The Qurʾan and Arabic Poetry

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The relationship between the Qurʾan and Arabic Poetry is rich, complex and enduring. It ranges from antagonism and ambivalence to mutually reinforcing interdependence, has gone through many phases, and remains to this day a pivotal aspect of poetic writing. In the absence of a full-length study, its range and significance can at present only be gleaned through a limited number of articles and the references to the Qurʾan which figure in much secondary literature on Arabic poetry.

This chapter is a preliminary attempt to identify some of the most salient aspects of this relationship.[1] The focus is on three historical periods: the early 7th / 1st century, which saw the genesis of the Qurʾan and its confrontation with pre-Islamic poetry; the medieval period, starting from the 3d/9th century, when a new style arose which brought classical Arabic poetry to its apogee; and the modern period, starting from the outbreak of the first World War up to the present, when poetry is transformed in the wake of European colonial dominance. The available material is so vast and varied that only a limited number of sources could be selected for reference. The resulting observations cannot but be tentative and must await verification by a more detailed study. They are intended to illustrate the diverse range of poetic responses to the Qurʾan over this long period, as well as the striking persistence of certain themes which re-emerge throughout in ever new guises.

Poetry and Prophecy

Pre-Islamic poetry is a very substantial body of high quality verse which was collected and edited by Muslim philologists more than a century after the rise of Islam. Its mainstay is the *qaṣīḍa*, a polythematic mono-rhymed ode (on its origin and significance see *inter alia* Hamori 1974, Stetkevych 1993, Sperl & Shackle 1996 and Montgomery 1997). Its themes and literary form appear to have very little in common with the Qurʾan, a fact which helps to explain why studies of pre-Islamic poetry and Qurʾanic studies have for long existed side by

[1] This Chapter is to be read in conjunction with Geert van Gelder's chapter ' The Qurʾan and the Arabic Medieval Literary Tradition' which also covers poetry.

side with relatively little overlap. The disconnect between the two types of text was deepened further by the suggestion put forward early last century by Margoliouth and Taha Hussain that pre-Islamic poetry was a later forgery. While their theory has been largely abandoned, doubts about the authenticity of the corpus have continued to persist.

One counterargument to the forgery thesis has always been that the notion of poetry figures quite prominently in the Qurʾan. The text emphasises repeatedly that Muḥammad is not a poet and in one instance launches a much discussed attack on poets about which more will be said below. So poetry clearly existed, but what evidence is there to prove that it was the pre-Islamic poetry transmitted by later sources? This question has been newly addressed in recent scholarship. Thomas Bauer (2010) argues that Qurʾanic diction deliberately avoids any semblance with the form, style or content of the poetry of its time. As a result of this 'negative intertextuality', a text came into being which 'is, in many ways, the complete antithesis of contemporary poetry' (2010: 705-6). Bauer points out, however, that there are instances where the Qurʾan, in a tone of disparagement, appears to evoke phrases found in pre-Islamic verse. These passages suggest that the poetry from which the Qurʾan seeks to distance the Prophet is indeed identical with the type of verse collected and transmitted by the Arabic tradition.

Bauer's findings corroborate the work of earlier scholars, notably Toshihiko Izitsu (1959), who have argued that the Qurʾanic message was intended to overcome the tribalist ethos of pre-Islamic Arabia. It centred on the concept of *muruwwa*, a term akin to the Latin *virtus* since it conjoins the notions of manliness and virtuous behaviour. Echoing Hamori (1974: 3-30) and Montgomery (1986), Neuwirth describes *muruwwa* as 'excessive hospitality, extravagance, grandiloquence, boastful attachment to one's tribe and extreme prowess in battle' and notes that 'it was particularly powerful due its artistic representation in the most prestigious literary genre, the ancient Arabic *qaṣīda*' (2014: 76). Having established poetry as the repository of the ethos to which the Qurʾan is opposed, Neuwirth repeatedly highlights how standard poetic themes are countered and implicitly nullified by passages in the Qurʾan. Thus the transitory bliss of lost love conjured up by the *nasīb,* the erotic prelude of the *qaṣīḍa,* is inverted by the 'counter-image of everlasting bliss' and amorous delight granted to the souls in Paradise (2014:79). Similarly, the *aṭlāl*, the ruins of the abandoned campsite bemoaned by the pre-Islamic poet, have a superior Qurʾanic counterpart in the *umam khāliya,* the communities destroyed by divine retribution (2014, 26). These and numerous other examples in Neuwirth's work go to show that in the Qurʾan

a pessimistic, anthropocentric world-view internalised by the tribal ethos of *muruwwa* and voiced through the medium of poetry, is effectively and deliberately countered by a theocentric vision in which the individual is answerable only to God and faced with the prospect of eternal punishment or reward.

The crucial role of pre-Islamic poetry as a 'foil' to the Qurʾanic 'fact' is further documented in the work of Ghasan El Masri where a more differentiated picture arises. In a recent article (2015) he detects the 'presence of eschatological notions' in some examples of pre-Islamic poetry, which yield a more precise understanding of Qurʾanic terms such as *al-ākhira* (the Hereafter). A forthcoming study of his focuses on the subtle but pervasive interface between a pre-Islamic poem and the Qurʾan. In the course of his argument, he provides evidence from a range of sources, including epigraphy and archaeology, that 'the poets describe the social and political contexts of pre-Islamic Arabia rather accurately' (El Masri, forthcoming). Touching on the authencity debate, El Masri concludes that pre-Islamic poems are not forgeries but result from 'a *selective act of cultural reclamation*' largely determined by 'the poetry's thematic relevance to the Qurʾan' (El Masri, forthcoming).

With the recent work of Bauer, Neuwirth and El Masri, a scholarly consensus emerges which confirms Kermani's view that the conflict between the Prophet and the poets was in essence 'a struggle over leadership' (2000: 352). A telling sign of this is the prominence in both pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾan of the imperative mode. As custodian of tribal honour, the poet speaks with authority and addresses friend and foe with commanding urgency. The first Qurʾanic revelation also begins with a command, but it emerges from a higher sphere (Q: 96: 1-2)

*Iqraʾ bi-smi rabbika lladhī khalaq * khalaqa l-insāna min ʿalaq*

Recite in the name of your Lord, who created, created man from a clot of blood

These words suffice to distance the Prophet's authority immeasurably from those of the poets: he speaks not in the name of a tribe, but of the Creator of mankind, and bears a message emanating from Heaven. Significantly, the issue of authority is the principal theme of the Sura of the Poets (Q 26), as indicated by the eightfold repetition of the imperative phrase 'fear God and obey me' (*ittaqū l-Lāha wa aṭīʿuni*) with which prophets of all ages are shown to have warned their disbelieving contemporaries. The verses berating the poets (26: 224-226) occur at the end of the sura and have been much discussed (e.g.

Shahid 1983, Zwettler 1990, Montgomery 1997: 210-216 and Bauer 2010).[2] Seen in the context of the pattern of admonition, rejection and punishment established by the text as a whole, the poets appear as just one more example of all those who fail to 'fear God and obey'. Their description as being followed by the wayward (*ghāwūn*) and saying 'what they do not do' (Q 26: 224-6) is all the more damning and their punishment a foregone conclusion. A stark warning is delivered, and the much repeated prophetic command is powerfully thrown into relief against the misguided authority of the poets – except for those 'who believe, do good work and often mention God', as stressed in the final verse (Q 26: 227).

To contrast the prophetic imperative with a sarcastic poetic counterpart we may turn to the *Muʿallaqa* of ʿAmr b. Kulthūm in which the martial zeal of the pre-Islamic ethos is most vehemently expressed. Turning to his adversary, the poet exclaims (ʿAmr, *Muʿallaqa*, 1971: 98):

Abā Hindin fa-lā taʿjal ʿalaynā wa-ʾanzirnā nukhabbirka l-yaqīnā
Bi-ʾannā nūridu l-rāyāti bīḍan wa-nuṣdiruhunna ḥumran qad rawīnā

Abū Hind, don't make us hurry!
Give us the time to tell you something that is certain (*al-yaqīn*):
Our banners are white when we bring them to the drinking fount [of battle]
And red when we bring them back, satiated [with blood].

Like the prophet in sura 26, so the poet here acts as a messenger passing on a warning of certain doom. As the poem progresses, it is repeated with increasing ardour, but must pale in comparison with the Prophetic warning of eternal doom addressed to all mankind. Significantly, the term *al-yaqīn* ('the certainty') appears repeatedly in the Qurʾan where it conveys not only death but the certain truth of the soul's encounter with divine judgment (e.g. Q 56: 95).

The rivalry between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾan is further accentuated by the fact that the authority of both derives from the mastery of language. Both convey a code of ethics whose credibility and impact depends on the aesthetics of delivery. The respective literary merits of poetry and the Qurʾan, and the inherent superiority and inimitability of

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the latter, have accordingly been a pivotal theme in classical Arabic literary sciences and theology (see Chapter ...). Symptomatic for this is the debate over the *Muʿallaqa* by Imruʾ al-Qays (d. 542), arguable the most famous pre-Islamic poem ever written. Its lasting allure was such that the medieval theologian al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) subjected the poem to a fierce critique in order to prove its failings, though his heavy-handed methodology has been compared to' taking a butterfly through a carwash' (Mir, 1990: 119).

The poem's antithetical relationship to the Qurʾan is best illustrated by comparing it with Sura 24 with which it shares numerous themes, though from opposing perspectives. The poet vaunts himself for trespassing into women's chambers, seducing them into adultery and disclosing their charms which are described in exquisite detail. True to the ethos of *muruwwa*, he glories in risking his life to transgress the boundaries of decorum. The sura, by contrast, appears designed to impose limits upon just such behaviour: adultery and indecent talk are proscribed, female charms are to be veiled in public, homes should not be entered without permission, and men and women are to lower their gaze in chastity.

Of particular note is that both texts are ring compositions, a fact which points to a structural parentage between sura and *qaṣīda* that merits more extensive research. As Farran (2011) and others have shown, the tears shed by the poet at the sight of the ruined abode at the beginning are countered at the end by the rain storm which brings both destruction and hope for renewal. In the sura, beginning and end are linked by verses on themes of conviviality and social interaction. Remarkably, a juxtaposition of darkness and light is centrally positioned in both texts. Here, Imruʾ al-Qays describes his beloved as a shining light, before plunging into a dark night of solitude and tribulation. By contrast, the famous light verse of the sura (Q 24: 35) shows God to be the true source of illumination, while wave upon wave darkness symbolise the perdition of those led astray (Q 24:40). The difference here is symptomatic of a new attitude to nature championed by the Qurʾan. For the pre-Islamic poets, nature is sufficient unto itself and represents both their salvation and their undoing. In the Qurʾan all natural phenomena are but signs (*āyāt*) pointing to the Creator and reminding man that his salvation lies elsewhere.

The new outlook brought about by the Prophet's message, coupled with the political success of his mission, could not fail to have an impact on poetry, but the result was 'complex' and 'occasionally contradictory' (Montgomery, 1997: 254). Some poets appeared to pay mere lip-service to the new creed. Others became subservient, as best illustrated in the panegyric *qaṣīda*s addressed to the Prophet, notably the famous *burda* by Kaʿb b. Zuhayr

(Stetkevych 2010:30-69). These were polythematic *qaṣīda*s in the old style in which the key ingredients of *muruwwa* – generosity and death-defying valour – are integrated into the new ethics of Islam. Alongside them we also find a new type of mono-thematic war-poem composed in simpler language. A notable example inspired by Qurʾanic punishment narratives is the ode by Kaᶜb b. Mālik on the expulsion of the Jewish Banū al-Naḍīr which portrays the Muslim warriors as agents of divine retribution (Imhoff, 2010). Like other politico-religious poetry of the early Islamic period, such as that of the Khārijites and the Shīᶜites (Gabrieli 1974), Kaᶜb's verse does not rank highly in the canon of Arabic letters. It is significant, however, because its fusion of missionary zeal and martial prowess anticipates all later Arabo-Islamic war poetry, form Abbasid times to the present day.

The Abbasid Period

By the 3d / 9th century the influence of the Qurʾan on Arabic poetry is all-pervasive. This does not mean that poetry has become religious or that the form and themes of inherited convention are abandoned, nor does poetry aspire to imitate the Qurʾan, an impossibility by definition (on this see Van Gelder in this volume). Citations of the Qurʾan, known as *iqtibās*, which proliferate in the poetry of the time (Zubaidi 1983, Van Gelder 2002-2003) are the most visible but not the most important sign of this influence. The thrust of it resides in a new, theocratic understanding of human history, individual destiny and the natural environment which is implicit even in works devoid of reference to scripture. This understanding gained in complexity by association with the philosophical theories and scientific insights made available in Arabic by the translation movement sponsored by the early Abbasid caliphs. As Stetkevych has shown, it led to the rise of a new mode of thought – 'abstract, dialectical, metaphorical' – which created a new style of poetic expression known as *badīᶜ* (Stetekevych, 1991: 37). It was to dominate Arabic poetry until the modern age.

The theocratic understanding generated by the Qurʾan and refined by speculative thought, in particular the philosophical cosmology of Neoplatonism, left a diverse range of imprints on Abbasid poetry. As illustration, four types of verse will be briefly discussed hereunder.[3] The first and most prolific is the panegyric mode. Here, the recipient of praise and his

[3] For a different approach to Abbasid poetry and the Qurʾan see Beatrice Gruendler (forthcoming) which examines the Qurʾan's appearance in recorded events (*akhbār*) about the poets.

exploits are placed into a teleological framework of history which sees the establishment and expansion of a just Islamic order as the fulfilment of the Prophetic mission and the pathway to communal salvation. To this effect the ethical virtues championed by the pre-Islamic code are recast and elevated from a tribal to an imperial context. The poet who more than any other forged this new language of praise and led it to a level of hitherto unparalleled intellectual sophistication was Abū Tammām (d. 845). In an incisive study, Stetkevych has documented how his work legitimises Abbasid statehood through the skilful fusion of Qurʾanic and pre-Islamic concepts (1991, see index, 'Qurʾan').

The mutually reinforcing combination of Islamic and ancient Arabian themes was to remain to remain a hallmark of the panegyric tradition and exemplifies the subservience of poetry to prophecy. A hidden element of rivalry nevertheless subsisted. Convinced of his genius, al-Mutanabbī (d. 356/965) in his youth felt impelled to compose verses in emulation of the Qurʾan which earned him his sobriquet 'the would-be prophet (see Van Gelder in this volume). The mature panegyrics of this master of eulogy illustrate the careful positioning of Qurʾanic allusions in the structure of the panegyric. His famous *qaṣīda* on the recapture of the frontier-post of al-Ḥadath from the Byzantines begins by endowing his patron Sayf al-Dawla with the classical Arabian virtues of resolve (*ʿazm*) and nobility (*karam*). The climactic conclusion by contrast grants him quasi-prophetic if not quasi-divine status in verses redolent with Quʾānic references, such as the following (al-Mutanabbī, *Dīwān* 3:392):

O sword (*sayf*) which is never sheathed
About which no one is in doubt (*murtāb*) and from which there is no protector (*ʿāṣim*)

The sovereign's might is here associated with the Quʿān 'in which there is no doubt' (*lā rayba fīhi*, Q 2:2) and with God 'from whom there is no protector', a thrice repeated Qurʾanic phrase bound to evoke the destruction the people of Noah (*lā ʿāṣima* Q 11:43). Thus the sovereign's victory re-enacts a Qurʾanic punishment narrative, and herein lies his historic mission. Of special note is the fact that his elevation from to quasi-divine status first occurs in the central line of the poem where he is described as transcending the bounds of courage as though he knew the Unseen (*al-ghayb*) – a prerogative only of God.

Al-Mutanabbī's depiction of the sovereign in such hyperbolic terms makes sense if it is seen in the context of the Neoplatonist cosmology which had become widely accepted by this

time. It views the cosmos as a hierarchy of being whose components stand in a mirroring relationship to each other, hence God's human agents may be validly endowed with attributes akin to those of the Creator. This way of thinking is relevant also for the understanding of the next two types of poetry I wish to discuss. Unlike the panegyric which portrays the role of communal leadership in the teleology of history, these are concerned with the fate of the individual: his emancipation by spiritual ascent; or his captivation by worldly delights. The former is the subject of ascetic and mystical poetry, starting with Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. c. 180/796) and culminating with Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235), Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and al-Būṣīrī (d.c. 694/1294) whose panegyric of Muḥammad marked the onset of flourishing tradition of prophetic eulogy (Stetkevych, 2010:70-150). The latter, rather more abundant, is the poetry of wine, love and indecent revelry (*mujūn*) made famous by Abū Nuwās (d. 199/813). In both types the Qurʾan is present, both as implicit normative framework and as source of citations and allusions.

As discussed by McAuley, Ibn ʿArabī's thought on the function of poetry provides an instructive insight into the ongoing debate over the relative merits of poetry. In keeping with most classical commentators, Ibn ʿArabī does not see the Qurʾanic verdict as an all-out condemnation. Rather, poetry has a distinct function. Unlike the Qurʾan, which is revealed in clear language, poetry is 'a deliberate act of encoding', whose structure and symmetry 'reflects the workings of the cosmos' and acts as 'a vehicle of secret knowledge' accessible to an elite (McAuley, 2012: 44-46). The cosmic order here alluded to is the emanatory world of Neoplatonism which Ibn ʿArabī came to know through intermediate sources and whose concepts he saw embodied in Qurʾanic terms and images (McAuley 2012: 17). His ample poetic production, examined for the first time in English by McAuley, is an tour de force of mystical hermeneutics which includes a series of poems on every Qurʾanic sura. The exploration of Qurʾanic concepts is equally prominent in the rather more accessible poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, where such citations have a climactic structural function, like in al-Mutanabbī's verse. One of his major works, discussed by Homerin (2007), ends with an imaginary voice that welcomes the mystical wayfarer to his long-aspired goal with the following words (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān* XX , Homerin 2007:396):

Good news for you, so strip off what is on you (*ikhlaʿ mā ʿalayka*)
You have been remembered despite your crooked ways.

ᶜAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulsī's interpretation of the verse points to the Qurʾanic verse 'remember me and I will remember you' (Q 2 :152) as the explanation for the welcome granted (Homerin 2007:397). The command to 'strip off ' what is on him - and hence divest himself of his worldly apparel - furthermore evokes a rhyming parallel with the divine command to Moses to strip off his sandals as he enters upon the sacred ground of Ṭuwā (*ikhlaᶜ naᶜlayka,* Q 20: 12). The poem thus ends with adept given access to the divine presence, like Moses stepping into the precinct of the sacred fire

While Qurʾanic associations are to be expected in religious poetry it may be surprising to see them in the poetry of revelry, including sexually explicit verses such those by Ibn al-Rūmī discussed by Smoor (2014). That multiple allusions to scripture can serve as subtext to an entire poem of this kind is documented in detail in Montgomery's study of a bacchanal by Abū Nuwās (1994).[4] Montgomery notices the paradox of 'positive Koranic terms' being applied to 'morally negative activities' (1994:127) – a paradox whose skilful exploitation is a hallmark of this entire genre. While the amorous exploits of the pre-Islamic poet were outdone by the Qurʾan's depiction of eternal bliss, here the opposite process is at work, as Qurʾanic images serve as a means to conjure up a sinful Paradise on earth. The aim is not just to shock by prarodying the sacred, or to render earthly temptation irresistible by giving it the lure of Eden. At work here is a vision warranted by the cosmology of the time in which the earthly represents an imperfect mirror image of the heavenly – a contrasting parentage moreover fully in keeping with the Qurʾanic message. The reveller's principle sin – as well as his claim to salvation – may reside precisely in his awareness that the source of his seduction carries an imprint of Heaven.

The fusion of medieval cosmology and the Qurʾanic way of seeing enables the Abbasid poet to discern a spark of the sublime even in the most ordinary of things, as illustrated in the fourth type of Abbasid poetry I wish to mention, the ekphrastic epigram. It is a type of miniature in which the object of description is woven into the cosmic fabric by mining and combining the associative potential of poetic and Qurʾanic language. Thus a five line epigram on the pen is enough for Ibn al-Muᶜtazz (d. 247/908) reveals hidden parallels between courtly and religious spheres, macrocosm and microcosm, human action and

[4] Considering the frequent allusions to the story of Jonah detected by Montgomery, it is to be noted that the poem's central lines may contain a further hint at the same tale. Here the wine is described as having been concealed for long as though 'buried inside a coffin' (1994:118), which brings to mind Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the whale, including the death and rebirth symbolism conveyed by the tale.

divine ordinance. What comes to the fore is the object's semiotic quality in the hierarchy of being - in short its quality as a sign (*āya*) in the Qurʾanic sense (Sperl 2000). Sumo's study shows that this analogical, metaphorical style is a feature of Abbasid descriptive poetry also in longer structures (Sumo, 2007).

The Modern Period

Abbasid poetry emanates from a culture at the pinnacle of its power. Arabic verse of the modern age reflects a culture shaken to its foundations by colonial subjugation, dictatorship, internal fragmentation and war. Central to these foundations are language and prophecy, shards of identity which poets seize upon them to confront the trauma. The existential challenge represented by colonialism and modernity is tangible in a famous poem composed in 1903 by the Egyptian Hafiẓ Ibrāhīm (d. 1932) in which the Arabic language is cited as bemoaning its own demise. Incredulously it exclaims (Ibrāhīm, *Dīwān* 253):

I have been broad enough to comprise the Book of God in word and meaning
I was not too narrow for any verse or admonition.

How then should I be too narrow to designate a tool
And string up names for new inventions?

In anti-colonial poetry the Qurʾan appears repeatedly as the key repository of arguments to delegitimise the occupier and rally the forces of resistance. How rich and skilful the use of Qurʾanic allusions to this end can be is shown in Hussein Kadhim's (1997) analysis of two poems by Aḥmad Shawqī (d. 1932), including the famous 'Farewell to Lord Cromer'. Here, Qurʾanic references form the bedrock of a 'counter-discursive strategy' which results in 'casting the struggle between Egypt and Cromer/Colonialism as one between belief/Islam and infidelity, as a conflict between good and evil, between the forces of life and those of death and degeneration' (1997: 194).

Confronted with French colonial rule and what he saw as the submissiveness and ignorance of his people, the Tunisian Abū l-Qāsim al-Shābbī (d. 1934), not only resorted to Qurʾanic paradigms like Shawqī, but assigned to poetry – and by implication to himself - a role

analogous to prophecy. His composition 'Al-Ṣayḥa' ('The Scream', 1925) concludes with the following Qurʾanic imperatives (al-Shābbī, *Dīwān* 47) addressed to the art of poetry:

Wa ṣbir ʿalā mā tulāqī *wa ṣdaʿ wuqīta l-ʿithārā*

Bear up to what you are faced with
And comply - may you be guarded from failure.

In the Qurʾan, both imperatives are addressed to the Prophet in order to strengthen and comfort him in the face of his detractors (see Q 15:94, 20:130). By association, al-Shābbī urges poetry to emulate the prophetic model, be steadfast and trust in eventual triumph.

Following the watershed year of 1948 the sense of existential crisis deepens and the search for poetic renewal leads to a rupture with the past. The two-hemistich mono-rhymed verse form which had persisted since pre-Islamic times was abandoned in favour of free verse. The change is symptomatic of the collapse of inherited certainties brought about by the upheavals of the time. Unfettered forms of expression were needed to erect new foundations. For the Iraqi Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (d. 1964), one of the pioneers of free verse, the transformation of poetic form is concomitant with a sea change in ideological consciousness. For him the teleology of history is no longer Qurʾanic but Marxist and encompasses elements of ancient Mesopotamian mythology. Qurʾanic themes and images nevertheless persist as symbolic fragments, like the mention of Thamūd, one of the communities destroyed by divine wrath, which figures in his master piece The Rain Song (1960), though here the agent of destruction is 'not nature and not God', but man (Deyoung 1993:58).

For the Syrian poet Adonis (b. 1930) the Qurʾan remained a seminal point of reference in his search for a new poetic language, though less on account of its message than on account of its unprecedented literary qualities which he saw as emblematic of the renewal he was himself aiming for. His *Introduction to Arabic Poetics* describes the Qurʾan as 'a radical and complete departure' which in the Abbasid period 'led indirectly to the opening up of unlimited horizons in poetry and the establishment of a genuine literary criticism' (Adonis, *Introduction,* 37, 42). By analogy, Adonis posits a similarly radical innovative surge for his own time to which his poetic work is intended to point the way. His classic compendium

Songs of Mihyār the Damascene (1961) adopts a mantic and prophetic tone, but carries no religious denomination. As Kermani remarks, his poems 'are oriented towards Heaven but not towards God' (2000: 361).

In the Middle East the cultural dislocation brought about by modernism has been aggravated and as though epitomised by the physical dislocation of the Palestinian people and the denial of its identity. In response, a new Palestinian literature arose which aimed to reassert that identity and root it both in the soil of the land and in the foundation of its culture. Its most notable representative is the poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh (d. 2008) whose work draws upon the Palestinian heritage in its entirety, including the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible. Among the countless Qurʾanic allusions in his poetry one is of particular relevance here for it harks back the above-mentioned command 'recite' which marked the onset of divine revelation. In a long poem composed under the impression of the Sabra and Shatila Massacre and the expulsion of the Palestinian fighters from Beirut he exclaims (Darwīsh, *Madḥ al-Ẓill al-ʿĀlī* , 1983: 28):

These are our verses (*āyātunā*)
So recite (*iqraʾ*)
In the name of the fighter (*fidāʾī*) who created
An horizon out of a boot (*jazma*)
(...)
In the name of the fighter who begins,
Recite (*iqraʾ*):
Beirut – our image (*ṣūra*)
Beirut – our sura.

Faced with extreme violence and catastrophic defeat the poet resorts to the Qurʾanic paradigm and inverts it in act of supreme defiance. Agency is wrested from God, as the freedom fighter assumes the role of the Creator and reveals a new sacred text in the form of a poem cast into the image of Beirut. In the process, the expulsion of the fighters from the city is transformed into a new beginning, a re-enactment of the prophetic *hijra,* as documented in Anette Månson's insightful discussion of the passage (2003 : 230-1). The example shows how a moment of utmost despair brings about a return to, and recasting of, the most seminal of Qurʿānic phrases.

Notwithstanding his frequent reference to Scripture, Darwīsh's poetry is non-denominational, unlike the politico-religious verse spawned by the Islamist movements which has proliferated in recent decades and seeks to counter modernity and secularism by reasserting the Qurʾanic teleology of history, often by recourse to traditional poetic forms. As shown in Alshaer's studies of the poetry of Hamas and Hizbullah (2009, 2014), it plays a major role in the propaganda war and casts a revealing light on the cultural dimension of the conflicts involved. Thus the Syrian poet ʿUmar al-Farrā (d. 2015) sanctifies the earth of South Lebanon in his poem *Men of God* composed to celebrate Hizbullah's resistance against the Israeli incursion in 2006 (Alshaer 2014: 134-6). Upon entering the land, the poet draws on the same Mosaic image which served Ibn al-Fāriḍ to validate his entry into the realm of enlightenment:

Here we have reached our journey's end
Come take [them] off (*ikhlaʿ*)
- I might even ask you to bow down (*tarkaʿ*) -
Come take off your sandals! (*ikhlaʿ niʿālaka*)
We are walking on holy land...

The power of the association is undiminished, as shown by the immense popularity achieved by the poem.

Despite his endorsement of Hizbullah, Al-Farrā was in the first instance not a political writer, unlike Abū Yaḥyā al-Lībī, a senior al-Qāʿida operative killed by a US drone strike in 2012 who was also a warrior poet. Readily available on the internet, his works remain an effective propaganda tool in the Islamist arsenal. Of particular relevance for the purpose of this essay is his poem *The Cry of Faith Arose In Us* which is composed in the same rhyme and metre as the above-cited *Muʿallaqa* by ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm. Though couched in far simpler language, it evokes the ferocity of the pre-Islamic ethos at its most death-obsessed and rallies it into the service of totalising religious warfare. In the following lines the poetic imperative reappears once more, invoking 'the promise of God' (*waʿd Allāh*), a phrase

repeated numerous times in the Qurʾan. Like in ʿAmr's poem, the word *yaqīn* ('certain') supplies a rhyme:[5]

Fa-yā man qad ghadaw lil-kufri ḥarban
bi-waʿdi l-Lāhi kūnū wāthiqīnā

Fa-ṣabran fī majāli l-mawti ṣabran
fa-inna n-naṣra ātīnā yaqīnā

O you who have turned into warriors against unbelief
Put your trust in the promise of God.

Be steadfast on the path of death, be steadfast
Victory will come your way for certain.

The combined veneer of pre-Islamic heroism and religious zeal harks back to the early Muslim war poetry by the likes of Kaʿb ibn Mālik. It is symptomatic of the categorical return to an idealised past championed by Islamist ideology which gains in appeal by the lasting resonance of this form of poeticised rhetoric. Thus the author of the above lines can be watched declaiming them on the internet, surrounded by crowds applauding with bursts of gunfire.

To conclude I would to turn to the Egyptian Muḥammad ʿAfīfī Maṭar (d. 2010) whose hermetic style is a world away from the reactionary pastiche of Islamist poetics, though no less steeped in Qurʾanic assonance. His work is perhaps the most outstanding example of the search for a new expressive medium which has dominated much of Arabic poetry since 1948. Composed between 1975 and 1988, his *Quartet of Joy* charts the rebirth of poetic language through a panoramic web of associations that deeply probe the fusion between nature and culture, world and word which makes us human. The notes to the prize-winning English translation by Ferial Ghazoul and John Verlenden (1997) indicate only the most evident of the many Qurʾanic allusions whose richness and complexity would merit a study in its own right.

[5] For the Arabic text see http://www.kurdname.org/2014/01/blog-post_7190.html consulted on 10/08/2015. The translation is mine.

In the following example, which ends the third Prelude (*muftataḥ*), we encounter once more the notion of certitude, though here it does not relate to certain death or triumph but to the poet's certainty of his task as their witness. Having recalled the Adamic covenant between God and human kind (Qurʾan 7: 172-3) and found it 'sealed with the blood of my tattoo and clay', he has the strength give to vent to meaning, like the trumpet of Judgment Day (*ṣūr*, Qurʾan 6: 73; Maṭar, *Quartet*, 1997, 7-8 [English], 9 [Arabic]):

Fa-nṭiq yā yaqīnī
wa-nfukh damī fī l-ṣūri wa l-tashhad yamīnī
anna l-madāʾina wa l-madāfina taḥta maḥḍ al-lamsi yarjufu
min rawājifihā nfijāru l-mashahdi l-yawmī bi l-ruʾyā

So speak up O my Certitude,
And blow my blood in the Trumpet.
Let my right hand attest that cities
of the living and the dead
under the pure touch quiver,
stirring the eruption of the daily scene
with apocalyptic vision.