

Arabic Prose in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra

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Men of letters and historians of Arabic literature have divided speech into verse and prose, holding that verse is what is bound by metre and rhyme, and prose what is free of both. From this a division arose into two parties:

- (1) The poets and their partisans.
- (2) The prose-writers and their supporters.

The first held that poetry imposes upon its author metre and rhyme, that it is the register of the Arabs, in which their glories were set down, and to which the credit is owed for perpetuating such ancient virtues as they possessed; and they went further still, holding that it suits music and the matter of song, and is thus a source of lyrical and musical delight, and they said: the poet recites standing, while the prose-writer speaks standing or seated alike; so poetry is superior to prose.

The others said: we do not deny poetry its virtue and distinction, but it can only ever be one of the arts of diversion, whereas prose answers the necessities of life; it is the language of politics, the language of religion, the language of science. So poetry may have its standing, but prose bears more directly upon man's needs, and is more closely bound to what he produces; prose is thus superior to poetry.

Scarcely a single weighty book of literary history is free of this dispute between poets and prose-writers and the partisans of each, and its source is that those who study Arabic literature do not weigh the place of poetry and the place of prose in life as closely as they ought; for poetry is a necessity of life in one of its stages, and once that stage has passed, poetry becomes unable to perform any part of that office, and prose becomes its successor, portraying the new things.

The poetry that was at first a necessity becomes, in the second stage, a kind of amusement and luxury, and life cannot do without either of the two.

And likewise, when we observe the history of nations that had a literary life, that had both poetry and prose, we observe that their literary life began with poetry, and that prose existed among them long before poetry came to exist — and when I say prose, I do not mean the language of ordinary speech, but rather the prose that the man of letters recognizes as such — for nations possessed of a literature, before they expressed their feelings and inclinations in prose, expressed their pleasures and their pains in poetry, and poetry was their literary tongue. Then, as these nations developed, as their minds matured, as their political and social institutions changed, and as they came into contact with other peoples, there arose among them ideas and opinions they had not had before, and they needed to order these ideas and opinions, to give them shape and to proclaim them, and poetry proved unable to express them, and they were driven to prose.

For this reason, when we observe the history of nations — the Greek nation, for instance — we see it first as a poetic nation producing poetry narrative in kind, then lyric, then dramatic. And prose does not arise among them except in a time of political upheaval, when the forms of government and of social life are changing, and when the bond between the Greeks and the peoples of the East and the Arabs grows strong. New ideas then arise — some political, some philosophical, some religious — and they were obliged to express all this; and so prose arose. The like of this we find among the Roman nation, and this same thing we find among the Arab nation in the earliest age, before Islam.

The Arabs were a nation of poetry, possessed of their own particular social and political life, relying in both these kinds of life on feeling and emotion more than on wisdom and deliberation, driven by this feeling to war or peace or feud, or to any aspect whatsoever of pre-Islamic life.

So when they arrived, by these means, at what they wanted, and were stirred by these impulses, they gave voice to it in poetry; and since they were not closely connected with other peoples, nor knew much of what those peoples possessed, they remained in this condition. Then, when Islam came, Arab life changed utterly: the old political order was overthrown, and a new order took its place resting on the unity of the Arab nation and the subjection of foreign nations. From this life arose forms of government unknown before: the caliphate came into being, social life changed, the institutions of marriage and divorce changed, and the relations between groups changed.

Then came the conquests, and the Arabs' contact with other nations grew ever stronger and more intense, until it became intermixing and then fusion, and from it came the Arabs' acquaintance with what these nations possessed of opinions, ideas, religions, sciences, and philosophy. They took from this, little by little, and from this their intellectual, poetic, emotional, and social life changed. Having been governed by sensation and feeling, they began to think and deliberate, and problems and difficulties arose before them that set them thinking and seeking solutions to these complex questions; and from all this life changed, and its subjects changed, and this required that the expressions by which they conveyed what was within them should change too, and a new tongue arose for them that they had not had before: prose, which conveys meaning without the constraints of poetry.

So the division of speech into verse and prose is a simple, naive division that may serve if we reduce things to their simplest terms, but the man of letters who studies the history of the Arabs concerns himself with speech only once it passes beyond ordinary talk and the discharge of immediate needs, toward thought on the one hand and beauty on the other. Ordinary talk and the language of daily speech do not concern us in the study of Arabic literature and its history, for such talk belongs to the study of literature only when it carries within it some particular artistic delight.

The truth is that, however much we may wish to stand among the partisans of the pre-Islamic age, we cannot be confident that this age possessed an artistic prose; what is beyond doubt is that the oldest text we can be confident of is the Qur'an.

The Qur'an: it is not poetry, for it is not bound by poetry's constraints; nor is it prose, for it is bound by constraints peculiar to itself found in nothing else — constraints bearing partly on the endings of its verses, and partly on that particular musical cadence of theirs. It is thus a book whose verses were made firm, and then set forth in detail; it stands alone in its kind, having had no like before it nor after it, and no one has attempted to produce its like, and it challenged men to imitate it and warned them that they would find no way to do so. The orators thus spared themselves this impossible attempt, which they reckoned a transgression against religion.

And since imitation is among the chief causes of literary production — for if an eloquent poet composed an ode that won men's admiration,

some would recite it, and some would attempt to imitate it and produce its like — and since the Qur'an is impossible to imitate, it is only right that we set it in its own particular place, where nothing else may rightly be measured against it, and turn instead to the search for "Arabic prose."

Pre-Islamic prose: this is not prose in the sense I have defined, and yet the pre-Islamic age did have a prose of its own, which has not reached us, owing to the weakness of memory and its lack of metre. This prose is oratory, and there is no doubt that the disputes that arose in the life of pre-Islamic Arabia required unmetred speech, and the orators who spoke in the tongue of the tribes were intent not merely on persuading their hearers, but on moving them, and on stirring in them an artistic delight.

And wherever this intention is found, artistic beauty is found with it; but nothing of this oratory has reached us that we can trust, though it is perhaps easy enough to form some approximate notion of this oratory when we read the books of the biographies and the oratory and speech contained in them.

Prose in the earliest age of Islam: the art of oratory grew strong, for reasons of debate and the attempt at persuasion, whether its subject was religion, or politics, or various disputes. And naturally, the Muslims had need to write; the Prophet wrote letters, and the caliphs after him wrote them too, but these were written tersely, intended only for plain persuasion, without artistry or any aim at some particular artistic beauty; so the letters were short, lacking detail, and lacking the artistic endeavours we find among the poets in point of diction.

It was rather in the middle of the first century of the Hijra that the conquests had advanced a great deal, that the Arabs had begun to come into contact with other nations, and that political and social difficulties had multiplied until they brought down the order of the caliphate and set up in its place the order of kingship. This had given rise to political factions... alongside this development, other things arose on the intellectual side: many foreign nations embraced Islam, learned Arabic, and studied the new religion, and the Arabs mixed with them and took on their political, social, and literary institutions. The Muslims came into contact with others on the religious side too, and relations arose between the adherents of the other religions and the Muslims, and disputations took place among them.

The Arabs began building a new civilization upon the foundations of the old; that is, the Arab mind, naive in the pre-Islamic age, found before

it real problems, some touching religion and civilization, some touching material and social life, and then found before it philosophical questions raised by the philosophers with whom it came into contact once the Arabs came to know the remnants of the philosophers of Persia and Greece.

The Arab could not but think, and take part in expressing these things in his own tongue, and could not but debate questions of politics and religion. And among the most notable traits of nations when they begin an urban life after a Bedouin one is that they set about recounting their past, and showing to themselves and to other nations that they possess glory and ancient standing. The Arabs were thus obliged to have a history in which to express their past, as the Persians and the Greeks expressed theirs.

Poetry could in no way express these new meanings, set forth political, religious, and philosophical opinion, and recount history in broad and detailed narrative; and so prose arose for debate and disputation, and for the description of history and the sciences. In this age, prose found the means that enabled it to grow strong on the one hand, and to develop arts worthy of the name on the other. What grew strong in it was oratory, which had already existed in the pre-Islamic age; and what arose in it anew were these arts that express these meanings concerning history, scholarly disputation, and the rest.

Arabic prose, then, is not the language of ordinary speech or daily talk, which conveys no feeling or emotion as feeling or emotion, but rather is a general picture in which the fruit of reflection appears. This prose is one of the traces of the new life of Islam; it appeared under Islam and had not existed before.

These causes that called it into being are natural causes; it did not come about because some nation lent the Arabs their prose, but rather is an art called for by the needs of Arab life; and so we must rid ourselves of the notion that the Arabs borrowed their prose from other nations — though this does not mean that this prose was remote from the Persians and the Greeks, for it was Arab in its origin, yet was influenced by these peoples and developed through the Arabs' contact with them.

These foreign nations embraced Islam, and many of them learned the Arabic language and wrote in it, yet this group could not divest itself of its own national character; rather, when the Greek and the Persian learned Arabic, each brought into it what he had inherited from his own people, even as he was influenced by the pure Arab culture he found

within it, and so it became a blend of which we cannot say that it is purely Arab, or purely Greek, or purely Persian.

And which of these two elements had the stronger influence on Arabic prose, the Persian or the Greek? Most orientalists incline to think the Persian influence was stronger, on the ground that most of those who wrote prose under Islam, in the Umayyad and Abbasid ages, were among the clients (*mawālī*), and these were of Persian stock, and here is Ibn al-Muqaffa' the Persian, the chief of the prose-writers.

But there are others — and I am among them — who hold that the Greek influence was the stronger, despite the preponderance of Persian writers; for Greek culture had been long established in these lands since the days of Alexander — that is, the third century before Christ — and before the second century before Christ had ended, the Greek language was already the official language of the Near East, and scarcely had the Christian era advanced before every land of the Near East, in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, was studded with Greek schools teaching philosophy, letters, and the sciences of the Greeks.

When Islam came and the Arabs went forth as conquerors, they encountered these lands with these Greek schools already spread throughout them, and these left in the minds of the Egyptians, the Syrians, and the Iraqis traces that time alone could efface.

This Greek culture, which persisted in the East for nine centuries, was not confined to Syria, the Peninsula, Iraq, and Egypt, but pressed on into Persia itself as early as the age of the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Asia.

Greek culture continued to spread into Persia until it reached the furthest East, and under the Roman Empire the bond between the Greeks and the Persians grew stronger, and Greek culture took deeper root in Persia. And toward the end of this age, when Christianity appeared and became the official religion and the pagan temples were closed, Greek culture migrated to the lands of Persia, and found there protection and support, and received the backing of the Chosroes... so that the Persian mind was influenced by it to the point that Ibn al-Muqaffa', chief of the prose-writers of the Arabs and the Persians alike, had great store of Greek culture — so much so that it was said he translated works of the Greeks. And we know that the Greeks had a literature taught in Alexandria, Gaza, Edessa, and Antioch before Greek culture ever settled in Persia.

Persian culture is limited; if the Persians had a literature, the truth is that this literature, in the age of the Arabs' contact with the Persians, was not a great one, and what was translated into Arabic letters from the Persian is little, set against the abundance of what was translated from Greek letters. Persian letters are confined to: the Book of Kalila and Dimna, the Great Book of Conduct, and the Lesser Book of Conduct, and the maxims contained in the poetry of certain poets, such as Abu'l-'Atahiya, and a few books on politics.

This is all that can be said: that there was a Persian literature that reached the Arabs in the second and third centuries, whereas from the Greeks there reached the Arabs philosophy, and various systems of thought that left their mark on grammar, rhetoric, and the other arts besides.

And the truth is that the Persians took more from the Arabs than they gave them, and it suffices us to know that living Persian literature arose only after the Persians came into contact with the Arabs, and after they had learned Arabic; nor did the Persians contribute to the influence upon Arabic prose to the degree the orientalist imagine, nor to the degree held by the partisans of Persian nationalism among the Persians, who said that the Arabs were indebted to the Persians for everything! There is no doubt that the Arabs are indebted to the Persians for a great deal in material matters, political institutions, and the rest; but in literature I am very sparing in this regard, and in my view the Arabs owe their literature to the Greek nation.

This, besides the fact that most of the writers who began writing prose were not Persians, but came from Syria, the Peninsula, and Egypt; they were thus either Greeks, or Semites whose culture was Greek.

Let us ask: is there not some Arabic prose, besides oratory, untouched by either Persian or Greek influence? If we can lay hold of such prose, it will be easy for us to see the difference. And finding this prose is not difficult; it suffices to read the lampoon-poems (naqā'id) to find in them allusion to the Days of the Arabs, and the commentators are obliged to recount to us the history of these days, which the Arabs said occurred between Dāhis and al-Ghabrā', and the War of al-Basūs, and the Day of al-Kilāb, and what passed between 'Āmir and Tamīm, and the Days of al-Fijār, and others.

All these tales were recounted in the two cities of Basra and Kufa, once the Arabs had settled in these two garrison towns, and those who

told them were the Bedouin. And what appears in these tales is neither the Greek nor the Persian mind, but the Arab mind, seeking to establish for the notable men of the tribes the highest claim to valour.

In these tales, which recounted the Days of the Arabs, the campaigns of the Prophet, the early conquests of Islam, and the civil strife of Islam in the days of 'Uthman — purely Arab matter — you see pure Arabic prose; and if we can define this prose, it will be easy for us to weigh it against the prose of the writers who appeared in the second and third centuries, those touched by this blend of Greek and Persian culture.

This comparison leads us to the various influences that the various cultures produced in Arabic prose. For when we compare the writing of those clients of Syriac, Syrian, or Egyptian origin, who were influenced by Greek culture, with the clients of Persian origin, we can distinguish the Greek stamp from the Persian stamp.

Professor William Marçais delivered a lecture on the origin of Arabic prose, which he closed with this question: "To what extent did the Persian language influence what Ibn al-Muqaffa' wrote and what he translated? Was his translation literal, with the Persian stamp predominant, or was it free, with the Arabic stamp predominant?" And the Professor expressed his regret, saying: "The answer to this question is not easy to come by at present, since those capable of answering it are those who have mastered both Arabic and Pahlavi, and it is our ill fortune that the originals from which Ibn al-Muqaffa' translated have been lost."

And yet, we may say that the answer to Marçais's question is to be had, despite the loss of the originals, for we can find it in the Lesser Book of Conduct and the Greater Book of Conduct.

When you read Ibn al-Muqaffa's writing, you find in it something of twisting and turning, and we feel, as we read, that the writer finds difficulty in expressing the meanings he senses, and we feel this strain he imposes upon the Arabic language. We feel it not with our minds alone, but with our ears, and we find that Ibn al-Muqaffa' imposes upon Arabic grammar demands which Arabic grammar was perhaps not prepared to bear.

And Ibn al-Muqaffa' himself, for all that he is the chief of the prose-writers, the author of its models, and the one who set the highest standard for writing, was not himself blessed with great eloquence or mastery of Arabic grammar. And if we weigh him against the masters of

grammar, we find that he is like an orientalist well versed in both Arabic and Persian, who labours hard and succeeds much, but errs at times.