

Arabic Poetry and Narrative

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This is a topic stirring a great deal of dispute and disagreement among those who chronicle Arabic literature's history, who concern themselves with its criticism, and who pay particular attention to comparing it with the great foreign literatures. Some claim Arabic poetry is of lesser significance than foreign poetry, of humbler standing, since it contains no narrative epic, and since Arabic poetry cannot count, among its many ancient and modern verses, anything resembling the Iliad or the Odyssey, or the other narrative epics of the Greeks and Romans, and of other ancient and modern nations besides. It is, therefore, they say, a deficient poetry, one that ought never to rival foreign poetry, nor aspire to any distinguished place among the forms of poetry genuinely deserving of immortality.

Others find this scorn for Arabic poetry genuinely hard to bear, and reject it as forcefully as possible, wishing to establish for our own national poetry the same distinguishing qualities foreign poetry possesses. They show no real hesitation or caution in this, claiming that ignorance alone leads Arabic poetry's opponents to imagine it contains no narrative — indeed, claiming that Arabic poetry, in its own ancient eras, comes very close to being narrative poetry altogether, arguing that all heroic battle-poetry is itself narrative, exactly like the poetry of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Does it not, after all, contain descriptions of war, depictions of real events, accounts of heroes, and of those who charged and retreated among the armoured warriors and horsemen? What difference, then, they ask, is there between it and the poetry of the Iliad and the Odyssey, or any other narrative poetry belonging to any nation or people whatsoever?

Both sides go too far. It is certain that Arabic poetry offers nothing quite like the Iliad or the Odyssey, and knows nothing of these long epics depicting a nation's own life the way narrative poetry depicts it. But this diminishes Arabic poetry not one whit, nor does it lower its own standing relative to foreign poetry.

We should note, first of all, that our own inability to discover a poem in Arabic poetry resembling the Iliad or the Odyssey does not prove such a poem never existed — it merely proves it was never transmitted, never preserved for us by history. It is entirely possible such a poem once

genuinely existed, that people once recited and passed it down among themselves, until that era arrived in which many transmitters and memorizers were lost, and poetry itself was neglected, under political pressures and their own consequences — so that when the Arabs returned to transmitting and memorizing poetry, they found this poem gone, or found of it only scattered fragments depicting nothing coherent at all. This is a hypothesis I am putting forward; had I the leisure to study and verify it properly, I might well arrive at something of genuine substance. The Arabs' own life in their pre-Islamic era remains largely unknown to us, but the little we do know of it suggests poetry was the sole literary form for this turbulent life their tribes lived in the desert, and that this life of theirs was a social existence in which the individual very nearly dissolved entirely, his own personality very nearly effaced altogether — strength, authority, and renown belonging to the tribe, never to the individual, nor to the family.

And when the turbulence of this life, and the sheer abundance of horrors and trials filling it, combined with this effacement of individual personality, its dissolution into the tribe, poetry inevitably arose to depict it — poetry that comes closest, among all known types, to narrative poetry proper. These "Days" preserved for us by oral tradition, of which history itself knows almost nothing — the Day of al-Basus, the Days of Dahis and al-Ghabra', the Days of al-Kilab, and others — were, without doubt, sung by the poets in their own poetry; they dwelt at length on them, singing of them and speaking of them, carrying their own songs and accounts from tribe to tribe, across the far-flung reaches of Arab lands. People gathered to hear them, listened to them, admired them, and rewarded them for these accounts and songs — and this is precisely what the Homeric poets themselves once did.

Scholars are mistaken if they imagine Greek narrative poetry, for instance, arose suddenly, or that the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* were composed all at once, following some fixed plan laid down before their own composition. They were, rather, a body of songs and chants addressing related themes, or a single shared theme, later gathered together and compiled, with official versions eventually issued — the very versions people went on transmitting among themselves, once writing had become widespread in Greece.

Who, then, can possibly claim the Arabs, in their pre-Islamic eras, had no poems powerfully and socially depicting their own wars and their own "Days," poems the poets carried with them, reciting and singing,

only for these poems never to find anyone to order their own collection, organization, and circulation among the people — exactly as Peisistratus ordered the collection, arrangement, and circulation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* among the Greeks?

And if you add that Islam's own emergence thoroughly erased the traces of Arab paganism, resisting it with the utmost force, and that poetry ranked among the most significant of these traces, it is no wonder the Arabs never amassed, from their own narrative poetry, or their own narrative-tinged verse, anything comparable to what the Greeks amassed. Religion is, after all, among the most significant influences on the very existence and spread of narrative poetry; were it not for religion, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* would never have survived at all, since both were recited at religious gatherings right up to the end of the pagan era, and were, for this reason, collected, copied, and officially circulated by the state — being, as they were, very nearly religious texts themselves. How much more so, then, when Islam resisted paganism and its own traces with the utmost force, finding every possible means to erase them, and succeeding entirely in doing so, within the very first century of the Hijra.

Our own inability to discover an Arabic narrative poem resembling the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, then, does not prove such a poem never existed at all — it merely proves, as we have said, that we simply never managed to recover it.

Nor should one ask why the Arabs failed to produce narrative poetry after Islam, since narrative poetry is never composed, never artificially contrived, in eras of civilization and intellectual advancement — it is, rather, a natural product of Bedouin life and simplicity. Should civilized peoples deliberately attempt it, it turns absurd and feeble, and holds no real appeal for the general public — exactly as happened with Virgil's own contrived *Aeneid*, and with the narrative poetry modern Europeans have contrived, Voltaire among them, for instance.

It would, however, be excessive, and a real departure from the truth, to say that the Arabs took no interest whatsoever in narrative poetry after Islam. They did, in fact, take a genuine, visible interest in it, whose traces we can observe in two entirely distinct directions:

The first is a distinguished, literary Arabic form — these very books composed to record the "Days" and events of the pre-Islamic era. These books are narrative through and through, narrative rather than history,

with legend claiming a far greater share of them than fact. They rely heavily on poetry, transmitting a great deal of it — scarcely mentioning a single battle, or a single war, without transmitting whatever verse was composed about it. They are, then, a form of narrative cast in prose, yet adorned with poetry, and dependent upon it.

The second form is a colloquial one, scorned by our own men of letters, since it was never rendered in the classical literary language they concern themselves with so particularly. You find this form in these many popular tales the common people still delight in, which reciters still perform for them — now in prose adorned with verse, now in pure verse alone, accompanied, from time to time, by the melodies of the rebab. This form of colloquial narrative is, in every respect, the thing most closely resembling foreign narrative poetry: resembling it in subject matter, resembling it in form, resembling it in performance, resembling it in its reliance on music, resembling it in the way reciters carry it from place to place, and in the audience's own enthusiasm and devotion for it.