāt al-Taḥaddī* (Verses of Challenge), it emphatically declares itself as forever irreproducible by anyone, poets or nonpoets alike. The confrontational tone in the following verses positions the Qurʾān as an aesthetic manifestation that is simultaneously internal to the linguistic tradition of Arabic and external to the *modus operandi* that produces poetry:

وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُمْ مِمَّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ⁶⁴
أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِعَشْرِ سُورٍ مِثْلِهِ مُفْتَرِيَاتٍ وَادْعُوا مَنِ اسْتَضَعْتُمْ مِمَّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ⁶⁵
قُلْ لَئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا⁶⁶

And if you are in doubt of what we have descended unto our servant, then bring forth a sūra like it and call your ungodly witnesses if you were telling the truth. Or would they say: "he made it up." Say: "bring forth ten made-up sūras like it, and call out to whom you can other than God if you were telling the truth." Say, "if humans and jinn were to collaborate in producing something like this Qurʾān, they would not produce anything like it, even if they backed one another."

Because the Qurʾān cannot rely on any ethos or objective realities expressed in these poems, it has to produce its own system of knowledge, its own supremacy,

so to speak. Saleh understands this tension very well. “The Qur’ān speaks to humanity triumphantly,” he says, doing so in a tone “based on the presumption that it knows human beings better than they know themselves.”⁶⁷ This knowability, however, is only achievable through the pretext of pre-Islamic poetry, as al-Jurjānī notes, since the Qur’ān’s aesthetic eloquence would be impossible to assess, comprehend, or appreciate “except by those who know poetry, the very *dīwān* of the Arabs and the signature of their literature.”⁶⁸ These accounts alone would make the valorization of historical categories occur at the expense of aesthetic rigor, or any claim for reducing the Arabicity of the Qur’ān as a self-enclosed totality of epistemic “intertexts,” an exercise in dogmatism. Once again, (Arab) aesthetics are not a self-enclosed totality awaiting the defensive Western literary critic, à la Nicholson, to denigrate it in comparison to his own tradition. The nexus between social and linguistic habits of the Arab community, their art, and their oral aesthetics is built into the structure of pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur’ān, not in the dogmatic sense that aesthetics are concerned with matching poetic meters with tribal politics as their main focus, but in the much deeper sense that, here again, the discursive passage from a rhetoric of intelligence (pre-Islamic poetry) to a rhetoric of power (the Qur’ān) must include communal aesthetics as the one and only *pre-requisite* for such a passage to take place and be understood in the first place. How Qur’ānic oral aesthetics are articulated is not a simple matter to research, but this is nonetheless a topic that continues to be dismissed in Euro-American scholarship.⁶⁹ A truly meaningful reflection on the Qur’ān can therefore only be achieved through the practice of aesthetic thought, accessible exclusively by engaging with the literary figurations and tropes of its formative language. This is because tropes do not just adorn language; they unlock its deepest layers, revealing the profound truths and wisdom embedded within.