Conclusion

The Future of Qurʾānic Studies

At the outset of this study, I suggested that pre-Islamic Arabic literature, rather than the category of late antiquity, is the most effective way of approaching and understanding the Qurʾān. I then tried to demonstrate that pre-Islamic Arabic thought and culture are "symbolic," both aesthetically and socially, of the foremost exception that is the Qurʾān itself, a scripture that both reflects and eclipses its own contemporary historical setting. Over the course of this book's chapters, I have taken this argument one step further. I have tried to demonstrate that whereas pre-Islamic poetry represents poetic discourse turned into a socio-aesthetic space, the Qurʾān represents aesthetic discourse turned against itself. On a pragmatic level, this distinction does not seem substantial. Both discourses, after all, end up as social-political aesthetics. However, what the transformative power of the Qurʾān has introduced to the field of aesthetics, that the transformative sovereignty of poetry into socio-aesthetics could not, is a much more profound integration of social and aesthetic categories than has ever been witnessed before in the entire history of the Arabo-Islamic world.

This is no small feat. For this reason, it has been important for me, and as I assume for all global readers alike, to redirect the course of Qurʾānic studies in the Euro-American academy. I did so by interrogating Euro-American scholarship's reliance on the historical-critical method, a method that fulfills the path of biblical criticism by treating the Qurʾān as a footnote to such history. To this day, most Euro-American scholarship on the Qurʾān operates from within an epistemological framework that presupposes such a primary biblical "intertext" (a new euphemism for "influence" or "borrowing").[1] By taking the immediate prehistory of the Qurʾān out of this equation, this predominant approach clings only to a method of interpreting the text from the theoretical end tail of extrapeninsular sources,

leaving behind the story of the Qurʾānʾs Arabicity, its internal dialogues and conversations with its immediate pre-Islamic culture, and the local literary and socio-economic contexts associated with its age. Geert Jan van Gelder, whose estimable work on pre-Islamic Arabic "respects the Muslim tradition" and expresses hopes that "enlightened Muslims" would be able to address the extraordinary literariness of the Qurʾān, does not fail to underscore the necessity of a series engagement with pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.[2]

In this spirit, the guiding principle of this study has been to let the Qurʾān speak for itself, and to let it make its own statement, in its own distinct way, through its own language, images, narratives, and themes. Readers of and listeners to the Qurʾān in its original Arabic would realize how inviting the freedom and open-endedness of its figural ingenuity is. The Qurʾān proclaims its difference from poetry, and it retains within its own text the evidence of its difference. To argue that the Qurʾān reflects the context of its age is neither new nor, for the most part, contestable, but it is nonetheless an argument that continues to be understudied.

This book has engaged directly with this literariness and and has offered a rhetorical, literary, and linguistic reading of the two discourses of pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾān. It has focused on the aesthetic potential of the Arabic language, as well as on the autonomous possibilities of its significations in both discourses. As far as the comparison between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾān is concerned, the truth that interests a literary critic is not of the order of broad categorizations or sweeping generalities. As I have sought to demonstrate, a literary reading is skeptical of the bulldozering and levelling that a historical categorization makes, and of all similarities that it must construct to justify its own status. Yet such a reading remains concerned with a specific reality, and because this reality goes as far as to question the validity of broad historical categorizations, it chooses to stand outside the comfy blanket of late antiquity, which paints everything "as a night," to recall Hegel, "in which all cows are black."[3] The method this study calls for does not yield to the historical imperative of one size that fits all.

While I steer away from hankering after origins and histories of texts, I focus on the language, aesthetics, ethics, individuals, and communities associated with the primary texts of seventh-century Arabia. My main objective is to open new horizons in the field of Qurʾānic studies. There is a definition of Islam in relationship to late antiquity that views the Qurʾān as organic, and not necessarily advocating for the abandonment of its native soil in favor of "out-sourcing." Thomas Sizgorich offers this position by stating that "the birth and early growth of the Muslim community within a late antique cultural milieu did nothing to undermine the evolution of a distinctively Islamic cultural tradition. Rather, the tradition begun within that milieu would prove so powerful as to recast ancient signs and symbols as uniquely its own."[4]

Sizgorich's statement reminds us that historical traditions cannot be reduced to texts. However, when a text becomes the main concern of a certain brand of historians, it follows that its very history will only be made available through a serious and direct engagement with its form and content. In fact, it was only two hundred years ago, in the long aftermath of Europe's scientific revolution, that the notion of discovering a truth behind the past through a "scientific method" became the preoccupation of history. In Europe, the birthplace of the historical-critical method, the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries witnessed the academic rise of revisionism, with an agenda that Frederick Beiser aptly describes as "simple but ambitious: to legitimate history as a science. Its aim was to show what makes history a science. All the thinkers in the historicist tradition . . . wanted to justify the scientific status of history. They used 'science' in a broad sense of that term corresponding to the German word 'Wissenschaft,' that is, some methodical means of acquiring knowledge."[5] I address this issue elsewhere, but suffice it here to say that the move toward the "scientification" of history as a discipline is akin to the polarization we witness nowadays in the university, where the humanities are perceived as providing lesser market value than STEM research.[6]

In its Abrahamic version, a history of monotheism means for scholars of the Qurʾān and late antiquity that there is an intended execution of the original idea, a continuity thesis of Old Testament monotheism. When it comes to the Qurʾān, this continuity thesis has come to mean, or rather necessitate, the historical formation of an order of divination that is structurally identical, or at least substantially similar, to the original order of such divine history. There is truth to this claim. So, when Neuwirth states that "in its eschatological parts, the Qurʾān comes distinctively close to biblical prophet speech, although the great visions of the biblical prophets have come to be replaced by the short sura-introducing tableaux of the oath series,"[7] she advances the argument that divine history (scripted divine history, that is) is an order of calculated repetitions, not of voluntary or original spontaneity, and that the only changes are more or less technical, designed to "orient themselves stylistically to the ancient Arabic models of the seer speech."[8] Neuwirth further contends that apocalyptic visions "such as that of the 'valley of the rotting bones' in Ezekiel 37 have their Qurʾānic counterpart in the oath of Q. 100:1–5 on the suddenness of the awakening, or Q. 82:1–5 on the loosing [sic] of the cosmos."[9] She maintains for the Qurʾān what Daniel Weidner says of the Bible—namely, that "it is speech performance in the most eminent sense of the word, performance with apocalyptic power."[10] In this particular instance, she effectively demonstrates the parallels between the Bible and the Qurʾān and confirms, perhaps with a hint from Stefan Sperl and James Kugel, that "just as in the Bible, in the Qurʾān context the speech owes its impressing power to poetic strategies—an immanent potential for conflict—which in both cases requires a demarcation between prophecy and poetry, which in the case of the Qurʾān already occurred during the genesis of the text itself."[11]

This is how Neuwirth makes a powerful case for Islam as a "shared tradition" of late antiquity. For her intended audience, Neuwirth's argument is considered a revolutionary academic venture, coming a time when Europe has grown so scholastically accustomed to alienating and distancing itself from Islam and Muslims. Armed with her penetrative expertise in biblical criticism, Neuwirth proves that Islam has been misunderstood and treated as the *other* of Europe, whereas it is indeed part of Europe's own inherited theological history. This is perhaps the best and most sophisticated retooling of late antiquity as a bridge between a highly appreciated period that led to the very idea and foundation of Western Europe and the less historical appreciated ramifications of the period. Neuwirth's approach responds effectively to a current crisis in modern and contemporary political thought in Germany and a timely call for de-exoticizing and de-othering Islam, asking the question, "gehört der Islam zu Deutschland/Europa?" (does Islam belong to Germany/Europe?).

But to retool late antiquity this way blankets, rather than levels, the variegated histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Europe, Africa, and Asia.[12] In fact, while "sameness" implies "repetition," at least theoretically and, to some extent, monotheistically, in accord with the Abrahamic tradition, one must not, in practice, ignore the differences. Reading the Qurʾān with biblical eyes, or searching for the Bible in the Qurʾān, one is conditioned to spot only "similarities" and hence derivativeness—variations on an original theme. Academically, at least, the historical sources of this issue lie clearly in a centralized Old-Testament*ism* that has shaped Euro-American scholarship on the Qurʾān since the nineteenth century. Repetition is an attractive idea, and it insightfully facilitates Neuwirth's inclusion of the Qurʾān in the ancient cycles of biblical history. But one must also learn to see, and accept, the differences and diversities of the Qurʾānic text. The Qurʾān includes alternative themes, ideas, commentaries, references, inversions, subversions, and interpretations that must not be lost in the macrocosm of the late antique debate. In addition to its similar attachment to a monotheistic ideal, the Qurʾān remains a document of alterity with intricate microlinguistic significations and with "inside" references and subtleties that will be lost if read only as part of the complex continuum of a *terra incognita*. It certainly does include staggering fragments of language and dehistorized arrangements of sūras that may appear "illogical" to Western eyes.[13] But to "rationalize" it and reduce it to a category that makes it look like an end product of late antique biblical history repeats the same vicious circle of *othering* by a different name.

One would thus hope that future scholarship on the Qurʾān would regard it with Brechtian eyes, as a *Verfremdungseffekt*, a distancing or estrangement effect, precisely because it emerged in and engaged with a distinct linguistic tradition. This estrangement effect serves two important functions. First, it ultimately allows for more nuanced appreciations not only of the diverse literariness and language of the text—or what we might call the aesthetics of the text—but also of the text

itself as different, which we might call the ethics of reading the text. Second, it will make us more aware of the extent to which a consistent and methodical ideology has dictated its conceptual limitations on ethical and aesthetic judgments of the celebrated tradition of another culture, imposing them on academic curricula, and continuing to project erroneous simulations of Islam's history—which is obviously one of the "privileges" through which Euro-American academe has access to history itself.

When we recall that the language of the Qurʾān rivaled poetry as a new discourse of aesthetic power and that conventional *tafsīr* accounts relied fundamentally on the language of pre-Islamic poetry to explicate the Qurʾān and that without it no exegesis or translation of would have been possible, it becomes difficult to ignore the fact that the absence of pre-Islamic Arabic from current academic debates betrays a deeper contradiction in terms, leaving a gaping lacuna in the Western academy of Qurʾānic studies. It is not without a valid reason that Amīn al-Khūlī, a towering Arabist, philologist, and rhetorician of the last century, would describe the Qurʾān as *kitāb al-ʿArabīyya al-aqdar wa-atharuhā al-fannī al-aqdas* (the greatest book of the Arabic language and its most revered literary heritage).[14]

This testimony is not surprising given that the Qurʾān is by far the most significant literary text of the Arabic language, even more compelling than other texts centuries before or after. In part, this may explain the rush in late antique scholarship to "include" it in its periodization, with the insistence that the Qurʾān is ultimately "homiletic" in character and "belonging to" (euphemism for "derivative of") an ancient genre that flourished in the late antique world *writ large*.[15] Yet, a literary-linguistic approach to the Qurʾān from within the context of its own Arabicity reveals that this so-called "scientific" method of interpreting the Qurʾān from the lens of the historical-critical method is neither emancipatory nor inclusive, but is at best a Eurocentric orchestration of the Old Testament's avowal of origins.

Viewing late antiquity as a new avenue for escaping the entrenched hierarchy in academic discourse offers hope. It suggests that embracing Islam within this framework could offer the most timely and considerate approach yet for addressing Eurocentrism in Qurʾānic studies and the broader academic world, thanks to its potential to explore similarities and connections between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, this approach is fundamentally flawed, as it merely provides a partial resolution. It not only overlooks the specific historical context and diversity of the Qurʾān; it also portrays a Judeo-Christian world that appears static and unmoved in its own textuality, disregarding the significant historical evolutions of these texts and of the Qurʾān itself. This perspective recurrently adopts a negative analogy of the Qurʾān, relying on a methodology grounded in derivative thought rather than the much needed positive analogy that would acknowledge the Qurʾān both as a product of its era and as a transformative force within the monotheistic tradition.

A positive analogy would in fact put the Qurʾān into its own immediate *mise en scène*, allowing it be the document of history that it is, noticing that it is a *commentary* on biblical history that lends itself easily to a comparison between seemingly incompatible versions of divine narratives. As a result of this comparison, the Qurʾān points out affinities, allusions, equivalences, and resemblances among preceding prophetic narratives whether recurring in the Qurʾānic text or acknowledged without inclusion;[16] more importantly, however, it also draws distinctions between narratives that are, in fact, comparable, but whose comparability subscribes to certain terms—for example, sociohistorical conditions and power relations in seventh-century Hijaz, rather than just the thin linearity of an origin and its replica.

Yet the law of Eurocentrism has always been a law of an original versus a copy, not the acknowledgement of difference as authority, but the dissolution of this authority into an "inclusive" act of hierarchical referentiality. It is not at all difficult to amass a series of passages from the Qurʾān that are analogous to biblical and para-biblical traditions.[17] The reason for this is obvious: the Qurʾān does not disavow its relationship to Judaism and Christianity. On the contrary, the Qurʾān embraces this relationship and demonstrates deep interest in and familiarity with narratives and ethical traditions of communities from which both Judaism and Christianity originated. Yet the Qurʾān unequivocally discards claims of "influence" under any name. As is evident from the academic training of numerous Euro-American scholarships on the Qurʾān over the span of the last fifty years,[18] methodological approaches to the Qurʾān and late antiquity originate primarily in the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation. However, it remains inexplicably reductionist to approach the Qurʾān as the sum of its biblical narratives and themes, especially when these narratives serve as only one component of its overall constitutive totality. Even on occasions when the Qurʾān addresses prophetic miracles, it does so in a manner that is at once relatable to *and* different from the Old Testament, focusing more on episodic interlacing of such stories (to serve a higher moral lesson and affirm a monotheistic continuum) than on presenting each story as a sequential historical plot with a beginning, middle, and end, except perhaps for the story of Joseph (12). This progressive dehistoricized consciousness embraces a condition of admonishment where historical time is set right up to the moment in which the Qurʾān answers to it. Precisely by doing so, the lesson drawn from prophetic stories across human time is itself the transforming critique of human history.[19] In other words, the Qurʾān proclaims that it neither invents nor originates monotheism, but functions, rather, as an endorsement of its existence throughout time since creation.

In every context, the Qurʾān confirms divine justice as an inalienable attribute of divinity. God, who occupies half the space of the Qurʾān, is not in the business of abandoning humanity, the Qurʾān tells us, but is keen on sending prophets and signs to every community and nation.[20] Prophetic narratives recited in the

Qurʾān are themselves symbolic of this overarching divine justice. It therefore matters significantly that we position the Qurʾān within seventh-century Arabia, among communities with a massive appetite for language and for gods. Otherwise, it would be practically impossible to envisage the Qurʾān emerging outside this backdrop of literary aesthetics and theistic ethics. It is precisely inside this local context that the Qurʾān ascertains its theistic and linguistic triumph in the face of historical determinacy.[21] What does not simply rehash older patterns and narratives is itself historically signifying, at least in accordance with Karl Marx's remark that each era completes only the tasks assigned to it.[22]

While the argument for a superhuman prophetic narrative in the Qurʾān—or for the Qurʾān itself as an extraordinary linguistic phenomenon—may fall flat in a secular postreligious world, a world in which many of us can be found on our phones rather than reading poems, studying languages with "strange" alphabets, or reading arcane poetry, one must not rush to the conclusion that the extraordinary is not part of our world, or that the fantastic does not take place in our lived reality. It is just that its impact on our shared humanity may well be too close for comfort. In this context, what must be historically recorded—and what must not get lost in translation—is that the Qurʾān remains the most reliable source of its own language. Nothing more, nothing less. In Islam, as well as in Judaism and Christianity, the core doctrine will always remain the mysterious Logos, *kalima-tu-Allāh* (the Word of God). Whether this Word of God is incarnate or remains immaterial, its (im)materiality is inherently immaculate, beautiful, and unmimetic.

Those who choose to bypass this Arabicity and view the Qurʾān as a byproduct of an extrapeninsular historical condition of late antique times are not only missing the rich open-endedness, wealth, and complexity of its distinct language; they are masking an anxiety of having their own ideological methods laid bare by the very text they seek to read and historicize. It turns out that "including" the Qurʾān under the rubric of late antiquity is, after all, nothing but a refusal to read the Qurʾān, a refusal that has reached its highpoint in the historical-critical approach of the Euro-American academy. By freeing the Qurʾān from the ʿaṣabiyya of the "derivative," one would also embolden the Abrahamic and eventually free it from the toxic opposition between origin and replica, which is itself a genetic symptom of a naïvely mimetic Eurocentric mind.

For the field of Qurʾānic studies to have a fresh beginning, it will have to emancipate itself from relying on an outmoded method to interpret the Old Testament and the reapplication of such a method to the Qurʾān, especially when this method has already garnered the discontent of eminent Bible scholars. Not only this, but its subscription to academe must rid itself of what Neuwirth herself characterizes as "an epistemic pessimism," a rash dismissal of the "vast corpora of Islamic learning as useless for Qurʾānic studies" and "little interest in the pagan, the *Jāhilī* Arab background of the Qurʾānic event . . . for the sake of a principal re-location of the Qurʾān out of Arabia into an undetermined Christian space."[23] There is

nothing necessarily perverse in juxtaposing the Qurʾān with the historical contexts of Abrahamic monotheism; the Qurʾān itself welcomes this juxtaposition. But one must do so from within the ethics of the comparative, without hijacking the Qurʾān's Arabicity or colonizing its socio-linguistic context. David Damrosch makes an excellent point when he states that "appropriately so, the Qurʾān is a gift not only to humanity in general but to comparatists in particular," a gift that may not immediately be "inviting to the literary critic,"[24] but that soon opens up to "literary analysis and insights."[25] Damrosch's words remind us of this dire need for a new generation of scholars who can study the Qurʾān, comparatively, in nonessentialist terms and challenge, where appropriate, orientalist, neo-orientalist, and even Islamist forms of "conventional wisdom."

The future of Qurʾānic studies in the Euro-American academy will flourish only when its method is no longer a prisoner to ideological nonlinguistic value judgements. Academically and ethically, today we need a method that respects the Qurʾān's Arabic language, the reception of the form and meaning of such language by its intended audience at its own historical time, and the aesthetic and linguistic modalities extant both in the language of the Qurʾān and the pre-Islamic idiom that forms and informs it. In fact, the corpus of pre-Islamic literature is rich enough to require an independent discipline to further investigate its status and relationship to the Qurʾān. Euro-American scholarship on the Qurʾān will also have to come to terms with the fact that compelling instances of humanism could also lie outside the epistemic spheres of Europe.

The Qurʾān, a seminal document of seventh-century humanism with a global reach, still beckons further exploration and a wider audience. Overlooking this strand of humanism in both pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾān itself not only reinforces the divisive force of ʿaṣabiyya; it also amplifies its distortion. We should imagine, then, the transformative potential were the Qurʾān to be positioned in a way that decenters biblical history from its long-standing pedestal as the sole point of reference, challenging the historical-critical method's monopoly on interpreting scripture. Could this not herald a paradigm shift, prompting a reevaluation of our collective humanism and inspiring a level of critical thought more daring and profound than ever before? What could the implications of embracing such a positive analogy be?