The Poetics of Ancient and Classical Arabic Literature

Orientology

Esad Duraković
Translated by Amila Karahasanović
The Poetics of Ancient and Classical Arabic Literature

Through analysing ancient and classical Arabic literature, including the Qur’an, from within the Arabic literary tradition, this book provides an original interpretation of poetics, and of other important aspects of Arab culture.

Arabic literature is a realm of poetry; prose literary forms emerged rather late, and even then remained in the shadow of poetic creative efforts. Traditionally, this literature has been viewed through a philologist’s lens and has often been represented as “materialistic” in the sense that its poetry lacked imagination. As a result, Arabic poetry was often evaluated negatively in relation to other poetic traditions. *The Poetics of Ancient and Classical Arabic Literature* argues that old Arabic literature is remarkably coherent in poetical terms and has its own individuality, and that claims of its materialism arise from a failure to grasp the poetic principles of the Arabic tradition. Analysing the Qur’an, which is known for confronting the poetry of the time, this book reveals that “post Qur’anic” literature came to be defined against it. Thus, the constitution and interpretation of Arabic literature imposed itself as a particular exegesis of the sacred Text.

Disputing traditional interpretations by arguing that Arabic literature can only be assessed from within, and not through comparison with other literary traditions, this book is of interest to students and scholars of Islamic Studies, Arabic Studies and Literary Studies.

Esad Duraković holds a PhD in the field of Arabic literature from the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade and is Professor of Arabic Languages and Arabic Literature at the University of Sarajevo. His research interests focus on literary interpretation from Arabic.
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Esad Duraković
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He created man;
He taught him the power of expression
(Qur’an, 55:3–4)
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Preliminary considerations

The study of Oriental-Islamic culture is often burdened by the ideological position of the researchers, be they those in the Islamic world or outside it. In general, on one hand, this culture understands itself from within and presents itself to the world from such a position. On the other, there is a well- and long-established discipline called Oriental studies, which – mainly from the vantage point of Western culture – interprets and evaluates the Oriental-Islamic culture and presents it not only to the West, but also to the Oriental-Islamic world itself. These two approaches often do not entail any correspondence in their methods and conclusions. There is even no closeness at times, but rather an emphasis on diverging conclusions. This fact indicates that the study of Oriental-Islamic culture is historically changeable, and this underscores Barthes’s idea about the need for the history of history and history of philosophy – and thus, of course, history of literature, as he clearly indicates – to be recreated over and over, in order to make a past object always a complete object.¹ Barthes, of course, speaks in light of the European tradition, invoking the claim made by Lucien Febvre and Merleau-Ponty: he varies and reinvigorates the European constant on the necessity of doubt and permanent re-examination, which is the basis of progress in science in general. This need is also evident in light of the fact that there is a “third approach”, somewhat different from the former two: the Russian Oriental “school”, which can be presented in this context by referring to several notable Russian Oriental scholars: И. Ю. Крачковский, И. М. Фильштинский, А. Е. Крымский, etc.² Consequently, what transpires from this is that Oriental studies need the same thing premised by the West in science in general – constant re-examination, with valid methodology and argumentation.

Oriental studies, which refers here to the Western study of the Oriental-Islamic world, and particularly of its culture, is to be objectively credited in the Oriental-Islamic world, since many Oriental scholars worked hard to promote many of its values by uncovering them to the Western world, and did so in certain aspects it had failed to observe by itself. It seems that one of the greatest contributions of Oriental studies is its philological part, with the least amount of ideological deviations, since Oriental philology – in terms of being exact in a particular sense – is the closest to an ideologically neutral position, i.e. that which can be described as scientifically necessary objectivity. It is almost
impossible to imagine this field of study today, had it not been for the enormous and beneficial activity of Oriental philology, which uncovered and published (i.e. revealed) an impressive part of Oriental-Islamic cultural and scholarly heritage: entire libraries of fundamental works of this culture were uncovered by Western philosophers, who prepared numerous critical editions – from the United Kingdom, through France and Germany, to faraway Calcutta. Russian Oriental philology (particularly in the Soviet era) should not be neglected. German classical philology, for example, made an immense contribution to the development of Oriental studies; this is not only in reference to German philologists, but also to the German school of classical philology, which had, in terms of methodology, spread to other countries and other languages.

Oriental philology thus created a solid basis for Oriental studies in the wider sense. However, once that basis, created by philology, is used to approach interpretations of Oriental-Islamic culture or its fundamental works, once one ventures into the ever so sensitive and historically unstable area of valuation, certain problems appear – as scholarly disagreements, sometimes disputes, etc., although it is the same area, or “object” of scholarly interest. The tradition of Oriental studies is well acquainted with such differences in interpretation and value judgements. The entire history of Oriental studies is a testament to occasionally different or diverging approaches and judgements related to Oriental-Islamic culture. They seem to be particularly evident in the modern era – in what we call postcolonial criticism.

In light of the scope of production of Oriental studies – be it burdened ideologically in relation to the culture it studies, be it apologetic towards it, or somewhere between the two opposites – it is simply impossible to include here all the authors and their works. The aim of this study is not to be apologetic or critical towards any Oriental studies method or its results, but rather an autonomous step into this vast culture, hoping to deliver new results. With these preliminary considerations I want to indicate, at least in summary form, some of the typical phenomena appearing in approaches to Oriental-Islamic culture, to be substantiated by certain names in Oriental studies, which, in turn, justifies the need for new research over and over. It is these phenomena that moved me to produce this study. There are among them those that instigate scholarly opposition and presentation of different views; well-informed readers will recognise my opposition, even when I do not debate directly (while citing names and titles), for this is not a critical study in that sense, but rather an exploratory one. On the other hand, Oriental studies bibliography offers methodological approaches and research results that overcome successfully the ideological burdens of some other Oriental scholars, or rather the type of rigidity in positioning themselves as the Other, which is an expression of disastrous prejudice. I believe that support is required to overcome such extreme positions. We simply work in a relatively sensitive area, whose history testifies to sharp ideological confrontations, so much so that in some oeuvres this field of study has been turned into an “ideological science” and can sometimes become servant to politics. A particular problem arises from the fact that in some cases, the authority of certain canons of Oriental studies, or
Oriental canons, is proportionate to their ideological potential. One should separate Oriental studies from any domination of ideology over it – and this is a tall order, be it in the so-called Western approaches, or the ones within the Oriental-Islamic world.

The fundamental texts of Oriental-Islamic culture are the Qur’an and poetry. That is why these two corpuses are at the core of my research, just as Oriental studies in general afford them the greatest attention – justifiably so. These two corpuses have a clear and strong link, despite the fact that they negate each other in certain aspects and they do so in very complex ways – for the Qur’an used literary devices only to show its superiority over poetry (much loved by ancient Arabs), i.e. it used literary devices to set itself in relation to literary expression in general as entirely non-imitative. Noting the enormous significance of the Qur’an and poetry in Oriental-Islamic culture, which developed so powerfully in poetry, but also under the influence of Qur’anic text in the Arabic language and in the context of the then present literary traditions – scholars have generally been very attentive to those texts, be it as autonomous corpuses, be it as texts that influenced significantly the creation of a wider cultural context. Such scholarly research presents two principal directions: the one created by scholars in the Oriental-Islamic world, and the one created within Oriental studies, noting that there are dissonant voices in the latter, as well as particular positioning towards Oriental-Islamic culture as the Other. The key role in this – on “both sides” and primarily – was played by ideological positions for approaching fundamental texts and values of the Oriental-Islamic cultural realm. I will substantiate this with examples of certain approaches and conclusions regarding the Qur’an and ancient Arabian poetry.

The category (or the doctrine, as it is often referred to in referential sources) of ῶi῾jāz, understood as the supranatural and non-imitative nature of its texts, is, according to Muslim belief, one of the key aspects in approaching the Qur’an. The complexity of this issue rests not only on how the supranatural in it is to be elaborated and interpreted, but also in the fact that this issue, irrespective of conclusions, has far-reaching consequences for the approach to the entire Oriental-Islamic culture. Since the Qur’an is the fundamental text of the culture considered here, the conclusion as to whether it is supranatural/non-imitative or not indicates the position of the researcher – whether it is immanent in the sense of studying the culture from within itself (usually though not solely Muslims) or distancing in the sense that the study is conducted from the position of different traditional experiences and ideological (i.e. religious too) constellations. This is a matter of method(s), which always condition the research results. Consequently, another question arises from this, of a rhetorical nature: how well can a vast culture be understood and presented by the researchers who do not accept the postulates articulated as such by that same culture? The question of an immanent approach thus sharpens. In other words, we have a situation whereby the Oriental-Islamic culture postulated this sacred text as its fundamental text (and the entire culture is primarily a Culture of the Word), meaning that it developed deliberately in harmony with such a postulate. Is it possible or
Preliminary considerations

scientifically justified to ignore such an important fact?! Ultimately, it seems irrelevant in this context whether the Qur’anic text is supranatural/non-imitative or not; what is important is how much can either belief allow for a valid study of that culture. It is natural and legitimate for non-Muslims to consider it divine, non-imitative, etc., for they would otherwise accede to the fact that they have accepted Islam. It is also natural – and legitimate – for the principal creators of Oriental-Islamic culture throughout its history and in its present time to consider the text supranatural – thus also that its ‘i’jāz is beyond doubt. I believe that this complicated situation can be “resolved” in the following way.

Namely, scholars outside the Islamic world, i.e. those who are not Muslim, cannot accept ‘i’jāz as a kind of axiom, in view of their position: it is understandable, but scientifically unjustified, as stated above, to study a culture while disregarding the fact that it was the culture itself that posited the Qur’an as its fundamental text and developed in compliance with that. Ultimately, those scientists who are unable to accept this fact about the self-positing of a sacred text in Oriental-Islamic culture act in the name of another ideology and against the one contained in the Other. Science is thus powerfully ideologised, and such an orientation is damaging to both the science and the ideology. The burden is comprehensive. For example, in his book La letteratura araba (Milan, 1967), in the chapter entitled “The Qur’an”, the Italian Arabist Francesco Gabrieli says that the Qur’an is the most difficult book to understand “for a modern man from the West”, and that this text “seems to us [my emphasis] to be spiritually poor, repeating endlessly a set of basic motifs, harsh and confused in exploration, chaotic in the actual sequence – in short and honestly, boring”, and that, as such, it was “the guidance and light for a large part of mankind”.3

These categorical positions and a host of other negative qualifications presented in just a sentence or two are accompanied by no explanation or argumentation whatsoever, but the author thus created the preconditions for disqualifying a huge culture, even a large part of mankind (!), since that part of mankind finds “guidance and light” in a book that is difficult to understand, chaotic and even boring, etc. Unfortunately, Gabrieli said this on behalf of the Western man. His position is clearly ideological and negativist, even conflicting in relation to the culture it represents, as well as the principles of science in general. Naturally, there have been different approaches in Oriental studies.

Yusuf Rahman is one of the authors who have presented important works dealing with the issue of ‘i’jāz of the Qur’an. He presented key authors who had dealt with the issue of ‘i’jāz (al-Bāqillānī, Abū ‘Ubayda, Ibn Qutayba, Abdul Aleem, ‘Abd al-Jabbār, etc.).4 One of his important conclusions states: “One might be correct in assuming that in Muslim works dealing with miracles and, especially with ‘i’jāz al-Qur’an, the author’s primary aim is always ‘practical,’ that is to defend and to prove the prophethood of Muhammad.”5

Al-Bāqillānī is also underscored and his position is summarised as a presentation of three key aspects of reflection of ‘i’jāz: (1) knowledge of the invisible (how the Qur’an presents the invisible); (2) the Prophet was illiterate and could not have produced such a body of text; (3) the composition of the text is
fascinating. The Oriental-Islamic tradition is dominated by the studies that base the ῾i῾jāz in the Qur’an on exactly what al-Bāqillānī said, but it seems to me that Mustansir Mir was right, to a large extent, when he said that, strictly speaking, the challenge of the Qur’an should be understood as a literary challenge addressed to Arabs of Muhammad’s era, with little relevance for post-Qur’anic generations, be they Arabs or non-Arabs, Muslims or non-Muslims. The Qur’an is a book of the context and as such it was determined to demonstrate to the then speakers of the Arabic language that it was, first and foremost, superior to the found tradition of using literary devices. Traditional Muslim exegesis was focused on studying ῾i῾jāz in a host of devices of literary expression, such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme, ellipsis, etc. The same author states that until the twentieth century, the study of ῾i῾jāz was based on an atomistic approach to Qur’an – ayah by ayah, surah by surah. Little attention was focused on the internal structure of the surah, particularly so in terms of coherence within the surah themselves.

This dominant orientation towards the literary aspects of ῾i῾jāz is historically justified, as Mir confirms, and it is, I believe, mainly a consequence of two things. First, the Qur’an was explicitly in competition with poets, trying to prove its divine superiority, i.e. that the Prophet himself was not a poet, as often described by opponents who were his contemporaries. So, in the Prophet’s time, within that context, ῾i῾jāz was primarily founded on its literary expression; hence the effort to prove ῾i῾jāz within that aspect. Second, as stated earlier, Arabian and also the entire Oriental-Islamic culture was such that it expressed itself very successfully in the Word; it is thus understandable that even so long after the Prophet the supranatural nature of the Text is proved by placing it against other texts. This kind of action by inertia was necessary.

With due respect for the results reached by this type of studies, since they did indeed provide a major contribution, I think that it is necessary at this time to take a step further in interpreting the “doctrine of ῾i῾jāz”. This is one of the aims of my study, and the public will judge the results. Literary approaches to Qur’anic text, just like linguistic, stylistic and other so-called traditional approaches to this very influential text, will remain important, with a possibility to further contribute with valid research results – i.e. provided they do not fall within the area of mere compilations and epigonism. It is particularly important for scholars in the Islamic world to resist this type of traditionalism. Approaching the Qur’an from the vantage point of the scientific areas I have just mentioned makes sense and has future perspectives in line with the well-recognised fact that these fields of study also continuously expand their horizons, and that the text itself simply makes itself available to modern scientific disciplines. For example, I believe that interesting results may arise from studying the Qur’an from the vantage point of semiotics, or cognitive stylistics, which seem to be – with good reason – very attractive modern fields of scholarly research. However, in principle and without diminishing the importance of specialist approaches that Johns called atomistic, the Qur’an should be analysed in a way significantly different from the traditional “atomistic” approaches, although they are in no
way contradictory – on the contrary. Namely, what Mir called “a holistic approach” \textsuperscript{11} takes courage, although the notion itself may be discussed within this context. Such an approach is a huge step forward compared to al-Bāqillānī’s consideration of ‘i‘jāz, as well as that of many authors in the long tradition of studying the Qur’an and particularly its ‘i‘jāz.

I am of the opinion that this text should be considered as the Text in the entire Culture. This expands the different aspects of ‘i‘jāz. Namely, this text comprises a “range of meanings”, to use a term referring to Barthes, if observed within itself; however, meanings multiply when observing the Qur’an in a culture that, as a whole, may be named the Text. In other words, the text functions on its own at one level, and it functions differently, or at another level, when introduced into the Context/when observed as an important part of a highly functional whole (and I use the term holistic approach in that sense). The text and its context are thus clearly and lastingly mutually dynamicised. The conservationist, traditionalist approaches and their results are thus permanently overcome, and this word indicates that the results of traditional (“atomistic”) approaches have not been annulled or negated, but rather built on further. And it is this approach that is immanent to the Qur’an, for it is a highly contextualising text. (In this sense, let us recall at least the notion of derogation in the Qur’an: derogating own decisions in changed circumstances, or, for example, the category of sabab al-nuzūl – the occasion for revealing certain ayahs, etc.) The Qur’an contextualised itself not only by its relationship with poetry: its contextualisation is quite comprehensive, down to the aforementioned category of derogation, for example. On the other hand – and this is particularly interesting about Qur’anic text – at the same time, it created a new context: a new society and enormous complexity of relations within it, a new religion with all that it brings with it, new aesthetic and poetic postulates in literature, etc. It is explicit in that its aim is to create a new context at the most comprehensive cultural level, but it also – seen historically – gradually added to the context of many important aspects, probably in order to reach the optimum in terms of communication. Finally, it managed to create a new context – an entirely new circle of culture and civilisation. That is why I used the title of my study to define the Oriental-Islamic culture as the universe of the sacred text; at that, in the word universe I want to underscore the very dynamism of all its parts for the purpose of functionality of this giant whole. Any ideological bias from a distance becomes inappropriate. The immanent approach allows for immeasurable advantages. Therefore, I believe that scholarly research should indeed use this kind of holistic approach. Moreover, in light of that, there is a repeated confirmation of the belief that the literary challenge of the Qur’an for Muhammad’s contemporaries (the shā‘ir, the kāhin) has been resolved, since this context has been essentially overcome, and it is better to observe the text – very powerful in a significant part of mankind – in a new context, or contexts, or in the universe of culture it defines. This is also an important part of the immanent approach.

Should we opt for this approach to the Qur’an – as an undoubtedly significant text in an important historical and current context – then the category of ‘i‘jāz is
seen in a new light, with an understanding that is truly different, innovative when compared to the traditionally established aspects of 'i'jāz, which see it predominantly as a historically delineated text. Contrary to that, it is its continuous contextualisation (which entails the creation of context) that makes it a permanently open and dynamic structure, and since 'i'jāz is considered (in the Islamic world) to be its inseparable feature, this means that 'i'jāz is just as dynamic and just as contextualised. In my opinion, it is obsolete to see 'i'jāz only in terms of knowledge/speech about the of-the-other-side invisible or non-imitative stylistic expression. Studying this text in context, it is not difficult to find reasons for the belief in its supranatural nature ('i'jāz) in terms of the great powers it demonstrated in the creation of history (as a “context unto itself”), which we can see today, as well as in terms of influence over a considerable part of our contemporary times. This understanding of 'i'jāz is unusual when compared with the traditional ulama-based one – which seems quite reductionist from this vantage point – but I am convinced that there is a basis to see 'i'jāz in that light, and that such an approach can deliver new results. Since this relationship between text and context is important regarding the Qur’an, it arises from this that 'i'jāz is a kind of process, rather than a finite given. This does not escape the immanent approach.

Scholars who deal with the issue of 'i'jāz are – as I have already mentioned – prone to establishing it only within the realm of literary expression. Any research into this issue must bear in mind that there is almost a consensus on this in the Islamic world: this fact has greatly influenced the entire Oriental-Islamic culture.

The focus of Oriental studies is usually on Arabian poetry, carefully considered by the Qur’an itself, by basing an important aspect of its 'i'jāz on the aspect of stylistic and general literary supremacy – to the level of supranatural, as Muslims believe. So, poetry is particularly important, as this importance was assigned to it by the Qur’an as the fundamental text of the entire culture and, on the other hand, history testifies convincingly to the fact that Arabians, and then the entire Oriental-Islamic culture, expressed their genius very successfully through poetry. Studying the relationship between these two important textual corpuses of culture, there is some controversy or disagreement, as a consequence of (I must repeat this here) different approaches – the “inner” and the “outer” one, the ideologically burdened and the ideologically unburdened one. Since I started this chapter by speaking about the Qur’an through indicating the clearly ideologically contaminated positions by the Arabist Gabrieli, it would be appropriate to cite his judgement of Arab poetry, indeed a judgement in keeping with his positions on the Qur’an, which he, just like his positions on poetry, presents “in the name of the Western man”. This intervention “on behalf of the Western man” or “Western culture” is erroneous on at least two counts. First, Oriental studies include a considerable number of scholars who have expressed views quite different from those of Gabrieli, and I will mention just some of them at a later stage. Second, any initial emphasis on affiliation with Western culture (or any other culture) when approaching another culture expresses an a priori
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position of a “researcher” who will do anything in his power to interpret the
culture which is the subject of his “research” in accordance with the a priori pre-
sel criteria and models: the object of his “expertise” must be assessed negatively,
just because it differs from the works in his own culture. Such positions com-
promise the entire area of study where the “researcher” works; it equally com-
promises science in general.

In light of the above, it is not surprising – though it is methodologically unac-
ceptable – that Gabrieli concludes, in his La letteratura araba, that “it is futile to
search in Arab poetry for any dense construction or inner coherence of classic or
modern Western poetry”. On the very next page, he concludes, after referring
to the authority of T. Nêldeke, that “no pre-Islamic qaṣīda, and perhaps no Arab
qaṣīda, may be called complete poetry”.12

As for the relationship between the Qur’an and poetry, we should recall the
opinion of Robert Irwin.14 Irwin emphasises rightly that the Qur’an influenced
significantly all the literary forms used by Arabs.15 I would like to expand this
statement, basically accurate and as such useful when studying the Qur’an and
Arab literature, by stating that the Qur’an not only influenced all the literary
forms used by Arabs, but also generally had a strong influence on a vast empire
of literature created in Oriental-Islamic languages (Arabic, Persian and Ottoman
Turkish). Therefore, the Qur’an first influenced literature in Arabic, and then this
literature strongly influenced the entire literary creation in the Oriental-Islamic
cultural realm. In the classical period, literature in Persian and Ottoman Turkish
applied the terminology of the Arab tradition and accepted most of the poetic
postulates and aesthetic principles – down to the perception of beauty and the
notion of creativity as defined in relation to Divine Creation.16 Classical Oriental-
Islamic literature, in fact, belonged to the same poetic system, notwithstanding
the fact that it was created in three different languages, and subsequent ethno-
centric approaches to this literature are thus unfounded in terms of poetology.17
Thus, poetological studies of classical literature in these languages shows
beyond doubt that the Qur’an influenced strongly this entire universe – through
the Arabic language and literature, rather than just Arab literature.

Some of Irwin’s positions that my study deals with as well may be open for
discussion, with full respect for the author. For example, Irwin states:

As can be seen, the qaṣīda moved from topic to topic and much of the poet’s
skill lay in his ability to make the necessary transitions. Even so, a typical
qaṣīda is likely to strike a Western reader as lacking all formal unity. It can
be, as often was, compared to a loosely threaded string of beads. The earliest
Arab poets expected their audience to recognize the scenes and sentiments
they were evoking. There was little scope for fantasy in the qaṣīda, for it
reflected the perceived realities of existence in the desert.18

This observation should be followed by a detailed elaboration, in order not to
create an impression of a negative valuation of ancient Arab poetry, because of
what was unusual to Western recipients. My study tries to prove, using methods
of stylistics and poetology, that ancient Arabian qaṣīda was pronouncedly realistic, since it was dominated by comparison as the most appropriate stylistic device for presenting the physical and the visible world, as that of the Bedouin was. Only the powerful Qur’anic metaphors would revolutionise the Arabian literary expression, and I established, I hope, a clear link between the predominance of these two stylistic devices in two epochs (pre-Islamic and Islamic) and in the two corpuses with their different perceptions of the world. And it is only in this sense – conditionally, that is – that one speaks about the absence or of the limited presence of imagination in ancient poetry. It is pronouncedly realistic, but not entirely unimaginative, for poetry does – of itself and always – entail a certain degree of imaginativeness, as it is unimaginable without transposing procedures and effects. Any denial of imaginativeness in ancient Arabian poetry would mean that we accept it as a mere biographic or factual notation, which equals an attempt to deny qaṣīda as a poem, i.e. as an artistic entity. In fact, the very notions of ṣhi῾r and shā῾ir semantically indicate knowledge, as noted by Irwin. However, it is knowledge different from the kind contained in the notion of ‘ilm: sha῾ara means to learn by sense, by imagination. In ancient times, shā῾ir was the one who learned about the metaphysical, the of-the-other-side, by the very power of imagination and emotion. Therefore, this ability and this quality of a poem are contained in the very notions of ṣhi῾r and shā῾ir, which are, in essence, poetological terms. And I focus on this in my study.

Ancient Arabian qaṣīda is indeed unusual to a Western recipient. But the question is: what does that actually mean? Is that a value judgement? Whenever faced with old texts, particularly classical ones, we are faced with a manifest problem of the vantage point of the present and the vantage point of the past. When studying poems from the sixth or the seventh century in our time, in the twenty-first century, we must count on certain difficulties and peculiarities, particularly so since they were created in a different language, in different poetics and a different culture. In any encounter with ancient texts, be it through reading or interpretation, we face a serious issue that I will refer to here as the lost context. This is our severe and unavoidable handicap and it is thus recommendable to try – as much as possible, for we can never be entirely successful – to reconstruct the context of the poem. This also says something relevant about us in the twenty-first century, but we must bear in mind that the poem was written in the sixth century, for example. This kind of caution will add validity to our judgement of ancient poetic work. And it is in this sense that one should consider yet another position by Irwin regarding ancient Arabian poetry, which requires elaboration and observance of different types of contexts. I add this only as a possible illustration of how to observe a particular poetic creation, i.e. the need to contextualise it. Moreover, a certain measure of contextualisation (and I reiterate: it cannot be completed, but one must not give up the attempt) is necessary for the purpose of the immanent approach, the “approach from within”. Irwin states that ancient Arabians treated women in the same manner as other material goods and that their descriptions of women were similar to descriptions of camels:
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The nasīb dominates the rest of qaṣīda and is heavy with an earthly sensuality. The fleshiness of the women is tacitly echoed in the poet’s description of the frilled lumps of meat from his slaughtered riding camel, which the women are engaged in cutting up.\(^{20}\)

To a modern Western reader, this kind of explication is undoubtedly a negative, or rather a very negative recommendation of this poetry, and the consequences are almost immeasurable: ancient Arabian poetry (particularly the Mu῾allaqāt) are the most important corpus in Oriental-Islamic literature in general, and this statement suggests – perhaps unintentionally – a negative recommendation for this entire poetic tradition.

Such presentation of the ancient Arabian treatment of women illustrates the loss of several types of context or several of its levels. First, it is a matter of the aforementioned vantage point of the present and the vantage point of the past. Second, this indicates disregard for the fact that this is a work of poetry, not a scholarly or a historical record, which means that the “mechanisms” of transposition and stylisation of reality, the very essence of a work of art, are simply ignored. Third, most importantly, there is disregard for the social context wherein the cited description of a woman was created in a work of art. Descriptions of women using certain attributes of camels do indeed exist in ancient Arabian poetry, but it is necessary to bear in mind that the value of a camel to us today is indeed very different from what it was to an ancient Bedouin. It is a matter of the sum of values in the given social ambience, and not the literal elements of description. For a pre-Islamic Bedouin, a camel was one of the primary values in life. If understood in this way – and history indicates that it should be – then the Bedouin’s comparison of woman to a camel becomes the opposite: it is clearly positive, because with such a description the Bedouin presents women as the sum of values of importance for life itself, precious to both him and his wife. It is terrifyingly wrong to ignore this kind of context, for the consequences are dramatically negative: nothing is as wrong as a literal interpretation of works of art, particularly of those that were created and “acted” in very different contexts. (Thus, for example, Jannah is represented as an oasis: it is wrong to see it literally as a garden full of women and other “hedonist props”; Jannah is represented metaphorically – as the sum of the most precious goods a Bedouin could have imagined, i.e. an oasis.) Finally, one is surprised by the sentence: “There is no sign that Imru’ al-Qays was interested in the personality of the women he pursued and whose conquest he then boasted of.”\(^{21}\)

This opinion ignores a capital fact, the one I have mentioned before – that a poem cannot be reduced to a biographical note, and that it is degrading for a work of art to try to find any kind of evidence (back in the sixth century, no less!) whether Qays was or was not interested in the personality of women he wrote about. Besides, the minute she “moves” to a work of art, a woman stops being a personality: she then transforms into a character, transposed from reality into a different kind of reality.
As for the earlier statement that ancient Arabian poetry is unusual for Western recipients, something else needs to be added here, something that re-emphasises the importance of context. Namely, Westerners are distanced from this poetry in more ways than one (which is quite normal), for it is simply a matter of two different worlds, but it should be noted that the complex context of their ancient poetry is lost to modern Arabs too: it is distant to them in several aspects – poetic, social, even linguistic, since it is, after all, an ancient language.²²

One of the fundamental questions regarding the relationship between the Qur’an and poetry emphasised by some scholars is the question of structural changes in the qaṣīda in the so-called interim period (muḥadramūn). James Montgomery thus wonders if the structural changes in the qaṣīda noted, for example, in the work of al-Â’shâ and Labīd, are the consequence of influences of the Qur’an or just natural poetic evolution.²³ He focuses in particular on the poetry of Ka’b Ibn Zuhayra when considering structural changes in the qaṣīda.

This issue is both important and complicated. It is hard to assume that structural changes in the qaṣīda (change of position of certain themes, or exclusion of some of the themes of the pre-Islamic qaṣīda) happened through spontaneous poetic evolution. Historical facts strongly oppose such an assumption. Namely, as poetised text, the Qur’an affected strongly the found literary tradition. It confronted poetry explicitly and implicitly: on one hand, it emphasised numerous times that the Prophet was not a poet, that what it presented to people was not poetry in the sense in which poetry it had found, but rather – it explained – words of God; on the other hand, and at the same time, the Qur’an cherished the value of its own literary expression, trying to overshadow the values and the influences of the poetry it had found and of the saj’. Moreover, it is beyond dispute that one of the fundamental aspects of ījāz has been proved in the domain of the supranatural aspect of the Qur’anic literary expression. In light of these historical facts, then, one cannot speak about a natural or a spontaneous poetic evolution, in a sense that it did not come about independently from Qur’anic text. I believe that the antagonism of the Qur’an towards one type of poetry (the type will be discussed later) intervened strongly, even dramatically, in the poetics of the found poetic tradition, specifically in the domain of structure of the qaṣīda, or rather in its ideological aspect. This poetic aspect requires attention: this study does exactly that. In short and moving forward from Montgomery’s reasoned assumption, poetry did change in the time of the Prophet, or rather the time of muḥadramūn, but this change was brought about by intervention of the Qur’an, and not by natural evolution, independently from it. The Qur’an intervened in poetry in terms of content, or rather in terms of ideology, since it condemned the primary task of pre-Islamic poets, considered a medium between fellow tribesmen and metaphysical forces, and using poetic, rhymed and rhythmical words for that purpose. This was radical reorganisation of poetry in the area of poetics. Poetry dwelled in this state for a short while and after that, particularly during the Umayyad and further on in history, it blossomed in the true sense of the word. Scholars noted rightly that pre-Islamic poetry – in the form that reached our times – did not contain any traces of pre-Islamic beliefs,
which is a paradox in light of the fact confirmed by the Qur’an many times, that a poet was considered a medium between humans and supranatural forces. What happened with that part of ancient Arabian poetry?

Here too, a logical supposition is linked to the position of the Qur’an in the universe that was being created at the time. Namely, for a long time, pre-Islamic poetry had lived in oral tradition and its written record started in the eighth century, which was relatively late in terms of the strong and constant opposition between the Qur’an and the poetry often referred to as pagan from the vantage point of Islam; it is thus normal to assume that early philosophers, who started recording poetry, de-paganised this corpus in a way. There are historical records by Arabs themselves, for example, Khalaf al-Ahmar (d. 796), who were prone to forging ancient poetry. A similar, interventionist approach was present on other occasions, and also in other cultures.24 In any case, there is an evident problem of authenticity of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry (Ar. ṣiḥha al-shi’r al-jāhilī), with a plethora of referential works written about this in the Arab world and in Oriental studies.25 This fact obliges us to be fairly cautious when it comes to the structure of pre-Islamic poetry and the influence of the Qur’an over it. In fact, it was thanks to the Qur’an that this poetry has been preserved, though not in its authentic form. The fundamental if not the only motive for recording this poetry was the exegesis of the Qur’an in the aspects of language and style: scholars, theologians in particular, needed a linguistic, or rather a literary “background” for interpreting the Qur’an and, at the same time, proving its supremacy (’i’jāz) in the field of language and the use of literary devices.

As for the relationship between the Qur’an and poetry, there is another “place” of particular contestation in Oriental studies that deserves full attention. It also negates indirectly the claim about an alleged fabrication of pre-Islamic poetry. This contested place relates to the alleged anathema/prohibition of poetry in Qur’anic text, ensuring an important precondition for a negative attitude towards the Qur’an – for what kind of a book is it that banishes poetry from a culture, despite the fact that this very poetry was the most successful form of artistic expression in that culture?! At that, interpreters base their conclusions regarding the Qur’an and poetry on ayahs 224–227 at the end of Surah 26 (The Poets). For example, Irwin, whose study I have cited here, ends his presentation of the Qur’an with ayahs that, according to him, openly condemn poets. It is almost incredible that Irwin cites ayahs 221–225, and leaves out the crucial ayah (227) wherein the Qur’an exempts one type of poets, and Irwin thus draws an erroneous conclusion about the overall attitude of the Qur’an towards poets. I will expand on ayah 227 in the text that follows.

It is interesting, for example, that Goethe understood the end of Surah 26 as a humiliation of poets, and inspired by it, on 7 or 8 March 1815, he wrote the poem Indictment.26 Goethe’s opinion on this is particularly important, since he is one of the most important minds in the entire human history. As such, he developed particularly close contacts with the Oriental-Islamic culture (and the Qur’an and poetry in particular), which contributed to extraordinary achievements in his work, and through that in European culture in general. It seems to
be reckless to refer to this ennobling contact as influence of either “side”, since
the very word influence seems one-sided and simplistic: it is incapable of
expressing the complexity of beneficial relationships and results engendered
through encounters of truly great minds such as, for example, Goethe and Hafez.

In any case, the claim that the Qur’an prohibits or condemns poetry is incor-
rect and has, as such, far-reaching consequences in terms of understanding the
Qur’an, the vast poetic tradition and the Oriental-Islamic culture as a whole. If
such a claim is to be accepted – and I will demonstrate how wrong that would be –
there would then be a reason to ask the question cited earlier: What kind of
fundamental text of an entire culture is it if it forbids poetry?! Consequently,
there would be a conclusion on ethical disqualification of Muslims in general as
hypocrites, since for hundreds of years, despite the alleged prohibition by the
Qur’an, they cherished poetry en masse as their supreme art. Therefore, one
could say that the Qur’an condemns poets and hypocrites, but Muslims too are
hypocrites, since they cherish poetry despite the Qur’anic prohibition.

It is sufficient to read carefully and without prejudice ayahs 221–227 to reach
an unambiguous conclusion that the Qur’an condemns the pre-Islamic poet as
the shā῾ir. Understanding the Qur’an is based on context. From the point of
view of Islam, the pre-Islamic poet was a pagan poet, since he introduced
himself as a medium of metaphysical forces and used the poetic verse to that
end. The Qur’an condemns that kind of poetry: And the poets, only the deviators
follow them/Do you not see that in the valley they roam/And that they say what
they do not do. This is a serious ethical disqualification of the pre-Islamic poet
who claimed to be in contact with the metaphysical forces, to be acting in
accordance with that, thus a very respected though not the most respected
member of his community. In many other instances, the Qur’an supports these
very ayahs, insisting that what the Prophet says are not words of a poet, but
rather the pure, divine truth.

Such critical attitude of the Qur’an towards this status of the poet in his com-
community is not unique in history: allow me to recall Plato, although there have
been many similar philosophical stands on poetry after him. Plato – and this is a
general point of reference – banished poets from his ideal republic (the famous
Book X) because they arouse emotions and, allegedly, act irrationally, thus
“clouding reason” and obstructing the philosophers who are supposed to run the
state.

It is unusual, to say in the least, how interpreters of the relationship between
the Qur’an and poetry overlook the last ayah (227) of this Surah (26): “… save
those who believe and do good works, and remember Allah much …”. Thereby
the Qur’anic disqualification excludes poets who behave and act as Muslims.
From the vantage point of this ayah – the final, or the concluding one on this
topic – things look quite different: implicitly, this is a recommendation of the
poetry that disowns the prerogatives of pagan ideology, as borne by the pre-
Islamic shā῾ir. This is quite clear in this ayah, and this can be overlooked only
by those who are, as researchers, reckless and unconscientious, or wish to render
a biased interpretation. In that sense, Montgomery questions the common
opinion that the Qur’an adopts a negative stance on poets. At that, he cites authors who claimed, justifiably, that the Qur’an did not condemn poetry in general, but rather that through these ayah it criticised particular poetic genres. Such authors include Margoliouth, Blachère and Zwitter, and in the Islamic world the authoritative al-Zamahsharī.27 And finally, in an act of particular importance for the history of Oriental-Islamic literature, Prophet Muhammad affirmed poetry compliant with Islamic norms, i.e. poetry that is, in compliance with the Qur’an, free from pre-Islamic religious content. Namely, when Ka’b Ibn Zuhayr recited to him a panegyric that started with the words “Bānat Su῾ād …” (that is, a panegyric to the Prophet and thus to Islam), the Prophet removed his mantle and wrapped it around the poet’s shoulders. This was a clear sign of reciprocal praise to the poet.28 In terms of literary history and poetology, this robe – as an expression of the highest praise, particularly at the level of the sacred – did not wrap the poet personally, but rather his poem (figuratively, of course) as the poetic guidance to new poetry – the poetry of the Islamic era. This historical fact should not be interpreted as an act of the Prophet’s protection of panegyric poetry, or a possible guidance on how Islam places poetry in the service of its own promotion. Ka’b’s poem had numerous elements of the traditional qaṣīda, but the most important thing for the Prophet was – in compliance with the Qur’an – that poets did not convey pre-Islamic religious cults and beliefs, but rather that they recognised him as the religious authority. The Qur’an intervened at this watershed of epochs and, in particular, at this watershed of poetics, allowing a poetically redesigned poetry, which blossomed already in the Umayyad period. The Qur’an thus confirmed to the Prophet its own superiority in the realm of literary expression, and reaffirmed its own religious prerogatives as well, granting enormous space to poetry, provided it did not collide with Islamic norms. Is it possible today to even imagine the Oriental-Islamic culture – vast in both space and time – without its literature, primarily its poetry?!

In general, the Oriental-Islamic culture has relatively exciting scholarly discoveries waiting further ahead; by that I mean new research successes, largely dependent on methodological approaches. I believe that innovativeness definitely lies ahead, and I draw this belief from the knowledge about current results of research in the Oriental-Islamic culture, which come from the two approaches I presented briefly. I say this in general terms, aware of the risks arising from generalisations, exceptions notwithstanding. Allow me to refer to such an exception, but first I must specify the two types of approach to the Oriental-Islamic culture. With that I return to the starting point of this chapter.

In the Oriental-Islamic world itself, the dominant methods of study of the Oriental-Islamic culture are those that are pronouncedly traditionalist. In this study, I illustrate this point through traditionalist approaches to ‘i῾jāz and ancient Arabian poetry. Namely, there is in the Oriental-Islamic world a myriad of traditional studies that are a deviation of sorts of the immanent approach: there has been a transition from immanence to hermetic closure, and this kind of approach is doomed to collapse. When traditional approaches become traditionalist,
horizons of science become restricted. One needs to re-read al-Baqillānī, or al-Zamahsharī, but not to define their oeuvre in this time as *non plus ultra*, but rather to be an incentive towards *plus ultra*. At that, it is important to take into account, most seriously, the methodology that has been well developed in the West, although its application in Oriental studies is often problematic. Requirements include full methodological competence, coherence and consistency.29

On the other hand, some Oriental studies approaches have been burdened by the fact that they completely ignore the advantages of the immanent method; not only that – they often take the very fact of differentiation as the basis for promoting their own cultural supremacy in relation to inferiority of “others”. This antagonising approach is wrong. A culture is to be studied from within itself, and differences are to be promoted for what they are – as the richness of “world culture” (to paraphrase Goethe’s notion of *world literature*), rather than antagonising them or deducing any conclusions about alleged supremacy.

An example I wanted to underscore in this context is a text by Margaret Larkin. She is aware of the importance of the immanent method in studying the Oriental-Islamic culture, and she states that we observe how scientific categories and scholarly paradigms devised in the West have been imposed unnaturally onto the science and culture of the Islamic world. The first challenge for a scholar in the West is to draw conclusions from the texts themselves, rather than try to adapt those texts to his or her pre-defined expectations.30

Indeed, good results may be achieved through the immanent method, using impressive methodological experiences accumulated in the West, but with no, or anyone’s, ideological burdens, for they impede valid scientific results. Ronald Barthes (with whom I started this chapter) was right – to paraphrase him: one should read the classics over and over again, and be prepared for re-canonicalisation.

Notes

2 Their oeuvres are large and very important for the field of science discussed here. See the titles in the Bibliography.
5 Rahman, op. cit., p. 413.
9 Ibid., p. 81.
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10 Ibid., p. 82.
11 Ibid., p. 32.
13 Gabrieli, op. cit., p. 27.
14 I am also familiar with his work entitled *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*. It has been translated into Bosnian: Robert Irwin, *1001 noc na Zapadu*, translated by Enes Karić, Tugra, Sarajevo, 1999. This work was interesting also in light of the fact that my translation of *A Thousand and One Nights* was published in Sarajevo in 1999; this is so far the only integral translation of *Nights* into any of the languages of former Yugoslavia directly from the original Arabic.
17 I have just (2014) written a study on this, entitled *Poetika klasične književnosti na orijentalno-islamskim jezicima* [Poeticism of Classical Literature in Oriental-Islamic Languages].
18 Irwin, op. cit., p. 5.
20 Irwin, op. cit., p. 12.
21 Irwin, op. cit., p. 13.
22 Since I published an integral translation of *The Seven Odes* (*Sedam mu’allāqa*, Sarajevo, 2004), I have had numerous opportunities to observe a positive surprise even by Arabs with sound knowledge of literature, stating that those are poems that even they cannot understand without well-elaborated annotations, and that they too find them unusual.
24 For example, the work *Kalila and Dimna*, assigned to the translation work by ‘Abdullāh Ibn al-Muqaffa῾ (d. 756.), went through a kind of Islamisation: this notable piece of *adab*, al-Muqaffa῾ introduced the noun *Allah*, and even quoted the ayahs, and we know today, on the basis of translation of this work into the Syrian language, as well as from other sources, that it originates from Indian literature in Sanskrit, and that al-Muqaffa῾ transposed it into Arabic from the Pahlavi language of the pre-Islamic period. Moreover, *A Thousand and One Nights* reached eighteenth-century Europe in translation by the French Arabist Galland, who was so inventive that, when observed today, the original is barely recognisable when compared with Galland’s translation.
25 There are even radical hypotheses, which I find unacceptable, that the entire pre-Islamic poetry was invented in the Islamic era and assigned to invented poets. Even Taha Hussein once put forward such a hypothesis (in his work *Fī al-shīr al-jāhilī*, 1926), but he subsequently revised it considerably, in *Fī al-adab al-jāhilī*.
28 That is why history of literature knows this poem as *Qaṣīda al-burda* (Qasida of the Mantle). For a very long time, this poem served as an inspiration to other Muslim poets, notably al-Būṣīrī (b. 1212).
Thus, for example, the interpretation of ‘i‘jāz includes a very problematic view, that superiority of the Qur’an rests on its content, and not its style. Cf. Abu-Zayd, op. cit., p. 11. In a literary text of high aesthetic values, it is impossible to determine its superiority by breaking it down into content and style/form in this way: the work exists as an entity – content and form combined.