

INTRODUCTION



SOME TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO I witnessed a remarkable incident. The occasion was a lunch given by the late King Hussein of Jordan for the chiefs of the loyal tribes. The place was a group of tents in the eastern desert of the kingdom; the principal guests were the tribal chiefs and some of their tribesmen. The host was the late King, accompanied by his two brothers and their personal guests, of whom I had the honor to be one (see photo opposite). While the appropriate units of the royal Jordanian army prepared the customary *mansif* feast of mutton and rice, the King and his guests assembled in a large tent for the usual exchange of compliments and pleasantries, with appropriate refreshments. At a certain moment a tribal poet appeared, with the traditional task of declaiming an ode (*qasida*) in praise of the King. The ode, in appropriately flowery literary Arabic, went on at considerable length, and the King obediently sat cross-legged on his carpet, occasionally nodding in appreciation. Then the poet paused in his declamation. The King assumed that he had finished, and began to rise to his feet with some well-chosen words of thanks. But the poet had not finished; he had merely paused for breath. Switching abruptly from the classical Arabic of poetry to the collo-

quial Arabic of everyday speech he said to the King: "Wait a minute, I haven't finished yet." The King obediently resumed his seat and allowed the poet to complete his dithyramb.

This happened in a tent, not a palace; at a tribal rally, not a court ceremony. Even so, I find it difficult to conceive of any situation in any Western society, even the most democratic of republics and monarchies, in which a poet would feel free to put the head of state in his place in quite this way. This encounter between king and poet gave me a sharp and direct insight into something I knew only from literature and history—the love of poetry and respect for poets characteristic of Arab culture from antiquity to the present day. In classical times, we are told, the Arabs prized two arts above all others, and took pride in their mastery of both: poetry and eloquence. Both are arts of the word, and the immense esteem accorded to the word and to the skills and sciences associated with the word has remained a characteristic feature of Middle Eastern civilization. Poetry and poets in particular have been the subject of passionate, one might almost say obsessive, interest from the earliest times to the present day.

This respect for poets is the more remarkable if one compares it with the other arts. Music in medieval Middle Eastern society was widely appreciated, but musicians, even composers, were held in low esteem. Many of them were slaves, used by their wealthy or powerful owners to entertain their guests. Their names are known, if at all, only from literary mentions, and no method of preserving musical compositions was devised or borrowed

until the introduction of tablature and then of staff notation from Europe in the nineteenth century. Musicians were entertainers, no more, and such reputation as they acquired came principally from setting poems to music.

Artists, and especially architects, were slightly better placed, but not by very much. They were seen basically as artisans, working with their hands, and therefore of inferior social status. The painting, as a separate work of art to be hung on the wall, was unknown until modern times, when it was introduced from Europe. Painters were employed occasionally in the very early period and again comparatively recently to do murals, but their more usual and more characteristic task was to illustrate manuscript books. The painter, like the musician, served to embellish and offset the written or spoken word. What little is known about artists, as about musicians, comes from passing references or allusions. Metalworkers and masons sometimes inscribed their names on their products, thus adding to our scanty knowledge. After the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, perhaps because of Chinese influence, artists seem to have been held in somewhat greater regard. More are known by name, and for some we even have a few biographical details. Architects in particular became better known since many of them were military officers and as such enjoyed a certain status in society. But for the most part artists and musicians alike were not deemed worthy of the attention of monarchs and ministers during their lifetime, nor of historians after their death. It is not until the Ottoman period that we have any detailed information—names,

biographies, etc.—and even then the information remained sparse, until the processes of Westernization brought Middle Eastern practice into line with that of the Western world. The history of Islamic art and music and the biographies of Islamic artists and musicians, with few exceptions, were not written until Western orientalists turned their attention to this aspect of Middle Eastern culture and history.

All this is in striking contrast with the status of poetry and poets. The Arabs developed an elaborate and sophisticated literary analysis and literary history centuries before such studies were even conceived, let alone executed, in Europe. The esteem, one might even say the cult, of poets and poetry is the more remarkable and explains not only the preservation of such vast quantities of poetry but also of so much information about the poets, their lives, and often, the circumstances in which particular poems were composed and, so to speak, published. Even caliphs and sultans did not disdain to compose and publish poems, on love (p. 48), on war (p. 150) and other themes.

The place, the time, the people, the culture from which these poems come are best defined by Islam. Its heartlands are the region which in the twentieth century came to be known as the Middle East, consisting of Southwest Asia with extensions westward into North Africa and eastward into Central Asia. For a while, it stretched beyond North Africa into Spain, where for centuries Islam was the dominant faith and Arabic the main language of culture. In Asia it extended east and north of

Iran and Afghanistan into regions which historically, culturally, and ethnically form part of the traditional Middle East but were separated from it when these countries were conquered by the Russian czars and incorporated in the Russian empire. They were retained by the Soviets, and recovered their independence only with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In most of these regions the dominant languages are closely related to Turkish or Persian, and the dominant culture until the Russian conquest was that of Islam. They are now gradually resuming their historic links with the Islamic lands of the Middle East.

The time of this collection is also defined by Islam. The earliest poems come from the seventh century when the prophet Muhammad was born, lived, and died in Arabia, bringing a new scripture in Arabic and founding a new religion. The latest examples come from the eighteenth century, the final stage of classical Islamic literature, before poetry, like everything else, was transformed by the impact of the advancing and expanding civilization of the West.

Islam did not come into a new world but into a world of rich and ancient cultures, and some aspects of the civilization of classical Islam in its prime can be traced back to antiquity—to the heritage of Roman law and government, Greek science and philosophy, Judaeo-Christian religion and ethics, and beyond them to the more ancient civilizations of these lands. But Islamic civilization was nevertheless something new, distinctive and original, and in nothing is this more clearly seen than in its poetry.

The classical and scriptural language of Islam is of

course Arabic—the language of the Qurʾan, of the oldest Islamic literature, of Muslim tradition and law. Structurally, Arabic ranks among the most ancient of the Semitic languages; historically, it is among the most recent. The name “Arab” is first attested in an Assyrian inscription of 853 B.C.E. Thereafter there are frequent references to Arabs, more precisely Arabians, in inscriptions, as well as in the later books of the Hebrew Bible and in Greek and Latin works. The oldest extant text in a language recognizable as Arabic was found in Namara, an oasis in the Syrian desert on the fringe of the Roman province of Arabia, and dated 223 of the Bosra era, corresponding to 328 C.E. Written in an Aramaic script but in the Arabic language, it records the death and celebrates the achievements of the famous Imruʿl Qays, “King of all the Arabs.” From the text of the inscription, it would seem that his kingship was over the nomads of northern and central Arabia.

Arabic first appears as a literary language in the seventh century C.E.—a newcomer among the ancient languages of the region, and it is to that comparatively recent time that the oldest Arabic poems are attributed, though some may contain verses of earlier origin. These Arabic poems have a character of their own, owing surprisingly little—far less than in law, science, philosophy, art, even religion—to the pre-Islamic cultures that were incorporated in the empire of the caliphs.

Three languages prevailed during the great age of Islamic civilization, though others were added later as Islam expanded into Asia, Africa and, for a while, Europe.

Of these, the first was Arabic, the language not only of religion but also of government and law, as well as of virtually every aspect of written culture. For some centuries, Arabic was in effect the sole written language of the Islamic world. Older languages survived for a while—Coptic among Christians, Hebrew among Jews, Aramaic among both—but these were in time restricted to ritual and literary use, and replaced by Arabic as the language of communication, both verbal and written.

A major exception was Iran where the Persians, though conquered and converted, nevertheless retained their own language and in time created a new form of that language. Persian, unlike Arabic, is not a Semitic language but belongs to the Indo-European family, which includes most of the languages of Europe as well as Sanskrit and its derivatives in India. The name “Iran” derives from the same root as the term “Aryan.” The earliest Iranian inscriptions date from remote antiquity, and are in a script adapted from the Assyrian-Babylonian cuneiform. In the centuries immediately preceding the advent of Islam, the language of that time, which scholars sometimes call Middle Persian, was written in the so-called Pahlavi, based on the Aramaic script. The Zoroastrian scriptures are in this writing, and are still preserved among the Parsees, the Zoroastrians of the present day. The impact of the Arab conquest on the Persian language can be compared with the impact of the Norman conquest on Anglo-Saxon. The need to communicate led to a simplification of the grammar; the new order brought new classics and models and an immense new vocabulary,

covering every aspect of intellectual, cultural, political, and social life. But Persian did not become Arabic; it became a new form of Persian, just as Anglo-Saxon became English, and with comparable richness, vigor, and flexibility.

A little later, the Turks were also brought into the Islamic fold, some by conquest, more by wandering missionaries. The name “Turk” is attested in both Byzantine and Chinese writings from the sixth century onward. Inscriptions and a small number of literary works in recognizably Turkic languages date from the seventh to the tenth centuries, and were written in a variety of scripts. After the conversion of almost all the Turkic peoples to Islam, they too adopted the Arabic script and many Arabic and also Persian words. In the vast area extending from western China to the Balkan peninsula, the Turks created more than one literary idiom. The best known of these is Ottoman Turkish, the language of the Ottoman Empire, from which is derived the language of the present-day Turkish Republic. Others include Azeri, the language of Azerbaijan, as well as several Central Asian literary languages. The poems in this collection are from the Ottoman and the closely-related Azeri literatures.

These new languages—Islamic Persian, Turkish, and later others—were written in Arabic script, which replaced the scripts previously used. These were retained, if at all, only in the rituals and sacred books of the pre-Islamic religions, now followed by ever dwindling minorities. The new, Islamized languages, along with an immense vocabulary of Arabic words, imported Arabic

literary forms and, for a while, tastes. They also developed their own distinctive poetics. A notable development was in narrative, especially heroic narrative. The ancient Arabs had their heroic poetry, celebrating the deeds of the great warriors in the wars of pre-Islamic Arabia and in the early wars of Islam. Some later writings, such as an account of the life of Saladin in rhymed prose, have something of an epic quality. The Persians went a step further, creating an authentic epic tradition comparable with those of Greece, Rome, and the Vikings. This, too, became in time, a form of Persian national self-definition. The most famous of Persian epic poets, Firdawsi (940–1020), has been translated several times. An extract from the story of Farhad and Shirin, as told by the twelfth century Persian poet Nizami, exemplifies another form of narrative poetry (p. 117).

The addition of Hebrew deserves a note. Hebrew is a Semitic language, and as such is related to Arabic. But its cultural history is very different. Like Persian, it was already a written language in remote antiquity, and went through a number of phases of development, from the earlier to the later books of the Old Testament, through the vast rabbinical literature of the late pre-Christian and early Christian periods, and, particularly the creation of a rich and varied poetry of prayer. By the early centuries of the Christian era, Hebrew had ceased to be a spoken language, and Jews generally spoke the language of the country in which they lived, sometimes in a distinctive dialect of their own. A few passages in the Old Testament, and much of the rabbinic literature, are written in Ara-

maic, the most widely spoken language, or rather group of languages, in the countries of the Fertile Crescent until the Arab conquest and the subsequent Arabization of these lands. Jews in ancient Arabia spoke Arabic, and some of them composed poems which do not differ significantly from those of their pagan neighbors. Jews elsewhere, along with the rest of the population, gradually switched from Aramaic to Arabic.

But Hebrew, though no longer a vernacular, remained very much alive. As well as in worship, it was extensively used in scholarship, in literature, and even, to a remarkable extent, in business and private correspondence. Arabized Jews made an important contribution to Arabic literature, notably in science and philosophy. But for poetry—intimately linked with religion—they preferred to retain the Hebrew language, and to write it in the Hebrew script. Nevertheless, these Hebrew poems, written in the Middle East, North Africa, and Muslim Spain, are unmistakably part of the same cultural tradition as the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish poems produced in the realms of Islam. This Hebrew poetry reflects many aspects of Islamic literary culture, and even its language shows strong Arabic influence. We have become accustomed nowadays to speak in the Western world of a Judaeo-Christian tradition—a tradition which is predominantly Christian, but in which Jewish origins and later Jewish minorities play a significant part. One could with equal justification, and for similar reasons, speak of a Judaeo-Islamic tradition in the past, though no longer at the present time. The Hebrew poems translated here

clearly belong to that tradition. Some Biblical figures, such as Joseph and Solomon (Arabic Yusuf and Sulayman), also figure prominently in Muslim stories and poetry.

How was a poem published, at a time when printing was unknown and even writing and reading were rare skills? The poet relied of course primarily on his own declamation of his poetry before a suitable audience, but from early times there were ways to supplement this, and a poet might employ one or more reciters known as *rawi*, whose task it was to memorize his poems and repeat them on suitable occasions to others, thus securing a wider circulation. The processes of memorizing and circulating the poem could of course be greatly facilitated and accelerated if the poem was set to music. In time, the *rawi* became a kind of professional performer, reciting poems before an audience. The Arab literary historians tell many stories of this or that *rawi* —his extraordinary memory, his enormous repertoire, his entrancing performance. One *rawi* is credited with having recited 2,900 poems at a single sitting. Sometimes the *rawi* was himself an apprentice or aspiring poet, trying to gain a hearing for his own compositions. Such *rawis* were suspected of editing or even inventing some of the verses they declaimed in the names of the great masters of the past. These accusations raised serious questions concerning the accuracy and even the authenticity of the poems that were transmitted in this way. It was perhaps for this reason that among the Persians and Turks it became common practice for the poet to incorporate his signature in the poem.

For the first century or more of the Islamic era, Arabic

poems were transmitted orally, and this oral transmission adds to the problems of accuracy and authenticity. Verses appear in variant versions, and are attributed to different poets. Some are palpably projections backward of later attitudes and events. From an early date the Arabs developed a scholarly discipline to study and, where possible, to answer such questions. This study used several methods—philological, historical, and literary. The Arab scholars of the Middle Ages made a great effort to establish and authenticate texts, though many problems remained to which modern scholarship has sometimes given conflicting answers. Some time in the eighth century—the second of Islam—an unknown *rawi* compiled the famous collection known as the *Muʿallaqat*, literally the hanging or suspended poems, a collection of poems each by a different poet of the pre-Islamic era, each regarded as its creator's masterpiece. This collection was followed by many others, some of them anthologies, grouped in variously defined categories, some of them the collected poems of a single poet. Such a collection was known as a *diwan* (Persian and Turkish *divan*), a term that has been retained until modern times.

Sometimes the compilers of anthologies added some explanatory notes and commentaries. This in turn developed into two new literary genres: poetics, a science inherited from classical antiquity, and literary history. An early example of the first was a work by Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 908), a prince of the caliphal ʿAbbasid family and himself a poet of distinction. A better known treatise is that of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), who wrote a famous work enti-

tled *The Book of Poetry and Poets* and also compiled a literary thesaurus in ten books. The most esteemed and most informative work of classical literary history is the *Kitab al-Aghani*, the *Book of Songs*, by Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967), as his name indicates, a native of Isfahan in Iran. In twenty-one volumes, Abu'l-Faraj provides an invaluable store of information concerning the biographies of poets and musicians, with samples of their work and details of the circumstances of their composition.

Many other works on poetics and literary history followed, in every age and in every land where the Arab language and its literature flourished. Later, as new Persian and Turkish literatures developed under Arab-Islamic influence, a similar scholarly literature was produced in these languages.

A notable feature of this literature was the collections of biographies of poets, first in Arabic, later more extensively in Persian and Turkish. While often anecdotal and sometimes of questionable accuracy, these collected biographies form an immensely rich source of information both on the development and on the perception of poetry in these cultures. They also form the starting point and basis of much modern scholarship.

Arabic poets devised and used elaborate rules of prosody, expressed in a number of different verse forms designed for a variety of purposes. These were adopted and often modified by the Persians and the Turks, who added new forms of their own. Certainly the best known of these among Western readers is the quatrain, *rubaʿi*, plural *rubaʿiyyat*, made famous in the Western world

by Fitzgerald's translation of 'Omar Khayyam. Similar forms were also adopted in other languages. To give the reader some idea of the rhythms and tonalities in the original, I have appended the texts of four quatrains, one from each of the four languages (see Appendix). The Turkish poem is given in the standard modern Turkish orthography, which replaced the Arabic script in 1928; the other three are transcribed, two from the Arabic, one from the Hebrew script. According to a thirteenth century treatise on Persian prosody, the *ruba'i* was invented by an ancient poet who heard a child cry out during a ball game, "The ball is rolling, rolling to the bottom of the hole" in rhyme and quantitative meter. Rhyme is indeed an important feature of Arabic poetry and of others under Arabic influence. This is in striking contrast with Latin, Greek, and Biblical Hebrew alike.

Poets gained their livelihood in various ways. In the earliest tribal societies, a poet was a member of a tribe, more specifically of a family within the tribe. His status was determined by the status of his family. In the more complex life of the cities, we find poets at various economic and social levels. Some were themselves men of wealth or power or both, and had no need of gainful employment. Many belonged to the learned professions—teaching and religion, to which one might add service in the state secretariat. Some were of relatively humble origin. We hear, for example, of a saddler's apprentice, a small storekeeper, a carpenter, and the like. A special category consisted of those who were designated by the Persian word *rind*, defined by the dictionary as a knave, a

rogue, a drunkard, a debauchee, a vagabond. The term was taken up by Persian and later Turkish poets and especially by mystics and given a positive connotation. In this sense, it denotes the mystic who has abandoned all ambition and all self-interest in contrast with the insincerity and selfishness of the formally pious, even—and perhaps especially—of the ascetic. The term was frequently used by Hafiz and was also later applied to him.

Like their counterparts in the West, poets in the Middle East depended heavily on patronage for their support, on protection and funding from kings, princes, and other men of wealth and power. They were expected to earn their keep by composing and declaiming poems in praise of their patrons, and panegyric poetry became a profession, even a vocation. Many tales are told of relations between poets and patrons and of rivalries between poets for the attention of this or that munificent benefactor. One such tale, almost certainly apocryphal, is told of the Persian poet Amir Mu^ʿizzi, (d. ca. 1125–7) who was chief court poet to the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar. Determined to keep his position, he denounced every rival as a plagiarist and claimed that the poems which they recited to the Sultan as their own had in fact been copied, through reciters, from his work. This method was successful in preserving Mu^ʿizzi's monopoly until the aspiring young poet Anvari (d. ? 1191) found a way of circumventing it. Dressing himself in rough peasant clothes and assuming an appearance of ignorance and stupidity, he presented himself to Mu^ʿizzi and told him that he had composed a very beautiful panegyric. He then recited the opening verses,

which didn't scan and conveyed no meaning. Mu^ʿizzi saw in this an opportunity to amuse the court and at the same time stress his own superiority. The following day he presented Anvari to the Sultan, saying "Here is one who wishes to recite an ode that he has composed in your honor." Anvari then threw aside his disguise and declaimed a truly magnificent ode of praise, to the delight of the Sultan and the discomfiture of Mu^ʿizzi. Anvari became famous, and is regarded as one of the great masters of panegyric poetry in Persian. Later, when he fell from grace and was banished from the court, he composed some poems denouncing the venality and insincerity of court poetry and the sycophancy of its practitioners. "It is better" he says "for you to earn your bread as a scavenger rather than as a poet." In another poem he even speaks of poetry as "male menstruation."

Some other poets speak light-heartedly or even disrespectfully of their art and even of their patrons. The twelfth-century Spanish Arab poet Ibn Quzman, with charming irony, begins a poem by describing his dalliance with his mistress and ends as he explains to her that he must go off to earn his living by praising his generous patron. The Spanish Hebrew poet al-Harizi denounces and even threatens a patron—presumably a private individual—whose gifts did not come up to his expectations (p. 196). These were no idle threats. The great Arab poet al-Mutanabbi worked for a while as court panegyrist to the Nubian eunuch Kafur who was the *de facto* ruler of Egypt in the mid-tenth century. Later he turned against his former patron, and denounced him in a series of biting satires.

But most panegyric poets seem to have been well satisfied with their profession, and one of them, the Persian poet Farrukhi, in a striking metaphor, describes how he came like a merchant from his native Sistan, bringing uniquely precious merchandise—the word, the tongue, and his poetic gift. Patrons did not limit their generosity to payment for panegyrics. There are many tales of royal bounty to poets, especially for epic and other narrative poems. But panegyric remained a primary function.

One of the most important functions of poets and poetry in traditional society was what we nowadays call propaganda, or as some prefer to call it, public relations. In the days before journalists, propagandists, public relations men, and spin doctors, poets were often called upon to fulfill these functions. They were, in many ways, the public relations consultants of chiefs and of rulers, and had been engaged in these tasks for a very long time. The Roman emperor Augustus, for example, had his court poets in Rome, doing PR work for the empire in general and the emperor in particular. One might even argue that Virgil's great epic, the *Aeneid*, is in part a public relations exercise for the Roman imperial idea.

This aspect of classical Arab poetry is familiar to all students of Arabic literature. The traditional classification by the Arab literary historians of the different types of poetry includes at least three that have an important element of propaganda: the *fakhr*, or boast, in which the poet makes propaganda on behalf of himself and his tribe; the *madih*, or panegyric, in which he promotes his ruler or patron, and the *hija*², usually translated satire,

consisting of invective and ridicule against hostile or rival groups or persons. A form combining elements of the *fakhr* and the *madih* is the elegy, the lament for the dead. Some of these, notably the poems of al-Khansa⁷, reflect deep personal feeling. Others share the courtly and formal character of the panegyric.

In its earliest and simplest form, as described by the Arab literary historians, the *fakhr* is a technique of battlefield propaganda, designed to strengthen the morale of one's own fighters while undermining that of the enemy. It thus corresponds, in some ways, to the epics and sagas and heroic ballads of other cultures. An early Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* somewhat improbably identifies *hija*⁸ with comedy and *madih* with tragedy. In Persian and Turkish especially, *hija*⁸ is often blended with humor. Indeed, humor is a distinctive feature of classical Middle Eastern poetry, ranging from the pungent epigram (e.g., p. 116) to the good-humored sally, evoking an appreciative smile (e.g., p. 101). An early example is the Persian poet Rudagi's gently ironic poem, comparing the rewards of serving God and serving the king (p. 91).

In the earliest Arabic poetry, the rivalries and conflicts reflected are usually personal or tribal. Later, in the Islamic empire, the differences become more complex, and there are poems illustrating the tensions between rival groups. Sometimes these are simply political, between rival contenders for power; sometimes religious, between the followers of different religious teachers or teachings; sometimes ethnic or even racial, as for exam-

ple in the poetic wars between Persians and Arabs, or between blacks and whites. In the vast, multi-racial empire of the caliphs, such rivalries were inevitable, and they gave rise to a considerable literature ranging from good-humored banter to embittered hostility. The poems translated here include examples of two such conflicts. One group (pp. 39–41 and pp. 44–46) comes from black slaves, some enslaved and imported from Africa, some born in captivity. Like their counterparts elsewhere, they learned and mastered the language of their owners, and used it to good effect. A group of black poets in the seventh and eighth centuries, known as “the Crows of the Arabs,” is particularly famous. Another form of ethnic self-assertion was that of the Persians. After the conquest of Iran by the Muslim Arabs in the seventh century, the old Persian empire was extinguished and the followers of the old Persian religion dwindled into a minority. But the Persian spirit smoldered on, and in time the Persian poets began to reassert themselves against Arab domination, at first in Arabic, later in Persian. An Arabic poem by the eleventh-century poet Mihyar al-Daylami, from Daylam, the Persian province immediately south of the Caspian Sea, is a fine example of both Arab verse and Persian pride (p. 70). There are many others.

Poetry came to play an important, indeed a central and essential part in Persian identity and self-awareness. While Persians, Arabs, and Turks were all Muslims, the quality of their Islam and the artistic and other expression that they gave to it developed significant differences. Some have likened the split between the different

branches of Islam to the conflicts in Christendom between Orthodox and Catholic, between Catholic and Protestant. In theological terms such a comparison is meaningless. Islam has so far known neither schism nor reformation, and the strictly theological differences between Shi'ā and Sunni Islam are relatively unimportant. The question of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, so important in Christendom, simply did not arise in a society which, until modern times, had created no ecclesiastical institutions, and where the distinctively Christian differentiation between state and church, God and Caesar, was meaningless. But the cultural differences were enormous, and in terms of their magnitude though not of their content, one might not unjustly compare the differences between Arab, Persian, and Turkish Islam with the differences between northern Protestantism, southern Catholicism, and eastern Orthodoxy in European Christendom.

Poets seem at times to have played a part in some of the wars and conflicts of early Islamic history, as propagandists on behalf of one or another individual or faction. There are episodes in the biography of the Prophet in which different poets appear among both his supporters and his opponents. From the narrative it is clear that their propaganda efforts, on both sides, were considered important if not decisive. The Umayyad Caliphs, and thereafter virtually all Muslim rulers, had court poets. In the days before printing and modern methods of communication, poetry had obvious advantages. Poems could be memorized, recited, and often sung, thus reaching a very wide audience.

It was not only rulers who employed poets in this way. They were also used by rebels and sectarian leaders to disseminate seditious propaganda, and sometimes even for purely personal ends. As well as rulers, private individuals also employed poetic spokesmen, to project a favorable image, or even to sell a commodity. The *Kitab al-Aghani* tells a story of a merchant who went from Iraq to Medina in Arabia with a collection of ladies' veils of various colors. He managed to sell all but the black ones, which were left on his hands. He complained of this to his friend the poet al-Darimi, who had recently renounced music and poetry and taken up the ascetic life. Darimi said to the merchant: "Don't worry. I shall get rid of them for you; you will sell the whole lot." The poet then composed these verses:

Go ask the one in the black veil.
 What have you done to a devout ascetic?
 He had already girded up his garments for prayer
 until you appeared to him at the door of the mosque.

This, says the author of the *Kitab al-Aghani*, was set to music and became very popular: "People said, 'Darimi is at it again and has given up his asceticism.' There was not a lady of refinement in Medina who did not buy a black veil, and the Iraqi merchant sold all he had."¹ And so, behind a black veil, the singing commercial was born. Poetry was also used for what we would nowadays call the social column, as a way of announcing births, deaths,

¹Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-Aghani*, vol. iii, (Cairo 1347 / 1929), pp. 45–46.

marriages, and other events of this kind. The hunt—a social occasion, a popular pastime, a training for war—inspired an entire poetic genre.

In addition to the public poetry, there is of course also personal poetry expressing personal feelings and attitudes, venting personal problems. In Middle Eastern as in other literatures, many poems are devoted to wine, women, and song. These raise interesting questions in a religious society where wine is strictly forbidden and access to women is subject to a whole series of religious, social, and legal constraints.

Despite the Muslim ban on wine, there are innumerable poems by ostensibly Muslim poets celebrating its delights and its effects. The convention, adopted at an early date, that wine was a metaphor for divine love and drunkenness a metaphor for ecstasy helped to provide some cover. The same metaphor was also used, less convincingly, for physical love, seen as representing mystical union with God. Sexual activity outside the strict limits laid down by the holy law was a sin and a crime, and could incur severe punishment.

Nevertheless, there is a rich literature of love poetry, expressing sentiments, relationships, and aspirations both inside and outside the law. The poems reflect a wide variety of approaches and activities, in changing times and different places, from the pagan desert to the Muslim city. They present the lover in many roles, from the boastful prowler and philanderer to the chaste and submissive adorer-from-afar. The stricter moral codes enforced by Islam brought a new respect for chastity, and a conse-

quent spread of the pangs of unfulfilled love. A recurring theme is that of the parting of lovers, sometimes at dawn after a nocturnal assignation, sometimes because of the migrations of their tribes. An unusual farewell is that of the pre-Islamic Arab poet al-A^ʿsha in the poem I have entitled “Bill of Divorcement” (p. 37). The early commentators offer various explanations of the circumstances in which this poem was composed.

Much of the poetry comes from cities and more specifically from royal courts, very different from the relative freedom of pre-Islamic and early Islamic times. The free lady, so important in early poetry, disappears, and the well-guarded harem makes the nocturnal assignation dangerous if not impossible. Often, the woman addressed in love poetry is a slave, perhaps one of the educated and cultivated singing girls who provided the feminine element in court society and are celebrated by many writers. The great essayist and litterateur ʿAmr ibn Bahr al-Jahiz (776–869), by common consent one of the great classical masters of Arabic prose, even devoted a whole essay to the subject of singing girls which has been admirably translated into English.²

In the Islamic world as in the pre-modern West, the poets were overwhelmingly male. For the most part, women had no access either to the education which would have enabled them to develop a poetic talent or to the patronage which would have enabled them to exercise it. In a society in which women were excluded from

²*The Epistle on Singing Girls of Jahiz*, edited with translation and commentary by A.F.L. Beeston, (Warminster, 1980).

public life and secluded in the home, there was little opportunity for them to find a place in the world of poets and of poetry. But there are exceptions. One such was Khansa⁷ (d. ca. 640), one of the very few women poets whose poems were actually collected in a *divan*. Her best known works are her elegies on her two brothers and four sons, all killed in battle. Another is Rabi'a (d. 801), known for her religious poetry. A Turkish example is Mihri Hatun or Lady Mihri (d. 1506, pp. 151–52).

The different literary situation of men and women is vividly illustrated in the most famous of all Middle Eastern romances, that of Majnun and Layla. Majnun, literally, possessed by a jinni, that is to say, demented, was the name given to a young Bedouin, purportedly in the early days of Islam, who fell madly in love with a young Bedouin woman called Layla. In some versions she was a cousin whom he had known as a child; in others a stranger whom he met by chance. Majnun asked for her in marriage. But Layla's father had made arrangements to assign her to another man and she was therefore not available for Majnun. In the romance, Majnun suffers the pangs of unrequited, unconsummated love, and eventually dies of his suffering. There are many narrative poems telling the romance of Majnun and Layla, in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and other languages, and great numbers of Arabic poems attributed to Majnun himself, telling of his love for Layla and bewailing his unhappy lot. The difference in status between the two of them is vividly exemplified in one of the very few poems attributed to Layla.

There is nothing Majnun endured for love
That I did not endure as he did.
But he proclaimed love's secret
While I hid it, pining away . . .

There was a time when the word “gender” had a primarily grammatical meaning, and was used to denote a difference between words rather than between people. It still retains some importance in this sense, especially—since languages may vary in the perception and expression of gender differences—for the translator of poetry. Arabic and Hebrew, like English, use different words for “he” and “she,” but have no word for “it.” They have only two genders, masculine and feminine, and no neuter. The personal pronoun “you,” in both the singular and plural forms, must be masculine or feminine—a matter of some importance in poetry. Even the verb, in some though not all tenses and persons, is modified for gender, depending on whether the subject is masculine or feminine. Persian and Turkish go to the opposite extreme and do not reflect gender at all; not in the verb, not even in personal pronouns. In both languages “he,” “she,” and “it” are the same word. This sometimes poses problems for the translator. For example, in Sa‘di’s poem “The Moth and the Candle” (p. 125), the English “it” seemed inappropriate, and I took the liberty of making the moth and the candle, respectively, masculine and feminine. The image of the moth and the candle is also used by other poets.

This lack of grammatical gender may give rise to a sometimes useful ambiguity in love poetry, where the ob-

ject of the poet's passion may be variously understood as male, female, or divine. Homosexuality is condemned and forbidden by the holy law of Islam, but there are times and places in Islamic history when the ban on homosexual love seems no stronger than the ban on adultery in, for example, Renaissance Italy or seventeenth-century France. Some poems are openly homosexual; some poets, in their collected poems, even have separate sections for love poems addressed to males and females. Erotic imagery was also used to express religious sentiments, especially but not exclusively in mystical poetry. The assigning of religious meanings to apparently erotic poetry is familiar to us from other cultures, notably from the Biblical book of the Song of Songs.

Religious poetry has a special place in Islamic literature. There are no hymns or fugues in Islamic worship, only the simple recitation or cantillation of verses from the Qur'an. There was therefore no development of liturgical poetry such as we find in Christianity and in Judaism. But religious poetry enters Islam by another route—the way of the Sufi. The name is said to come from an Arabic word meaning wool, denoting the simple and unadorned dress of mystics and ascetics. The word was applied at an early stage to those Muslims who, like some Jews and Christians before them, wanted to go beyond the simple observance of religious rules and practices as prescribed by the faith, and to achieve mystical experience, harmonizing ritual with ecstasy. The wearing of rough, simple garments was in a sense a reaction against the increasingly luxurious attire of an increasingly affluent society.

The Sufi found many ways of reaching toward mystical union with God; through poetry, through music, even—reviving an ancient tradition—through the dance, as exemplified in the rituals of the so-called dancing and whirling dervishes. Poetry played an important part in the Sufi's search for mystical experience, and even in religious rituals, notably in the dervish fraternities. The first Sufi poems are in Arabic, the language of Islamic scripture, law, and prayer. In the eleventh century, Persian and later Turkish Sufis began to compose mystical poetry in their own languages. Sufi poems in this collection include those of the poetess Rabi'ā, Al-Hallaj, and Ibn al-ʿArabi in Arabic; Galib and Nesimi in Turkish; and of course the great Persian masters, Hafiz and Rumi.

The imagery of love and wine—of passion and intoxication—provided the means to express the love of God and the mystical experience of union with Him. Not surprisingly, the dividing line between sexual and allegorical love is sometimes problematic and the poets who celebrate them have at times been regarded with a certain suspicion. Sufi poets often went dangerously near the limits of orthodoxy, expressing ideas which in other times and places might be called pantheist or even relativist, as for example in some of the poems of Rumi. Some of the less fortunate Sufi poets paid a high price for these deviations from strict orthodox teaching.

It is always difficult to translate works of literature, especially poetry. The difficulty is incomparably greater when one is translating works not just from another language

but from another civilization.³ An example occurs in the last line of a poem by ʿUmar ibn al-Farid (p. 77) which begins with the words “your reward.” The Arabic is *haqq*, a word with a wide range of connotations and associations, depending on context. Its primary meaning is truth; it can also connote rightness, what is just and proper, and, in certain contexts, what is incumbent or obligatory. In modern Arabic *haqq*, plural *huquq*, is the common word for rights, as in “rights of man,” “civil rights,” and so on. Yet to speak of “your right” in a translation of a medieval mystical poem seems to me misleading. I can think of no precise English equivalent for this Arab-Islamic compound of authenticity, appropriateness, and justice. “Reward” seemed to me the closest to the meaning and intention of the original.

The poetry of the Middle East comes from a world nurtured on different scriptures and classics, shaped and inspired by different history and memories, in which words not only have different meanings, which is normal, but different ranges of meaning, so that the simple listing of equivalents that we find in a dictionary can be dangerously misleading. Each civilization has its own universe of discourse, its own framework of allusion and reference, readily understood by those to whom it is addressed, and unintelligible or even invisible to others. A passing reference in an Arabic poem may bring immedi-

³For a fuller discussion of these problems, see my “Translation from Arabic,” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 24/1, February 1980, pp. 41–47, reprinted in Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, (Oxford: New York, 1993), pp. 61–71.

ate understanding and emotional response to an Arab, or even to a classically educated Persian or Turk, but it would need heavy footnoting to make it intelligible to a Western reader. It is not only the semantics that are different. The differences go far deeper, sometimes reaching to the very roots of human emotion, experience, and thought.

A particularly difficult problem in what one might call intercultural translation is that of images. Some refer to basic human qualities, and can be readily recognized and understood even between remote and unrelated peoples. Others may be unintelligible or even grotesque. For example, the image of the heart as the seat of the emotions is common to many cultures, including those of both the Western and Islamic worlds. But in Arabic and Persian and some other languages, the liver, as well as the heart, sometimes serves the same purpose. This occurs occasionally in Latin poetry, but in modern English it would strike most readers as comic or absurd. Usually, the translator may replace “liver” by the more familiar “heart” without too much disservice to the original. But sometimes this simple solution is not possible, as for example, in some lines from the late fourteenth- to early fifteenth-century Turkish poet Şeyhi:

Heart, do not die of parting, for
the breath of resurrection is coming.
Liver, do not burn with grief, for
succor is coming.

Şeyhi, it may be noted, was a physician by profession. I remember many years ago being given a piece of ex-

cellent advice by a great master of translation, the late Arthur Waley, justly admired for his magnificent translations from Chinese and Japanese. He would, he said, lay down only one firm rule for translators: never introduce an image which is not in the original. If you can use the original image in English, well and good. If you can't, leave it out, and don't try to replace it by some equivalent. It won't work. I have followed this rule. I cannot claim to have rendered into English everything that is in the original—such a feat would be beyond my powers—but I have tried not to introduce anything in the translation that is not in the original. This precluded any attempt that I might have made to translate these poems into rhymed and metric English verse, a task which would inevitably have required the insertion of new material. Instead, I have sought to convey as much as I can of the poetry of the original in poetic and rhythmic English prose.

Some of these translations of poetry were made during the war, that is, more than half a century ago. As every survivor will recall, in wartime there are long periods of intense boredom, when nothing much changes, and there is nothing one can do. Like so many others, I usually carried a little book in my pocket, to read when circumstances permitted. I preferred poetry, not only for its own sake, but also—perhaps more especially—because it offered more reading time in relation to weight and bulk than prose. Later, I found that the ratio could be still further improved by reading poetry in a foreign language. It also required greater concentration—of some advantage in excluding such distractions as exploding bombs and shells.

At some stage I found that I could tilt the balance still further in my favor and dispense with the book entirely by learning a few poems by heart and then trying to translate them into English. Memorizing poetry was child's play—literally, since as children at school in England we were required to memorize vast quantities. Translation was of course more difficult, but there too, tools acquired in dealing with Virgil and Horace were honed on both ancient and modern poets of the Middle East. During the past half century, in the course of my work as a historian, I read many of these poets, and from time to time felt the urge to try my hand at rendering them into English. A poem is a historical document, no less than a treaty, an inscription, or a chronicle, especially in a society in which poets and poetry are held in such high regard and play so significant a role in public life. Reading them may contribute to historical understanding as well as—and sometimes more than—to aesthetic appreciation.

In choosing poems for translation and translations for inclusion, I was guided by certain criteria. The first is quality, or to put it differently, that I liked it. The second is translatability, meaning that I felt I could translate it into intelligible English, able to stand on its own without needing any elaborate scholarly apparatus. An occasional brief explanatory note here and there might be acceptable, but an extensive critical apparatus would destroy the whole purpose of the work. A further requirement is that at least some of the poems should be in some way illustrative of the time and place from which they derive and should exemplify some aspect of its history and culture.

And again, that aspect should be intelligible and recognizable, without elaborate explanations and annotations, to the reader of our own time.

An important consideration was of course whether poems were already available in English translation. In a few places, I have indulged myself by including my versions of poems which I later discovered had already been published in English translation. There is no reason why the reader should not have more than one translation of a fine poem at his disposal, especially if the translators come from different times and places. But in general I have tried to avoid duplication and to confine myself to poems of which my translation, as far as I am aware, is the first to appear in English. These criteria required the exclusion of many of the most original, most important, most esteemed, and to put it simply, the best poems from these literatures. It is therefore only in the most general sense that I can claim that this collection of translations is in any way representative of the cultures of the time, the place, the nations, or even of the individual poets from which they come. A truly representative selection would raise difficult, perhaps insuperable, problems of translation and communication.

There are many statements by Arab and other authors on the role and the importance of poetry in society. The point is well made by the ninth-century Arab author Ibn Qutayba, in his book on literature:

Poetry is the mine of knowledge of the Arabs, the book of their wisdom, the muster roll of their history,

the repository of their great days, the rampart protecting their heritage, the trench defending their glories, the truthful witness on the day of dispute, the final proof at the time of argument. Whoever among them can bring no verse to confirm his own nobility and the generous qualities and honored deeds which he claims for his forebears, his endeavors are lost though they be famous, effaced by the passage of time though they be mighty. But he who binds them with rhymed verse, knots them with scansion, and makes them famous through a rare line, a phrase grown proverbial, a well-turned thought, has made them eternal against time, preserved them from negation, averted the plot of the enemy, and lowered the eye of the envious.⁴

⁴Ibn Qutayba, Abu Muhammad ʿAbdallah, *ʿUyun al-Akhbar*, 4 vols., ed. Ahmad Zaki al-ʿAdawi, (Cairo 1343–8/1925–30), vol. ii. p. 185.