

Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Peter Matthews Wright: Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics
(Under the direction of Carl W. Ernst)

The following dissertation utilizes recent allusion theory to produce an intertextual reading of the Qur'an with Biblical materials and argues that the Arabic revelation's use of such literary protocols as allusion, citation, and echo supported its claim to prophetic authenticity in the poly-confessional milieu of the Late Ancient Near East.

To my children

و قال الرّسول یربّ انّ قومي اتخذوا هذا القران مهجورا.
— Qur'an 25:30

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Introduction

*Greek are the Pythian oracles, and yet hard to understand.*¹

The foregoing remark is taken from the mouth of the Chorus in Aeschylus' tragedy Agamemnon. In the context of the drama, the Chorus is responding to the prophetess Cassandra who has just foretold Agamemnon's murder. The Chorus confesses to being baffled by this oracle and Cassandra interprets this failure to comprehend as a complaint about her language skills. Defensively, she replies: "See now, I know the speech of Hellas, only too well." But the problem is not with Cassandra's Greek, the Chorus assures her; the problem is with the prophetic genre itself.² Undeterred by this, Cassandra returns to her mantic discourse and, in the course of the ensuing colloquy, the Chorus helps to elucidate for the audience the sense of her prophetic utterances.

Prophets, it appears, require Choruses; and those prophets who are favored by the preservation of their oracular performances eventually acquire them.³ Rarely does it happen in recorded history that a Chorus (or an interlocutor performing the same hermeneutical function as the Chorus in Agamemnon) is on

¹ Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," Greek Drama, edited by Moses Hadas, New York: Bantam Classics (1965), p. 45.

² I have used A. W. Verrall's translation of Aeschylus' Greek because it encapsulates in a single line a meaning that a reader or auditor of the original must piece together from the dialogue as it unfolds. See Aeschylus, "Agamenon," Aeschyli: Septem Quae Supersunt Tragoedias, edited by Denys Page, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1972), p. 182.

³ Zhang Longxi, The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1992), pp. 13-17.

hand to ask clarifying questions of a prophet at the moment she or he delivers the Word; and even in cases where there is such a “Chorus” present, the subsequent inscription of their colloquy is never free from ambiguity. The reasons for this state of affairs are multiple; I shall review a variety of them in the ensuing chapters as well as a family of attempts to address the scene of interpretation where it involves prophetic speech as it has been transmitted to the present in Near Eastern Scriptures.

My task in this Introduction, however, is far more modest; here I wish only to provide the reader with a trio of provisions for the road ahead: (1) a resumé of the personal intellectual journey that informs my particular approach to the history of Near Eastern prophecy, (2) that journey’s relationship to the theoretical swerve I take in the history of modern hermeneutics, and (3) a very brief description of the organization of the work.⁴

1.

Thirty years ago, in the spring of 1977, I was wandering the stacks of my high school library, killing time before first period. I was raised in a family that honored reading for its own sake and my personal habits in that regard (then as now) could be best described as voracious and eclectic. In my mind’s eye, I can see myself on that particular spring morning, pulling books from the shelves, looking restlessly for something to catch my interest. Serendipitously, I noticed a book with the letters K-I-E-R-K-E-G-A-A-R-D spilling down its spine. Curious, I

⁴ The “swerve” is from the early steps of Romantic philosophy in Europe through the 20th century literary Renaissance in Egypt to the present moment where I inflect Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’s recently published writings on the Qur’an with my own version of Rortian “Yankee” hermeneutics. On Richard Rorty’s brand of “Yankee hermeneutics,” see John D. Caputo, More Radical Hermeneutics, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (2000), pp. 84-124.

pulled this volume from the shelf and opened it at random. There, in the pages of Robert Bretall's A Kierkegaard Anthology, I found another voracious and eclectic reader, but one unlike any other I had ever encountered. Kierkegaard seemed to me to be someone who had practically lived his life in books—so much so that he was moved to create and re-create himself through the various characters and authorial personae that appear in his work. I was immediately baffled by this most readerly of writers and yet, at the same time, fascinated by him. As I worked my way through Bretall's Anthology, it became evident to me that S. K. not only read widely and thought deeply, but also possessed a unique combination of religious earnestness, ironic sensibility, and moral passion. Indeed, here was an individual (*that* individual, as he would say) at one and the same time literary, philosophical, religious and Socratic-skeptical.

My attraction to Kierkegaard had much to do with my religious upbringing which, I must admit, is difficult to describe. My mother, originally an Episcopalian, always regular in her church attendance, is quietly pious. My father was another story. A research scientist and hard-nosed skeptic, he nevertheless served for many years as Superintendent of Sunday Schools at the local Presbyterian Church. He therefore oversaw a curriculum in religious education that he routinely disavowed. As he was (and remains) a powerful presence in my consciousness, my admiration for expressions of piety (like my mother's) are always tempered by a critical eye. What I found in Kierkegaard was a way to reconcile the conflicting approaches to religion that I had absorbed from parental example; for he managed to honor in his own personality the contradictory claims of a passionate piety, on the one hand, with a rigorous, ironical

circumspection, on the other. How he had integrated these two poles within a single personality he never explained; nevertheless, after meditating upon his literary-philosophical project, I determined to do the same myself. Years would pass before I would even approach a degree of Kierkegaardian proficiency in this matter. In the meantime, I tended to lurch back and forth from one pole to the other, see-saw fashion, until I reached an approximation that Cornel West describes as a “critical alignment with an enabling tradition.”⁵

At a relatively early stage in my life, then, Kierkegaard’s unconventional piety provided me with a paradigm for personal religiosity that has informed my thinking ever since. Indeed, though my reading has ranged far and wide from the solitary Dane, his shadow is forever cast upon my approach to matters religious. It is unquestionably a Kierkegaardian predilection that has drawn me to various other figures whose influence upon me has been as nearly profound: Spinoza, the excommunicated Jew who taught that the true end of all religion is piety and, as proof, founded the modern historico-critical approach to Scriptural studies; Ludwig Wittgenstein, the linguistic philosopher who baffled his admirers in the Vienna Circle with his devotion to Leo Tolstoy’s revisionary Gospel In Brief and the mystical poetry of Rabindranath Tagore; the revisionary Count Leo Tolstoy himself; the irascible 11th century Muslim jurist and polymath, Ibn Hazm; and the gentle 21st century Muslim literary critic, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, to name but a few. In my view, despite their many obvious differences, all of these thinkers share a common trait: the desire to achieve a form of religious faith that

⁵ Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press (1989), p. 233.

marginalizes credulity—or what world historian Marshall Hodgson termed “wishful thinking.”⁶

No one, in my estimation, has moved farther along this path than the Kierkegaard of the Concluding Unscientific Postscript. After reviewing the apologetic uses to which Christian theologians have put the “historical point of view,” Kierkegaard asks, “For whose sake is it that the proof is sought? Faith does not need it; aye, it must even regard the proof as its enemy.”⁷ As an historian and critic of religious literatures, I observe and attempt to describe the intricate interrelations of faith and belief that I find presented in the texts I study; but as a practitioner of a religious tradition, I struggle always to cultivate a faithfulness that seeks not for proofs on its own behalf, but to be the self-validating proof of my motivating convictions. Those convictions are not based on the embrace of creedal propositions but, rather, upon something akin to a Heideggerian “fore-understanding” of my radically contingent being-in-the-world—perhaps what some pre-moderns termed “gnosis.”⁸ In this sense, gnosis refers to an experientially-informed intuition that supplies “con-fidence”—it supports and underwrites faith.⁹

⁶ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, vol. 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1974), pp. 158-162.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1941), p. 31.

⁸ See Jean Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics, translated by Joel Weinsheimer, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (1994), pp. 91-105.

⁹ Hans Jonas, a student of Martin Heidegger, made the interesting connection between the Existentialism for which Heidegger was partly responsible and ancient Gnosticism in The Gnostic Religion, Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

That sense of gnosis and sense of faith have really very little to do with the treatise that follows. I remark them in order to suggest to the reader that one need not look to history for reassurance that one's religious identity is, in a meaningful sense, "enabling."¹⁰ In my view, historical reflection is a form of timely meditation upon contexts alternative to those I know first-hand. My understanding of religious tradition and practice is enriched through such meditation, but my sense of "enabling" derives from my location within a "community and a tradition that corresponds to me and furthers me."¹¹ I would describe my relationship to that community and tradition as hopeful, Gnostic (in the limited sense alluded to), and largely purged of wishful thinking—hence my "critical alignment" with it.

There is, however, a second sense of "gnosis" that is far more pertinent to the subject matter of this treatise than the one previously mentioned. This sense is likewise an "experientially-informed intuition that supplies confidence"—but it supports and underwrites textual interpretations rather than religious faith *per se*. The experiences that inform this intuition are both linguistic and literary in nature and have to do with an adept hermeneut's life-long acquaintance with the ways of language in history. In Chapter Three (below), I discuss Classicist and Literary critic Joseph Pucci's notion of the "full-knowing reader"—the individual who is empowered by her immersion in a particular literary genre to recognize allusions within that genre (in the instant case, the genre of Near Eastern

¹⁰ In this I am guided by Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, propositions 5.6 to 7. See also Frederick Sontag, Wittgenstein and the Mystical: Philosophy as an Ascetic Practice, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995.

¹¹ Herman Hesse, Narcissus and Goldmund, translated by Ursule Molinaro, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1968), p. 281.

prophecy). Such recognitions are instrumental to the construction of “deep” intertextual readings that defy the artificial boundaries imposed upon textual reception by tradition, canon, and sect. I argue that they help to articulate the “gnosis” encrypted within Harold Bloom’s definition of a literary critic as one who “knows the hidden roads that go from poem to poem.”¹² An abbreviated account of my journey to Qur’anic studies will serve to illustrate my own initiation into this second sense of gnosis. The course of this journey was uncannily convoluted, but I can chart it with some accuracy.

Unlike my encounters with Kierkegaard and his ilk, the Qur’an was not included among the intellectual adventures of my youth. In fact, I had given very little thought to Islam or its Scriptural traditions until I completed my second year in law school. It was then—early June, 1989—that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini passed away. Prior to his death, Khomeini seldom crossed my radar; but when he died, scenes of his funeral procession were broadcast to television screens around the world. His death was therefore delivered to my living room and, to this day, I can still recall the intense drama that took place in the streets of Teheran as his casket bobbed like a cork over a heaving sea of shoulders, heads, and hands. Not surprisingly, many of those hands held small copies of the Qur’an.

As the Imam’s body made its way to its final destination, I noticed how some in the crowd gestured emphatically with their Books in the direction of his bier. I registered these scenes as the instinctual choreography of inconsolable

¹² Bloom is a “strong precursor” of both Pucci’s work and my own. See his The Anxiety of Influence, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1973), p. 96.

grief—one so ponderous that it had robbed some of those present of their power of speech. Those whose tongues failed them on that day appeared to turn to the Qur'an to “speak” for them—by means of a symbolic act—the emotions of gratitude and loss that flooded their hearts. Perhaps because of my own inveterate bibliophilia, I was intrigued by the passionate attachment the Imam's mourners displayed for that iconic text. In the days to follow, I continued to reflect upon what I had seen. With a naiveté that still causes me to smile, I eventually decided to do what I had always done when I found a book interesting: I went to the library.

I no longer recall which translation of the Qur'an I checked out; what I do remember is that it lacked any sort of scholarly apparatus. There were no explanatory notes discussing the history of the text, the felicities of the Arabic language, or the peculiarities of its classical expression. As a consequence, the words that I read seemed somehow “flat” to me; they lay listlessly, as it were, upon the page. Much later, I would speculate that this effect may not have been unintended; that it might have had something to do with the ideological pre-commitments of the translator. In any event, I would also conclude that I, too, deserved some apportionment of the blame for this poor first impression. The expectations I brought to my reading of this text—expectations as to how a “sacred scripture” *ought* to read—had been formed by my experiences of reading the Bible. The Qur'an, I discovered, had little use for my Biblicism: its comparative lack of sustained historical narrative, the polemics with implied but largely unnamed interlocutors, the continual shifts of its “voice” among pronominal persons and number—aspects of Qur'anic discourse that are rich

with literary, historical, and theological implications—bewildered me.¹³ It was not long before I judged the book refractory and returned it to the library, largely unread. “Is it possible,” I wondered, “that *this* book is the same one I witnessed being flourished with such passion at Khomeini’s funeral?” So passed my initial encounter with Muslim Scripture; at the time, I did not anticipate ever returning to reconsider the Qur’an.

In October 1992, still reading voraciously and eclectically, I came across Aileen Kelly’s review essay “Revealing Bakhtin” in the New York Review of Books. Until that moment, I had never heard of Mikhail Bakhtin; moreover, I had enjoyed about as much success reading the 19th century Russian novel as I had reading the Qur’an—this despite an interest in Russian literature piqued by Tolstoy’s impact upon Wittgenstein. Kelly’s essay prompted me to purchase the book that had occasioned it, and with *that* book—Morson and Emerson’s Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics—I was able to gain entrance not only to Bakhtin and Russian literature but also to the novelistic genre more generally.¹⁴

At the time, I had completed law school and was engaged in private practice, a portion of which was dedicated to criminal defense work. Most of my criminal clients were poor, many of them African-American, and some of these were Black Muslims. On occasion, I would interview the latter in the prisons where many of them had converted—and there I witnessed for the second time, and in a completely new context, the power of the Qur’an to “give voice” to the

¹³ See Michael Sells, Approaching the Qur’an, Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press (1999), pp. 1-31.

¹⁴ See Aileen Kelly, “Revealing Bakhtin,” The New York Review of Books (September 24, 1992), pp. 44-48.

otherwise voiceless. I was prompted by these experiences to pick up the Book again; this time, with Bakhtin's treatment of polyphony under my belt, the Qur'an's "many-voicedness" no longer confounded me. Though I scarcely recognized it then, I was on my way to developing a deep appreciation for a Scripture that had previously seemed utterly opaque. But, to be clear: my initial association of literary theory with the Qur'an was, in a word, accidental. I did not read Bakhtin in order to find a way to make sense of the Holy Book. Instead, I steeped myself in Bakhtinian literary theory for what insights it might generate when reading fiction. Later, when a heavily-annotated bilingual edition of the Qur'an fell into my hands, I read it with new eyes.

Compared to the history of the Qur'an's reception by both Muslims and non-Muslims the world over, my personal experience with Islamic Scripture is remarkably idiosyncratic. Through a unique and unrepeatable series of events, my early acquaintance with the Qur'an was largely innocent of its venerable traditions of insider interpretation as well as the legacies of outsider polemics. Though I should perhaps be embarrassed to admit to the unconventional way I learned to appreciate the Book, I stubbornly consider myself to be quite fortunate in this regard. I am living proof that someone raised on Biblical traditions can learn to value the Qur'an as a species of Near Eastern prophecy with only those figures from his personal intellectual history—who had taught him how to think—"looking over his shoulder." In my case, non-Muslim literary-philosophical figures led the way. Had they been Muslim theologians, apologists, polemicists, or even jurists, I doubt I would have come to regard the Qur'an with the sense of piety-inducing wonder that I did; and having subsequently read much in the way

of Islamic theology, apology, polemics, and law, I feel confident in the accuracy of that judgment.

I undertook formal graduate study in the history of Islam and Islamicate civilization in August of 2001. At the time, my specific interests were largely shaped by my previous experience as a practicing attorney: I wanted to develop insights into the specific forms of Islamic religiosity that I had encountered while interviewing incarcerated Black Muslims. The tragic events of that September, however, set me on a different course. Counter-intuitively, perhaps, I did not dive into the study of geo-politics then, but journeyed back to those earlier periods in my intellectual development that I have briefly recited. I also took advantage of the opportunity graduate school afforded me to broaden and deepen my knowledge of the Bible and Biblical literatures. Indeed, it was in the spring of 2003, while researching a paper on “Paul and the Law” for Professor Bart Ehrman’s graduate seminar on the New Testament, that the seeds of the present study were planted.

My research on Paul’s relationship to law was an attempt to discover to what extent the traditional interpretation of this subject is supported by New Testament evidence and to what extent it reflects wishful thinking on the part of the later (predominantly Gentile) Christian community. According to the prevailing tradition, Paul’s visionary experience on the Damascus road radically altered his previous orientation towards Jewish *halakha*. This man, who boasts in his letter to the Philippians that he was “as touching the law, a Pharisee ... touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless,” is presumed to have abandoned the dietary restrictions and prayer rituals that he had strictly followed

throughout his life prior to his conversion.¹⁵ While such a clean and sudden *volte-face* is not outside the realm of possibility, it seemed more likely to me—and more consistent with certain passages in the Pauline corpus—that a Pharisee such as Paul would have stopped short of a complete suspension of *halakhic* practices and, instead, learned to reinterpret for himself the meaning he attached to them.¹⁶ After all, in Paul’s day, “Christianity” had not yet achieved the status of a rival to the inherited streams of Judean religion.¹⁷

With this revisionist thesis in mind, I began to educate myself about Jewish life in the Hellenized world of the ancient Near East. An important aspect of my study involved trying to make sense of Paul’s boast of Pharisaic identity in his letter to the church at Philippi. As I was researching this particular question, I came across one of the standard histories of the Pharisaic movement, Ellis Rivkin’s A Hidden Revolution. I read this book with much interest, impressed by Rivkin’s prudent employment of the textual evidence. When I arrived at the final two pages of the concluding chapter, however, I encountered an unexpected connection to my own field of Islamic Studies.

Rivkin was explaining how the “Pharisaic Revolution” as he terms it, “is encapsulated in [the] Mishnah.” He then quoted at length a passage from that work which performs an exegesis upon the Cain and Abel story from the book of Genesis and includes the lines: “For this reason man was created a singular

¹⁵ Philippians 3:5-6, KJV.

¹⁶ The book which helped to shape my thinking on this issue is Peter J. Tomson, Paul and the Jewish Law: *halakha* in the letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990.

¹⁷ On the complicated picture of religious affiliations and identities in the Late Ancient Near East see Daniel Boyarin, Border Lines, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

individual: to teach you that anyone who destroys a single soul of humankind, Scripture reckons him as having destroyed the entire world. [Contrariwise] whoever preserves alive a single soul of humankind, Scripture reckons him as having preserved alive the entire world.”¹⁸ I recognized these lines immediately—not from the Mishnah (which, to that point, I had never read)—but from the 5th *Surah* of the Qur’an. When I turned to that *Surah* in an effort to determine whether or not my mind was playing tricks on me, I discovered not only the lines that I had been reminded of in Rivkin, but also the fact that the Qur’an cites this Mishnaic passage in the context of a discussion of the Cain and Abel story from the book of Genesis.

Further research revealed that a similar pairing of these lines with the Cain and Abel story also appears in the Babylonian Talmud. In order to make certain the chronology of the texts I now found myself synoptically considering, I compared the respective histories of their production. What I discovered was that if one adopts the latest possible dating of the redaction of the Talmud and the earliest accepted dating of the Prophet Muhammad’s recitation of the Qur’an, one could suggest—though few, if any, scholars would find the suggestion compelling—that the Talmud was alluding to the Qur’an. But when it came to the latest possible dating of the Mishnah with the earliest accepted date for the original recitation of the Qur’an, there can be little question: scholars have long dated the final redaction of the Mishnah to the turn of the 3rd century C.E. No one dates the life of Muhammad earlier than the late 6th century, C.E. And neither of these dates have ever been calculated with respect to one another—in other

¹⁸ Ellis Rivkin, A Hidden Revolution, Nashville: Abingdon (1978), pp. 310-311.

words, the scholarship which has determined a date for the final redaction of the Mishnah never took into consideration the scholarship which has determined a date for the earliest Prophetic performance of the Qur'an—and vice versa. Therefore, nefarious pre-dating or post-dating of these events is to be excluded as a possibility.

There exists a widely-held tradition among Muslims that the Qur'an was revealed to an illiterate Prophet who could not have had first-hand knowledge of the exact wording of the Mishnah—or any other text, sacred or secular. If it happens that the Revelation evidences an awareness of the wording of texts that the Prophet, by definition, could not have read, this fact is taken by Muslims as proof of the Qur'an's miraculous nature. I have no quarrel with the belief that the Qur'an (or any sacred text for that matter) is a miracle; indeed, I am happy to endorse this belief. I profoundly disagree, however, with those who couple it with the presumption that the miraculous resists all rational investigation and, at least partial, explanation. The analogy I like to use is to the twofold conviction shared by many adherents of the world's religious traditions that (1) the very existence of the universe is a miracle and (2) there are valid scientific explanations for all manner of phenomena occurring within that miracle. I find it ironic that those adherents who embrace this twofold conviction often stubbornly refuse to entertain the possibility that the miracle of Divine Revelation in verbal form is also available for rational inspection.

The Qur'an, most interestingly, refers to both natural phenomena and its own discourse as Divine "signs."¹⁹ The implication that I draw from this parallel reference is that the miracle of the Qur'an, no less than the miracle of creation, may be submitted to semiotic inquiry. Unfortunately, this implication is burdened by dogmatic assertions that flatly contradict it. Those assertions were developed through the course of intramural Muslim polemics over a thousand years ago. Ancient as this dogma is, it is exceeded in antiquity by the Qur'an itself. If I fail to accord these dogmatic considerations the weight that they clearly carry in the minds of the majority of Muslims, it is because I am unwilling to contradict what I consider to be the Qur'an's own self-description. Knowing the political history of this particular dogma only serves to confirm my position.²⁰

My chance discovery of what I can only describe as a Qur'anic citation to a text of Rabbinic Judaism's "oral Torah" occasioned a broader investigation over the last four years into aspects of Near Eastern Scriptural intertextuality. This research protocol disturbs the settled assumptions of many sincere believers (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) about their sacred texts. My Kierkegaardian respect for the claims of a passionate piety prompts me to wish that this were not the case. On the other hand, my tendency towards a rigorous, ironical Kierkegaardian circumspection in such matters has made it virtually impossible for me to conduct my Qur'anic studies in any other way.

Once I had become aware of what appeared to me to be Qur'anic evidence of a prophetic colloquy with the adherents of various convictional communities

¹⁹ E.g., Qur'an 2:252; 3:108; 33:34; 40:61-68; 45:6; 65:11.

²⁰ See the discussion of this controversy in Chapter Three *infra*.

conducted through allusive appeals to their own Scriptures, I felt that I had no choice but to engage that evidence. What I found is that the Qur'an is rife with such material; along the way, I also discovered that Biblical and Parabiblical literatures are as well.²¹ In other words, the Scriptures produced in the Near East over a period that spans the better part of two millennia (from say, the 12th century B.C.E. to the 7th century of our own era, and from the Iranian plateau in the East to the Nile Valley in the West) including, but not limited to, the Tanakh, Christo-centric literature, and the Qur'an, all contain evidence of intertextual engagements with materials that lie outside of their respective canonical boundaries.

What the ordinary adherent of a Rabbinic Judaism, or a Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox Christianity, or a Sunni or Shi'a Islam receives and perceives as distinct codices—books—may be better described, in my view, as the memorializations of intra- and inter-communal conversations. These conversations—as befits truly interesting ones—contain arguments, allusions, poetry, polemic, humor, asseveration, exaggeration, rhetoric—a full complement of the linguistic techniques and devices that enable human beings to gesture meaningfully towards one another and, for the believer, that enable the Divine to communicate with humankind. That this re-description of these sacred texts may not conform in all of its particulars to the traditional descriptions endorsed by sectarian elites will no doubt trigger profound anxieties in some readers. It is my earnest desire, however, that such anxieties will spur others to further investigation and open up new opportunities for inter-confessional dialogue—the

²¹ See Chapters Three, Four, and the Conclusion, *infra*.

robust sort of inter-confessional dialogue that, I have concluded, is modeled for all of us, believer and non-believer alike, in the surviving texts of Near Eastern prophetic discourse that we call, over-simply, the Bible and the Qur'an.

2.

The genealogy and proposed trajectory of hermeneutics that I chart in the chapters to follow is perhaps best described as a “swerve” from what most readers familiar with the history of hermeneutics would expect. This is due, in part, to the fact that the rise of hermeneutics as an intellectual discipline is closely allied in the European context with the history of Biblical interpretation. My focus is upon the Egyptian School of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics which, though it shares some of the same history with hermeneutical styles born in Europe, is more than a mere epigone of those styles. The inspiration for the Egyptian School is the Romantic mood that gripped Egyptian intellectual life in the early decades of the 20th century. The ascendance of this mood was most pronounced in the poetry written by Egyptians in those years, but its effects are visible in the subsequent attempts to make critical sense of the new poetic fruit that ripened upon Romanticism's transplanted vine.²² Unlike their European counterparts—many of whom had extensive theological training (e.g., Schleiermacher, Heidegger)—the Egyptian pioneers of Qur'anic hermeneutics tended to be, first and foremost, professional literary critics. This decidedly literary orientation has focused the efforts of the Egyptian School upon the practical side of textual interpretation

²² See M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; Muhammad Abdul-Hai, *Tradition and English and American Influence in Arabic Romantic Poetry*, London: Ithaca Press, 1982; and Chapter Two, *infra*.

and left underdeveloped the more philosophical considerations that come to the fore whenever Hermeneutics is invoked in the European context.

From my perspective, this philosophical underdevelopment presents something of an opportunity, if not a blessing; for the direction that the field has taken in Europe and North America subsequent to Martin Heidegger's intervention tends to distract a reader's attention away from the pragmatics of interpretation and invest it in a form of quasi-metaphysical speculation that I term theologico-poetics.²³ Rather than simply pick up where Heidegger and his successors leave off, I have chosen to take advantage of the Egyptian School's relative insulation from this trend and strike off in a different direction. In so doing, I do not intend to imply that the philosophical hermeneutics bequeathed us by its recent German practitioners and their intellectual progeny can be safely ignored. On the contrary, I hope the following pages will demonstrate the potential value of engaging in critical dialogue with hermeneutical schools the world over. It is my conviction, however, that at this stage in the development of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics, there is much more to be gained by exploring a pragmatic approach to the sacred text—whether in criticism or philosophy—than in assuming the burden of Heideggerian ontological vocabularies.²⁴

²³ The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger's most illustrious successor in the field, does offer something of a corrective in this regard—but does not, in my view, go far enough. Among other concerns, I agree with the assessment of Jürgen Habermas that Gadamer understates the degree to which tradition is a creature of “systems of labor and domination.” In a curious way, Gadamer's version of historicism tends to “de-historicize” the past. See Habermas, “A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, edited by Gayle Ormiston and Alan Schrift, Albany, NY: SUNY Press (1990), pp. 213-244.

²⁴ See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, pp. 124-144.

Admittedly, this conviction privileges—yet again—figures from my personal intellectual history and, in particular, those who stimulated the development of my thinking in the wake of its early Kierkegaardian turn. These figures are also readers of Kierkegaard and, at the same time, associated in one way or another with Anglo-American trends in recent Romantic philosophy.²⁵ It is perhaps fortuitous that my own intellectual development is congenial to English and American Romanticism since the writings of British Romantics were held in high esteem among members of the Egyptian Renaissance School. I would suggest, however, that this “happy accident” was the product of an unconscious process of self-selection: I recognized in the work of Egyptian literary historians and critics a kinship with my own way of thinking. That I would choose to contribute my own efforts to their labors was, in some sense, unavoidable.

3.

It remains only to offer a brief summary of what follows. The text is divided into two parts. The first part argues that, in the wake of what world historian Marshall G. S. Hodgson termed the Technicalistic Revolution, intellectuals in Europe and the Middle East developed reading strategies designed to account for a new “modern” or “contrapuntal” sense of time. This new sense of time psychologically underwrote their historicist conclusion that history *has* a history—or, as we would say today, that cultural memory is as much constructed as it is “found.”

While I argue that this modern sensibility is peculiar to those who have experienced the effects of Technicalism, I do not argue that everyone who has

²⁵ I have in mind Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Cavell.

experienced these effects in one way or another necessarily responds to them in the same way. Empirically, I think, such an assertion would be impossible to verify. What I do contend is that no one before the Technicalistic Revolution gave evidence of historicist thinking. Therefore, no purportedly historical text produced before, say, 1500 C.E. performs history in the way that post-medieval historical texts perform history. To treat any pre-modern text as historically “reliable” in a modern sense involves the disregard (either naïve or willful) of a documented change in post-Technicalistic intellectual patterns.²⁶ It is like doing geography, post-Magellan, and presuming that the earth is flat; or biology, post-Darwin, without regard for the effects of natural selection; or mapping the solar system, post-Copernicus, and placing the earth at its center.

The first chapter of Part One charts the development of this post-medieval way of reading among Europeans; the second chapter charts its development among Egyptians. This way of reading is described as Historicist and Romantic, for it is both.

Part Two consists of two chapters as well. The first chapter (Chapter Three) picks up where Part One: Chapter Two leaves off and develops the implications of the Egyptian contribution to Romantic philosophy and its recent application to Qur’anic studies. The work of the Egyptian literary critic Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd receives particular attention, connecting it with recent trends in the critical study of sacred texts. Chapter Four consists largely of examples of applied Romantic criticism of the Qur’an.

²⁶ I rely here upon the scholarship of Reinhart Koselleck. See Chapter One, *infra*.

The special burden of Part Two is to suggest a new way to understand the overall message or *kerygma* of the Qur'an. This new understanding may be characterized as "post-Islamic" (or, perhaps, "pre-Islamic") in the sense that it does not presume that the interpretive trajectories of sectarian (i.e., Sunni and Shi'i) tradition as historically realized place natural or inevitable limits upon the meanings which the Revelation makes available to those who study it. Put another way, contrary to the presumption of sectarian elites, Islamic tradition as developed to date does not exhaust the possibilities of what the Qur'an has to "say" to the present or to the future; nor, in my view, does it adequately account for what the Qur'an had to "say" to generations past.

Of particular interest to me is what the Qur'an may have meant to its first hearers—not because I believe that therein lies its "true" and, therefore, exclusive meaning—I do not believe that. What I do believe is that it is possible, through the application of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics, to "recover" a lost meaning or meanings that allow us to read the Qur'an "outside the box" of the prevailing interpretations that compose received Islamic tradition. Read "pre-" or "post-" Islamically in this way, the Qur'an emerges as the inscribed record of a Late Ancient, Near Eastern *da'wa* or "invitation" to a post-Messianic prophetic Universalism. The implied invitees of this *kerygma* were the inhabitants of the eastern littoral of the Red Sea basin—an important (but historically overlooked) *situs* of diasporic Judaisms, Christianities, East African, Persian, peninsular Arabian, and possibly Indian religio-political identities and affiliations.²⁷ The

²⁷ See Gordon Newby, *The Jews of Arabia*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988; see also Boyarin, *Border Lines*.

Qur'an addressed these communities in order to create a new religious and political culture; it represented, for many in its audience, the last prophetic intervention in diasporic Perso-Judean religion prior to the rise of the interpretive traditions we now call Islam.²⁸

The literary device or technique empowering this Arabic *da'wa* was a recognizably prophetic portfolio of inter-Scriptural allusions in the form of citations, allusions proper, and echoes. Whenever this allusive portfolio triggered inter-textual recognitions among members of the Prophet Muhammad's audience, it was capable of stimulating the "mystic chords" of Near Eastern cultural memory—"gnosis" in the second sense suggested above. I would argue that, over time, the accumulated repertoire of these allusive recognitions substantially contributed to the forging of a new nation *e pluribus unum*; I would also wager that it led to many instances of gnosis in the first sense suggested above. And since this nation was not to be a new Byzantium but, rather, Allah's Commonwealth, I should substitute the Arabic *min jahili ila ummatin* for the Latin phrase *e pluribus unum*—from a diffuse state of unknowing to an informed state of communal solidarity.²⁹

In my Conclusion, I propose an itinerary to further the research program to which the present work is a prolegomenon.

²⁸ For what I consider to be a parallel or consonant view, see Fred M. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," *Al-Abhath* 50-51 (2002-3), pp. 9-53.

²⁹ "Allah's Commonwealth" is the coinage of the historian F. E. Peters.

PART ONE

In the wake of the Technicalistic Revolution, intellectuals in Europe and the Middle East developed reading strategies designed to account for a new contrapuntal sense of time...

Chapter One:

The Romantic Legacy: New Protocols for Reading After Vico

Modern scholars, for their part, had failed to see that they must not expect an ancient historian to use the methods and meet the standards of a modern archivist, a systematic error which Vico named “the conceit of the learned.” The folie à deux of ancient writers and modern scholars had twisted the historical record into something as distorted as the image in a fun-house mirror.³⁰

The Task of Re-Thinking

In an essay first published in 1966, Martin Heidegger identified philosophy with metaphysics and then declared its “end”—in the sense of its “achievement” but also in the sense of its transmutation. Philosophy (i.e., metaphysics) ends by turning

... into the empirical science of man, of all that can become for man the experiential object of his technology, the technology by which he establishes himself in the world by working on it in the manifold modes of making and shaping...Philosophy is ending in the present age...The sciences are now taking over as their own task what philosophy in the course of its history tried to present in certain places, and even there only inadequately, that is, ontologies of the various regions of beings (nature, history, law, art)...The end of philosophy proves to be the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technological world and of the social order proper to this world. The end of philosophy

³⁰ Anthony Grafton, “Introduction” to Giambattista Vico, New Science, translated by David Marsh, London: Penguin Classics (1999), p. xviii.

means the beginning of the world civilization that is based upon Western European thinking.³¹

This is a complicated historical claim. Putting aside for the moment his wholesale reduction of philosophy to metaphysics (and his implicit reduction of all of philosophy to a variety that has dominated Western European thought), it is interesting to note that Heidegger sketched a thesis regarding the role played by Western European philosophical thinking in the development and emergence of a “scientific-technological” *world civilization*.

Heidegger’s sketch was mere preamble to his larger aim: to ask what comes next for thinking—a “thinking that can be neither metaphysics nor science.”³² He wanted to prepare future intellectuals for the “possibility that the world civilization that is just now beginning might one day overcome its technological-scientific-industrial character as the sole criterion of man’s world sojourn. This may happen,” he opined, “not of and through itself, but in virtue of the readiness of man for a determination which, whether heeded or not, always speaks in the destiny of man, which has not yet been decided.”³³ In other words, Heidegger was struggling, late in life, to articulate a way out of the world civilization that he witnessed aborning. Although he acknowledged that the “destiny” of humankind was undecided, his pessimism was palpable. He was “uncertain whether world civilization will soon be abruptly destroyed or whether it will be stabilized for a long time.” He went on to remark that even if the

³¹ Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell, San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco (1993), pp. 434-435.

³² *Ibid*, p. 436.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 437.

technological-scientific-industrial world order achieved stability, it would not “rest in something enduring, but establish itself in a sequence of changes, each presenting the latest novelty.”³⁴ Martin Heidegger, the anti-metaphysician, still longed for solid ground.

To find that ground, Heidegger advocated a return to the philosophical *heritage* of Western Europe—but not to the *tradition* of metaphysics that it spawned.³⁵ He intimated that the task of thinking at the end of philosophy was present to philosophy “since its very beginning” and, yet, somehow managed to “conceal” itself from philosophy.³⁶ Consequently, this task represents a philosophical road not taken:

Because of this, the thinking in question here necessarily falls short of the greatness of the philosophers. It is less than philosophy...the thinking in question remains unassuming, because its task is only of a preparatory, not of a founding character. It is content with awakening a readiness in man for a possibility whose contour remains obscure, whose coming remains uncertain...The preparatory thinking in question does not wish and is not able to predict the future. It only attempts to say something to the present that was already said a long time ago, precisely at the beginning of philosophy and for that beginning, but has not been explicitly thought.³⁷

Though longing for solid ground, Heidegger resisted the temptation to offer his reader the security of a foundation. The kind of thinking that can be neither metaphysics nor science is not the kind of thinking that delivers sure footing. But

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ My reading of Heidegger was greatly enhanced by J. Robert Cox’s deft weave of certain reflections on temporality found in Heidegger, Marcuse, Kierkegaard and others (J. Robert Cox, Cultural Memory and Public Moral Argument [The Van Zelst Lecture in Communication] Evanston: Northwestern University School of Speech, 1987).

³⁶ Heidegger, Basic Writings, p. 436.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 436-437.

neither is it something new; rather, it is something that “was already said a long time ago, precisely at the beginning of philosophy.” It belongs, therefore, to the philosophical *heritage*, but not to the discursive trajectories that are traced when the history of Western European philosophy is reviewed: “...every attempt to gain insight into the supposed task of thinking finds itself moved to review the whole history of philosophy. Not only that. It is even forced to think the historicity of that which grants a possible history to philosophy.”³⁸ Heidegger is here suggesting that the way in which the philosophical conversation of Western Europe worked itself out in time was not an inevitability: the path he traces from the metaphysical speculations of Plato through their dissolutions in the specialized sciences is a matter of the historical record; as such, its contours were completely contingent upon specific events that took place in time. It is not itself a creature of metaphysical necessity. There is no denying that what happened in the history of Western European thinking happened; but for any number of possible alternative reasons, it might have happened differently.

After positing this thesis, Heidegger proceeded to outline a new task for thinking that aspires to a Goethean contentment with “primal phenomena.”³⁹ Here Heidegger’s language waxes theologico-poetic. He speaks of the coming day when “we will not shun the question whether the clearing, free openness, may not be that within which alone pure space and ecstatic time and everything present and absent in them have the place that gathers and protects everything.”⁴⁰ This,

³⁸ Ibid, p. 436.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 442.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 442-443.

again, is a complicated claim. Reading Heidegger, one finds that the more he elaborates his sense of the “opening” or “clearing,” the more difficult it becomes to render his discourse in any words other than those he himself has chosen. This is not an unfamiliar problem. Indeed, given his desire to think outside the box of the Western European philosophical tradition, the difficulty one encounters in Heidegger’s language ought to occasion little surprise. Such linguistic opacity is reminiscent of a great deal of religious and aesthetic discourse. I do not intend this observation as a criticism, necessarily; indeed, I am reminded of an anecdote George Steiner relates concerning the composer Robert Schumann: “Asked to explain a difficult étude, Schumann sat down and played it a second time.”⁴¹ Having embraced Goethe’s admonition to “Look for nothing behind phenomena: they themselves are what is to be learned,” Heidegger abandoned analysis in favor of quasi-poetic production.⁴²

The difficulties one encounters reading the discourse of Heideggerian phenomenology only serve to underscore the reasons that the philosophical tradition of Western Europe followed the course that it did. To content oneself with “primal phenomena” requires an intellectual discipline that privileges wonder at the expense of curiosity. Curiosity—the desire to look for “something” behind phenomena—drove the Western European philosophical tradition first to metaphysical speculation and then to the specialized sciences. Through a kind of willed forgetfulness of scientific explanation—what later Phenomenologists

⁴¹ George Steiner, Real Presences, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1989), p. 20.

⁴² Heidegger, Basic Writings, p. 442.

would call “bracketing”—Goethe hoped to reintroduce wonder into the philosophical conversation. Ultimately, his goal was to teach himself to see natural phenomena afresh. Goethe’s articulation of this desire set the tone for the rise of Romanticism in Europe’s literature, Organicism in its science, and Idealism in its philosophy.⁴³ Heidegger’s desire was akin to Goethe’s: in an effort to reinvigorate his apprehensions of the world, Heidegger privileged wonder at the expense of curiosity. But there is a crucial difference to be remarked in the approaches of these two men: in Goethe, one finds a pronounced longing to restore some balance to his apprehensions—to place wonder and curiosity in a rational relation to one another—i.e., to achieve a *ratio* between them. Heidegger’s distrust of the emerging world civilization appears to have left him less sanguine about scientific curiosity and, not surprisingly, many contemporary scholars who count themselves among Heidegger’s heirs express a similar ambivalence. Unlike Goethe, who would be puzzled by their apparent estrangement from natural science, these thinkers permit a laudable desire to avoid a narrow empiricism to approach hostility to the scientific enterprise.⁴⁴

Re-Thinking the Task

Heidegger’s wholesale reduction of the philosophical tradition to metaphysics is a rhetorical move symptomatic of the depth of his pessimism about the world civilization that looks to Western Europe as its progenitor; it is not an accurate representation of the history of Western European philosophy, let

⁴³ Robert J. Richards, The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

⁴⁴ See Richard Rorty’s essay “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism” in Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press (1982), pp. 139-159.

alone the history of those philosophical traditions that have emerged in other cultural matrices. It is true, as Heidegger wrote, that “all metaphysics, including its opponent, positivism, speaks the language of Plato.”⁴⁵ But what does this say about the philosophical tradition as a whole? The metaphysically-minded Plato may have secured his reputation as the most successful disciple of Socrates, but he was not the *only* disciple of Socrates. Moreover, positivism is not the *only* alternative to metaphysics that the European philosophical tradition has put on offer: other philosophical schools and wisdom traditions that could not be described as positivistic—some of which even looked to Socrates as their founding figure (Cynics and Stoics, for example)—had little taste for metaphysical speculation.⁴⁶

By resisting Heidegger’s identification of philosophy with metaphysics, the intellectual heritage upon which one may draw to insure the continuing vitality of philosophical reflection is generously expanded. One recent philosopher who has taken advantage of Heidegger’s insights—without resorting to his theologico-poetics—is Richard Rorty. Rather than reduce all of philosophy to metaphysics and its scientific progeny, Rorty speaks of a “split” within the Western European philosophical tradition itself:

Some philosophers have remained faithful to the Enlightenment and have continued to identify themselves with the cause of science. They see the old struggle between science and religion, reason and unreason, as still going on, having now taken the form of a struggle between reason and all those forces within culture which think of truth as made rather than found. These

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 444.

⁴⁶ On the Cynics see Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.*, London: Methuen, 1937; on the Stoics see John Sellars, *Stoicism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

philosophers take science as the paradigmatic human activity, and they insist that natural science discovers truth rather than makes it. They regard “making truth” as a merely metaphorical, and thoroughly misleading, phrase. They think of politics and art as spheres in which the notion of “truth” is out of place. Other philosophers, realizing that the world as it is described by the physical sciences teaches no moral lesson, offers no spiritual comfort, have concluded that science is no more than the handmaiden of technology. These philosophers have ranged themselves alongside the political utopian and the innovative artist.⁴⁷

A self-styled Heideggerian reading this passage might be quick to assert that, but for the Master’s attempt to think beyond the “end” of philosophy, no such split would now exist. Not so, claims Rorty; the fork in the road preceded Heidegger by a century:

Had the first sort of philosopher, the sort whose hero is the natural scientist, always been the only sort, we should probably never have had an autonomous discipline called “philosophy”—a discipline as distinct from the sciences as it is from theology or from the arts. As such a discipline, philosophy is no more than two hundred years old. It owes its existence to attempts by the German idealists to put the sciences in their place and to give a clear sense to the vague idea that human beings make truth rather than find it.⁴⁸

Rorty’s characterization of the difference between the two branches of recent Western European philosophy comes down to a disagreement among intellectuals about what metaphor is most appropriate to the philosophic project where the ascertainment of “truth” is concerned. As is suitable for the progenitors of the specialized sciences, metaphysicians regard truth as something external to the human being—something “out there” in the world—the sort of “thing” that may be “found.” On the other hand, the German Idealists—following Gottlieb

⁴⁷ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1989) pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

Fichte's appropriations of Kant—insisted upon the human subject's contributions to the development of what a given community regards as "true."⁴⁹ To clarify his point, Rorty offers a useful distinction between "the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there." The distinction runs as follows:

To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.⁵⁰

The conclusion that Rorty draws from this distinction is that "Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot."⁵¹ The distinction between word and world that Rorty rehearses is a difficult one for many people to contemplate. It strikes one as counter-intuitive. "Can I not now name the object in my hands as a book?" one asks. Yes, of course. The critical question for philosophy is not "How is this particular object designated in a given language?"—that is simply a matter of translation. The critical philosophical question is "How does a particular object *acquire* the designation that it has in a

⁴⁹ These distinctions are also succinctly summarized in Gary Handwerk, "Romantic Irony," The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol. 5: Romanticism, edited by Marshall Brown, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000), pp. 203-225.

⁵⁰ Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, pp. 4-5.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 5.

given language?” Ancillary to this question is another: “Do such designations ever change over time?” Rorty answers:

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. The realization that the world does not tell us what language games to play should not, however, lead us to say that a decision about which to play is arbitrary, nor to say that it is the expression of something deep within us. The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of “arbitrary” choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another. Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, *Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.*⁵²

Here we find Rorty linking two recent traditions in philosophical method. First, he confirms his allegiance to the “linguistic turn” that he made famous with his eponymous book of 1967.⁵³ Truth is a property associated with language use and does not exist independently of it. Second, he reiterates the pragmatic approach to philosophical problems that he openly embraced in his 1982 collection of essays, Consequences of Pragmatism.⁵⁴ This linkage permits Rorty to offer a rather novel theory of ideational change as a reflection of linguistic habits. When the habit of speaking in a certain way about particular aspects of the world is lost or broken, the ability to conceive of the world in that certain way is also forfeit.

⁵² Ibid, p. 6. Emphasis added.

⁵³ Richard Rorty, The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

⁵⁴ Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

One may find evidentiary support for Rorty's theory in the work of the historian of science Thomas S. Kuhn and more broadly in that of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck. I will review Koselleck's work shortly but, before I do, I want to return to Rorty's conclusions about what his theory of ideational change means for the practice of philosophy.⁵⁵

The Romantic Alternative to Technicalistic Thinking

As noted previously, Rorty's resistance to Heidegger's identification of philosophy with metaphysics generously expands the intellectual heritage upon which one may draw to insure the continuing vitality of philosophical reflection. In his own rehearsal of the recent history of Western European philosophical thought, Rorty focuses upon Fichte's appropriations of Kant (as previously mentioned) but also upon Hegel's subsequent "romantic description of how thought works."⁵⁶ Indeed, Romanticism is a key descriptor in Rorty's brief history of ideational transmission and change. He credits Hegel with elaborating the Romantic thesis that "what is most important for human life is not what propositions we believe but what vocabulary we use."⁵⁷ According to Rorty, Hegel elaborated this thesis by endowing it with "the historical sense of the relativity of principles and vocabularies to a [specific] place and time" and with "the romantic sense that everything can be changed by talking in new terms."⁵⁸ Rorty spells out what he thinks this means for the practice of philosophy through his advocacy of

⁵⁵ For Kuhn see Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

⁵⁶ Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism, p. 149.

⁵⁷ Ibid, pp. 139-159.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 149.

interesting philosophy. I will explicate Rorty's understanding of "interesting" philosophy under the more historically accurate (and rhetorically neutral) rubric *Romantic* philosophy. Rorty opposes Romantic philosophy to what I term *Technicalistic* philosophy or thinking—the form of philosophizing that survives the displacement of metaphysics by the specialized sciences and which acts in an auxiliary capacity to those sciences.⁵⁹ Unlike Technicalistic philosophy, Romantic philosophy rarely involves "... an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things."⁶⁰ What constitutes an "entrenched vocabulary" and how it may become a "nuisance" is something that I shall have occasion to consider in the context of religious discourse; for the moment, my immediate focus will be upon the development of promising new vocabularies. With this intriguing formula, Rorty has gestured towards the method by which Romantic philosophy proceeds; he has defined this method further as a practice of *redescription*:

The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions. This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like "try thinking of it this way"—or more specifically, "try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions." It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it suggests

⁵⁹ See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 7-8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 9.

that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else. But it does not argue for this suggestion on the basis of antecedent criteria common to the old and the new language games. For just insofar as the new language really is new, there will be no such criteria.⁶¹

Rorty maintains that, through the production of new vocabularies, Romantic philosophical redescription makes possible the consideration of things not previously considered—it makes possible the saying of things previously left unsaid, or, perhaps, once said but now forgotten or ignored. However, no claim is advanced that what is now capable of being spoken about is necessarily superior to what had previously dominated the conversation. Eschewing the old trump card of metaphysics, Romantic philosophy must make its way honestly by offering alternatives to hegemonic traditions of interpretation. By means of the practice of redescription, Romantic philosophers deliberately and methodically attempt to instigate ideational change—a process that, as we have seen, Rorty believes to occur unbidden at the whim of linguistic habituation and its obsolescence. For the Romantic, philosophy is a form of linguistic (and, therefore, ideational) intervention and it is for this reason that the practitioners of Romantic philosophy “range themselves,” as Rorty put it, “alongside the political utopian and the innovative artist” rather than the natural scientist.⁶² As we shall see, Romantic philosophers have also ranged themselves alongside the interpreters of sacred texts.

Rorty claims that Hegel made his Romantic philosophical project *historical* by coupling the linguistic habits that mark ideational formation and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See *supra*, footnote 17.

change with the spatio-temporal contexts where and when such events occur. He does not venture to guess what made Hegel's historicism—best defined as the notion that history *itself* has a history—possible. To Heidegger's imagined chagrin, I am prepared to suggest that Hegel's historicism is a consequence of “the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technological world and of the social order proper to this world.”⁶³ In other words, I claim that the *bête noire* of Heidegger's pessimism is, ironically, the condition precedent to the sort of “preparatory thinking” that Heidegger hoped, in his later years, to foster.⁶⁴ Indeed, absent this condition precedent, Heidegger himself could never have conceived the desire to think the end of philosophy.

The Historicist Turn in Romantic Philosophy

The Romantics embraced the notion that history (like “truth”) is conjured through linguistic practices. The past is something that has happened and is no more; nevertheless, it “lives on” insofar as there is someone who remembers it. *That* memory has no reality independent of the discourse that perpetuates it. The ways in which human beings conceive of the past and talk about it have themselves a past (or, more accurately, pasts). In the 20th century of the Common Era, some historians in Western Europe and North America began to trace the histories of the ways in which human beings have conceived of the past (and spoken and written about it) through time. This historical practice—sometimes referred to as the practice of “conceptual history” or the history of the concept of history itself—represents a unique moment in the development of Romantic

⁶³ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 435.

⁶⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 436-449.

philosophy since Hegel.⁶⁵ At the heart of this development is the emergence of a *felt* distinction between natural temporality and historical temporality. This feeling has been traced to the unprecedented experiences engendered by the world-historical changes that accompanied the rise of European technicalism and its global exportation or, what world historian Marshall G. S. Hodgson called, more grandly, the “Great Western Transmutation.”⁶⁶

The “felt distinction between natural temporality and historical temporality” is a good way to define the Romantic historical sense. It is unfortunate, however, that the word typically used to designate this sense is “historicism.” Few words in the English language have been subject to so much abuse. Depending upon speaker and context, historicism in English can have opposite and contradictory meanings. When, for example, Karl Popper used the term, he intended a conflation of history with traditional metaphysics. That conflation produced certain “iron laws” which, once understood, were counted upon to endow with scientific accuracy prognostications concerning the course of future events.⁶⁷ This variety of historicism is presently out of fashion (thanks, in part, to Popper’s devastating critique of it) and, it is hoped, will not find its way back into the work of serious historians. In the work of Reinhart Koselleck, on the

⁶⁵ Genealogies of this practice abound in the literature and the well of its past may be expected to prove bottomless. At present, I am investigating an ideational trajectory that spools out in chronological reverse from Spinoza through the Andalusí Muslim philosophers Ibn Rushd and Ibn Hazm to the writings of the early Yahwists. What I have in mind is less an exercise in the establishment of “influence” than an experiment in the heuristics of the notion of a “school of thought.”

⁶⁶ See Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1974), pp. 165-222 and *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, edited by Edmund Burke III, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1993), pp. 44-71.

⁶⁷ Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

other hand, historicism points to a change in the way in which Europeans—sometime in the century between 1750 and 1850—conceived of themselves as historical actors.⁶⁸ These dates are no doubt rough estimates on Koselleck's part, and it is perhaps not too adventurous to suggest that Giambattista Vico, who published the final revision of his Scienza Nuova in 1744, may have been the first human being to consciously articulate an experience of this distinction.⁶⁹

Whether Vico was the first to articulate this experience or not, his argument that human beings occupy a unique position with respect to their own history—that they have “privileged access” to it because they are its “authors”—signaled the sea change in sensibility that was to follow.⁷⁰

With the technicalistic revolution, Western Europe—which had played a very minor role in world affairs for a thousand years—suddenly found itself in possession of previously unimagined powers. Hodgson summarized the situation with admirable economy:

The same generation that saw the Industrial and French revolutions saw a third and almost equally unprecedented event: the establishment of European world hegemony... It was not merely, or perhaps even primarily, that the Europeans and their overseas settlers found themselves in a position to defeat militarily any powers they came in contact with. Their merchants were able to out-produce, out-travel, and out-sell anyone, their

⁶⁸ Koselleck's *magnum opus* is Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, translated by Keith Tribe, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. His notion of “conceptual history” is ably summarized in Hayden White's “Forward” to Koselleck's collection of essays, The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts, translated by Todd Samuel Presner, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2002), pp. ix-xiv.

⁶⁹ Giambattista Vico, New Science, translated by David Marsh, London: Penguin, 1999. It is tempting to regard Hamlet's *cri de coeur* that “the time is out of joint” as a prescient intimation of this experience, but I doubt that's what the Bard had in mind. Shakespeare may have written the play around 1600. See Harold Bloom, Hamlet: Poem Unlimited, New York: Riverhead Books, (2003), p. 1.

⁷⁰ Vico, New Science, pp. 119-120.

physicians were able to heal better than others, their scientists were able to put all others to shame.⁷¹

According to Hodgson, new technologies of communication (e.g., movable type), new patterns of capital investment, and the beginnings of “rationalized” forms of social organization contributed to the creation of what he termed “technicalistic expectations.” In line with these new expectations, time and distance appeared to be increasingly malleable and under human control. If Vico had taught his fellow Europeans that they were the “authors” of their own history, the Great Western Transmutation convinced them that they were the authors of their own destiny as well.⁷²

When Vico proposed it, the notion that one’s ancestors were somehow uncannily “other” than oneself was novel and the idea that one could apprehend that “otherness” was more novel still; nevertheless, Koselleck’s work demonstrates that the “otherness” of the historical subject *was* apprehended by Europeans and the unique integrity of that apprehended “otherness” *was* preserved as an unprecedented kind of historical sense.⁷³ This unprecedented sense was (and is) expressed in a variety of ways. One way is the belief already alluded to that “historical process is marked by a distinctive kind of temporality different from that found in nature.” Koselleck elaborates that “this temporality is

⁷¹ Hodgson, Venture, vol. 3, p. 177.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 179-196.

⁷³ Vico insisted that the “privileged access” attending “authorship” comes with ethical strings attached: modern history requires a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which the historian’s own time and place differ from that of her alien, historicized subject. What this means for historiography is that it is composed under an ethical obligation to render those differences in such a way as to preserve their uncanny “otherness.” Vico did acknowledge that the heightened sensitivity necessary to observe this new moral standard represented a scholarly disposition achieved and maintained only “with great effort.” See Vico, New Science, pp. 124-125.

multileveled, is subject to differential rates of acceleration and deceleration, and functions not only as a matrix within which historical events happen but also as a causal force in the determination of social reality in its own right.”⁷⁴ Koselleck contended that one of the most revolutionary consequences of the advent of technicalism is the European “discovery” that “history could be ‘made’ as well as ‘suffered.’”⁷⁵ From that discovery two crucial and *properly historicist* conclusions were drawn: (1) “that history is an open-ended process rather than a closed science and a fatality”—the latter alternative being the version of “historicism” criticized by Popper—and (2) that there exists “a gap between historical events and the language used to represent them—both by the agents involved in these events and by historians retrospectively trying to reconstruct them.”⁷⁶ Over time, a broad spectrum of Europeans embraced these properly historicist conclusions and began to re-shape their social reality to better conform it to them. As the past became available for reconsideration and reconstruction, new linguistic habits emerged to accomplish the task.

Hodgson showed that the phrase “modern times” is a marker for the technical revolution that made a distinction between “natural” and “cultural” time palpable—alerting Vico and other newly post-medieval scholars to *qualitative* differences in temporality. These differences were never reported by historical actors who lived during the pre-modern epochs in which natural time and cultural time were not distinguished. The reason for this “oversight” is

⁷⁴ See Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, p. xii.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

simple: those who studied cultural materials produced by such actors—and were *themselves* such actors—had not yet experienced the contrapuntal rhythms of the technicalistic age. Therefore, it never occurred to them to try to tease out from the material survivals in their possession the temporal texture of the “real time” in which those materials were produced. Time, for pre-moderns the world over, was uniform: no one made temporal distinctions of the sort that Koselleck has identified among moderns because no one was aware that there were any such distinctions to be made.⁷⁷ The past was something finalized, fixed—though it “lived on” insofar as it was preserved in cultural memory as a potent source of present authority. In other words, the past was presumed to be “eternally present” for some purposes, but irretrievably lost for others. The present—though believed to be continuous in some way with the past—was always worked out in its shadow; it occupied a subordinate position. Though in “dialogue,” as the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin would have it, past and present were by no means conceived as equal partners.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ It is worth noting that, while Hegel deserves credit for the historicization of Romantic philosophy, what underwrites this argument of temporal difference is not a Hegelian theory of the “world-spirit” or even a Marxist mechanism of society; Koselleck has researched and documented changes in functioning historical vocabularies—the ways in which people have *talked* to one another and written about the passage of time and their relationship to it—before and after the advent of technicalism. His work conforms perfectly to philosopher Robert Brandom’s Hegelian notion that “to understand the nature of an object is only to be able to recapitulate the history of the concept of that object.” No claim is being advanced that there is (or ever was) an underlying “substance” *out there* that necessarily determines the reported impressions of post-medievals that, as Hamlet put it, “the time is out of joint.” See Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, The Future of Religion, edited by Santiago Zabala, New York: Columbia University Press (2004), pp. 56-57.

⁷⁸ Louis Althusser has pushed back the chronology of the development of the modern historical sense to Spinoza (d. 1677), arguing that he was the first person in history to recognize what Althusser termed the “opacity of the immediate”; accordingly, no one before Spinoza suspected that *intimations* (“evidence” is perhaps too strong a word) of a temporality distinguishable from the present were embedded within the various incidents and accoutrements of life in the past. See Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, Reading Capital, translated by Ben Brewster, London: Verso

The post-Medieval sense of history is a reflection of the dislocations (social, cultural, political, and economic) that Europeans suffered as a result of rapid technological innovations and the science that made these innovations possible. Acknowledging the likely provenance of this felt disparity between and among temporal textures does not explain it *away*, nor does it invalidate the techniques for historical inquiry that have been developed in its wake: “philology, paleography, diplomatic, heuristics, and hermeneutics in general.”⁷⁹ These techniques have demonstrated their utility time and again as methods for *re-describing* the heritage of the past. Consequently, the Romantic philosopher cannot seriously entertain the notion that investigating that past is a simple act of retrieval—like stooping to pick up an apple that has fallen from one’s apron. At bottom, the past is a scholarly construction and the historian—whether a professional or amateur—is implicated in that construction, by virtue of her practice, as a kind of participant-observer.⁸⁰

Romantic Philosophy Discovers its Vocation

Romantic philosophy was born in the throes of felt disparities: the apprehension of a cleavage between the words we use and the world we intend those words to describe; the sense that the time is somehow “out of joint”; and the feeling that there is some inchoate connection between these two phenomena. Marshall Hodgson did not explore this issue, but his study of the Great Western

(1970), pp. 16-17. On Mikhail Bakhtin see Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson, Mikhail Bakhtin: The Creation of a Prosaics, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

⁷⁹ Koselleck, The Practice of Conceptual History, p. xiii.

⁸⁰ Historian of religion J. Z. Smith has argued that the category “religion” is itself a creature of the scholar’s study. This claim is uncontroversial in my view. See Smith, Map Is Not Territory, pp. 289-309.

Transmutation suggests that the Romantics's intuitive grasp of their predicament was entirely sound. European perceptions of time were altered as a consequence of the new technicalism. We can identify this change anecdotally: in the 5th century C.E., St. Augustine complained that he knew what time was until he tried to explain it to someone else. He found it an elusive concept to grasp, eventually concluding that the perception of time is a peculiarity of human psychology.⁸¹ Such a conclusion has often been credited as strikingly "ahead of its time." I would argue, on the contrary, that it is quite consistent with its Medieval provenance because, in the course of his ruminations, it becomes clear that Augustine embarked upon this train of thought in an effort to put an end to speculations as to what relationship *God* bears to time. As for those who indulge in such "vain talk," Augustine prays that they will come to "understand thee the eternal Creator of all times, to have been before all times; and that no times be co-eternal with thee: no, nor any other creature, even if there be any creature before all times."⁸² It is the defense of God's honor in the face of impious questions that motivates St. Augustine's concerns. By reducing time to a function of human cognition, Augustine had an opportunity to get God "off the hook" as it were and to declare human beings the masters of time. He seized the former opportunity but passed by the latter in silence. When we arrive in the 18th century, we find that God's honor is not what is at stake for Giambattista Vico.

⁸¹ Although not a European himself, Augustine was educated as one and lived within Europe's cultural orbit. See his *Confessions: Books IX-XIII*, translated by William Watts, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1912), p. 239. See also John F. Callahan, "Basil of Caesarea a New Source for St. Augustine's Theory of Time," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 63 (1958), pp. 437-454.

⁸² Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 281-283.

For Vico, the question of time has become a matter of human agency: human beings have privileged access to their own past because they are its authors. This position is quite different from Augustine's. Vico makes the argument that St. Augustine *could have made* had he experienced temporality in the same way that Vico and the generations of Europeans born in the midst of the Great Western Transmutation had experienced it. Vico's thought is representative of the new relationship to time that Europeans acquired with the collapse of hegemonic Medievalism.⁸³

The new technicalism caused linguistic obsolescence to occur at increasing rates of speed; with this altered relationship to time came a demand for new vocabularies that would permit its articulation. What distinguished the Romantics from other Europeans was their attempt to rise to the occasion with programmatic solutions for coping with the novel conditions. The solutions they chose were literary, political, and religious. The Romantics deemed literature to be particularly important for a post-Medieval age, privileging it as a site for linguistic experiment. This is one of the motivating factors behind the Romantic preoccupation with literary projects. But belletristic literature was not the only aspect of culture that now occupied the Romantic imaginary. With their post-Medieval relationship to time, the Romantics also reconsidered the past as such through a critical re-evaluation of past *treatments* of the past (i.e., historicism). One conclusion that they reached was that no past treatment of the past ought to be accorded continuing authority in the present absent careful scrutiny. The

⁸³ Benjamin Nelson, On the Roads to Modernity: Conscience, Science, and Civilizations, edited by Toby E. Huff, Totowa, N.J. : Bowman and Littlefield (1981), pp. 17-106.

Romantics reached this conclusion on the fair assumption that no past treatment of the past could adequately reflect the post-Medieval apprehension of history as essentially “open.” Furthermore, no past treatment of the past had been conducted with the critical tools lately forged in the smithy of this post-Medieval apprehension—for the obvious reason that such tools had yet to be invented. The task to which Romantic philosophy first turned, then, was revisionary history. The immediate impetus for this turn came, however, from an unexpected quarter: recent developments in 18th century Biblical criticism.

Romantic Philosophy’s Relationship with Religion

The links between Romanticism and religion have been long remarked. In 1971, literary critic Harold Bloom declared that the “religious background” of “all the English Romantic poets” was in the “tradition of Protestant dissent, the kind of nonconformist vision that descended from the Left Wing of England’s Puritan movement.” As such, Romanticism is best understood as a “displaced Protestantism ... the poetry of the English Romantics is a kind of religious poetry, and the religion is in the Protestant line, though Calvin or Luther would have been horrified to contemplate it.”⁸⁴ In the same year, M. H. Abrams published his famous thesis that Romanticism effected “the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking.” For Abrams, the term “secularization” captured the Romantic quest “to reconstitute the grounds of hope ... of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find

⁸⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1971), p. xvii.

himself thoroughly at home.”⁸⁵ The obvious (if implicit) eschatology of Abrams’s wording exemplifies his thesis. Nevertheless, we may find here a clue as to what might have horrified Calvin and Luther in this quasi-religious literary and political movement: a shifting of mood from resignation towards life lived in a fallen world, to a mood of active embrace of a world no longer burdened by dogmatic assertions of Original Sin.⁸⁶ The Romantics’s decision to make peace with the world as it exists here and now exemplifies the gift with which they bequeathed post-Medieval Europe: a genius for belonging to imperfection; to regard this life not as trial and tribulation but as an opportunity to effect moral improvement among peoples and, most significantly, *in time*. Romantic “secularity” is exactly what the word (when unencumbered by political usage) implies: a reconciliation with temporality. Romantic philosophy generously temporalizes everything. The basic presumption is that whatever falls within the reach of human experience is subject—no less than human experience itself—to history. This presumption is all inclusive. For the Romantics, even apparently timeless Nature or materials dogmatically construed as timeless (i.e., Scripture) have always—despite both dogma and appearances—belonged to time.⁸⁷

A “secular” approach to things deemed sacred appears at first glance to be something of an oxymoron and Romantic attempts to articulate this perspective

⁸⁵ M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, New York: W. W. Norton (1971), p. 12.

⁸⁶ Calvin, it is helpful to recall, wrote a commentary on Seneca’s De Clementia. On John Calvin’s selective reading of Stoicism, see Calvin’s commentary on Seneca’s De Clementia, translated and edited by Ford Lewis Battles and André Malan Hugo, Leiden: Brill, 1969.

⁸⁷ See Robert J. Richards, The Romantic Conception of Life, pp. 8-14.

have often provoked scandal. Nevertheless, the Romantics were preceded in their secularizing project by intellectuals steeped in religious and theological training:

The higher critical movement stemming from Spinoza (and gathering strength from J. S. Semler and J. G. Eichhorn to D. F. Strauss's Life of Jesus (1835)) asserted the appropriateness of applying secular historical scholarship to the sacred books, and sifted the biblical texts, their authorship and dating, the process of canon-making, the relationship of the canon to the apocrypha and the roots of both in myths, legends, and literary traditions of the societies in which they were first produced.⁸⁸

There is no small amount of irony in the fact that the Romantics and some of their precursors—figures identified with the European Enlightenment—regarded themselves as forming “counter-movements” to what they (and many other religiously-inclined individuals) considered to be the more corrosive effects of “higher criticism.” What they offered the religiously-inclined was not a refutation of higher critical findings but, rather, new ways to appreciate sacred literatures *as such* by means of critical insights:

A characteristic countering technique was to found an apologetics on the basis of the newly won Enlightenment ground, that is, to employ its means with an opposite valuation. Perhaps the most successful such counter-movement turned on the positive valuation placed on the mythology that had been dismissed with mockery as mere superstition by the Enlightenment. Robert Lowth's Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1749) suggested that religious belief was grounded in the folk poetry and myth of a particular people, and treated the Old Testament as literature, Oriental literature; moreover, his influential commentary on the Book of Isaiah (1778) as the type of prophetic utterance, the irrational, ecstatic, disordered language of Biblical prophecy, offered a new stylistic model.⁸⁹

Many thinkers associated with the European Enlightenment had regarded the “close relations between religion and literature in most societies” as sufficient justification to downgrade the status of sacred literature to *mere* literature—i.e.,

⁸⁸ E. S. Shaffer, “Religion and Literature,” The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol. 5, p. 139.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

to divest it of the prophetic value and authority accorded it by convictional communities.⁹⁰ Robert Lowth, Oxford's Praelector of Poetry in the 1740's, challenged the notion that the "literariness" of Scripture could sensibly be accounted as devaluation. On the contrary, evidence of verbal "artistry" provides Scripture with "aesthetic validation" of the high esteem with which it is held.⁹¹ Moreover, with the suggestion that "religious belief was grounded in the folk poetry and myth of a particular people," Lowth—reasoning in a manner quite similar to Vico's—opened a door to Romantic historicism in Biblical study.⁹² Consistent with this reasoning, Lowth maintained that readers of the Hebrew Bible must "endeavor as much as possible to read Hebrew as the Hebrews would have read it."⁹³ In order to arrive at a competent understanding and appreciation of the prophetic word as it was received by those to whom it was directed in the past, one must try to enter a foreign and ancient mind-set. To accomplish this task, one must acquire not only the linguistic tools made available by grammar and philology, but also a grounding in the components of the prevailing world-view of the particular prophetic audience concerned. Folk poetry and myth reflect that world-view and, therefore, their presence in Scripture ought not to detract in any way from its value. Later Romantics would deem the *absence* of such elements from a sacred text—or, at any rate, from an ancient one—cause for suspicion as to the authenticity of the text in question; but it was Robert Lowth's

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 138.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 141.

⁹² See Giambattista Vico, New Science, p. xi.

⁹³ Ian Balfour, The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2002), p. 58.

treatment of the Hebrew Bible as an artifact of literary history and an appropriate subject of rhetorical criticism that set their hermeneutical agenda. As one recent scholar of Romanticism has noted, Lowth's lectures on Isaiah did "more than any other single work to make the biblical tradition, rather than the classical one, the central poetic tradition of the Romantics."⁹⁴

Lowth's treatment of the Bible as not only literature but *Oriental* (or Asian) literature was embraced in the following generation in Germany by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803).⁹⁵ As with Lowth before him, Herder was a theologian whose studies of sacred texts ranged beyond the traditional parameters of theology, forming "a vast project of cultural and anthropological hermeneutics, much of it marked by a deep concern with the origins and development of societies."⁹⁶ Scripture was not a thing to be placed upon a pedestal and venerated for it contained a vast treasure trove of information about the Asian societies it purports to chronicle. To access this information, however, one must learn to read it in a distinctive manner. In a guide written for theological candidates in his diocese, Herder admonished those preparing for holy orders to

... read the Bible in a human [*menschlich*] way: For it is a book written through human agency for human beings; human is the language; human were the external means whereby it was written and preserved; human, finally, is the sense with which it must be grasped and every aid that elucidates it, as well as the entire purpose and use to which it should be applied.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 76.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 107.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 106.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 107.

Not every Romantic was quite ready for this degree of “humanization” of the Biblical text. In England, the poet and Romantic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge was scandalized—scribbling his protests in the margins of his copy of the guide: “In other words the Bible or Word of God is not the Word of God”—an emotional response that does not do justice to Herder’s position.⁹⁸ To be fair, Herder never expressed any doubt as to the Divine provenance of Scripture; neither did he doubt the human agencies which vouchsafed it to mankind. He simply saw “no problem in recognizing the Bible as simultaneously the word of God and the work of human hands.”⁹⁹ Indeed, the Bible itself makes no contrary claim. In the Hebrew Bible, the prophets and other holy personages are depicted as human (sometimes *all too human*); its implied audience is no less human. The claim made by many Christians that the New Testament’s Christ is endowed with an ontological status that somehow exceeds the *merely* human is not extended to those who actually chronicled his life or commented on its significance; the implied audience is, again, no less human than, say, Paul or the gospel writers are thought to have been.¹⁰⁰ Like Robert Lowth, Herder was born in the post-

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ I am aware, of course, that many Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians adhere to various dogmas of “Biblical inerrancy” and the like. These aspects of the Christian interpretive tradition problematize the human agencies involved in the transmission of the Biblical text no less than parallel aspects of the Muslim interpretive tradition problematize the human agencies involved in the transmission of not only the Qur’anic text but also the voluminous traditions surrounding the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*). My efforts here are dedicated to elucidating Herder’s position regarding the human element in the transmission and reception of the Biblical corpus. Balfour notes that Herder, when stressing this human element “moves almost silently from the neutral term *menschlich* to the value-laden *humaner*, connoting the highest sense of humanity” (Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, p. 107). But what the “highest sense of humanity” actually entails is left open to interpretation. To try to construe Herder as an adherent of Fundamentalist or Evangelical dogmas of Biblical inerrancy and the like would be to engage in a species of anachronism unbecoming a religious historian. This I decline to do.

Medieval age; he was therefore struck by what Ian Balfour terms the “temporality of prophetic rhetoric.”¹⁰¹ Accordingly, he sought to shift the emphasis of Biblical study from the timelessness of theological truths to a more humble historicism that traces the development of ancient Asian civilizations. *Pace* Coleridge, it was not perversity on Herder’s part that drove him to ask of the Bible different questions than his theologian predecessors had asked; rather, it was a curiosity about the past that Herder believed the Bible was uniquely capable of satisfying *if* its readership developed an appropriately *secular* arsenal of interpretive techniques. For example: Herder regarded Moses as “the archetypal prophet, the standard by whom all others are to be measured.”¹⁰² He therefore regarded the “visions of Moses” to be

the foundation of the whole “economy” of prophecy in the Old Testament; the earliest post-Mosaic prophets cite and revise the “writings” of their great predecessor. But the prophets retain individual visions commensurate with their historical situations and not only that: Each has a distinctive mode of writing, a characteristic style. Isaiah is a “royal” prophet, and therefore his vision of God is colored by the splendor of the earthly king he sees before him. God becomes what the prophet beholds, because God himself cannot be seen.¹⁰³

Here Herder arrives upon a new conceptual threshold, contemplating Near Eastern prophecy as a “post-Mosaic” discursive *genre* that, despite timeless or archetypal elements, never loses touch with the historical situation into which the prophetic word is always spoken. Indeed, as intimated above, Herder’s proto-

¹⁰¹ Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, pp. 55-81.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 109.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, pp. 109-110. The assertion that “God becomes what the prophet beholds” is oddly reminiscent of a *hadith qudsi* attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: “I am as my servant thinks I am” (*Ana ‘inda thanni ‘abdi bî*). See *Forty Hadith Qudsi*, translated by Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies, Beirut: Dar Al-Koran Al-Kareem (1980), pp. 78-79.

Romantic hermeneutics saw no conflict with placing secular history side by side with timeless conceptual categories; as illustrated by the case of Isaiah, he allowed prophetic speech to be further divided into sub-genres that foreground particular aspects of the prophet's historical situation—drawing literary and historical analysis of sacred texts into ever closer relations. This increased intimacy of literature and history in Biblical scholarship would find consummation in the work of Herder's contemporary, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827).

In his most influential work, Einleitung in das alte Testament, Eichhorn refers to his project as “Literär-Geschichte”—literary history—a term that, Balfour informs us, was quite uncommon at the time:

Under that rubric Eichhorn understands a kind of formalist philology inherited from the study of classical antiquity, but a formalism not at all at odds with the emergence of what could then have been called a “new historicism.” For Eichhorn, the Bible has to first be thought of as one Oriental text among others and understood in the light of the historical moments of its “human” production, to use Herder's term that Eichhorn will echo. Eichhorn's researches led him to conclude that Hebrew prophecy was much like the oracular discourses of other cultures, although he would not hesitate to exalt it above, for example, the Greek oracle in terms of its philosophical truth.¹⁰⁴

For Eichhorn, as for Lowth and Herder, the Bible belonged to a time and place that was considered by many Europeans to be not only ancient and foreign but also alien, exotic, and threatening: the “Orient.” This may account, in part, for the fact that their characterization of the founding text of European religion did not become a byword in the working vocabulary of most Biblical scholars—despite

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 116. Eichhorn's Einleitung in das alte Testament, Göttingen: Carl Eduard Rosenbusch, 1823-1824 (“Introduction to the Old Testament”), does not appear to have been fully translated into English. Its impact upon the English Romantics was due to Coleridge's enthusiasm for it. See Balfour, p. 115.

the revolutionary and continuing impact of some of their other views.¹⁰⁵ An argument can be made as well that this aspect of their scholarly legacies was too closely tied to the fortunes of an intellectual fashion that saw the end of its popularity among European intellectuals in the late 19th century. That fashion, termed the “Oriental Renaissance” by the French historian Raymond Schwab, had pretty much run its course by 1880. Nevertheless, as Schwab and others have shown, the “rediscovery” of India and the “East” by European intellectuals in the two centuries between 1680 and 1880 was decidedly influential among the exponents of Romantic philosophy—who occupied roughly the third quarter of that period (1780-1830).¹⁰⁶ Eichhorn and Herder published some of their major works during that period, and their historicized embrace of the Bible as “one Oriental text among others” may be regarded as an instance of the method by which Romantic philosophy proceeds: the practice of redescription—i.e., the construction of (hopefully) compelling counter-narratives to the selective cultural memory that characterizes hegemonic tradition.

As exemplified by the scholarship we have reviewed thus far, Romantic philosophy’s relationship with religion is perhaps best described by Cornel West’s notion of a “critical alignment with an enabling tradition.”¹⁰⁷ Unlike many self-

¹⁰⁵ Although Herder is not frequently remembered for his Biblical scholarship, Lowth’s “discovery” of parallelism in Hebrew poetry and Eichhorn’s advocacy of “higher critical” methodology remain influential. See, e.g., Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.

¹⁰⁶ Two works representative of the “Orientalizing” mood then current were Goethe’s West-östlicher Divan (1814-1819) and Victor Hugo’s Les Orientales (1829). See Raymond Schwab, The Oriental Renaissance, translated by Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking, New York: Columbia University Press (1984), pp. 1-20.

¹⁰⁷ Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy, p. 233.

conscious heirs of the European Enlightenment, Romantic thinkers have been unwilling to regard religion as a useless survival from pre-Modern times—much less wrong-headed or dangerous. Instead, they consistently engage human religiosity as a creative process—“spilled poetry” as some have called it¹⁰⁸—and have worked to unseat entrenched vocabularies that they deem no longer capable of carrying the semantic freight they once did. It is the Romantic “secularization” of religious language that makes such evaluations possible—and here secularization means an acute sensitivity to historical context. This sensitivity to historical context—the apprehension that history itself has a history—has not always been present to the human nervous system: it is a new thing in the world, brought about by the rise of technicalism in Europe beginning in the 16th century C.E. As we shall see in the next chapter, those who do not share this temporal sensitivity are frequently suspicious of Romantic interventions in religious discourse—regarding such interventions as evidence of cultural betrayal or unbelief rather than what they authentically are: the genius for belonging to the contrapuntal flow of post-medieval time.

¹⁰⁸ See Harold Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism, New York: Seabury Press (1975), p. 52.

Chapter Two:

The Egyptian Literary Renaissance: From Romantic Orientalism to “Oriental” Romanticism

Malraux asks why, how, one painter learns from another, of whom he makes copies (Van Gogh of Millet)—to be himself, learn himself in the other, with and against him.¹⁰⁹

The Great Western Transmutation Revisited

In the preceding chapter, I re-described Romantic historicism as the expression of a new sense of time induced by the rise of technicalistic expectations among Europeans after 1500. To my knowledge, the connection I have drawn between Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual history and Marshall Hodgson’s world historiography is novel. Quoting Hodgson, I alluded to the various means by which European technicalism was exported to the rest of the world:

The same generation that saw the Industrial and French revolutions saw a third and almost equally unprecedented event: the establishment of European world hegemony... It was not merely, or perhaps even primarily, that the Europeans and their overseas settlers found themselves in a position to defeat militarily any powers they came in contact with. Their merchants were able to out-produce, out-travel, and out-sell anyone, their physicians were able to heal better than others, their scientists were able to put all others to shame.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press (1968), p. 211.

¹¹⁰ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. 3, p. 177.

I consider this is to be an accurate and necessary description of the establishment of European world hegemony, but not a sufficient description. In the grand scheme of things, one may accept at face value Hodgson's assertion that "it was not merely, or perhaps even primarily, that the Europeans and their overseas settlers found themselves in a position to defeat militarily any powers they came in contact with." The inherent problem with such "grand schemes"—or the view of history *sub specie aeternitatis*—is that they represent, in effect, a luxury available to only a very few. In the minds and sensibilities of those peoples around the world who found themselves on the receiving end of military conquest and colonial occupation, European hegemony was—and for many continues to be—associated in the first instance with the barrel of a gun and, in the second instance, with the sense of shame and humiliation that accompanies violent subjugation. The fact that European merchants were able to "out-produce, out-travel, and out-sell anyone," and that European physicians were able to "heal better than others," and European scientists were able to "put all others to shame," has historically provided little comfort to the colonized—to whose benefit these positive effects of the Great Western Transmutation rarely accrued.

The first Muslim majority country to succumb to Europe's unprecedented military advantage was Egypt, home to one of the world's most ancient and influential river-valley civilizations. From the moment that Napoleon invaded (1798) until the latter half of the 20th century, Egypt occupied the front lines of Europe's colonial ambitions in the Middle East. To be sure, it was an unenviable position to be in, but it also placed Egyptian intellectuals at the forefront of

Muslim responses to the spread of technicalism and the expectations that it spawns. As among European intellectuals, Egyptian thinkers reacted to the trappings of modernity in a variety of ways: some with enthusiastic embrace, others more cautious—adopting a wait-and-see attitude—and still others with Heidegger-like pessimism and a determined disinterest or disdain. One view that was expressed early on and which has spread among Muslims far beyond the borders of Egypt, gaining currency not only among elites but also on the popular level, is that of Rashid Rida' (1865-1935). Acknowledging the provenance of the technicalistic revolution, Rida' referred to its appearance among Muslims as a form of “Westernization”—the encroachment of an alien and (especially significant for Rida') non-Muslim mode of enculturation. Rather than reject this subtle manner of “alienation” outright, Rida' believed that it was something that could be used to advantage by Muslims without untoward effects *if*—and this is a crucial qualification—Muslim exposure to the technicalistic revolution was limited to the acquisition of its material products and the means necessary to reproduce them. “All that we need to acquire from Europe,” he wrote, “is its scientific achievements, technical skill, and advanced industries. The acquisition of these aspects does not require [much from Muslims in the way of] Westernization.”¹¹¹

For the reasons rehearsed above, Rashid Rida'—like so many of his countrymen and co-religionists—had valid reasons to be chary about “Westernization.” Ironically, his argument—designed to minimize the power and

¹¹¹ Cited by Charles Kurzman in Modernist Islam, 1840-1940, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2002), p. 8.

influence of overseas imperialists—actually had the opposite effect. By propagating the notion that Europeans had gained nothing more from the technicalistic revolution than the sum of social, economic, and military efficiencies it produced, Muslims who thought like Rida’ overlooked the *intangible* dividends that Europe had accrued: new ways of thinking about the world and how it works. Chief among these new ways of thinking was the discovery that time is neither a monolithic entity nor immune to human manipulation—a discovery that dramatically expanded European expectations of human agency and paved the way for modern historicism as well. By overlooking the *intangible* benefits of technicalism, Rida’ and likeminded Muslims became subject to what I term the “Trojan Horse effect” that the acquisition of the *tangible* products of technicalism entails. For once these products were “inside the gates,” as it were, their intangible effects began to be felt among the populace. It was not long before philosophically inclined Muslim intellectuals emerged in Egypt who, like their European counterparts, reflected upon the ways in which the new tempos of technicalistic urban life affected their perceptions of time. Under such conditions, it is reasonable to expect that, sooner or later, an Egyptian intellectual would draw Vico-like inferences from these new tempos and apply their lessons to the study of the past. And this is, in fact, what happened in Egypt. As technical Westernization increased, so did the number of Egyptian intellectuals—including members of Rida’s own generation—who were willing to think philosophically about it. An impressive number of those individuals explored the writings of the European Romantics. Many who did so became

associated with what scholars have since termed the “Egyptian Literary Renaissance.”

The Literary Renaissance: Poetic Beginnings

It is important to make clear from the outset that this period in Modern Arabic literature was not the result of an organized intellectual movement; it was, rather, “a diffuse phenomenon of cultural revival” associated by some observers with the shock of “l’agression française” itself and by others with subsequent political after-shocks:

The significance of the [Napoleonic invasion resides] ... in the fact that it opened the way to the rule of the Turco-Albanian condottiere Muhammad ‘Ali. The Mamluke defeat at the Pyramids gave him the opportunity to seize power after the departure of the French troops in 1803 and, even more importantly, to murder the leading Mamluke beys a few years later. Consequently, the expedition had an indirect, chiefly political effect ... [“Renaissance” in this instance] means not so much “rebirth” or a related notion, as “rising up.” This makes it clear that to modern Arabs the activation of cultural life has been its main characteristic.¹¹²

Whatever its precise origins, the Renaissance is scholarly shorthand for the variety of novel cultural expressions characteristic of Egyptian intellectual life in the turbulent post-Napoleonic period. The first act of this drama began around the middle of the 19th century when Egyptian poets of the al-Barudi school began to take inspiration for their work from such classical predecessors as Bashshar b. Burd, Abu Nuwas, and al-Mutanabbi. The al-Barudi poets were attracted to these figures from the Arabic literary past on account of their individualism and their concern for acknowledging in their verse life as they experienced it. These renewed emphases represented a marked change from the refined products of

¹¹² J. Brugman, *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt*, Leiden: E. J. Brill (1984), pp. 11-12.

post-classical Arabic poetry in which the cultivation of form “often led to mannerism” and an artificial style.¹¹³

The neoclassicists Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932) and Muhammad Hafiz Ibrahim (known as “Hafiz,” 1872-1932) are “often mentioned in one breath ... together these two poets are considered the most brilliant representatives of the [neo-classical] school of al-Barudi.”¹¹⁴ Shawqi’s poetry was distinguished by the manner in which it engaged the political situation in Egypt. At one point, he composed an ode to Khedive ‘Abbas the Second upon the latter’s deposition by the British at the outbreak of the First World War. This act was rewarded by the British with a period of exile in Spain.¹¹⁵ Hafiz also wrote in response to political events, expressing “unease about the British occupation and the growing Western influence in Egypt.”¹¹⁶ Both of these men broke with the post-classical tradition by acknowledging, each in his way, life as he experienced it; however, neither did so to an extent that would satisfy the literary tastes of a new generation of poets that rose to prominence in the early decades of the 20th century. The new poets—most notably ‘Abd al-Rahman Shukri (1886-1958), ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad (1889-1964) and Ibrahim ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini (1890-1949)—objected to the “time-worn language” of their predecessors and their “excessive use of metaphors and figures of speech.” But they did not limit their criticism to matters of form. Al-‘Aqqad considered the topicality of the neo-classicists to be merely superficial.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 26.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 45.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 36.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 47.

Shukri voiced a similar complaint: the writings of the neo-classicists amounted to a “poetry of daily events” (what he called *shi’r ijtimā’i*). What was needed instead was a poetry of life (*al-hayah*) and the present moment (*al-‘asr*); this could only be achieved by means of an unfettered expression of feeling (*al-wijdan*). Shukri prefaced his first collection of poetry (1909) with the words: *Ala ya ta’ir al-firdawsī inna’ l-shi’ra wijdanu* (“O Bird of Paradise, poetry is feeling”).¹¹⁷

In a modern European context, such sentiments would be accounted unmistakably Romantic; not surprisingly, “the young Egyptian literary revolutionaries of around 1910 derived their main inspiration ... [from] Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley—the latter perhaps taking pride of place—and among the critics Hazlitt...”¹¹⁸ To those who objected that such writers were the “ancestors” (by nationality if not through literal genealogy) of the British invaders and occupiers of Egypt, Shukri was unapologetic: “If the Arabic poets read the literature of other nations,” he wrote, “they will profit by the novelty of their themes (*jiddat al-ma‘anī*) and the gates of creativity (*abwab al-tawlid*) will be opened to them.” Besides, he reminded his readers, “classical poets like al-Mutanabbi, al-Radi, and al-Ma ‘arri had also been influenced by the (non-Arabic) ‘learning’ of their day.”¹¹⁹

Shukri’s response to his critics was clever, but it did not quite account for the true burden of the objection—why the learning of *these* foreigners at *this* particular period of Egyptian history? The relationship of the classical poets to

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 95.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 96-97.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 96.

the non-Arabs whose poetry they imbibed was qualitatively different than the relationship of 20th century Egyptians to their colonial overlords. The neo-classicists had appreciated that difference. What happened to the new generation to change their perceptions so radically? One plausible answer to this question may be found in the system of education that prevailed under British rule:

The great influence of English on the Egyptian literary revival was probably largely due to the fact that English was used at the Teachers' College (*Madrasat al-mu'allimin*), a school established in 1889, where some of the writers of the new movement were trained. This was, as far as we can see now, one of the best schools in Egypt, offering a widely varied programme. It had an English department which was closed in 1904, but re-opened in 1906, the year in which the poet Shukri registered. It was one of the few schools of higher education in Egypt and of greater importance than one would expect a teachers' training college to be. The teaching of English was probably of a high standard and the students were introduced to English literature, most probably with a strong emphasis on the romanticists. Shukri himself has described how impressed he was by one of the teachers at this school, who kindled his enthusiasm for English literature.¹²⁰

The generation *after* the neo-classicists received an English education; or, rather, it received the English education that the colonial government provided.

Naturally, such an education would be designed to portray British culture and literature in a positive light. In so doing, however, it also acquainted the rising generation of Egyptian poets with some remarkable instances of 19th century Europe's fascination with the "Orient."

I touched upon this phenomenon—albeit briefly—in the previous chapter; there I focused particularly upon the effect that Europe's fascination with the "Orient" had upon proto-Romantic and Romantic treatments of the Bible as "one Oriental text among others." Writing as I do in an intellectual climate that has

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 98.

been profoundly influenced by Edward Said's controversial Orientalism, it is important to emphasize that this Romantic characterization of Scripture was an affirmation of the high esteem in which these intellectuals held *both* the Bible *and* Asia. In my view, it is an unfortunate irony that Said's scholarly intervention on behalf of Arabs and Muslims has produced an unintended effect among contemporary thinkers whereby the tendency which Said attacked—the imagination on the part of many European Orientalists of a monolithic and reified “East”—has been generalized and deemed applicable to all European approaches to matters Asian.¹²¹ A more nuanced assessment takes notice of the fact that Europe produced *Orientalisms*: a fact attested to by Said himself in the “Forward” he contributed to the English translation of Schwab's The Oriental Renaissance. As Said acknowledged in his “Forward,” Schwab's book provided an

intimate as well as a panoramic vision of *reorientations* in the work of scholars, scientists, critics, philosophers, and historians ... [in which he] multiplies the complexity of Orientalism as a phenomenon of reception and transmission ... the Oriental Renaissance was fundamentally a phenomenon of difference, generating comparative techniques, whereas the first [i.e., 15th-16th century] Renaissance was essentially assimilative in that it flattered Europe without disturbing Europe's self-affirming cultural centrality.¹²²

It is unlikely that a young Egyptian intellectual such as ‘Abd al-Rahman Shukri was unaware that his schooling was at the hands of his country's foreign occupiers; indeed, when one considers the list of Romantic writers that Shukri and his compatriots found particularly compelling, a case can be made that their consciousness of occupation informed their literary tastes: “It was at the

¹²¹ See Edward W. Said, Orientalism, New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

¹²² Schwab, The Oriental Renaissance, pp. xvii-xviii. Emphasis added.

Teachers' College that al-Mazini met Shukri, who, as he later said, 'opened his eyes to Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Shelley, Burns, Milton, Hazlitt, Carlyle, Lee Hunt and Macauley.'"¹²³ It bears noting here that Wordsworth glorified the French revolution in his early work, Shelley authored a radical political poem entitled "The Revolt of Islam," Milton's Puritanism was radically republican, and Carlyle, a curmudgeonly critic of 19th century European culture, wrote a relatively admiring life of the Prophet Muhammad.¹²⁴ Romantic fascination with the "East" was often intertwined with Jacobinic politics; part of Asia's allure for the Romantics was the way in which it disturbed, in Said's words, "Europe's self-affirming cultural centrality." It would seem to me to be a mistake, therefore, to proceed under the assumption that the generation of Egyptian intellectuals who steered the Literary Renaissance in a Romantic direction did so with the intention of furthering the objectives of British colonialism. It would also strike me as something of a stretch to argue that—whether intended or not—such was the effect of their Romantic inclinations because one could just as easily argue that Romanticism played a key role in developing the Nationalistic sentiments that, by the middle of the 20th century, set the stage for the Free Officers' Rebellion, initiating Egypt's post-colonial period. The personalities and the phenomena with which we have to deal in historical work are complicated and often self-contradictory. Human life and human thought rarely achieve syllogistic perfection. The scholar who enters upon historical investigation without the

¹²³ Brugman, *Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt*, p. 99.

¹²⁴ "Carlyle's *On Heroes* influenced many Egyptian writers, for example Haykal, and may have inspired al- 'Aqqad to write his still popular series on the men of genius in Islam, *al- 'Abqariyat*." Ibid, p. 100.

benefit of a keen sense of irony may hope to develop one in the course of her labors; to the extent that she should fail to do so, her grasp of the material will suffer proportionately.

The Literary Renaissance: Early Literary History and Criticism

As one might expect, the introduction of innovations in poetic subject and technique called for the formulation of new literary theories; consequently, Egyptian intellectuals who were close to these developments began discussing “historical, nationalist, and even philosophical” approaches to literature.¹²⁵ One early center for these discussions was Cairo’s *Dar al- ‘Ulum*. Founded in 1870 or 1871 by the influential historian and educationalist ‘Ali Mubarak Pasha (d. 1893), *Dar al- ‘Ulum* quickly became “one of the first modern Egyptian educational institutions of academic stature” and “a centre of cultural innovation.”¹²⁶ What distinguished the new school from its venerable competitor, *al-Azhar*, was the emphasis placed in its curriculum upon secular literature—a subject the Azharis deemed too “frivolous” to merit serious study.¹²⁷ Closely associated with *Dar al- ‘Ulum* was another project of ‘Ali Mubarak’s, *Rawdat al-madaris*, a magazine originally intended for primary and secondary school teachers but which evolved into “one of the first semi-literary magazines in Egypt.”¹²⁸ It is in the pages of this magazine that one can identify foreshadowings of the modern historicist sensibility in Egypt: “...the attitude towards the classical poets began to change;

¹²⁵ Brugman, *Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt*, p. 321.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 66.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 322.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 67.

they were admired but at the same time came to be regarded as figures from a remote past, distinctly separate from the present. The notion of a literary past, which had been practically absent with the post-classicists, proved to be important for the development of neoclassicism.”¹²⁹ Its importance would only expand with succeeding generations until the arrival, in the early 20th century, of Egypt’s Romantics—for whom not only literature had a past, but history *itself*.

The incipient historicism of Egypt’s late 19th century literary critics cannot be accounted for by the influence of Western models:

The contributors to *Rawdat al-madaris* on the whole knew no European languages, or only imperfectly, and were hardly interested in foreign literatures. For some time Western literary criticism was only sporadically influential; it was not until well into the twentieth century that Egyptian critics discovered Western criticism. In 1887, it is true, Ya’qub Sarruf, the editor of ... *al-Muqtataf*, published a general article about literary criticism in his magazine in which he did refer to Western models, quoting an impressive series of names of Western critics starting with Aristotle. But this ... is an isolated example which seems to have failed to inspire others.¹³⁰

This state of affairs is wholly consistent with my claim in the previous chapter that Romantic philosophy emerges with the rise of technicalism and the *felt* distinction between natural and historical temporality that surfaces in its wake. Eventually, Western models of literary history *would* be introduced to Egypt—but, even then, the earliest examples appear to have been provided by Orientalists whose use of periodization remained heavily dependent upon medieval Arab prototypes.¹³¹ Given the “brusque, hasty, unfriendly” introduction of post-Medieval European ideas by Napoleon, Egyptian culture needed time to

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 323.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 327.

absorb and embrace them; the effective reception of Western notions of literary history depended upon the development of an indigenous sensibility congenial to them.¹³² The cultivation of this sensibility was accomplished by means of the “Trojan Horse effect” alluded to in the previous discussion of Rashid Rida’. Once the requisite sensibility had taken root among her literati, the rise of Egyptian historicism was rendered certain; indeed, it actually made the later acceptance of Western models somewhat redundant. For once the requisite sensibility developed, Egypt was quite capable of producing her own Vico—which she did—in the unlikely person of an Azhar-trained author and critic by the name of Taha Husayn.

Taha Husayn

As late as 1927, Taha Husayn (1889-1973) complained that “‘the time for an Arab literary history had not yet come,’ thus indicating that he did not consider the surveys published till then as up to standard.”¹³³ His opinion is not one to be taken lightly; for if the Egyptian Literary Renaissance produced a thinker of world-historical stature, it was undoubtedly Taha Husayn. His stated recognition of the need for an Arab literary history reflects his Vico-like apprehension that historical process is a kind of temporality distinct from that found in nature. Having achieved this crucial realization, he drew from it the proper historicist conclusions that history is an open-ended process and that a gap exists between historical events and the language used to represent them. He

¹³² Pierre Cachia, Taha Husayn: His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance, London: Luzac & Co. (1956), p. 6.

¹³³ *Ibid*, p. 330.

was now in a position to engage European historians and critics of literature on their own ground—a task he enthusiastically embraced.¹³⁴

Taha Husayn gave evidence of this historicist turn early in his career. In the doctoral dissertation which he defended in 1914, *Dhikra Abi'l- 'Ala* (a study of the 11th century poet al-Ma 'arri), Husayn allotted considerable space to

a discussion of the source materials, to the times in which al-Ma'arri lived and to his political and cultural background, followed by an extensive biography. A great deal of attention is also paid to the philosophical and social ideas of al-Ma'arri, his literary work proper being relegated to a rather subordinate position ... The book obviously applies the methods of the positivist French literary critics, like Taine, Brunetière and Sainte Beuve: al-Ma'arri's work is regarded as a product of his time and, to a lesser extent, as the outcome of his personality.¹³⁵

Here we see Taha Husayn actively contextualizing (and, thereby, historicizing) a literary subject. He does so with reference to three 19th century French critics—one of whom, Sainte-Beuve, had been intimately associated with the poet and novelist Victor Hugo and, through Hugo, with French Romanticism.¹³⁶ Despite J. Brugman's classification of Sainte-Beuve as a "positivist" critic, a study of his work as a whole reveals that he lived several critical "lives." With respect to his views on literary history, however, he appears to have been fairly consistent. For Sainte-Beuve, history provides a "framework" for literary study, "but only a permissive, never a determinative one." Rather than simply insert Sainte-Beuve into the "positivist" camp as Brugman has done, I would argue that he inflected a

¹³⁴ He was no doubt aided in this direction by several years of study in France, first at the University of Montpellier and later at the Sorbonne. While still a student, Husayn married a French woman and for much of his life divided his time between France and Egypt. See Brugman, *History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 361-366.

¹³⁵ Brugman, p. 367.

¹³⁶ On Sainte-Beuve see A. G. Lehman, *Sainte-Beuve: A Portrait of the Critic 1804-1842*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

materialistic approach to literature's historical frame with a Romantic insistence upon individual initiative: "... singular aptitudes and marvelous inborn faculties always sooner or later blend with the age they are born into and undergo lasting inflexions," Sainte-Beuve wrote. "But even here human initiative is to the fore and less subject to general causes; individual energies modify and assimilate things, as it were ..." ¹³⁷ This is a variety of "materialistic" literary history proffered with a light hand—the kind espoused by 19th century French Romantics and by the 20th century Egyptian heir to the Romantics, Taha Husayn. ¹³⁸

Brugman speculated that Husayn's acquaintance with the aforementioned French critics was "indirect" because he wrote and defended this dissertation prior to his first sojourn in France and

it was only there that he learnt French properly. It seems more likely that [two of his professors at Egypt's National University, where he received his first doctorate, the Orientalists] Nallino and Wiet led him into this direction, the more so as, certainly at the beginning of the twentieth century, most Orientalists had an objectivist approach towards literature." ¹³⁹

Taking into consideration the fact that Taha Husayn was blind from childhood, and his acquaintance with literature and criticism was always mediated by his personal secretary who read to him in several languages, it is difficult to know what would constitute for Brugman a "direct" acquaintance with literature and criticism by Taha Husayn. ¹⁴⁰ In any event, it is reasonably certain from the treatment that Husayn accorded the theories of Taine, Brunetière and Sainte-

¹³⁷ Ibid, pp. 82-83.

¹³⁸ Compare Cachia, Taha Husayn, p. 167.

¹³⁹ Brugman, p. 367.

¹⁴⁰ See Cachia, p. 215.

Beuve in his 1927 book, *al-Adab al-Jahili* (Literature of the Pre-Islamic Period), that his acquaintance with those theories was, by then, more than passing—however he came by it.¹⁴¹

The first edition of *al-Adab al-Jahili* (published a year earlier under the slightly different title *al-Shi'r al-Jahili*—or Poetry of the Pre-Islamic Period) is of particular interest in the context of the present study because it was in that book (i.e., the first edition) that Taha Husayn made his most significant contribution to the nascence of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics. It is also a work that helped to establish Taha Husayn's reputation as a kind of intellectual provocateur. Indeed, the fire-storm of hostility that erupted in Egypt following the appearance of the first edition of his book is what prompted him to make revisions to it, resulting in its republication the following year.

An Accidental Revolutionary

Regardless of the way in which the Egyptian public received *al-Shi'r al-Jahili*, Taha Husayn was not interested in overthrowing Islamic tradition. His purpose in publishing the results of his investigations into pre-Islamic poetry was to establish the post-Medieval practice of literary history in Egyptian letters. In order to accomplish this goal, he felt it necessary to find a way to illustrate for the reading public compelling reasons to prefer a non-theological approach to this subject over the theological one that had characterized its treatment in the pre-Modern period.¹⁴² The means that he chose—calling into question the early dating of Arabic poetry's "classical tradition"—may seem to be a fairly innocuous route

¹⁴¹ Taha Husayn, *al-Adab al-Jahili*, Cairo (1927), pp. 40-45.

¹⁴² Taha Husayn, *al-Adab al-Jahili*, Cairo: Dar al-Ma'rif bi-Misr (re-issued, 1958), pp. 61-67.

to take but, as previously noted, it created wide-spread offense. Part of what offended Taha Husayn's readers was that he not only questioned the authenticity of Arabic poetry's alleged pagan provenance, but also argued the alternative thesis that this poetry was composed by early Muslims to "promote political designs, to gratify national rivalries, to serve the purposes of narrators, story-tellers, grammarians, tradition-collectors, theologians, and commentators on the Kur'an [sic]."¹⁴³ Broaching the possibility that early Muslim intellectuals might have allowed political schemes or ethnic rivalries to influence the way in which they thought about aesthetic, linguistic, or—most troubling of all—religious matters, generated stiff critical resistance.¹⁴⁴ But it is my guess that an even more disturbing issue—unvoiced by both Taha Husayn and his detractors—crouched anxiously at the psychological margins of the debate over his book. For, by casting doubt upon a centuries-old historical judgment, Taha Husayn was, in effect, declaring "unsettled" a foundation stone of the Islamic self-image long presumed settled. According to the religious tradition's master narrative, the Arabs—prior to the coming of Islam—had been a people mired in the darkness of ancient superstitions and polytheistic practices.¹⁴⁵ Making no attempt to deny this traditional view, Taha Husayn simply asserted that what pre-Islamic literature had survived to the present day was too meager to support "a correct picture of

¹⁴³ Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, New York: Russell & Russell (1968), p. 256.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 255-256.

¹⁴⁵ See, e.g., the article "Djahiliyya" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Vol. II, edited by B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, and J. Schacht, Leiden: Brill (1965), pp. 383-384.

the culture of that period.”¹⁴⁶ All the same, the door to questioning the “salvation history” that had become an integral part of traditional Islamic discourse now appeared to have been pushed slightly ajar.¹⁴⁷ Was this to be the start of a skeptical re-appraisal of the tradition as a whole? Husayn made no such far-reaching claim; again, his purpose was to demonstrate the unique and never-before-possible contribution that literary history could make to the study of the Egyptian and Arabo-Muslim past. Unfortunately, at a time when Egypt was under renewed colonial pressures by the British, many of his co-religionists and countrymen were in no mood to question one of their time-honored historical presumptions.¹⁴⁸

Taha Husayn mounted his critique of one of the heretofore unchallenged sources of Islamic tradition on the basis of a very sophisticated literary-historical argument—one that took into account (a) linguistic differences known to have prevailed in Arabia prior to the time of the Prophet and (b) aspects of the Arabian social and cultural milieu that he found presented in the Qur’an. “Pre-Islamic” poetry, he observed, ought to reflect the grammar, vocabulary, and syntax of the Arabic language before the Qur’an set new standards for all of these. Moreover, it should provide the Muslim reader with the sense that she has come into contact with an alien world—one where the social and cultural expectations of the poet differ palpably from those with which the Qur’an had invested the generations of

¹⁴⁶ Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, pp. 255-256.

¹⁴⁷ On the notion of Islamic salvation history, see John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu*, edited by Gerald Hawting, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006.

¹⁴⁸ For the history of popular Egyptian reaction to Husayn’s book, see Adams, pp. 254-255.

Arabs who subsequently rose under its influence. When he found purportedly pre-Islamic poetry disappointing on both counts, he argued that it had been fabricated for the reasons cited above.¹⁴⁹

Such considerations are Vician in tenor and decidedly untraditional. Taha Husayn, however, did not stop there. Noting that the patriarchal figures of Ibrahim (Abraham) and Isma'el (Ishmael) appear in both the Torah and the Qur'an, Husayn argued that their mere mention (presumably in either text) was "not sufficient to establish their historical existence."¹⁵⁰ He went on to speculate that their Qur'anic appearance represents an Arab appropriation of an earlier story.¹⁵¹ These suggestions were more than Taha Husayn's readership could bear and, in response to the pressure of the ensuing public controversy, he agreed to excise the paragraph in which these statements occurred from the second edition of his book. According to Pierre Cachia—a scholar who personally interviewed him in the 1950's—Taha Husayn denied that this excision represented any adjustment of the views he originally expressed.¹⁵² As an historian with a post-Medieval sense of time, he had merely resigned himself to the notion that Egypt was not yet ready for a genuine exploration of Arab literary history.

¹⁴⁹ See Cachia's summary, p. 146. *Pace* Husayn, I would argue that the evidence he adduced suggests that the pre-Islamic period was not as profoundly different from what followed it as Muslim tradition would lead one to believe.

¹⁵⁰ My translation of "...*la yakfy li-thabati wujudhima al-tarikhi*." Taha Husayn, *fi al-shi'r al-jahili*, introduced by 'Abd al-Muni 'm Tallima, Cairo (1996), p. 64.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Cachia, *Taha Husayn*, p. 147.

Amin al-Khuli (Part One)

Despite his retention of these views, Taha Husayn did not work through their implications for the study of the Qur'an in a systematic fashion. His role in the development of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics was, therefore, more symbolic than substantive. With his critique of the dating of classical Arabic poetry and his open skepticism regarding the historical reliability of selected Scriptural references, Husayn was among the first to step forward and set a precedent for the practice of Romantic re-description in Qur'anic studies. However, the task of embarking upon a more thorough foray into literary-historical waters fell to others such as his contemporary and colleague at the state-run Egyptian University, Amin al-Khuli (1895-1966).

Al-Khuli's biography provides an indication of the degree to which Romantic thinking had become "indigenized" in early 20th century Egyptian intellectual life. Unlike Taha Husayn, al-Khuli did not study formally with Orientalists nor did he cultivate extensive contacts with Europe; a graduate of the Egyptian University's *Madrasat al-Qada' al-Shar'i* (School for Muslim clerics), his first-hand exposure to Europe was limited to a brief "stint as imam in Egyptian embassies." He did read widely, however, and was exposed to Orientalist approaches to Islamic materials after he obtained a faculty position at the University.¹⁵³ Even so, he set himself apart from his more "Europeanized" colleagues among the professoriate by dressing in the traditional "shaykhly" garb appropriate to his clerical training. In his scholarship, he "drew on Orientalist

¹⁵³ Donald Malcolm Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1990), pp. 34, 155.

techniques, yet he criticized the articles of his Cairo colleagues Joseph Schacht and Paul Kraus [two eminent Orientalists] in the [Arabic edition of the] *Encyclopedia of Islam*.”¹⁵⁴ In sum, Amin al-Khuli did not fit the profile of a rabid “Europaphile.” And yet, he developed an historicist approach to the Qur’an that went far beyond Taha Husayn’s occasional criticisms and speculation.

Al-Khuli divided Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*) into two general categories: (a) historical background studies (*ma hawl al-Qur’an*) and (b) the interpretation of the text itself in light of these preliminary studies (*dirasat al-Qur’an nafsih*).¹⁵⁵ By means of this exegetical division of labor, al-Khuli created a protocol for approaching the Qur’an that made *intra*-Qur’anic explanation dependent upon *extra*-Qur’anic investigations. On the surface, such a protocol is relatively unremarkable. After all, Muslim exegetes (*mufasssirun*) had included extra-Qur’anic materials in their repertoire of interpretive tools from an early date. Marshall Hodgson has observed that “a significant part of the population that accepted Islam in its formative centuries was composed of Jews, whose narrative traditions, called *Isra’iliyat*, dominated the popular legendry of early Islam. It would appear that much of the spirit that formed Muslim expectations of what a religion should be was inspired by Jewish example.”¹⁵⁶ Muslims relied upon the *Isra’iliyat* for more than just inspiration; these narrative traditions also played a significant role in the development of the classical Muslim exegetical tradition from the 9th to the 11th centuries CE. The *mufasssirun* enlisted this body of lore in

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 155.

¹⁵⁵ Amin al-Khuli, *Manahij Tajdid*, al-Hayat al-Misryah al-‘Amah al-Kitab, Cairo (1995), p. 233.

¹⁵⁶ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. 1, p. 317.

their efforts to provide their readers with background information regarding persons and events mentioned in the sacred text. Employed in this way, the *Isra'iliyat* merits recognition as a pre-modern variety of *ma hawl al-Qur'an*.¹⁵⁷ Despite its frequent use in early exegesis, the *Isra'iliyat* became, over time, a source of controversy. In order to make sense of this development and deepen our understanding of al-Khuli's project, it is necessary to take a brief excursus into Islamic intellectual history.

A Brief Excursus

The late 7th century witnessed the expansion of the Islamic community well beyond its purported origins in the Red Sea basin; by the first few decades of the 8th century, the community had been twice transformed: first into a polity, and then into an empire which stretched from the Iberian Peninsula in the west to Transoxania in the east. This rapid expansion, while phenomenally successful in military terms, was subject to severe growing pains on the societal level as diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious groupings struggled to find their place in the new world order. Around 750 CE, social unrest in Syria and the Iraq culminated in the overthrow of the Damascene elite and, with it, a ruling class dominated by individuals with North Arabian tribal affiliations. In its place was a new dynastic party, the 'Abbasid. The 'Abbasids seized power with the help of factions affiliated with, and sympathetic to, South Arabian tribes. These tribes

¹⁵⁷ G. Vajda, "Isra'iliyyat" *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, edited by E. Van Donzel, B. Lewis, and Ch. Pellat, vol. IV, Leiden: Brill (1973), pp. 211-212.

had historical and political ties to both Judean religion and Persianate culture.¹⁵⁸ After reconstituting the Imperial court in Baghdad, the ‘Abbasid party secured its position by purging many of those with South Arabian connections from its ranks.¹⁵⁹ What occasioned this betrayal of the Southern Arabs is not altogether clear, but it is conceivable that their Judean and Persian connections may have contributed to their loss of standing once their political usefulness had come to an end.¹⁶⁰

In light of this history, Professor Gordon Newby has suggested that the ‘Abbasid revolution awakened many Muslims to the precariousness of their position atop a variegated and often volatile social and cultural *mélange*. Muslim intellectual dependence upon those sectors of the population that insisted on maintaining an independent religious identity—something that Jews and Christians were entitled to do under Islamic law—would have appeared particularly incongruous to an increasing number of *mufasssirun* at a time when social stability was being re-established.¹⁶¹

Newby’s explanation for the decline in the use of *Isra’iliyat* by Qur’anic scholars is complemented by Robert G. Hoyland’s recent observation that the

¹⁵⁸ See Robert G. Hoyland, Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam, London: Routledge, 2001, and Giorgio Levi Della Vida, “Pre-Islamic Arabia,” The Arab Heritage, edited by Nabih Amin Faris, New York: Russell & Russell, Inc. (1963), pp. 25-57.

¹⁵⁹ See Hodgson, Venture, vol. 1, pp. 187-284. See also Hugh Kennedy, “Intellectual Life in the First Four Centuries of Islam,” Intellectual Traditions in Islam, edited by Farhad Daftary, London: I. B. Tauris (2000), pp. 17-30.

¹⁶⁰ It is not insignificant that, by this time, to possess “Persian connections” might also mark one as a partisan of ‘Ali or at least sympathetic to Shi’a claims to leadership of the Muslim community.

¹⁶¹ See Gordon Darnell Newby, The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad, Colombia, SC: University of South Carolina Press (1989), p. 11.

first century of 'Abassid rule witnessed the construction of a "pure" Arab identity with respect to all things Islamic:

The Muslim Arabs now had their capital at Baghdad, which exposed them to the challenge of the strong and well-articulated identity of Iran, whereas before, at Damascus, they had only to contend with the numerous parochial and etiolated identities of the Levant. Moreover Iraq was a very cosmopolitan land with a large cultural elite, whose members now set about debating the cultural orientation of the Muslim empire (Arab or multi-ethnic?), the foundations of the Islamic sciences (traditional Arabian lore or more [Greek and/or Persian] rationality-based?), and the respective merits of the world's great peoples and religions...Inevitably the fact that the Holy Book was in Arabic and that the Prophet was an Arab born in Arabia meant that many a good Muslim, even if not of Arab ancestry, would acknowledge the link between matters Arab and Islam and even seek to strengthen that link.¹⁶²

Hoyland refers to this effort to identify Islam with "pure" *'arabiyya* as part of a larger trend towards "Arabhood and Arabization"—a moment when the history of Islam and the history of Arab ideologies of Islam began to converge in the discursive practices of Sunni traditionalism.¹⁶³ Although this project could not help but be suspect from an historical point of view—such constructions must always overlook the fact that no human culture or community arises or flourishes in a vacuum—the task of building an identity that masses of people might adopt for themselves despite the niceties of modern historical reflection may only proceed successfully if it discovers a way to remain innocent of them. Obviously, as pre-moderns, the intellectuals who elaborated Arab-Islamic identification were peculiarly blessed in this regard and their efforts enjoyed considerable success on a number of fronts. In the field of Qur'anic exegesis, Arabization took

¹⁶² Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, pp. 246-247.

¹⁶³ Ibid, pp. 229-247. Recall that Taha Husayn went so far as to read the process of Arabization back into the Qur'an itself (*supra*, p. 74)!

the form of displacing the *Isra'iliyat* with scholarly recourse to Bedouin poetry (i.e., the “Classical” tradition of the nomadic poets of the Arabian Peninsula which dates to no earlier than 500 CE) and with an increased focus upon traditions relating the sayings and life circumstances of the Arab Prophet.¹⁶⁴

The process of exegetical Arabization did not represent an outright rejection of the use of extra-Qur'anic background material when interpreting the sacred text. What this process did entail was a shift away from a prior reliance upon legendry that Muslims shared in common with non-Muslims. Increasingly, the *mufasssirun* promoted what might be referred to as “proprietary” background to the Qur'an: purportedly oral traditions collected and preserved in the form of narrative segments supported by an *isnad*—i.e., a chain of transmission that traces a given story or saying from auditor to auditor until its authorization—and uncontested Arabian provenance—is located upon the lips of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Although we lack the documentary evidence to prove it, it would be surprising if this kind of material did not circulate in at least anecdotal form during Muhammad's lifetime. It is therefore somewhat perplexing to note that the volume of material that has a direct bearing upon particular portions of the Qur'an is relatively slim when compared to the massive body of sayings

¹⁶⁴ It is important to emphasize that the displacement of the *Isra'iliyat* did not happen overnight but was the result of a gradual process: for it was not until the 14th and 15th centuries that influential figures such as Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) and al-Sakhawi (d. 1497) began to condemn the use of *Isra'iliyat* altogether (see, e.g., Vajda, “*Isra'iliyyat*” The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition, vol. IV, pp. 211-212). The historical context informing these condemnations suggests that, as Newby argued regarding the 'Abbasid period, Muslim intellectuals were responding exegetically to pressures exerted by social forces. The 14th and 15th centuries found Muslims in the Imperial heartlands learning to reinvent their civilization after Mongol armies had sacked Baghdad (1258 CE) and brought to the fore cultural elements that had only been experienced previously—if at all—as frontier and marginal. It appears that, in times of social and political crisis, the *mufasssirun* found it expedient to assert the “pure” or “original” Arabian pedigree of their discursive traditions.

(*ahadith*) contained in the canonical collections—i.e., little of it depicts the Prophet's *Sitz im Leben* at the moment when a particular line or passage of the Qur'an was first recited by him. Moreover, it was not until the 11th century that a few Muslim scholars made the effort to select out and segregate such material from the voluminous *hadith* collections for the convenience of those who might wish to make use of it in Qur'anic exegesis.¹⁶⁵ One can only speculate as to why there is comparatively little of this material extant (did the Prophet typically receive a revelation out of the presence of his wives or other companions?) or why Muslim exegetes have placed little emphasis upon its use. As to the latter issue, one reasonable explanation is that the *mufasssirun* had alternative materials available to them (including the *Isra'iliyat*) in the centuries preceding the ideological Arabization of their discursive practices.

Amin al-Khuli (Part Two)

Al-Khuli's advocacy of *ma hawl al-Qur'an* was both blessed and burdened by the history of Qur'anic exegesis recited above. He was blessed by the fact that historical background studies enjoyed a long association with scholarly approaches to the sacred text because this association relieved him of the necessity of having to justify *in principle* the importance of such studies to his colleagues. But the burden of this history clearly weighed heavily upon the manner in which he articulated his historical approach. Previous periods of intellectual Arabization by Muslims had already limited to the "proprietary" the

¹⁶⁵ Professor Andrew Rippin has characterized Ahmad al-Wahidi's (d. 1075) collection *Occasions of the Revelation of the Qur'an* (*Kitab Asbab Nuzul al-Qur'an*) as "not only one of the earliest" of its kind, but also "the work which firmly established [this type of compendium as a distinct exegetical] genre." Rippin, "Occasions of Revelation," *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 3, edited by Jane D. McAuliffe, Leiden: Brill (2001), pp. 569-572.

range of materials that would be deemed acceptable when interpreting the Qur'an; having started his career "during the contentious period of European colonization," al-Khuli reached scholarly maturity at a moment when "Arab intellectuals were pressed to decolonize, to produce indigenous traditions rooted in their cultural heritage and relevant to their immediate concerns."¹⁶⁶ He therefore felt constrained to acknowledge the claim of the past upon his critical practice, and did so through his articulation of the protocols of *tajdid* (renewal).

According to Amin al-Khuli, the first step towards *tajdid* always involves the critic in a thorough analysis of tradition; absent such a foundation, the critic will produce not renewal but the squandering (*tabdid*) of his or her cultural inheritance.¹⁶⁷ For al-Khuli, acknowledging the claim of the past upon a critic's work went beyond historicism: he wished to acknowledge the claim of past Muslim *scholarship* upon his work. This was a significant concession to tradition on his part; one that would place him in compliance with the Arabizing trend by which Muslim exegetes had eventually limited historical study of Scripture to extra-Qur'anic (but proprietary) narratives, e.g., the *asbab an-nuzul* ("occasions of revelation") literature. Al-Khuli's "Traditionalist" desire, however, chafed against his estimation of the task of criticism that lay before him. He was not content to anchor his literary history of the Qur'an in the *asbab an-nuzul* because it did not reflect the exacting standards developed since the medieval period for historical research. In order to introduce his students to historical methods that

¹⁶⁶ Wen-Chin Ouyang, Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture: The Making of a Tradition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (1997), pp. 5-6.

¹⁶⁷ See Nasr Abu Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an," *Alif* 23 (2003), p. 22.

did reflect modern standards, al-Khuli was forced to transgress the preference for proprietary materials and recommend the German Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke's Geschichte des Qorans [History of the Qur'an] as "indispensable reading" (*dirasat daruria*).¹⁶⁸

In turning to the work of a non-Arab and non-Muslim for a model of Qur'anic research, Amin al-Khuli risked—and received—the censure of his colleagues. Given the fact that he is often remembered fondly as a man of mild manners and moderate opinions, it is somewhat curious that he would take such risks on behalf of what he had to know would be an unpopular approach to Qur'anic study.¹⁶⁹ It is therefore appropriate to pause and consider why this outwardly old-fashioned and "shaykhly" professor adopted what was regarded by some as a contentious critical stance.

Tradition in a New Key

I would suggest that al-Khuli's critical approach was dictated, in part, by the Qur'an itself. As a collection of inscribed prophetic utterances, the Qur'an presents its readers with the peculiarities endemic to this ancient Near Eastern literary genre (i.e., prophecy). Therefore, those who read the Qur'an with the

¹⁶⁸ Al-Khuli, Manahij Tajdid, pp. 234-235. Published in the 19th century, Nöldeke's study employs what is generally known among Biblicists as "tradition history": a method that attempts to make historical sense of sacred texts, not on the basis of internal literary evidence alone, but on the basis of such evidence read in the light of information adduced from sources external to it. Nöldeke's rigorous application of this method yielded a hypothetical chronology for various portions of the canonical collection of the Qur'an—an order not explicitly reflected in the codex itself. While not all Qur'an scholars find the results of Nöldeke's research entirely convincing, it was the method itself that appealed to al-Khuli, whose own two-pronged approach (combining *ma hawl al-Qur'an* with *dirasat al-Qur'an nafsiah*) suggests Nöldekean inspiration. See also Theodor Nöldeke, Geschichte des Qorans, Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1860; J. J. G. Jansen, The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt, Leiden: Brill (1974), pp. 65-67.

¹⁶⁹ Amin al-Khuli's personality and career are profiled in Reid, Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt, pp. 139-156, 169-173.

expectation of following a linear narrative sequence (such as one finds in the Genesis-through-Kings saga of the Hebrew Bible) will only be disappointed. That saga represents an early example of another ancient literary genre—the genre referred to by scholars as “universal history”—and it happens to be the aspect of the Bible that seems to come to mind most often when many people think of it. But the Bible contains a wide variety of literary materials and, therefore, ought not to be reduced to this pre-modern historical genre.¹⁷⁰ If a reader familiar with the Bible picks up the Qur’an and cannot seem to find her footing with this portion of Muslim Scripture—for the Qur’an is regarded by Muslims as one facet of a much larger body of holy writ—she should turn to the books of Biblical prophecy in order to find more familiar terrain.¹⁷¹ If she does so, she will return to the Qur’an able to make significant points of comparison between the two sacred texts. The similarities are so striking that Klaus Koch’s remarks on the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible apply with equal force to the Qur’an. Koch explained the lack of linear narrative in the writings attributed to the Hebrew prophets “... by the fact that the prophets...committed to writing what they delivered orally. And the orally delivered saying was formulated tersely and poetically, so that the listener could easily commit it to memory.”¹⁷² This discovery was achieved, by the

¹⁷⁰ A wonderfully readable account of the literary history of the Bible that helps to clarify some of the generic distinctions that obtain *within* the Bible itself is Donald Harman Akenson’s Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and Talmuds, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998.

¹⁷¹ On the relationship of the Qur’an to other literatures held sacred by Muslims, see Fazlur Rahman, Islam, 2nd edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1979), pp. 11-67.

¹⁷² One famous reader of the Bible, Martin Luther, complained that the prophetic books were “unedifying, if read continuously, ‘since they maintain no kind of order but leap from one matter to another so that a man can neither understand nor endure it.’” See Klaus Koch, The Prophets, vol. 1, translated by Margaret Kohl, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1982), p. 165. In “The Hero as Prophet,” Thomas Carlyle expressed a similar frustration with the Qur’an—though Carlyle,

way, through the application of modern literary critical tools (in this instance “form criticism”) to the Biblical text.¹⁷³

Those individuals who collected and compiled the inscriptions produced by Muhammad’s prophetic activity into what became, within a few decades after the Prophet’s death, the canonical codex of the Qur’an, were *not* modern archivists.¹⁷⁴ Consequently, the book does not “wear upon its sleeve” the historical incidents it impliedly addresses. When later generations began to formulate questions regarding the “occasions” of Qur’anic revelation, Muslim scholars replied to their inquiries by supplying extra-Qur’anic narratives (the *asbab an-nuzul* literature). These narratives are, like the Qur’an itself, the redacted precipitate of oral performances; they are helpful insofar as they provide a linear scaffolding for a relatively small portion of the Qur’an. But even if they covered a broader sweep of the sacred text, they would still be subject to criticism because they do not satisfy the requirements of the modern historian.¹⁷⁵

As a basic rule of procedure, the modern historian seeks to establish a chronological ordering of the various parts of a textual witness regardless of whether or not this order confirms or denies a legal principle previously derived

anxious to affirm the superiority of Christianity to Islam, was less delicate in his criticisms of the Muslim Scripture than Luther felt obliged to be towards the Bible. See Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, London: J. M. Dent and Co. (1908), pp. 277, 298-311.

¹⁷³ Koch, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ See John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur’an*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

¹⁷⁵ See Andrew Rippin’s reflections in his essay “Muhammad in the Qur’an: Reading Scripture in the 21st Century,” *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources*, edited by Harald Motzki, Leiden: Brill (2000), pp. 298-309. See also G. H. A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt*, Leiden: Brill, 1969; and *Hadith*, edited by Harald Motzki, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004.

from the text by jurists or a doctrinal point argued for by theologians. Pre-modern Muslim scholarship never aspired to this level of juridical or theological disinterestedness where sacred Scripture was concerned; indeed, it would have regarded such an approach to be unworthy of its subject.¹⁷⁶ Although the modern historian may be said to proceed blind to such scruples, she does not proceed blind to *all* scruples. Instead, she substitutes for those which were characteristic of the pre-modern period a different and, at times, competing set: for the ethics of a modern historian constrain her to insulate her narrative as much as possible from considerations that bear the marks of special pleading. Pre-modern treatments of the past were, by contrast, very often the *product* of special pleading. After all, appeals to the past were typically placed in the service of a particular juridical or theological position—typically one advanced by the historian’s patron.¹⁷⁷

Amin al-Khuli recognized in Nöldeke’s approach to the Qur’an a method of doing literary history with sacred texts that was not beholden to theologian or jurist; rather, it was one that stood on its own two feet, operating in accordance with an “artistic standard, free from the constraints imposed by any other point

¹⁷⁶ Chase F. Robinson, Islamic Historiography, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹⁷⁷ See *ibid.* and G. R. Elton, The Practice of History, New York: Crowell, 1967. It is important to stress at this point that this practice was not peculiar to Muslims; it was characteristic of pre-modern historical writing more generally and, indeed, has survived among Muslims and non-Muslims to the present day. As argued in Chapter One, the rise of European technicalism made possible a new approach to historiography because the new temporal rhythms experienced in technicalism’s wake made the past intrinsically interesting to scholars for the first time. This new appreciation of the past did not eliminate the older approach; rather, it competes with it for the allegiance of all who traffic in the writing of history.

of view, even the religious....”¹⁷⁸ The constraints that this method was not free from, however, were those imposed by the text itself. In light of al-Khuli’s emphasis upon the importance of historical background studies (*ma hawl al-Qur’an*), such a caveat may appear, at first blush, to be inconsistent with the general tenor of his endorsement of Nöldekean “tradition history.” But modern tradition history appeals to a text’s historical background in such a way that the text itself remains present to the historian as the lens through which he or she must peer. Therefore, one “looks away” from the text by “looking through” it.¹⁷⁹

One way to distinguish modern “tradition history” from pre-modern methods of appealing to the past (e.g., the *asbab an-nuzul* literature) is to consider the modern historian’s attitude towards the sacred text. In her hands, the sacred text is regarded as an *historical artifact* that linguistically “encodes” aspects of the extra-textual environment in which it was produced; the text therefore serves as a kind of “palimpsest” that must be carefully scrutinized in order to reveal the data of interest it potentially conceals. Such encoding is not unusual; indeed it occurs whenever language is employed for any means. This is because a linguistic utterance, like any product of human activity, emerges from within a “specific socio-cultural reality” which it “embodie[s] within a specific linguistic system.”¹⁸⁰ For example, the page before the present reader contains a wide variety of clues that could provide a future reader with enough information

¹⁷⁸ Amin al-Khuli, *Manahij Tajdid*, p. 230 (my translation). In the next chapter, we will consider al-Khuli’s “artistic standard” in greater depth under the rubric of modern hermeneutics.

¹⁷⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, “The Text as Window: New Testament Manuscripts and the Social History of Early Christianity,” *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, edited by Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (1995), pp. 361-379.

¹⁸⁰ Nasr Abu Zayd, “The Dilemma of the Literary Approach...” p. 38.

to suggest the approximate time and place of its composition, the author's purposes in writing, and the potential audience for the work—even if it were torn from its manuscript. This information is contained in the language that appears on the page: a North American scholarly English that linguistic research would show was in use by the late 20th century and was still spoken (or at least written) in the first decade of the 21st century. This linguistic research would be supported by the dates of the referenced publications that appear in the footnotes at the bottom of the page. From these broad brush strokes, more specific information may be adduced: the author's level of education and intellectual interests, the level of education and intellectual interests of the author's implied audience, and even insights regarding the presumptions that author and audience may share about a variety of matters germane to the materials under discussion. Moreover, by attending to what is *not* discussed—or what may in fact be *excluded* from the discussion—the reader is in a position to develop further clues with which to profile the characteristics of author and implied audience.¹⁸¹ Naturally, to generate any of this information involves educated guesswork, requiring a great deal of extra-textual research to support it in the eyes of the scholarly community. It is precisely for this reason that Amin al-Khuli was careful to combine *ma hawl al-Qur'an* with *dirasat al-Qur'an nafsih* in a two-pronged

¹⁸¹ Tradition history's sensitivity to encoded context includes intensive concern with rhetorical occasion and audience and is fruitfully read alongside rhetorical criticism and theory produced in the United States since the 1960's. Examples include: Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1 (1968), pp. 1-14; Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 56 (1970); Kathleen M. Jamieson, "Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraint," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61 (1975), pp. 406-415; and Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal*, 35 (1984), pp. 197-216.

approach. Text and context may be examined separately, but the resulting data must be weighed in a balance constructed from both.¹⁸²

Pre-modern approaches to the past regarded the sacred text as exempt from acting as an historical artifact in this manner; moreover, they were largely innocent of the ways in which context is linguistically encoded as a matter of course in textual production. As a result, pre-modern approaches did not seek to disembody the sacred text from theological presumptions designed to insulate it from its historical context. For the pre-modern theologian, the sacred text is like a child delivered by Caesarian section: it does not acquire the usual markings (flattened facial features, elongated shape of the head, etc.) that identify one who has passed into this world through the birth canal. Pre-modern theological treatments deem the sacred text to be *part* of history, to be sure, but it has no history itself—at least not a secular one accessible to the tools developed by modern literary historians. To offer yet another metaphor, pre-modern theology posits a “vertical” context within which to make sense of a sacred text; God has miraculously vouchsafed the sacred text to history in such a way that connects the history-bound reader with an “a-historical” reality. It is this vertical context alone that activates any significant meaning to be made from the text.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Despite my employment in this discussion of terminology that was in vogue among Structuralists in the 1970's and 1980's, I am not committed to Structuralism as a science of language. My use of the metaphor of encoding is, to my mind, just that (a metaphor) and follows the usage of my mentor in modern Qur'anic hermeneutics, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (see, e.g., Abu Zayd, “The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an,” *Alif* 23, 2003, pp. 34-39). As the reader will soon discover, I draw upon a wide variety of metaphorical speech in an effort to articulate my sense of what goes on when readers make meaning of texts.

¹⁸³ See Fazlur Rahman's discussion in his *Islam*, 2nd edition, pp. 30-33.

From the perspective of the modern literary historian, scholars who exempt sacred texts from the rules which they would presumably apply to all others are engaged in a form of special pleading. Nevertheless, there is an added complexity to the distinction between modern and pre-modern approaches to the past that metaphors such as those employed above do not adequately capture. Many modern literary historians have been unwilling to deny a “vertical” context to the sacred texts that they study. In other words, they do not believe that carving an independent intellectual space for historical scholarship on sacred texts necessitates the abandonment of religion; nor do they believe that, by assigning a secular history to a sacred text, they have undermined the validity of the text’s connection to something which stands “outside” history. Modern *religious* literary historians such as Taha Husayn and Amin al-Khuli typically locate the sacred text at the intersection of vertical *and* “horizontal” axes—where the horizontal axis signifies the text’s “secular” or time-bound contexts—and assert that the two contexts may co-exist.

Asserting the co-existence of these two contexts is one thing; explaining how this co-existence may be effected is another. More often than not, such explanations are a vexed affair. One of Amin al-Khuli’s intellectual heirs, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, has suggested that this problem has deep roots in Muslim intellectual history, and he traces those roots to the 8th century CE. During this period, the problem appeared under a slightly different guise as questions raised by Ummayyad political theology caused it to be framed in terms of the Qur’an’s “createdness.” In that debate, those individuals who affirmed the proposition that the Qur’an was created impliedly affirmed as well that it, like all creatures, has a

history. On the other side of the ensuing controversy were those intellectuals who denied the Qur'an's "createdness," arguing instead that its existence is from eternity. It is interesting to note that the "resolution" of this debate in Muslim intellectual history was not achieved through the construction, by one side or the other, of an irrefutable argument; rather, the decision was handed down by Caliphal fiat in the 9th century.¹⁸⁴

Possibly because of the adversarial context in which it was formulated, the Caliph's decision favored the notion of an eternal Qur'an construed as a theologically defined "verticality" that makes no room for the horizontal axis of secular time. The uncompromising nature of this decision has had a chilling effect upon subsequent Muslim debate of the issue of the Qur'an's historicity—despite the fact that the Caliph who made the decision appears to have done so not on the merits but as a matter of political expediency.¹⁸⁵ Abu Zayd believes that a question of such importance to the Islamic intellectual tradition deserves a better fate than to be decided for all time on political grounds that have long since

¹⁸⁴ Abu Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach..." pp. 34-36.

¹⁸⁵ It is worth noting that, in rendering this decision as he did, the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (822-861 CE) placed the royal stamp of approval upon the position advocated by Sunni traditionalists who represented an Arabizing tendency over against the Hellenized rationalism of a group of maverick theologians. See J. R. T. M. Peters, God's Created Speech, Leiden: Brill, 1976, for a thorough review of the history of this particular controversy. A similar intervention took place in Roman Christianity when the Emperor Constantine intervened on behalf of the Athanasian party of Bishops at the Council of Nicea; the Church's Christological doctrine took its present shape in Constantine's imperial shadow. See, e.g., H. A. Drake, Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (2000), pp. 251-258.

been rendered moot.¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, this is the situation today: for many Muslim intellectuals in the 21st century, the matter remains closed to further discussion.¹⁸⁷

In an effort to re-start the conversation, Abu Zayd proposes that careful attention be directed to the respective theories underwriting the position of the proponents of pre-modern theological “verticalism” and of those who advocate the use of modern literary history. The theories of greatest interest are those that pertain to “the origin of language and the relation between languages and reality, on the one hand, and the significance of such theories to the issue concerning the nature of the Qur’an, on the other.” According to Abu Zayd, both parties to this proposed debate make certain assumptions regarding these matters that merit scrutiny in a systematic manner.¹⁸⁸

Following Abu Zayd’s suggestion, I would recommend that the conversation begin with the pre-modern theological assumption that the Qur’an’s status as prophetic speech is *necessarily* compromised by any concession to linguistic history. For if this is indeed the case, it is difficult to understand how the classical commentators on the Qur’an (*mufasssirun*) could have countenanced the study of pre-Islamic poetry in an effort to shed light on the definitions of certain words found in the Qur’an.¹⁸⁹ Such a scholarly enterprise is *itself* an admission that the Qur’an was revealed in a language that was in use among

¹⁸⁶ Indeed, this Caliphal decision has outlived the institution of the Caliphate itself!

¹⁸⁷ Abu Zayd, “The Dilemma of the Literary Approach...” pp. 34-40.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 36.

¹⁸⁹ It is ironic to recall that the one scholar to question the pre-Islamic provenance of such poetry was the tradition historian Taha Husayn—who, subsequent to questioning the historicity of this material, experienced the ire of the Traditionists!

human beings prior to the prophetic career of Muhammad—i.e., a language of human origin. Moreover, many of these same classical commentators were outspoken in their endorsement of the doctrine that the Qur'an is self-evidently God's Word (*i 'jaz*).¹⁹⁰ Internal consistency with their own practices, then, would seem to require the proponents of a pre-modern theological approach to grant the cogency of Abu Zayd's argument that the literary historian "... does not by any means intend to damage the Qur'an or even to question its divine and holy nature. [Her] position is that religious texts, though divine and revealed by God, are historically determined and culturally constructed."¹⁹¹

Just as Amin al-Khuli chafed at the limitations imposed upon his critical practice by Arabizing Traditionists, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd—as the foregoing remarks suggest—chafes at the limitations imposed upon his own critical practice by an exclusivist, verticalizing theology of the text. In its stead, Abu Zayd proposes a hermeneutics that attends to Muslim Scripture's location in both social space and cultural time. The resulting "horizontal" secularization of the text represents a synthesis of Taha Husayn's linguistic historicism (i.e., the close attention he paid to linguistic differences over time and the evidence of oral transmission embedded in written texts) and Amin al-Khuli's insistence that such

¹⁹⁰ Abu Zayd rehearses the history of this doctrine in "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach..." pp. 10-18. Among the early studies to compare the Qur'an and pre-Islamic literature were: Abu 'Ubayda (728-825 CE) *Majaz al-Qur'an*; al-Farra' (d. 822 CE) *Ma 'ani al-Qur'an*; Ibn Qutayba (828-889 CE) *Mushkil al-Qur'an*; the redoubtable al-Jahiz (d. circa 869 CE); al-Rummani (908-994 CE) *al-Nukat fi I'jaz al-Qur'an*; al-Khattabi (d. 998) *Bayan I'jaz al-Qur'an*. The work of al-Baqillani (d. 1013) attempts to distance the Qur'an from poetry (pre-Islamic or otherwise) and reflects his promotion of an emerging theological consensus that confirms the nature of the Qur'an as Divine speech of Arabian provenance. See R. J. McCarthy, "Al-Bakillani," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, vol. I, edited by H. A. R. Gibb *et al.* (1960), pp. 958-959.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, pp. 34-35. See also Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-Nass: Dirasa fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an*, Cairo: GEBO, 1990.

literary-historical decoding of Qur'anic discourse positions the Revelation as its own best witness to the circumstances of its prophetic declamation. By pairing the ways of language and history—or text and context—pioneered by his intellectual precursors, Nasr Abu Zayd has assured Qur'anic hermeneutics a seat at the transnational table of contemporary literary criticism.¹⁹²

¹⁹² See Ouyang's "Introduction" to his Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture, p. 1-21.

PART TWO

The Qur'an's post-messianic universalism represents the last prophetic intervention in diasporic Perso-Judean religion prior to the rise of Islam...

Chapter Three:

Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Transgressive Reading in the Romantic Grain

One of the remarkable characteristics of sacred texts (and one that they share with a very small body of secular literary compositions) is that, read either in a community of faith or in another admiring respectful context, they can prompt the reader to seek almost endlessly what Shils calls "a better disclosure of what was already there." But it is difficult to disclose what was already there if one concentrates on what was not.¹⁹³

We must unlearn the constellations to see the stars.¹⁹⁴

The Romantic Grain

In the first chapter of this study, I explored the rise of Romantic philosophy in Western European culture as the elaboration of four propositions: (1) truth belongs to language, (2) language belongs to history, (3) history belongs to humankind, and (4) to humankind belong both the familiar and the alien. The chapter closed with a brief sketch of the approach to the study of sacred texts that evolved from this propositional quartet.

In the second chapter, I reviewed the manner in which—and the circumstances under which—a specific group of Egyptian intellectuals

¹⁹³ Marilyn Robinson Waldman, "New Approaches to 'Biblical' Materials in the Qur'an," The Muslim World, vol. LXXV (January 1985), p. 13.

¹⁹⁴ Jack Gilbert, "Tear It Down," The Great Fires: Poems, 1982-1992, New York: A. A. Knopf (1994), p. 9.

appropriated Romantic philosophy in the 20th century, translating its concerns into a foreign context and applying its insights to the study of the Qur'an. I closed the second chapter with the observation that, through the relation of Qur'anic text and context, the Egyptian Romantics had historicized their study of the ways of language. In the event, they achieved an indigenous Egyptian and Muslim practice of hermeneutics: an interpretive method (*manhaj*) that has developed as a meditation upon time and temporality through textual study.¹⁹⁵

The task for the present chapter is (1) to discuss the propositional quartet outlined above in light of the peculiar concern that orients and animates every intellectual project meriting inclusion under the rubric of Romanticism: the desire for connection; (2) to consider the recent interventions of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the current standard-bearer of the Egyptian Renaissance School (*madhab tajdid misriyya*), and to remark the ways in which he is shepherding modern Qur'anic hermeneutics into the 21st century; and (3) by relating Abu Zayd's work to the Romantic project as it has evolved since its alleged demise in the 19th century, to suggest directions for new development. The final chapter will then illustrate what is possible for Qur'anic hermeneutics if those suggestions are taken seriously.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ A similar effect was achieved in the Western European philosophical tradition through the early Heidegger's intervention (most notably Part Two of *Being and Time*)—his later misgivings about the course of technicalistic civilization notwithstanding. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson, London: SCM Press, 1962; see also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Garrett Barden and William Glen-Doepel, New York: Seabury Press, 1975.

¹⁹⁶ I suppose that this is as good a place as any to acknowledge the received wisdom that Romanticism has run its course and that we are all now "post-Romantic"—so Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edition, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1996), p. 16. Eagleton, however, admits that "we" are all post-Romantic "in the sense of being products of that epoch rather than confidently posterior to it..." (ibid). In a similar vein, Duncan Heath has

In Chapter One, I argued that “Romantic philosophy was born in the throes of felt disparities: the apprehension of a cleavage between the words we use and the world we intend those words to describe; the sense that the time is somehow ‘out of joint’; and the feeling that there is some inchoate connection between these two phenomena.”¹⁹⁷ I characterized the Romantic preoccupation with language (embodied in the practice of re-description) as a response to this “predicament.” But this preoccupation is also emblematic of a basic conviction common among Romantic thinkers: the belief that language—as an irreducibly social phenomenon that we live “inside” and which, at the same time, somehow “lives” inside us—may hold the key to making an elusive, desired connection between the selves we posit and the world we inhabit.¹⁹⁸ This conviction takes on a tragic dimension when viewed in light of the apprehension of a cleavage between the world and our words. Accordingly, Romantics often see themselves as tragic figures. However, because they do not surrender their perennially hopeful quest that the connection they desire is capable of being made, they are tragic figures who participate in a cosmic (if not always divine) comedy. This is

recently observed that “Romanticism may have expired on the barricades of the 1848 revolution, but its spirit continues to haunt us.” He adds that it is also important to recognize “the influence of Romanticism as much in the movements that reacted against it as in those that were directly inspired by it.” Duncan Heath and Judy Boreham, *Introducing Romanticism*, Cambridge, UK: Icon Books (2005), p. 172. It is my position that Richard Rorty’s body of work as well as that of the philosophers Stanley Cavell (e.g., *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and Richard Eldridge (*Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and the recent edited volume *Philosophical Romanticism*, edited by Nikolas Kompridis, London: Routledge, 2006, among others, support my belief that reports of the death of Romanticism have been greatly exaggerated.

¹⁹⁷ *Supra*, pp. 43-46.

¹⁹⁸ Russell B. Goodman calls this desire a longing for the “marriage of self and world.” See Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1990), pp. 1-33.

why, as the philosopher Russell Goodman puts it, for the Romantic, “the process of weighing words never ends.”¹⁹⁹

It is also important to remark that the nature of the Romantics’ desired connection reflects the proposition that to humankind belong both the familiar and the alien. Romantic connection seeks to preserve this difference. The desired union is the object of a quest, not a conquest, and not an obliteration of the Other. On the contrary, for the Romantic, intimacy is contemplated as a way to affirm alterity.²⁰⁰ Were this not an integral element of the Romantic program, European Romanticism would not have proved as attractive as it did to the Egyptian intellectuals who embraced it. As we have seen, Romantic Orientalism reconstituted itself in the Arab East as “Oriental” Romanticism.²⁰¹

This, then, is the Romantic grain within which the Egyptian thinkers of the Renaissance School and their heirs have worked out their individual and collective expressions of literary intelligence: a tragi-comedy of language that produces a certain kind of reader of sacred texts—a Romantic reader. Such a reader is one who attends to language for the promise it holds of securing a connection between the reading self and the world beyond—*in time*. The Romantic reader’s meditations are always focused upon the temporal aspects of the text and the language that composes it; they are, therefore, irremediably history-conscious and worldly. This is a distinctive trait of Romanticism and it is

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 31.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, pp. 26-28.

²⁰¹ Although the Muslim world focus of this study is Egypt, Romanticism captured the imaginations of intellectuals throughout the Arab world in the early 20th century. See e.g., Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry, vol. 2, Leiden: Brill (1977), pp. 361-529.

one that truly works against the currents of much linguistic and literary study as it was conducted during the 20th century.

Whether one considers the Russian Formalists, the American New Critics, or the proponents of Structuralism, all understood close attention to language and its textualization to *preclude* temporal or historical considerations. This a-historical presumption strikes at the very heart of Romantic philosophy's propositional quartet: in effect, it disconnects the first proposition (truth belongs to language) from the fourth (to humankind belong both the familiar and the alien) by omitting the middle terms (language belongs to history and history belongs to humankind). Formalists, New Critics, and Structuralists all agreed that truth, to whatever extent it makes sense to speak of it, is something that subsists in language; they also tended to affirm that the familiar and the strange are both significant aspects of literate and linguistic experience. But the passage of time was deemed irrelevant to their linguistic investigations. The Structuralists found historical reflection so uncongenial that they developed a jaundiced opinion of human participation in linguistic affairs. The notion that someone (an historical human figure) might be identified as the "author" of a given text came under severe criticism until writers (I will not be so indelicate as to refer to them as "authors") like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault pronounced such figures "dead." Their elaboration of this theme has been understood by many as a mortal blow to the 19th century Romantic obsession with authorial personality and voice.²⁰²

²⁰² For an interesting take on the schools and trends of 20th century literary criticism, see Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction, 2nd edition, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

And, in many ways, it was. Romantic veneration of the author as demi-god or hero has had to give way to more modest and nuanced appreciations of literate and linguistic “authority.” Indeed, Romantic thinking has had to adjust itself to a host of other 20th century innovations in the way that language and literature are conceived. Those adjustments have been slowly surfacing as individual thinkers absorb the impact of new theory (recall that, as I noted at the close of the previous chapter, the field of contemporary literary criticism came into its own as an independent, transnational, specialized discipline of intellectual inquiry only in the latter half of the 20th century).²⁰³ There have been important figures on the periphery of these developments (like Taha Husayn and Amin al-Khuli) who were not in a position to fully assess their nature and extent.

As with any newly established field, questions as to precisely *what* this specialized discipline of intellectual inquiry entails became hot topics of debate—both within the field and without. The controversy over literary criticism’s “proper” subject reflects, in part, the aggressive expansion by literary critics into areas of inquiry that would have been considered completely outside their scope less than a century ago. The late 20th century transgression of those bounds was made possible by the theory-driven “discovery” that there is no “literature” in the sense of a “stable, well-definable entity” that one might study in the same way that an entomologist studies insects.²⁰⁴ The British critic Terry Eagleton argues

²⁰³ Ouyang, Literary Criticism, p. 8.

²⁰⁴ Eagleton, Literary Theory, p. 9. In the preface to the 2nd edition, Eagleton expanded (or, perhaps, contracted) his understanding of the field, claiming that “there is in fact no ‘literary theory’, in the sense of a body of theory which springs from, or is applicable to, literature alone.” p. vii.

that “anything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature—Shakespeare, for example—can cease to be literature.”²⁰⁵ This is because literature is not constituted by words on a page; rather, what constitutes literature are “historically-variable value-judgments” which bear a “close relation to social ideologies.” These value-judgments “refer in the end not simply to private taste, but to assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others.”²⁰⁶

Eagleton’s thesis has important ramifications for our study, for it problematizes the Muslim Traditionalist argument that the application of modern literary critical tools and techniques to the Qur’anic corpus reduces the sacred text to “mere literature.”²⁰⁷ If, as Eagleton asserts, “there is no ‘essence’ of literature whatsoever,” then there is nothing that the application of such tools and techniques can possibly reduce the Qur’an to.²⁰⁸ This supports the contention of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd that the literary historian “...does not by any means intend to damage the Qur’an or even to question its divine and holy nature.” Moreover, it puts teeth into his associated claim that “religious texts, though divine and revealed by God, are historically determined and culturally constructed.”²⁰⁹ Eagleton has sought to disclose the ideologically-charged nature

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 14.

²⁰⁷ See Mustansir Mir, “The Qur’an as Literature,” Religion & Literature 20.1 (1988), pp. 49-64.

²⁰⁸ Eagleton, Literary Theory, p. 8. See also Nasr Abu Zayd, “The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur’an,” Alif 23, 2003, pp. 8-47.

²⁰⁹ Abu Zayd, “Dilemma,” pp. 34-35.

of those very historical determinations and cultural constructions. Indeed, following his argument, one may assign responsibility for the “reduction” of the Qur’an to “mere literature” to the parties who accuse others of doing so—for the literary “reduction” of the Qur’an, to whatever extent it may occur, is produced by virtue of the accusation itself and not the application of analytical tools and techniques to Qur’anic discourse.

Rather than reduce the Qur’an to a “literary essence,” Romantic readers of the sacred text (like Abu Zayd) have translated a post-Medieval consciousness of time into a sense of history that opens the past to re-description. The re-description of the past of a given text issues in fresh readings of that text; as Eagleton has provocatively phrased this phenomenon: “...there is no reading of a work which is not also a ‘re-writing.’”²¹⁰ Islamic traditions, developed in the medieval period, “authored” a version of the Qur’an that bore a relation to the past significantly different from the version “authored” by the heirs to the Romantics. The former project is well established in Sunni traditionalism and Shi’ism; the latter, still under way, is in the process of producing the Qur’an of Romantic re-description.

Eagleton’s intervention is important for yet another reason: it supports the Romantic thesis that, where one encounters the “smoke” of language, there one can expect to find the “fire” of the human subject. Granted, Eagleton’s human subjects are engaged in power struggles through their privileging of certain texts over others; therefore, they do not look much like what one expects to find where

²¹⁰ Eagleton, Literary Theory, p. 11.

the Romantic imagination is involved. Be that as it may, they are active and interested figures, capable of fogging a mirror—unlike Barthes’s dead author.

In the wake of Barthes and others, Poststructuralists have had to “resuscitate” human agency, interest, intentionality, and time. It is important to stress, however, that their interventions ought not to be mistaken for wholesale capitulations to Romantic values. They have been more like an offer of amnesty to those unreconstructed Romantics who managed to survive the ideological purges of the 20th century with their longing for worldly connection still intact. That longing restores the middle terms of the Romantic schema (language and history) connecting truth to humankind (both familiar and alien) and calls to mind the Kierkegaardian mantra “truth is subjectivity.”²¹¹ But what sort of subjectivity might this be? Surely not one that would accept, without modification, Kierkegaard’s uncompromising stress upon the individual: for, despite Romanticism’s persistent identification with individualism and particularity, the Romantic desire to make contact beyond the self has been equally persistent. Restoring the linguistic and historical connections between truth and humankind encourages, therefore, a new invocation of truth as *inter-subjectivity*. And, given the critical communications role that Romantics accord to language and the passage of time, inter-subjectivity is often best understood as a function of *intertextuality*. Truth as inter-subjectivity mediated by intertextuality begins to emerge within the theoretical apparatus of the Egyptian School in the recent work of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd.

²¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1941), pp. 115-343.

Abu Zayd's Contributions

In reviewing the scholarly activities of the Egyptian Renaissance critics, we witnessed a practice of reading that focuses upon text-in-context. Their work has prepared the ground for Nasr Abu Zayd's recent studies of the ways of language-in-history. I characterize these critical practices as "transgressive reading"—transgressive in the sense that they do violence, not to the materials under scrutiny but, rather, to what Richard Rorty would term the "entrenched vocabularies" by which sectarian elites have construed those materials. As we have noted: whatever their virtues, such vocabularies privilege theological verticality at the expense of the horizon of historicity—a "defect" one may appreciate only in retrospect—i.e., from the vantage point of a post-Medieval sense of time (as found among the Romantics).²¹²

Building upon the work of his Egyptian predecessors and also mindful of trends in the newly transnational field of literary criticism, Nasr Abu Zayd has had to keep pace with the accelerated movement of cultural time. Heeding the Red Queen's advice to Alice in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass ("Now, *here* you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"),²¹³ Abu

²¹² As the negative reaction in Egypt to the Romantic readers of the Qur'an suggests, not all post-Medievales share this historicized sensibility; and, as we saw in the case of the later Heidegger, not all who do share such a sensibility do so without misgivings. We may infer from these facts that the cultural rhythms of technicalism have made a modern sense of history universally available, but not universally effective. This inference parallels Bruno Latour's observations of the ways in which the rhetoric of modern science co-exists with pre-modern rhetorics in our self-consciously modern but chronologically post-medieval moment. See Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

²¹³ Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, New York: Book of the Month Club (1994), p. 204; 1st pub. 1865-1871.

Zayd has embraced a hermeneutical protocol “whereby the study of language, literature, and cultural forms becomes irrevocably obligated to attend to the semiotic operations involved in the production of meanings”—meanings that can no longer be assumed to be natural” or “substantial” or “inevitable” but historically constituted.²¹⁴ In addition, Abu Zayd appears to accept the findings of those scholars who have determined, along with the Romantic critic M. H. Abrams, that “...the communicative efficacy of language rests on no other or better ground than that both writers and readers tacitly accept and apply the regularities and limits of an inherited social and linguistic contract.”²¹⁵ In his most recent publications, Abu Zayd has placed ever greater stress upon the human *relationships* (evoked here by Abrams’ contractual metaphor) which constitute texts. The result is an anti-essentialism whereby Qur’anic textuality is re-configured as a theatre of discursivity. This is a fairly radical turn on Abu Zayd’s part and one that merits careful consideration.

Abu Zayd’s “Discursive Turn”

In the final pages of Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis, Abu Zayd traces the evolution of his thinking since the publication of his book *Mafhum al-Nass* (The Concept of the Text) in 1990.²¹⁶ His focus in the latter work had been, as the title suggests, on understanding what it means to

²¹⁴ Rey Chow, “The Interruption of Referentiality,” South Atlantic Quarterly 101 (2002): 172. I first learned of this essay by reading Elizabeth A. Clark, History, Theory, Text, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

²¹⁵ M. H. Abrams, “Construing and Deconstructing,” Doing Things With Texts, edited by Michael Fischer, New York: W. W. Norton & Co. (1989), p. 312.

²¹⁶ Nasr Abu Zayd, Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

regard the Qur'an as a "text." He addressed this question by reviewing "the historical and linguistic dimensions of the Qur'an" through "critical re-readings" of the classical sciences of exegesis (*'ulum al-Qur'an*). In a manner reminiscent of the controversial work of Taha Husayn, Abu Zayd teased out of the language of the canonical codex (*mushaf*) encoded elements of the pre-Islamic Arab culture. He argued that while no one can or should ignore the fact that the Qur'an was the "producer of a new culture," that new culture was by no means discontinuous with the culture that had preceded the arrival of the sacred text in time. He concluded that an historical construction of the context of the Revelation would serve as a means of controlling its ideological appropriation at the hands of its interpreters—Modern and pre-Modern.²¹⁷

In 2000, Abu Zayd "attempted an elaboration" of his earlier re-reading (re-"authoring") of the *'ulum al-Qur'an* with the aid of a varied complement of interpretive and analytical methods (including semantics, semiotics, historical criticism and hermeneutics). This display of critical pluralism and virtuosity yielded a Qur'an located at the intersection of the "vertical" and "horizontal" axes discussed in the previous chapter. The sacred text emerged from this approach as "a space of Divine and Human communication"—creating a conceptual opening by means of which he began to re-think the notion of the Qur'an as "text."²¹⁸

Abu Zayd argues that, even if one uncritically accepts the information provided by the Classical Muslim sources about the revelation of the Qur'an, it is

²¹⁷ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, p. 97.

²¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 97-98.

difficult to escape the sense that the *mushaf* represents a redaction of surviving inscriptions that memorialize what was an interactive process involving, at minimum, God, the Prophet, and his historical context (including his audience). This process unfolded over the course of Muhammad's prophetic career. Close study of the "specific language structure" found in the canonical codex confirms this sense. Unfortunately, Abu Zayd contends, both Traditionalist and Modernist interpreters of the Qur'an read and argue over the Revelation with little appreciation for the "text" as *itself* the "outcome of dialogue, debate, argument, acceptance and rejection, both with pre-Islamic norms, practices, and culture, and with its own previous assessments, presuppositions and assertions."²¹⁹ He attributes this hermeneutical myopia to the deference Muslims routinely give to the "vertical" dimension of the interpretive equation over the "horizontal." Abu Zayd defines the latter as "the dimension that is embedded in the structure of the Qur'an and which was manifest during the actual process of communication. Realization of this horizontal dimension is only feasible if we shift our conceptual framework from the Qur'an as 'text' to the Qur'an as 'discourse.'"²²⁰

This discursive turn bears a family resemblance to Michel Foucault's call to suspend the "ready-made syntheses" and "unities of discourse" that arbitrarily privilege continuity over discontinuity and rupture.²²¹ For Foucault, such unities create illusory essences (like "literature") which (as we have seen Eagleton argue

²¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 97-99.

²²⁰ Ibid. p. 98.

²²¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books (1972), pp. 3-39.

in a Foucaultian vein) disguise the “historically-variable value-judgments” tied to “assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others.”²²² Indeed, Abu Zayd’s notion of “text” appears to fall into the category of those unities that, for Foucault, “must be suspended above all” because they “emerge in the most immediate way: those of the book and the *oeuvre*.”²²³

Foucault argued that, despite appearances, “the frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.”²²⁴ Writing in France in the early 1970’s, Foucault drew upon the scientized vocabulary of Structuralism in order to articulate a project that reflected his desire to move beyond the arbitrary boundaries which the material structures of text or codex impose upon the ways of language. But by incorporating the language of Structuralism, he fell prey to the familiar Structuralist tendency to overlook “certain crucial connotations of words which one could recognize only by moving outside the text itself to the cultural and social codes on which it draws.” He therefore tended to “seize the text synchronically, as an object in space rather than a movement in time”—a misstep that Abu Zayd’s historicism avoids.²²⁵ As we have observed, movement beyond the confines of the text in search of “crucial connotations” has been a consistent

²²² Eagleton, Literary Theory, p. 14.

²²³ Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 23.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Eagleton, Literary Theory, p. 101.

critical value within the Egyptian School since at least Taha Husayn. Abu Zayd's project attempts to assure the continuing relevance of this value to his own hermeneutical practice.

Kindred Developments

Having rightly remarked these technical differences in approach, we ought not to permit them to obscure the motivating gesture that they share: a desire to break the spell of the solitary, “vertically” activated text or codex—to move outside the textual artifact as tradition has delivered it to us—in order to make connections with other voices from the “heritage.” Those voices include rhetorical personae and possibilities that, through encoding, remain present to the history of the inscribed artifact *even if absent from its discursive surface*.²²⁶

The Romantic desire to make these connections can find fulfillment by moving outside the text which “holds us captive.”²²⁷ That said, it also bears remarking that the only way out of such captivity is *through* the text before us. This may be accomplished by means of a process that the Romantic philosopher, Stanley Cavell, calls “deep reading”:

Words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them. Meaning them is accepting that fact of their condition. To discover what is being said to us, as to discover what we are saying, is to discover the precise location from which it is said; to understand why it is said from just there, and at that time...To read [a] text accurately is to assess its computations, to check its sentences against our convictions, to prove the derivation of its words. Since every mark counts, the task is to arrive in turn at each of them, as at conclusions. A deep reading is not one in which you sink away from the surface of the words. Words already engulf us. It is one in which you depart from a given word as from a point of origin; you go deep as into

²²⁶ See Cox, Cultural Memory and Public Moral Argument.

²²⁷ To paraphrase Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 3rd edition, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, New York: Macmillan (1958), p. 48 (remark 115).

woods. Understanding is a matter of orientation, of bearings, of the ability to keep to a course and to move in natural paths from any point to any other. The depths of the book are nothing apart from its surfaces. Figurations of language can be thought of as ways of reflecting the surfaces and depths of a word onto one another.²²⁸

As a Romantic, Cavell feels deeply the troubling sense that, as he puts it, “words come to us from a distance.” In order to find his way about a text, Cavell must forge connections not only with the text itself but with the subjectivities it implies. This is because something “is being said to us” and we, too, are “speaking.” Presumably, “we” are aware of the location from which we speak—though this is not clear—because, in order “to discover what is being said to us, as to discover what we [ourselves] are saying, is to discover the precise location from which” something has been, or is being, said. It is critical that we come to some understanding as to “why it is said from just there, and at that time,” because context (spatial and temporal) plays a key role in the meaning-making process. Consequently, the transgressive impulse towards exodus or *hijra* from the constrictions of exclusivist theological verticality and into the open *Medina* of horizontal connection ought never to blind us to our own point of departure. All leave-taking commences with the expectation of an eventual return to circumambulate the *ka’aba* of the canonical codex. Invoking discursiveness or an oral substrate to a written text does not wave a magic wand over that text causing it to dissolve into thin air. The difficulties of the *textus receptus* always remain. There is a powerful sense in which its virtual “unbundling” into historically identifiable conversations (dialogue, debate, argument) changes nothing. After

²²⁸ Stanley Cavell, The Senses of Walden, San Francisco: North Point Press (1981), pp. 64-65.

hermeneutical deep reading, the Qur'an is still the Qur'an—only moreso. But it is that “moreso” that makes all the difference.

The path of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics traced out by Nasr Abu Zayd and the Egyptian School is unquestionably a road less traveled, but it is not by any means a road un-traveled. The desire to make connections through language may be a Romantic one but, as we have seen, the un- (perhaps even anti-) Romantic Foucault felt compelled to speak of a book as “a node within a network.” Foucault's notion that we are always already immersed in connections resonates with Cavell's observation that “words already engulf us.” Abu Zayd's position is quite similar: he argues that, before language can refer to the world, the referent must be “conceived, conceptualized, and then symbolized.” The result is that the referent of most locutions is yet another locution: linguistic signs refer to other linguistic signs in a never ending game of chase.²²⁹ For these thinkers the problem with linguistic connectivity is not how to find it; the problem is how to keep from drowning in it. Initially, Foucault took the position that drowning may not be, in the end, such a bad fate—and he embraced the Structuralist decision to do away with the “author.”²³⁰ He found, however, that on

²²⁹ Abu Zayd, “Dilemma,” pp. 36-37. Despite the echo here of Derrida's clever play of “différance” upon Saussure's “différence,” Abu Zayd does not appear to bite very far into the Deconstructionist apple. The worm in that apple, as far as I am concerned, lies in the fact that Saussure's notion of meaning-making (all meaning is reduced to the distinctions between words) was inadequate to begin with. The engine of semantics remains old-fashioned reference—not the naïve sort that one finds, for example, in Augustine's theory of ostensive definition (thoroughly “deconstructed,” if you will, by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 2-59)—but reference negotiated among those party to a given communication in *context* (where context is itself a party or silent partner to the transaction). For a superb appreciation and yet comprehensive critique of the Derridean project, see M. H. Abrams's Wittgensteinian essay “How To Do Things With Texts” in Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts*, pp. 269-296.

²³⁰ See also *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, London: Routledge (1988), p. 309.

this view (the Saussurean model of language) literature became a closed system.²³¹ Inter-connectivity was affirmed, but only *intra*-systemically. Looking back on the Structuralist movement, Foucault mused,

... but it seems to me that this was still only a stage. For, by keeping analysis at this level, one runs the risk of not unraveling the totality of sacralizations of which literature has been the object. On the contrary, one runs the risk of sacralizing even more.²³²

The process Foucault terms “sacralization” corresponds in interesting ways to Abu Zayd’s notion of “verticality.” Proclaiming the “death of the author” produces an effect in the field of secular literature that parallels the effect created in the field of sacred literature when the applicability of the “horizontal” dimension in exegesis is either severely restricted or denied: each move severs an important link between its respective “literature” and the world.²³³

The point I wish to emphasize here is that the Romantic desire to establish connections through the medium of language is predicated upon the commonplace that language is referential.²³⁴ Stated differently, all language is semiotic or “sign” language—i.e., it contains “signage” that points or refers to something else. It is upon this very aspect of language that many Romantics pin their hopes for making connections with the world. The difficulty with this solution is that the

²³¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.

²³² Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture, p. 309.

²³³ Ibid. See also Abu Zayd, Reformation of Islamic Thought, p. 99. Post-Structuralism would seek to remedy this problem by turning the world itself into “text.” But see Abrams, Doing Things with Texts, pp. 269-296.

²³⁴ The first Romantic to consider this aspect of language was the first Romantic—Jean-Jacques Rousseau. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder, On the Origin of Language, translated by John H. Moran and Alexander Gode, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1966), pp. 5-13.

nature of linguistic reference is necessarily indirect; its relationship to the world is oblique. Abu Zayd illustrates this point with the Arabic word “*anqa*’ (comparable with the English ‘phoenix’).” This word has meaning without referring to any existing thing except language.²³⁵ His insight is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s remark that “When we say: ‘Every word in language signifies something’ we have so far said *nothing whatever*...”²³⁶ Wittgenstein (who shows himself Cavell’s strong precursor) then directs his interlocutor to dig deep into the “language game” (*Sprachspiel*) she happens to be playing.²³⁷

Such exercises never take us completely outside of language to the world beyond; instead, they permit us to clarify the use of our words by means of more words. According to Wittgenstein, however, there is an experience that grows out of this very exercise: a dawning impression that our efforts at disambiguation of the signified world *show* us our own embeddedness in something beyond ourselves.²³⁸ Paradoxically, it would seem, intra-linguistic reference is *itself* a pointing to something beyond: “*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world... That the world is *my* world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (*the* language which I understand) mean the limits of *my* world.”²³⁹ Our

²³⁵ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, “Dilemma,” pp. 36-37. According to Hans Wehr’s Dictionary, ‘*anqa*’ may also refer to a griffon: more semiotic openness. Hans Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, 4th edition, edited by J. M. Cowan, Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, Inc. (1994), p. 761.

²³⁶ Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, p. 7 (remark 13).

²³⁷ Ibid, p. 39 (remark 83).

²³⁸ What Heidegger called our “facticity.” See John D. Caputo, More Radical Hermeneutics, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (2000), pp. 55-56.

²³⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, translated by C. K. Ogden, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (1922), pp. 149-151.

“sign” language points out to us its own limitation and implies, *through* this limitation, that there may be something beyond itself. Therefore, by attending to the ways of language in history one may arrive at a peculiar *feeling* of the world—a feeling, according to Wittgenstein, that escapes words: “...The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling...There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.”²⁴⁰

It is difficult to understand exactly what Wittgenstein intended by his use of the phrase “the mystical”—especially since he discouraged its direct investigation.²⁴¹ I would suggest that, by means of this instance of apophasis, he was attempting to resolve his own Romantic desire to connect with the world. This resolution took the form of a species of linguistic practice. Wittgenstein would later write that “...To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.”²⁴² The question that such a conclusion leaves unanswered, however, is precisely what kind of linguistic practice will do? Attending to the Wittgensteinian roots of Cavell’s metaphor of the wood, I suggest one that discriminates between a normative approach to the ways of language in history (i.e., grammar) and a descriptive one—privileging the latter whenever and wherever possible. The path of Rortian Romantic re-description is cut by means of such Wittgensteinian linguistic description.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 187.

²⁴¹ “Whereof one cannot speak [i.e., the inexpressible], thereof one must be silent.” Ibid, p. 189.

²⁴² Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, p. 81 (remark 199).

Perhaps the final destination of our wanderings with the Austrian philosopher is the conviction that knowledge or understanding is best appreciated as a kind of “know-how” that involves one’s facility with words. What is more, one’s “doings” in this regard occur during the ordinary course of everyday linguistic business. Though the study of hermeneutics may be an occupation for a scholarly few, its practice is inevitable and, indeed, unavoidable in some form for all. This is because (as Wittgenstein would say) the “language games” we play are inextricably inter-related with the “forms of life” (*Lebensform*) we inhabit.²⁴³ Though the form of the linguistic signage we employ involves intra-linguistic reference, its effect is world-disclosing. Therefore, by mastering the techniques of linguistic interconnectivity, we *show* the ways of language in history.²⁴⁴ In the next section, I will examine these ways descriptively.

Describing the Ways of Language

The empirical fact of intra-linguistic reference is partly responsible for the vogue that Structuralism enjoyed across the humanistic disciplines from the late 1960’s into the early 1980’s. As we have seen, however, this same empirical fact threatens to undermine the promise of connecting with the world beyond language by means of language—and it takes an extraordinary amount of effort,

²⁴³ Ibid, p. 8 (remark 19).

²⁴⁴ There is an analogue, if not a deep affinity, between the Romantic preoccupation with the ways of language in time and the speculative insights it produces, on the one hand, and Shihab al-Din Yahya ibn Habash ibn Amirak al-Suhrawardi’s procedure in the *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, on the other. Stanley Cavell’s insistence that “figurations of language can be thought of as ways of reflecting the surfaces and depths of a word onto one another” (*supra.*, p. 111) offers a suggestive link. If one wishes to establish a classical Muslim precursor for the procedural aspects of modern Qur’anic hermeneutics, Suhrawardi may prove to be the “hidden imam” (so to speak). See Suhrawardi, Yahya ibn Habash, *The Philosophy of Illumination: A New Critical Edition of the text of Hikmat al-ishraq*, edited with an English translation by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999.

culminating (for Wittgenstein at least) in a “mystical” feeling, to keep that promise alive. Nevertheless, heirs of the Romantics like Nasr Abu Zayd make the study of linguistic *semiosis* a standard part of the protocol for hermeneutics. In Wittgensteinian fashion, they choose to emphasize the semiotic openness of language and practice a version of Romantic Rortian pragmatism rather than allow metaphysical questions of solipsism to impede their progress.²⁴⁵

Yet, even if one accepts Wittgenstein’s solution to the problem of the relationship between words and world (or simply “brackets” it), one is not yet out of the woods—a comforting thought to Cavell. As we move forward into the linguistic thicket, our footing is never free from slippage. A crucial implication of the semiotic “openness” of language is that it shifts the burden of meaning-making from the “sender” of a given communication and distributes it across the various parties to the communicative transaction. I have already mentioned one consequence of this shift: the weakening (if not severance) of the linguistic ties that bind the sender of a communication to the receiver.

For surviving Romantics—as for post-Structuralist thinking generally—the author or sender of a communication is forced to endure the indignity of losing control over the process of meaning-making and to witness that control change hands. Now the “receiver” of a given communication, and the context in which the communication takes place, are *disproportionately semantically empowered* relative to the sender’s previously imputed level of control. The sender is like a monarch who, after a revolution, has had to take her place among other ordinary

²⁴⁵ As one of Rorty’s strong precursors, Wittgenstein was a Romantic Rortian Pragmatist *avant la lettre*.

citizens in a republic; her crown has been removed, but unlike many of her non-metaphorical counterparts, her neck has been spared.

Starting in the early 1960's—a few years *ahead* of the Structuralist curve—the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco began to develop a model of an “egalitarian” semiotics to re-describe the ways of language in history. He appreciated the shift of semantic empowerment implicit in the Structuralists' paradigm but, unlike them, saw no need to engage in authorial regicide. The ultimate result of his ruminations upon the subject was A Theory of Semiotics; but prior to the publication of that book, Eco developed a “poetics of the open work” in which he set out the terms and conditions under which meaning is made.²⁴⁶ Here we can begin to see the emerging outlines of the role of sender (often the author) of a communication and that of its receiver(s)-in-context that will survive the Structuralist moment in literary theory:

...the author presents a finished product with the intention that this particular composition should be appreciated and received in the same form as he devised it. As he reacts to the play of stimuli and his own response to their patterning, the individual addressee is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense conditioning which is peculiarly his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations, and prejudices. Thus, his comprehension of the original artifact is always modified by his particular and individual perspective...These give it a wealth of different resonances and echoes without impairing its original essence...[The artifact], therefore, is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence every reception of [an artifact] is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976.

²⁴⁷ Umberto Eco, The Open Work, translated by Anna Cancogni, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1989), p. 3.

At first blush, Eco's author appears to wear the same imperious expression as the demiurge of 19th century Romantic theory—or the Allah of verticalist Islamic theology. Upon closer inspection, however, his account is more nuanced than either of those alternatives. In effect, Eco attempts to broker a creative compromise that permits the material communicated an integrity attested by the stamp of authorial design while, at the same moment, acknowledging the distribution of the burden of meaning-making to addressee(s)-in-context. Implying that this shift is an *intended* part of the design, Eco's "author" or sender participates in her own disempowerment for the sake of the receiver(s):

...the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work *to be completed*. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the interpretive dialogue, a form which is his form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen. The author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development.²⁴⁸

From the Romantic perspective, Eco's move is felicitous: for if, included within the configuring intentions of the artifact-as-sent, there reposes a desire to see that artifact "completed" through interpretation, then Abu Zayd's insistence upon the horizontal dimension of sacred texts is no longer optional but prescribed—*by the author/sender of the interpreted text itself*. In other words, the self-sufficiency of theological verticality (or Structuralist *langue*) is made illusory by

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 19. Any reader familiar with the work of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin cannot help but wonder if this passage reflects a familiarity on Eco's part with Bakhtin's notion of "unfinalizability." See Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1990), pp. 36-49.

authorial intent.²⁴⁹ This would also appear to render Wittgenstein's linguistic mysticism redundant—or simply replace it by a different form of mysticism: one in which the competent receiver is an adept, preternaturally endowed with an ability to divine the mind of the author/sender from marks on a page.²⁵⁰ Interestingly, Eco does not appear to rely upon such mysteries. He opts instead for an Einsteinian “field of relations”:

The possibilities which the work's openness makes available always work within a given field of relations. As in the Einsteinian universe...we may well deny that there is [within the artifact-as-sent] a single prescribed point of view. But this does not mean complete chaos in its internal relations. What it does imply is an organizing rule which governs these relations. Therefore, to sum up, we can say that the [artifact] is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the [receiver] the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author.²⁵¹

Eco here hedges on the degree of specificity with which the reader may determine authorial intent—not the proposition that authors possess intentions. Indeed, it would seem that, for Eco, authorial intent is embodied in a given text's historical composition.²⁵² Every text is a linguistic artifact. Its facticity—its severe

²⁴⁹ Little wonder, then, that the Structuralists were anxious to announce the author's demise.

²⁵⁰ Such a “mystical turn” evokes Schleiermacher, the Protestant-Romantic “father” of modern hermeneutical thought. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, edited by Andrew Bowie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

²⁵¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 19. In an intriguing gesture that he does not develop in this essay, Eco suggests that the “god” of Einsteinian theory is the “Divinity of Spinoza.” Ibid, pp. 18-19.

²⁵² A notion that bears a striking resemblance to the medieval rhetorician ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani's theory of *nazm*. On al-Jurjani, a great favorite of Abu Zayd's, see Kamal Abu Deeb, *Al-Jurjani's Theory of Poetic Imagery*, Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, Ltd. 1979; Margaret Larkin, *The Theology of Meaning: ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani's Theory of Discourse*, New Haven, Conn: American Oriental Society, 1995.

particularities—subsist as a nexus of internal constraints (including the grammatical, idiomatic, and the impositions of authorial intent). These constraints act in concert as a self-governing “organizing rule” and require accounting for in the process of interpretation. But beyond that, the text stands as an open invitation for Cavellian “orientations”—including transgressive readings in the Romantic grain.

Elite Anxiety Over Custodial Control

The diminution of the sender’s power becomes a matter of heightened interest when, as in the case of Scripture, the sender is affirmed to be God.²⁵³ Consequently, elites in every Scripturalist tradition suffer bouts of dyspepsia (and, occasionally, apoplexy) over what they generally perceive to be a threat to their monopoly over authorized meaning-making when it comes to the texts they hold sacred.²⁵⁴

There is a fascinating anecdote in the Babylonian Talmud that reflects this form of anxiety. The Sages are arguing over a point of *halakha* when a Voice from Heaven interrupts to side with Rabbi Eliezer. This act of Divine intervention fails to impress the other Rabbis. Their reason is that the Torah was already given at

²⁵³ For the purposes of this discussion, I do not think that it matters whether one believes that the “sender” of the Qur’an is God, the Prophet Muhammad, or some person or persons as yet unknown to historical investigation. Even so, I note for the record that Eco’s “sender” is presumably *not* Divine. It is perhaps curious that his human sender may strike some readers as retaining more semantic power than God (see, e.g., Eco, *Open Work*, p. 19). I do not read it that way, but I am also at a loss as to how one would go about measuring any detectable difference. A Divine sender such as the God of traditional Muslim theology is presumed to know in advance the value of the cards held by everyone at the table. This raises questions of free will which I am not competent to address. On the God of traditional Muslim theology, see Richard J. McCarthy, S. J. *The Theology of Al-Ash ‘ari*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953; Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976; Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

²⁵⁴ Confirming Eagleton’s assertion that “literature” is constituted by value judgments that underwrite claims to power.

Sinai and there is therefore no need to heed the Heavenly Voice. It is later reported that the “Holy One, blessed be He” reacted to the Rabbis response with joyous laughter, saying, “My sons have defeated Me!”²⁵⁵ A similar acceptance of the shifting of the hermeneutic burden in the case of Scripture is found in the Muslim tradition that attributes to the Caliph ‘Ali the statement that “the Qur’an is between the covers of the book and does not speak, it is humans that make it speak.”²⁵⁶ While acknowledging the apparent celebration of this shift (in the Talmudic story) and the matter-of-fact acceptance of it (in the cited Muslim tradition), we ought not to lose sight of the fact that the subtext of the Talmudic tale is a confirmation of the investment of hermeneutical power in a select few (the Rabbis); the context of the Muslim tradition suggests that the Caliph-Imam was contesting an interpretation of the Qur’an put forward by others whom he did not consider to be qualified to do so.

What is particularly revealing about these anecdotes is the way in which the elites they feature attempt to manage the semiotic openness of language—rather than try to deny that it exists. Since both of these stories originate from the formative period of their respective traditions, it is likely that the position of those emerging elites was not so secure that they could hope to enjoy success by stonewalling on this particular issue. This does not appear to be the case today in either tradition. For his part, Nasr Abu Zayd is critical of such elite management

²⁵⁵ My re-telling is abbreviated from Richard B. Hays’ re-telling in Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul, New Haven: Yale University Press (1989), pp. 2-3.

²⁵⁶ Cited in Ebrahim Moosa, “The Politics and Poetics of Law after Empire: Reading Women’s Rights in the Contestations of Law,” UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law 1 (2001-2002), p. 45 and Nasr Abu Zayd, Re-Thinking the Qur’an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics, Utrecht: Humanistics University Press (2004), pp. 12-13.

of available meanings where the Qur'an is concerned: he wants to free "religious thought from power manipulation, whether political, social, or religious"; furthermore, he desires to "empower the community of believers to formulate 'meaning'" on their own. Echoing Eco, he describes this project as the construction of a "democratic and open hermeneutics."²⁵⁷

To summarize: our description of the ways of language in history coordinates four cardinal points: (1) the burden of making sense of any text shifts from the "sender" to receivers-in-context, (2) that shift represents a unique, semantic empowerment of those receivers, (3) among those receivers-in-context are sectarian elites who wish to monopolize this power for themselves, and (4) elites are therefore threatened by the relatively "open" nature of the described semantic shift. Consequently, the path of modern hermeneutics traced out by Abu Zayd and others is a road less traveled on account of elite interventions in the process of meaning-making. Ironically, those very interventions prove that it is not a road un-traveled; for if sectarian elites themselves knew nothing of this road, they would not attempt to control the course of its traffic.

Towards a General Theory of Open Hermeneutics

The preceding pages have brought us to a place where we may gather together what I hope will prove in time to be the rudiments of a General Theory of open hermeneutics. As applied to the Qur'an, this theory is built upon the transgressive readings pioneered by the Egyptian Renaissance School in the early 20th century and continues to be developed by Nasr Abu Zayd at the present time. Those readings represent a continuation of Romantic philosophy which has not

²⁵⁷ Abu Zayd, Reformation of Islamic Thought, p. 99.

only survived its many obituaries but has become more focused and subtle as it has transcended the parochialism of its European provenance. As practiced by Abu Zayd, the *manhaj* of this theory is pluralistic, but it invariably involves an acute sensitivity to semiotic referentiality, underscoring the premium Romantic thinking places upon making connections through language.

Unlike its Structuralist rival, Romantic connectivity embraces Vico's post-Medieval insight that human beings possess a unique relationship to history (i.e., privileged access to it) because they are its authors. As a result, the Romantic desire to champion inter-connectivity is not in any way limited to synchronic analyses of textual artifacts—indeed, diachronic analysis and exploration are considered *de rigueur*. Moreover, the transgressive nature of open hermeneutics does no violence to the sacred texts it studies but only to the elite management of available meanings to be made from those texts. Indeed, insofar as its *manhaj* is a species of what the American Romantic philosopher Stanley Cavell terms “deep reading,” the virtual unbundling of sacred texts into historically identifiable conversations and echoes changes nothing.

As with any form of literary criticism, transgressive readings in the Romantic grain are re-writings, but re-writings that stake no claim to either legal or theological authority. They represent instead a means of inquiring into the ways of language in history and are “democratic” in the sense that they may be practiced competently by any individual who has attained a degree of proficiency in their philosophy and technique. Muslim jurists or theologians may, of course, find compelling reasons to engage the results of such re-writings but, by the same token, they may also find compelling reasons to ignore them. Since engaging the

results of Romantic re-writings may entail an admission of semantic openness in sacred texts, and semantic openness entails a concomitant loss of custodial control, I anticipate that sectarian elites will find the reasons to ignore the results of Qur'anic hermeneutics far more attractive than the reasons to engage them.²⁵⁸

It is with modest expectations, then, that the practitioner of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics employs the tools and techniques of her trade, "assessing the computations" of the sacred text, "checking its sentences against her convictions," "departing from a given word as from a point of origin, going deep as into woods," attempting "to move in natural paths from any point to any other." The most "natural" pathways in this regard are those cut by the ways of language in time—language being a material of human origin. This means, of course, attending to the semiotic properties of language; but it also means moving beyond the broad sweep of semiotic analysis to referentiality on a more intensive scale.²⁵⁹

Here we may arrive at a clearer understanding of what Cavell terms "assessing the computations" of the text, for here we encounter a logical—or, to be more precise, geometrical—structure of meaning-making that literary

²⁵⁸ See also Abu Zayd, Reformation of Islamic Thought, pp. 96-97; Lenn E. Goodman, Islamic Humanism, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2003), p. 7.

²⁵⁹ One could argue that the Qur'anic term for a "verse" of the Revelation, *ayah*, implies a theory of semiotics. Bruce Lawrence has recently summarized this point as follows: "... the Arabic word for the smallest unit of Qur'anic text means 'verse', but 'verse' also means 'sign' or 'miracle'. As tangible signs, Qur'anic verses are expressive of an inexhaustible truth. They signify meaning layered within meaning, light upon light, miracle after miracle." Lawrence concludes that the Qur'an may be understood as "A Book of Signs." Bruce Lawrence, The Qur'an: A Biography, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press (2006), p. 8.

investigation discloses.²⁶⁰ The remarked shift of the burden of meaning-making on the linguistic level from the “sender” to receivers-in-context establishes a semantic pattern that iterates in the functioning of many literary devices, including citation, allusion, and echo. We will examine the functioning of these devices in the Qur’anic text at some length; the point I wish to make at the moment, however, is that the presence of these devices in communicative transactions ought not to be regarded as something exceptional. Rather, their presence should be expected. They are concrete examples of the ways of language in history and are as ubiquitous as they are inevitable. They represent an intertextual way in which meaning is transmitted and changes through time.

The foregoing description of the ways of language in history has found programmatic implementation in the work of the literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. For Gates, intertextuality is “a process of repetition and revision, by definition.”²⁶¹ Such an assertion corresponds with Eagleton’s observation that every reading is a re-writing. Gates insists that a critic must consider how every re-writing changes something about the writing that is re-written—even if the only obvious change is the context of its reception. That “only” is not to be underestimated; for like the “moreso” we considered earlier, it has the power to make all the difference in the way something is said to mean.²⁶² This is because,

²⁶⁰ What we might call “semantic geometry” resides in the “repetition of similar patterns at ever-diminishing scales,” the definition of a fractal. See Ron Eglash, African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press (1999), p. 4.

²⁶¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1988), p. 60. Gates’ concept of “Signifyin(g)” represents an active exploitation of intertextuality in the African-American community.

²⁶² *Ibid*, pp. 44-124.

with the change of context, the semantic burden still shifts away from the sender to the receiver(s). As Louis Althusser admonished his readers almost 40 years ago: there is no such thing as an innocent reading.²⁶³

Defining intertextuality as a process of repetition and revision takes us to the heart of a matter that is very little understood outside the small coterie of literary critics who study sacred texts. This lack of understanding is responsible for much mischief in the fields of Biblical literature and Qur'anic studies—not the least of which is centuries of inter-sectarian polemic involving the integrity of the Qur'an as *bona fide* revelation.²⁶⁴ While no literary critic has access to any tool or technique capable of settling arguments over whether a given text is the “Word(s) of God,” by approaching intertextuality as an instance of the ways of language in history, we can show how the study of intra- and extra-Scriptural citation, allusion, and echo furthers the project of “unbundling” the codices which have held so many readers “captive” for so long. In the process, we can create the opportunity for the experience of texts held sacred by much of the world's population to be experienced as discourse: as conversations carried on outside what Foucault called the “little parallelepiped” that contains the text.²⁶⁵ If we may accomplish this small but challenging task, we will have taken significant steps

²⁶³ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, Reading Capital, translated by Ben Brewster, London: Verso Classics (1997), p. 14. Originally published 1970.

²⁶⁴ Gates discusses similar polemics involving the integrity of “black letters” in The Signifying Monkey, pp. 113-124. The parallels between white racist and non-Muslim anti-Qur'anic polemics deserve closer scrutiny. Both employ a condescending attitude concerning what constitutes “real” literature/Scripture—an unwarranted essentialism that privileges one's own tradition over another's.

²⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 23.

towards the articulation of what I call the special theory of Near Eastern prophecy.

Towards a Special Theory of Near Eastern Prophecy

From the perspective of Romantic philosophy, the project of breaking the spell of the solitary, “vertically” activated, text or codex and moving outside what the tradition has delivered to us—in order to make connections with the discursive “heritage”—is particularly acute. This project applies to the Qur’an, as we have noted, but it applies with equal force to the larger tradition in which the Qur’an explicitly locates itself: that of Near Eastern prophecy more generally.²⁶⁶ In the case of the Bible, the process of unbundling the “little parallelepiped” that contains the text has been assisted to some extent by the unearthing of the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic Christian scriptures in 1945 and the subsequent discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran in 1947. Both of these finds have created the opportunity for Biblical scholars to re-examine previously held notions regarding Scriptural canonicity and its role in the development of sectarian communities.²⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the codex is a resilient and refractory charm; its spell is not to be underestimated.

One historical reason that may be offered for the staying power of the Bible’s “bookishness”—beyond its consistent presentation as white pages bound together by gilt-lettered, blackened cowhide—is the antiquity of its organization into discretely authored works. For example, scholars date the organization of a

²⁶⁶ For a remarkably inventive and insightful meditation upon the Qur’an’s place in the history of the Near Eastern prophetic tradition, see Norman O. Brown, “The Prophetic Tradition,” *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1991), pp. 46-68.

²⁶⁷ See, e.g., Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2 vols., New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995-2000.

collection of prophetic texts found in the Hebrew Bible (the so-called “Latter Prophets”) into “prophetic books” from about the 6th through 4th century B.C.E.²⁶⁸ The production of these texts as “books” preceded their collection in the form of the earliest Biblical codex by Christians in the 4th century C.E.²⁶⁹ The codex form would seem therefore to reinforce the impression of bookishness that had already been established in the minds of those familiar with these texts centuries before. That impression may well have led to a descriptive discourse about them in which their bookishness became reified and passed down through traditional channels from one generation to the next.

The strength of this impression has not been diluted by the findings of modern scholarship that the textual inscription of these “books” involved a complex history of composition in which oral prophetic declamation and written aide-mémoire were redacted by scribal hands over a period of centuries; nor has it been diluted by the findings that such scribal activity included, as a matter of course, not only transcription but revision in light of changed circumstances—including some which disconfirmed the original predictions. Michael H. Floyd summarizes this process thus: “...prophetic books are by definition reinterpetive documents, whose writers reapply patterns of divine-human interaction discerned in one particular historical context to another later historical context”—a remark consonant with Henry Louis Gates’s definition of intertextuality and the

²⁶⁸ Michael H. Floyd, “The Production of Prophetic Books in the Early Second Temple Period,” Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism, edited by Michael H. Floyd and Robert D. Haak, New York and London: T & T Clark (2006), pp. 276-297.

²⁶⁹ William M. Schniedewind, How The Bible Became A Book, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2004).

rudiments of the General Theory of Open Hermeneutics articulated in the preceding pages.²⁷⁰

The spell of the solitary, “vertically” activated, text or codex appears to be relatively invulnerable to the intricacies of compositional and redaction history. In my view, there is at least one very defensible reason why this is so: for the vast majority of readers, *how* a text happened to arrive in its present configuration appears to have very little bearing upon *what* meaning can be made from it now. Consequently, for these readers, the final, redacted or canonical form of a sacred text is the one that counts—how it came to be that way sustains only antiquarian interest.

In Biblical studies, this position has been championed by Brevard Childs. For his part, Childs “...does not deny that the historical-critical method may be able to elicit some real (historical) information from the text, or to discover what its original authors meant. It is not the possibility or efficacy of historical criticism that he calls in question, but its claim to unique validity.”²⁷¹ Presumably, Childs’s objection is a reaction to the attempt, on the part of some Biblical scholars, to privilege the historical interrogation of sacred texts over any other possible method of study; to that extent, one can hardly fault his scruples. By the same token, however, it is difficult to escape the sense that what bothers Childs the most about those who advocate a thorough investigation of the “horizontal”

²⁷⁰ Floyd, “Prophetic Books,” p. 290. This process of revision is not limited to any particular book or section of books in the Bible. See, e.g., Bart D. Ehrman, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, and, more recently, Ehrman, Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

²⁷¹ John Barton, Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Studies, 2nd edition, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press (1996), p. 80.

dimension of Scripture is that, from his perspective, it threatens the long hegemony that theological verticality has enjoyed in the field of Biblical interpretation.²⁷² He has taken it upon himself to offer a defense for elite anxieties.

From the perspective of an open hermeneutics, the most felicitous aspect of Childs's approach is the way in which it exposes the problem of how one makes texts mean. By championing the canonical version of any given sacred text, he reminds us that there is a canon. Canons, by definition, consist of collections of texts. One cannot therefore read a sacred text canonically in isolation from other texts of the same class.²⁷³ In this way, Childs introduces a form of "horizontalism" through the back door: by reading sacred texts *in pari materia*, questions of difference inevitably come to the fore. Why does this particular text appear to assert something that another (equally canonical) text appears to deny? In the attempt to interpretively reconcile sacred texts intra-canonically, appeals to context, to chronology, indeed, to the whole panoply of horizontalist concerns eventually undermine the isolated splendor with which theological verticality tends to endow Scripture. Tactics such as Childs's may defer these considerations, but they cannot do so indefinitely.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Ibid, p. 153.

²⁷³ Ibid, pp. 151-153.

²⁷⁴ Rudolf Bultmann formulated the horizontalist principle of research in Biblical studies (on his reading of Wellhausen) thus: "...a literary work or fragment of tradition is a primary source for the historical situation out of which it arose, and is only a secondary source for the historical details concerning which it gives information." Bultmann, Existence and Faith, translated by Schubert M. Ogden, New York: Meridian Books, Inc. (1960), p. 38.

The modern pursuit of intra-canonical intertextuality has led some Biblical exegetes to disclose the arbitrary nature of canonicity. Canons, like literature, do not subsist in the ether as Platonic forms: they reflect decisions made by sectarian elites on the basis of values shared among those elites at a given time and place. Moreover, by tugging at the threads of intra-Biblical intertextual reference, modern scholarship has discovered that the scribal hand was not the *only* revisionist one at work in the production of the canonical Scriptures. This most interesting feature of Near Eastern revealed writ has been examined in the course of scholarly investigations into the exegetical tradition. An important contribution to such studies is Michael Fishbane's Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel. In the course of his research into when the Jewish exegetical tradition came to be formed, Fishbane discovered that the roots of Biblical interpretation are buried deep "in the biblical past itself," i.e., much of the material that is found in the books of the Bible is itself exegetical in nature.²⁷⁵ In ancient Israel, prophetic vision often proceeded by means of revision.

Fishbane's work owes much to one of the 19th century's pre-eminent scholars of Judaism, Abraham Geiger.²⁷⁶ In his Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel in ihrer Abhängigkeit von der inner Entwicklung des Judenthums,²⁷⁷

Geiger not only demonstrated that the major textual versions (the Septuagint, Targumic, and Samaritan recensions) reflect

²⁷⁵ Michael Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation Ancient Israel, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1985), pp. 2-3.

²⁷⁶ Geiger also wrote a controversial work on the Qur'an, Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen? ["What Did Muhammad Borrow From Judaism?"], now available in English translation as Judaism and Islam, translated by F. M. Young, New York: Ktav, 1970.

²⁷⁷ 1st edition 1857; reprinted Frankfurt-on-Main: Mada, 1928.

reworkings of the Hebrew Bible in the light of post-biblical social and theological concerns, but that the Hebrew Bible is *itself* the product (and source) of such reworkings. Despite the acid criticisms of some Jewish contemporaries, Geiger's work convincingly shows "that the history of the biblical text is interwoven with the history of the people, that the text itself, being a response to life, constantly adapted itself to the needs of the people, ... [and] that what the process of midrash and exegesis accomplished in a later age, was achieved through textual manipulation in the period before the final stabilization of the biblical text."²⁷⁸

For Fishbane, "the enduring and significant supposition" of Geiger's pioneering effort is that "the content of tradition, the *traditum*, was not at all monolithic, but rather the complex result of a long and varied process of transmission, or *traditio*."²⁷⁹ Indeed, the neat distinctions which, for centuries, Biblical scholars routinely made between original, sacred text and subsequent interpretation of that text amounted to a scholarly "re-authoring" of both. This scholarly re-authoring was inferior to the "inspired" re-authorings of Hebrew prophets and scribes insofar as it failed to appreciate how,

at each stage in the *traditio*, the *traditum* was adapted, transformed, or reinterpreted—be this by the use of old cult legends for retelling the life of a patriarch, or the integration of traditions into major literary complexes, like the book of Genesis as a whole (with its diverse patriarchal materials and prehistorical prologue). Materials were thus detribalized and nationalized; depolytheized and monotheized; reorganized and reconceptualized...²⁸⁰

By "smoothing over the bumps" in this process, the scholarly version disconnected it from the history of the peoples who lived it and, hence, drained

²⁷⁸ Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation, pp. 5-6, quoting N. Sarna, "Abraham Geiger and Biblical Scholarship," New Perspectives on Abraham Geiger: An HUC-JIR Symposium, edited by J. Petuchowski, New York: Hebrew Union College Press (1975), p. 25. Emphasis added.

²⁷⁹ Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation, p. 6.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

from it much of its horizontal richness—typically in the service of a verticalist theology.

In his own scholarship, Fishbane attempts to chart a new course. He begins with the “stabilized” text of the Hebrew Bible—the canonical codex—and treats it as a composite *traditum* containing evidence of a form of *traditio* he terms “inner-biblical exegesis.” This internal Biblical *traditio* consists of “textual comments and clarifications, scribal remarks and interpolations, and theological reactions and revisions” representing the results of Israelite and, later, Judean discursivity as preserved in the text.²⁸¹ Inner-Biblical exegesis is a form of intertextuality, but decidedly circumscribed. Fishbane offers sound scholarly reasons for limiting his investigations in this manner but, in the course of justifying his method, he makes a most interesting distinction:

The position of inner-biblical exegesis is unique among the foundational documents of the Western religious tradition: neither the Gospels nor Pauline writings on the one hand, nor the Qur’an on the other, are quite like it. The dominant thrust of these documents with respect to the Hebrew Bible is their proclamation that they have fulfilled or superseded the ancient Israelite *traditum*. Theirs is an innovative *traditio*, continuous with the Hebrew Bible but decidedly something new...From this perspective, the Tannaitic sources (followed by the Rabbis of the Talmud), the Gospels and Pauline writings (followed by the Church Fathers), and the Qur’an (followed by the Doctors of Islam) are three post-biblical streams of tradition which are each based on the Hebrew Bible but have each transformed this *traditum* in radically diverse ways.²⁸²

I find this distinction interesting because, reading Fishbane’s discussion of his method to this point, I did not anticipate *any* mention of the Gospels or Pauline writings—and certainly not the Qur’an. It strikes me that the compulsion to assert

²⁸¹ Ibid, p. 10.

²⁸² Ibid.

the uniqueness of the Hebrew Bible in this context betrays a certain anxiety on Fishbane's part: one induced by a recognition that his disclosure of the *traditio* within the little parallelepiped that contains the canonical codex threatens to unbundle it.

From the perspective of a General Theory of open hermeneutics, Fishbane is onto something here—possibly to his own chagrin. This is because the theory's semiotic component suggests that meaning-making is a matter of negotiated referentiality. The theory *expects* to encounter intertextual reference consisting of repetition and revision and would demand a thorough investigation in its absence. This is not to say, however, that every apparent instance of intertextual reference necessarily represents what one interpreter or another claims for it. Indeed, open hermeneutics must proceed with caution when following up Fishbane's assertions concerning both the New Testament writings and the Qur'an. If these latter Scriptures contain *traditio* for which the Hebrew Bible serves in some sense as a *traditum*, this is a proposition that merits both elaboration and proof—whereas Fishbane appears to assume that this relation is self-evident. Furthermore, his companion assertion that the *traditio* he presumes to reside in both the New Testament and the Qur'an is innovative in ways that differ from inner-Biblical exegesis also requires proof. Even if the evidence suggests that this companion assertion is true, it may not exhaust the interpretive possibilities.

These issues will be taken up in the next chapter. The task for the instant section of the present chapter has been to assemble the rudiments of a Special Theory of Near Eastern prophecy. Such a theory may emerge more fully as

Fishbane's presumed intertextual connections between and among the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an (not to mention other texts from the Near East's sacred literary *milieu*) acquire evidentiary support. To that end, I turn now to a deep and transgressive reading of the Qur'an.

Chapter Four:

Visionary Revisionism

... Menschen, denen der Sinn des Lebens nach langen Zweifeln klar wurde, warum diese dann nicht sagen konnten, worin dieser Sinn bestand.²⁸³

At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival...²⁸⁴

A Carnival of Signs

After prolonged wandering in the thickets of language, we arrive at the canonical codex of the Qur'an equipped with only the rudiments of theories—and these in need of development. All that we have to show for our troubles to this point is a concatenation of metaphors, a carnival of signs. Since they function for us as our hermeneutical map and compass, they will have to suffice.

The Qur'an is *itself* a concatenation of metaphors and a carnival of signs: such is the glory of Near Eastern prophetic discourse—and the bane of sectarian elites.²⁸⁵ How is one to exercise custodial control over the meanings made

²⁸³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, proposition 6.521

²⁸⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences," Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, translated by Vern W. McGee, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press (1986), p. 170.

²⁸⁵ I am employing the term "carnival" here in a restricted, Bakhtinian sense. In his Rabelais book, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the medieval feast as "always essentially related to time" in the sense that its social function was not to "lead the people out of the existing world order...On the

available by an unruly Scripture? The genius and the genuine creativity of Islamic tradition show us how this task has been accomplished through many generations. That story, like Scheherazade's, has been told and re-told countless times and will no doubt continue to be told until history's end. It is a rich story, a fascinating and multi-faceted one; but it is not our story. We have chosen to return to circumambulate anew the *ka'aba* of the canonical codex and, in its very precincts, "to assess its computations, to check its sentences against our convictions, to prove the derivations of its words," and to savor its "figurations of language"—in short, to negotiate meanings through Romantic re-description: a set of practices I have collected here under the rubric of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics.

Yet, before taking a single step, the task overwhelms us; the Qur'an's "words already engulf us." Where, then, to begin? It is instructive to pause and remind ourselves of Stanley Cavell's Romantic admonitions: "Depart from a given word as from a point of origin. Go deep as into woods. Understanding is a matter of orientation, of bearings, of the ability to keep to a course and to move in natural paths from any point to any other. The depths of the book are nothing

contrary, [official feasts] sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it." Carnival, on the other hand, was the "anti-feast" that celebrated "liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order." Moreover, it exhibited a peculiar logic—that of the "'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear." It allowed for the construction of a world view that competed with the prevailing one and, as such, threatened cultural elites. Of course, medieval carnival involved many other elements that the Qur'an does not, e.g., the liberal use of irreverent scatological humor. The analogy is not on all fours. I would argue, however, that the Qur'an substitutes apocalypticism and eschatology for the scatological and that it retains within its discourse a subversive tenor—despite the fact that it eventually became an emblem of a new world order. When that happened, other carnivalesque discourses rose to the occasion (e.g., in the writings of Jahiz and *Alf Layla wa Layla*, etc.). See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (1984), pp. 5-15.

apart from its surfaces. Figurations of language can be thought of as ways of reflecting the surfaces and depths of a word onto one another.”²⁸⁶ But how might this advice help us? Are we to read by blindly choosing a word at random? And, if so, *then* what? Such are the anxieties aroused by the Romantic embrace of interpretive freedom. One experiences an immediate adrenaline rush, a moment of vertigo, and then...for some...a sense of clearing. The place we have been searching for, without necessarily knowing that we were searching for anything at all, is the place of “clearing”—what Heidegger called *Lichtung*—that spot among the trees where light is permitted to penetrate the foliage and illuminate the forest floor.²⁸⁷

As I suggested in the first chapter, it is my suspicion that—his protests to the contrary—Heidegger craved the reassurance of seeing that ground. We, however, will choose now to take him at his word, and accept his identification of the clearing with Parmenides’ invocation of *aletheia*—which Heidegger rather ingeniously translates as “unconcealment,” but which we will understand by its more common usage: truth.²⁸⁸ In searching for the clearing, our quarry has been nothing less than “truth”; and insofar as we understand truth Romantically (i.e., as something that belongs to language, with language belonging to history, history to humankind and, to humankind, the familiar and the alien), it is inter-subjectivity diachronically mediated by inter-textuality. Placing the Qur’anic carnival of signs upon the “horizontal axis” of history, then, we must learn to

²⁸⁶ Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, pp. 64-65.

²⁸⁷ Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy,” *Basic Writings*, pp. 441-449.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 444.

accept the fact that its “words come to us from a distance.” If we wish to “discover what is being said to us,” we must “discover the precise location from which it is said; to understand why it is said from just there, and at that time.”²⁸⁹

The key to answering the “whats” and “whys” of Cavell’s advice lies in the “how” of intertextuality. Employing this particular how is, as Wittgenstein would say, to “master a technique”—the technique of *traditio* (Fishbane), of repetition and revision (Gates), the technique by which meanings travel and change through time. In other words, we must approach the Qur’an expecting to encounter intertextual reference, for such are the ways of language in history. Adverting to the modern scholarship of a cognate Scripture (the Hebrew Bible), we found these expectations confirmed. Indeed, I suggested that it would be surprising if such a *Sprachspiel* were *not* characteristic of the literary *Lebensform* which produced Near Eastern Scripturalism. Even so, I sounded a cautionary note regarding Fishbane’s presumption that the Hebrew Bible is the *traditum* of New Testament and Qur’anic *traditio*. That is a proposition meriting both elaboration and proof—an issue that I will address shortly in the case of the Qur’an.²⁹⁰

The notion that the Qur’an contains “internal” intertextuality is so well established in traditional scholarship as to be practically uncontroversial. As early as the 8th century C.E. (and possibly earlier), Muslim scholars set about the task of attempting to harmonize “certain passages [of the Qur’an] that bore on

²⁸⁹ Cavell, p. 64.

²⁹⁰ With respect to the intertextual relations obtaining between the New Testament and the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), such elaboration and proof have been amply provided by scholars in that field. Recent examples include: Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989; Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.

the same issues but that seemed mutually contradictory.” Their attempts to do so “marked the rudimentary beginnings of the theory of abrogation (*naskh*), a theory that later stood at the center of legal hermeneutics.”²⁹¹ This theory represents a pre-Modern practice of textual criticism insofar as it involves the establishment of a simple “chronological” ordering (revealed before/revealed after) for parts of the canonical text. The *telos* of this practice was not to compose history in the post-Medieval sense but, rather, to define the

... actions through which Muslims could realize obedience to their God, in adherence to the Qur’anic command. Thus it was felt necessary to determine the Qur’anic stand on particular issues. When more than one Qur’anic decree was pertinent to a single matter, such a determination was no easy task. To solve such difficulties it was essential to determine the chronological order in which different verses had been revealed. Generally speaking, the provisions of later verses were thought to supersede those of earlier, contradictory ones.²⁹²

Studies of *internal* “intertextuality” are no doubt important aspects of Scriptural investigation. As we observed, Fishbane’s Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel is not only such a study but a major contribution to the field of “inner-Biblical exegesis.”²⁹³ I would argue that Amin al-Khuli’s *dirasa al-Qur’an nafsih* encompasses a notion of “inner-Qur’anic exegesis” as does the classical exegetical principle *al-Qur’an yufassiru ba’duhu ba’dan* (one part of the Qur’an explains another).²⁹⁴ But, as al-Khuli’s advocacy of *ma hawl al-Qur’an* implies, inner-

²⁹¹ Wael B. Hallaq, The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2005), p. 66.

²⁹² Ibid, p. 67.

²⁹³ See Benjamin D. Sommer, A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1998), pp. 6-31.

²⁹⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, a 13th century Muslim intellectual, explained this method as follows: “What is given in a general way in one place [in the Qur’an] is explained in detail in another place. What is

Qur'anic exegesis does not exhaust the possibilities of the Qur'an's inter-textuality: the horizontal dimension of the Revelation remains to be accounted for.

I argued above that, given the semiotic nature of linguistic communication, horizontal (including diachronic) intertextuality occurs in the ordinary course of language use. As the literary critic Robert Alter has remarked, "literature as language is intrinsically and densely allusive."²⁹⁵ The stress here belongs on the qualifier "as language" because literature, as we know, has no essence. On the semantic level of Qur'anic *semiosis*, the Revelation's horizontal engagement with its immediate audience may be expected to include the negotiation of intertextual meaning as a matter of course. But Qur'anic intertextuality does not end there; in terms of the Revelation's *rhetorical* effectiveness with its audience, it would be most surprising, even peculiar, if Qur'anic discourse were not strategically designed to appeal to authoritative texts lodged within its immediate audience's cultural memory. Despite this complex of intertextual occasions (semiotic/semantic and rhetorical), Qur'anic studies—from the suppression of the *Isra'iliyyat* to the present—have proceeded as though the Qur'an was revealed in an intertextual vacuum.

given briefly in one place is expanded in another." Imam Shatibi, another 13th century intellectual, argued that many Qur'anic verses or passages "can only be properly understood in the light of explanations provided in other verses or *suras* [i.e., chapters of the Qur'an]." M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, "Context and Internal Relationships: Keys to Qur'anic Exegesis," Approaches to the Qur'an, edited by G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, New York: Routledge (1993), pp. 72-73.

²⁹⁵ Robert Alter, "The Decline and Fall of Literary Criticism," Commentary 77 (1984): 50-56.

Re-Thinking Qur'anic Inimitability

Previous chapters have offered explanations as to why Qur'anic studies routinely overlook the Revelation's horizontal dimension (i.e., waves of Arabization among Muslim intellectuals and the demands of theological verticalism). Related to these explanations is a doctrine which I touched upon briefly in the second chapter: the theological affirmation that the Qur'an is "uncreated." This (formerly) controversial notion—decided, as I mentioned, by Caliphal *fiat*—introduces the theological problem of the Qur'an's ontological status *vis à vis* the Divine personality (Allah). In Islamic intellectual history and polemics, it has also entailed a corollary proposition articulated dogmatically as the "inimitability of the Qur'an" (*i'jaz*). Essentially, this corollary is a belief that the proof of the Qur'an's Divine provenance resides in the inability of the Prophet Muhammad's detractors—whether among his contemporaries or since—to produce a Scripture of comparable excellence.

The roots of this belief are to be found in Qur'anic discourse itself. The Qur'an alludes to skeptical members of the Prophet Muhammad's audience who dismissed his preaching as "mere poetry" or as the sort of oracular speech then associated with Arab soothsayers.²⁹⁶ Often left obscure in the commentary surrounding such criticisms is what they imply about the Prophet's detractors: they appear to have presumed that poetry, soothsaying, and *genuine* prophecy were clearly distinguishable from one another. Interestingly enough, the Qur'an accepts this presumption as valid: it agrees with the Prophet's antagonists that authentic prophecy is a different "kind" of thing from poetry and soothsaying. I

²⁹⁶ See Qur'an 26:224-226; 52:29; 69:42.

will substitute a term from literary criticism here and say that prophecy—whether genuine or not (and leaving open for the moment what that adjective might mean in this instance)—belongs to a distinct *genre* of discourse.²⁹⁷

When the Prophet's detractors dismissed his preaching as "mere poetry" and soothsaying, the Qur'an responded with a challenge: let those who regard it as something other than prophecy produce verses like those found within it. This very challenge provides the Scriptural basis for the theological doctrine of the Qur'an's inimitability. In attempting to explain precisely what, as a practical matter, this test of Scriptural authenticity entails, pre-Modern Muslim intellectuals made significant contributions to the development of rhetorical theory—contributions that warrant continued reflection today. Indeed, as one scholar has recently remarked, rhetoric (*balagha*)

was undoubtedly one of the most important subjects for Qur'anic exegesis, and began and developed around the central question of the appreciation of the style of the Qur'an and its *i'jaz* in particular...One of the important contributions of scholars of *balagha* was their recognition of the concept of *maqam* (the context of the situation) and its role in determining the utterance and providing the criterion for judging it. A central issue...is: *mutabaqat al-kalam li-muqtada'i l-hal* (the conformity of the utterance to the requirements of the situation).²⁹⁸

By virtue of its crafting of the concept of *maqam*, pre-Modern Muslim rhetorical theory laid a foundation for Amin al-Khuli's historicist notion of *ma hawl al-*

²⁹⁷ Which begs the question: what does the genre of Near Eastern prophecy look like? Both the Prophet's detractors and the Qur'an seem to know, but neither tells us directly. My Special Theory of Near Eastern prophecy would hold that, while the Qur'an may not tell us what this genre looks like, it *shows* us through formal means that bear deep structural similarities to those found in precursor literatures. It is these formal similarities that justify my use of the term "genre" here and in previous chapters.

²⁹⁸ Abdel Haleem, "Context and Internal Relationships: Keys to Qur'anic Exegesis," p. 72.

Qur'an.²⁹⁹ It is important to note, however, that the pre-Modern concept did not embrace any sense of diachronic intertextuality as I have outlined above. Instead, it relied on the production of the *asbab al-nuzul* literature to supply details deemed necessary to establish a juridical rule. As I discussed in Chapter Two, al-Khuli did not credit such literature as being “historical” in nature because its production did not conform to modern standards of evidence.³⁰⁰

The point of re-thinking the doctrine of Qur’anic inimitability is not to arrive at a pre-determined conclusion that the Qur’an either is, or is not, “genuine” prophecy; rather, the point is to approach this claim from a direction that is more amenable to articulation. For what, after all, does it mean to say that the Qur’an is a Scripture of incomparable excellence? Or that it is a Scripture that many may try to imitate, but none may replicate? These are surely instances of epideictic rhetoric and, as such, will be convincing to those who are disposed to being convinced; but they *prove* nothing.³⁰¹ And one can well argue that, after 14 centuries, the Qur’an has nothing left to prove anyway: deferring to the judgment of history, the central place of the Qur’an in Islamic tradition and Muslim faith and practice is by now secure. In the present moment, what one really wants to know is: Where does the Qur’an fit in the historical scheme of Near Eastern

²⁹⁹ Pre-Modern Qur’anic scholarship tended to pair *maqam* with attention to *maqal*—a close reading of different portions of the Qur’an with one another (Abdel Haleem, p. 73). These would seem to be the classical models for al-Khuli’s *ma hawl al-qur’an* and *dirasa al-Qur’an nafsih*, respectively. Despite their surface similarities, however, it would be anachronistic to conflate al-Khuli’s classical models with his modern iterations.

³⁰⁰ As noted previously, al-Khuli was not alone in this assessment. See G. H. A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969.

³⁰¹ See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1957), pp. 326-337.

prophecy? How does it relate to the Scriptures which preceded it in time and to those which post-date its appearance? These are questions that may be meaningfully addressed if the scholar proceeds attuned to the lineaments of intertextuality.

Unfortunately, progress along these lines is stymied by several obstacles. First, there is the regrettable history of Orientalist approaches to the Qur'an that set out to "prove" that the Revelation is not "genuine" Scripture. The *modus operandi* of these approaches has been to categorize instances of Biblical and para-Biblical reference in the Qur'an as evidence of Qur'anic "borrowing." By definition, for the Orientalists, the "borrower" is in a dependent (and therefore inferior) position relative to the one borrowed from. Since the Qur'an references such literary material it is, by definition, dependent upon and therefore inferior to the Bible.³⁰²

I am somewhat reluctant to address this argument (or, rather, insinuation—for it is seldom, if ever, constructed clearly as an argument in the literature) for the simple reason that, in so doing, I will confer upon it a dignity which it does not merit. Nevertheless, for the record: the Qur'an, the Bible, para-Biblical literatures, indeed, all literature that may be observed to "make sense" does so because it is composed in language; language is "intrinsically and densely" referential; referentiality is the soul of meaning-making. The assertion that one party to a communicative transaction is rendered inferior to another

³⁰² See Carl W. Ernst and Tony K. Stewart, "Syncretism," *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Margaret A. Mills, Peter J. Claus and Sarah Diamond, New York: Routledge (2003), pp. 586-588.

party by virtue of the fact that the linguistic commerce between them has proved meaningful is, simply put, absurd.

When Biblical scholars such as Abraham Geiger and Michael Fishbane demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible makes use of “old cult legends for retelling the life of a patriarch” and integrates independent (i.e., non-Hebraic) traditions into major literary complexes “like the book of Genesis as a whole,” no one suggests that the Bible is “inferior” to the materials which its writers and redactors liberally appropriated—nor should they.³⁰³ The picture that is gradually emerging from these studies and others like them is that the adherents of Judean religion long regarded their Scriptures as living, malleable, open, plastic, and eminently revisable texts. Divine communication with humanity was not effected simply through ecstatic utterance—indeed, that form of visionary communication appears to have given way over time to written “re-vision” or, as I like to say, “visionary revision.” It was only when sacred texts began to be regarded as possessing fixed content in canonical formation that Near Eastern prophecy passed, as Fishbane has shown, into sectarian exegesis.³⁰⁴

³⁰³ See Chapter Three, *supra*. The scholarship of Abraham Geiger is interesting in this regard, because his *Was hat Mohammed...?* is often singled out as the quintessential product of an Orientalist, anti-Muslim *animus*. But, as Fishbane points out, Geiger's Jewish co-religionists were equally threatened by his Biblical scholarship in the *Urschrift*. Geiger was a 19th century epigone of the European Enlightenment. In his eyes, every religion was explicable solely in accordance with the horizontal dimension of its phenomenology. He may be guilty of neglecting the rich development of his religious imagination in favor of his text-critical skills, but it is unlikely that he harbored a specifically anti-Muslim *animus*.

³⁰⁴ Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. The Christian Church implicitly acknowledged the constraints placed upon exegesis by Scriptural reification when it attempted to address the problem institutionally *via* the routinization of charisma under the doctrine of Apostolic Succession. Protestantism provides one form of relief for those who find even this solution too constraining. Shi'a Muslims arrived at a solution that is similar to the Roman Catholic one through the doctrine of the Imamate. These doctrines and movements represent medieval and early modern responses to the encroachment upon prophetic revisionism by the process of Scriptural reification.

Until the relatively late attempts by sectarian canonists and heresiologists to assert proprietary rights of ownership over what was previously public property, the basic materials of Near Eastern prophetic discourse belonged to what we would today call the “public domain”—indeed, there was no other domain. From at least the time of Babylon’s rise to regional hegemony, Near Eastern prophecy was an international phenomenon of re-visionary appropriations of an existing stock of stories, characters, myths, tropes, ecstatic utterances, legal prescriptions, poetry, proverbs, etc. In the ancient Near East, prophecy came to be, in the generic sense, less about forecasting the future than about back-casting new insights (re-visions) and interpretations onto a shared heritage by means of commonly accepted methods of editorially selective appropriations and literary allusion.³⁰⁵ From the standpoint of modern hermeneutics, therefore, I would be most surprised to find a Scripture that was in some sense “non-referential.” Indeed, I would be more than surprised; I would be stunned and perplexed, because I cannot imagine how anyone could go about making meaning from “non-referential” language.³⁰⁶

The second obstacle an intertextual treatment of the Qur’an must face is Muslim opposition to any intellectual inquiry that may be deemed an innovation with respect to pre-Modern scholarship. Here we must face the complex and imposing edifice that this scholarship has bequeathed to the post-Medieval world: theological verticalism, proprietary Arabization, and the twin dogmas of

³⁰⁵ The essays collected in Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism, edited by Michael H. Floyd and Robert D. Haak, New York: T & T Clark, 2006, are definitive in this regard.

³⁰⁶ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics and Criticism, pp. 30-31.

the Qur'an's "uncreatedness" and "inimitability." In the last three centuries, this complex has been endowed with a super-charged aura of legitimacy by the siege mentality that has afflicted Muslims individually and as social congeries in the wake of European (and, presently, Euro-American) colonialism and imperialism. Therefore, by virtue of some magic that I am at a loss to rationally fathom, pre-Modern scholarship on the Qur'an is presumed to preclude the possibility of Qur'anic connections with other Scriptures. Indeed, this presumption is so deeply imbedded in the minds of many Muslims that it can cause a gifted scholar such as M. A. S. Abdel Haleem to remark that the classical concept of *maqal*—i.e., *intra*-textual comparatism—"may, thus, be viewed within the framework of the modern linguistic concept of 'intertextuality' which involves the dependence of one text upon another."³⁰⁷ Admittedly, internal textual comparison is a *variety* of intertextuality—but it is a very limited one. The "modern linguistic concept of 'intertextuality'" to which he refers is not so limited; indeed, the prefix "inter-" typically implies comparisons among texts whose relationships to one another are not always immediately obvious—and may well be contested among readers. Abdel Haleem's treatment of Qur'anic "context" never acknowledges the literary context within which the Qur'an was revealed and to which it repeatedly refers.

As a student of the Qur'an, I find the resistance of many Muslim scholars to a more inclusive sense of "intertextuality" fraught with irony—for the Qur'an's own intertextuality is both inclusive and unselfconscious. In my view, the reasons that have lately legitimized this scholarly reluctance—Orientalist reproach and its historical ties to colonial and imperialist initiatives—only compound irony with

³⁰⁷ Abdel Haleem, "Context and Internal Relationships," p. 73. Emphasis added.

tragedy; for by slighting the Qur'an's active intertextual engagement with extra-Qur'anic Scripturalist traditions, Muslim scholars play into the hands of the colonialist project by isolating the Qur'an from the very prophetic genre to which it claims rightful inclusion. Thus isolated, the Qur'an (and those who regard it as a Late Ancient iteration of Near Eastern prophecy) are, as a practical matter, excluded from fellowship with the adherents of the extra-Qur'anic Scripturalist traditions with which the Qur'an itself engaged. Segregation is the result, and segregation has long been used as a tool to brand its subjects with the mark of inferiority. Why would Muslims wish to bring this fate upon themselves?³⁰⁸

At the close of the previous chapter, I alluded to what I consider to be the third obstacle to progress in this area. There I sounded a cautionary note regarding Michael Fishbane's assertions concerning the Hebrew Bible as *traditum* for New Testament and Qur'anic *traditio*. As I remarked in the body of my text, not every apparent instance of intertextual reference necessarily represents what one interpreter or another claims for it. I subsequently mentioned in a footnote (contained in the instant chapter) that New Testament scholars have amply provided elaboration and proof of the intertextual relations obtaining between the Greek New Testament and the *Greek translation* of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) upon which the New Testament writers overwhelmingly relied.³⁰⁹ This distinction may represent an excess of fastidiousness on my part, but I think such care is an essential ingredient to the

³⁰⁸ Obviously, there are few Muslims today who understand the effects of their Scriptural "independence" in quite this way.

³⁰⁹ See, e.g., Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1989) pp. x-xi.

maintenance of scholarly standards. The ubiquity of linguistic referentiality and the density of intertextual allusion that I have repeatedly remarked ought not to persuade us to view the Qur'an or Biblical or para-Biblical literatures as, in Eco's words, "amorphous invitations to indiscriminate participation." Every text presents a nexus of internal constraints that require careful negotiation if readers are to do justice to the various parties to a given communicative transaction. Open and democratic hermeneutics, yes; egalitarian hermeneutics, yes; chaos loosed upon the world—not where readers conduct themselves in a manner that is respectful and responsible to text and context—to the ways of language in history.

The Qur'an's Prophetic Colloquy with the World of its Time

It is a commonplace that the Qur'an contains narratives and tropes that parallel Biblical and Biblically-related materials. As noted, hostile critics construe these parallels as evidence of "borrowing" (conferring a "derivative" and impliedly inferior status upon the Qur'an as Scripture). They typically explain the presence of Biblical and related materials in the Qur'an by reference to Muslim traditions which inform us that the Prophet Muhammad was a merchant who traveled to Syria and other places where he came into contact with Christians and Jews; their claim is that, through these encounters, Muhammad picked up little narrative fragments that he incorporated in his preaching. As a consequence, say these critics, the Qur'an's engagement with Biblical and related materials is occasional, haphazard, and confused.³¹⁰

³¹⁰ See the translator's Preface and annotations throughout *The Koran*, translated by J. M. Rodwell, London: J. M. Dent, 1909. For a personal anecdote from a Muslim point of view of the

Muslims, on the other hand, reject the possibility of borrowing. They do not deny that the Prophet was a merchant or that he had contact with Christians and Jews; they claim, however, that these facts in themselves do not *prove* that Biblical and Biblically-related parallels are anything but parallels. In fact, Muslims frequently insist that it is the Qur’anic “parallels” which contain the “authentic” versions of these narratives and tropes—and that what one finds in the Bible and related writings are best understood as corrupted versions of the “true” Qur’anic story. This position has been articulated in Islamic tradition with reference to a somewhat obscure Qur’anic allusion to the “mother of the Book”—elaborated as a “heavenly codex” said to contain God’s original words.³¹¹ While such a position admirably accomplishes a polemical goal—the kind of “fair play” that turn-about entails—it refuses to entertain the possibility that the earthly codex of the Qur’an could possess a horizontal dimension.³¹²

The traditional retreat to a consistent verticality in Qur’anic studies effectively cuts the sacred text loose from its moorings in history, rendering ever more epideictic and tautologous (and, ultimately, unpersuasive) the explanations offered by Muslim apologists for the Revelation’s conversionary power. As a result, scholarship on the Qur’an has ignored opportunities for intertextual investigations that could ripen into fruitful inter-sectarian dialogue. Whatever the importance such dialogue may possess in the present moment, I argue that—

nature of this discourse, see Ebrahim Moosa’s memoir “Inside the Madrasa,” published in the Boston Review and available on-line: <http://bostonreview.net/BR32.1/moosa.html>

³¹¹ Qur’an 3:7; 13:39; 43:4.

³¹² Calling to mind the observation famously attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: “an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.”

historically speaking—it must have constituted a significant proportion of the Prophet Muhammad’s twenty-year struggle to establish the poly-confessional community one sees reflected in the Constitution of Medina.³¹³

A reading of the Qur’an that theologically excludes it from participation in the Prophet’s struggles is no doubt a transgressive reading—but not the kind which I have been advocating in these pages. Such a reading ignores the nexus of internal constraints that, as we shall see, the Qur’an’s own discursive practices invite us to observe. This is not meaning the text as negotiated with its immediate (i.e., 7th century) audience; it is meaning the text as negotiated with a much later audience—an audience composed exclusively of Muslims who, several generations after the death of the Prophet, were embroiled in theologico-political controversies unknown to the time and place of the Revelation.³¹⁴

The semiotic openness of language empowered the Qur’an’s verticalist readers to “author” for themselves the Revelation appropriate to their historical situation. Likewise, it has empowered the book’s Orientalist and sectarian detractors to author for themselves a codex appropriate to their own needs and desires. The result is two different and opposing Qur’ans—two incommensurable interpretations—which have shaped the history of the Revelation’s semantic empowerment of its readers. It is my intention to challenge this bifurcated paradigm. To accomplish this objective, I have engaged in a close study of the controverted parallels, on the one hand, and of the specific form of literary reference or “intertextuality” that, I argue, these parallels represent, on the other.

³¹³ A document generally accepted by scholars as authentic. See Fred M. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims,” *Al-Abhath* 50-51 (2002-3), pp. 9-53.

³¹⁴ Discussed in Chapter Three, *supra*.

I make this argument on the theory that the Qur'an, as language, is subject to intertextuality in all of its forms. To be consistent with this position, I believe that I am obliged to avoid engaging in special pleading—theologically motivated or otherwise—that would *a priori* exempt the Qur'an from a thorough investigation of its linguistic properties. In other words, I intend to employ my own readerly empowerment to “author” a third Qur'an to rival the other two. My Qur'an is the Revelation disclosed by transgressive reading in the Romantic grain; it is a Qur'an read with the horizontal dimension intact.

The specific form of intertextuality that characterizes Qur'anic discourse, in my view, is allusion. Allusion is a complex linguistic and literary phenomenon and one of the few forms of intertextuality that is, by definition, diachronic in nature: an allusion looks back in time to an earlier text. It therefore confounds the Structuralist romance with synchrony, making the study of intertextuality congenial to post-Structuralist theory and practice. Within this species of intertextuality are sub-species including citation, “allusion proper” and echo. I will introduce an example of a passage from the Qur'an that exhibits all three of these forms to support my contention that the identification of such intertextuality in the Qur'an reveals it to be engaged in what we might today term “robust religious pluralism.”³¹⁵

But first: a brief digression. I have repeatedly asserted that the shift in the burden of linguistic meaning-making results in the empowerment of the receiver-in-context at the expense of the sender. This is true of all linguistic

³¹⁵ Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*; Joseph Pucci, *The Full-Knowing Reader: Allusion and the Power of the Reader in the Western Literary Tradition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

communication, and especially true in the case of allusion which is a technique specifically designed for those receivers that the Classicist and literary critic Joseph Pucci has named “full-knowing readers.” As Pucci has shown, the use of allusion is never haphazard; it is an overt and intentional gesture—an invitation—to engage a specifically identifiable audience in intertextual dialogue. That audience consists of those individuals who possess the requisite knowledge base to enable them to recognize a textual passage *as* an allusion. Such recognition is a form of readerly empowerment that only the alluding text is capable of conferring. The “scene of allusive recognition” occasions a creative interruption in the course of textual reception yielding a “fuller engagement” of the receiver with both the alluding text and the prior text to which it alludes. It is by means of this feat of textual association that an allusion is made to “fully mean.”³¹⁶ This is why I qualify my notion of Qur’anic “religious pluralism” with the adjective “robust.” The Qur’an reaches out allusively not simply for the purposes of shaking hands with members of its audience, but to activate the power of a prior knowledge it recognizes as resident among them. The Qur’an names the full-knowing readers it allusively empowers “people of the Book.”³¹⁷

Of the many instances of allusiveness with which the Qur’an reaches out towards the full-knowing readers in its audience, one of the more intriguing is the complex allusion to the Bible, Mishna, and Babylonian Talmud found in *Surah al-Ma’idah* (the “feast-table”), *ayat* 27-34. Easily recognizable in this passage is the reference to the Biblical tale of Cain and Abel—so easy to recognize, I suggest,

³¹⁶ Pucci, *The Full-Knowing Reader*, pp. 41-44.

³¹⁷ Qur’an 3: 64-75.

that the Qur'an does not trouble to include their names. This is a case of "allusion proper." It is not a citation, because the Qur'an does not recite verbatim the story found in the book of Genesis; indeed, the Qur'an supplies some intriguing twists in the details of this story which are absent from the Biblical version. These twists will figure significantly in what is to follow, so we should pause to consider them now. In the Qur'anic version of this story, Cain threatens to kill Abel after learning that his brother's sacrifice was accepted by God and his (Cain's) was rejected.³¹⁸ Abel replies to this threat as follows: "God accepts [sacrifice] from those who are careful to obey; [therefore] if you raise your hand to strike me dead, I will not raise my hand against you to kill you; for I fear God, the Lord of the Worlds" (Q 5:27-28). Obedience to God is here presented as a willingness to submit to oppression—to the point of death. The following *ayah* (29) supplies Abel's rationale: Cain will be punished for his crimes in the Hereafter.

As noted above, recognition of an allusion requires background knowledge. In the present case, one needs to know more than simply the Genesis version(s) of this tale. A passage in the Babylonian Talmud quotes a section from the Mishnah in which the method of preparing a witness in the case of a capital offense is discussed. According to the Mishnah, when preparing the witness, the court is obligated to impress upon him the seriousness of the matter at hand. "Capital cases are not like monetary cases," the Mishnah intones. There is much more at stake in a capital case than mere money. The Court must advise the

³¹⁸ In all known textual traditions of Genesis, this threat is absent—although there is a peculiar ellipsis in some texts at Gen. 4:8 which begins "Cain said to his brother Abel..." and the words are missing. Other versions, including the Targum, supply an innocuous sounding "Come, let us go out into the field." See *JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH*, 2nd edition, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society (1999), p. 7, note d, and LXX Genesis 4:8 (which contains the invitation to go *eis to pedion* or "onto the level-ground").

witness that he will be held responsible for the life of the accused and the lives of his [presumably unborn] descendants until the end of time. Moral of the story: one had best tell the court the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but. The authority that the Mishnah invokes for its assertion of extended witness liability in capital cases is the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. The Mishnaic argument turns on the wording of the Hebrew manuscript of the book of Genesis to which its author or authors were referring. “Thus we find in the case of Cain, who killed his brother, that it is written: ‘The bloods [plural] of thy brother cry unto Me.’” In its effort to explain the presence of an otherwise unwarranted plural in the text, the Mishnah concludes that one’s guilt for the execution of an innocent defendant extends to his or her potential progeny.

The discussion which this passage occasions among the Babylonian Rabbis takes off in that wonderfully, meandering, Talmudic way that seems to cover all manner of unrelated topics. But a careful reading of the Rabbinic *gemara* reveals common themes including the appropriate evidentiary standards at law and acceptable modes of execution. I am not a Talmudist, but my reading of this material suggests to me that the Rabbis were deeply concerned that, in the effort to do justice at law, *injustice* may result. One way that the Rabbis chose to safeguard the integrity of their efforts was to raise the bar of evidence sufficient to convict to such an extraordinarily high level that capital convictions became a very difficult proposition. Another way was to leave to Heaven the responsibility

for carrying out a death sentence³¹⁹ —the very reason that the Qur’anic Abel gave for refusing to resist Cain’s assault.

This interesting parallel returns us from the Talmud to the passage in *al-Ma’ida*. Pucci points out that the desire to interrupt one’s reading and refer back and forth between the alluding text and the text alluded to for purposes of comparison is a strong indication that one has entered “allusive space”—the mental place where new meanings can be made from the engagement with allusion and where new texts are “authored” by full-knowing readers.³²⁰ Abel’s rationale for refusing to resist Cain’s assault is a type of allusion that literary critics term “echo.” Detecting the presence of echo in a text is rarely easy because it is in the nature of allusive echo to be more shadowy by several degrees than either “allusion proper” or citation. What echo thereby loses in definition, it gains through profound suggestiveness.³²¹ In the passage from *al-Ma’ida*, we find that the Qur’an, like both Mishnah and Talmud before it, follows its recitation of the Cain and Abel story with legal reflection: it prescribes the penalties appropriate for “those who war [against] God and His Messenger and who spread viciousness in the land” (5:33).³²²

But there are differences among these texts as well. In allusion, there are *always* differences. Unlike its precursor texts, the Qur’an’s attention in this matter is focused explicitly upon the punishment phase of a capital case: it does

³¹⁹ Making, at that point in history, a virtue from a necessity. *The Babylonian Talmud*, edited by Isadore Epstein, vol. 27, London: Soncino Press (1935), pp. 233 ff.

³²⁰ Pucci, *Full-Knowing Reader*, pp. 41-44.

³²¹ See John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

³²² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Qur’an in this chapter are my own.

not address the problem of evidence that the Rabbis discussed. *Or does it?* Here is where the full-knowing reader of the Qur'an has a palpable advantage over her fellow readers among the *mufasssirun* and the Jurists who interpret the Scripture oblivious to the presence of echo in the text—and here is where elite anxieties become acute. In the presence of echo, the mere fact that the Qur'an does not explicitly mention evidentiary issues in the context of the Cain and Abel story ought not to lead a reader to the conclusion that such issues are unimportant in this context. In the presence of echo, the importance of such issues is assumed. In the absence of echo, silence is silence; but in the presence of echo and other forms of allusion, silence presumes a prior understanding that may speak volumes.³²³

I would not be so confident of the presence of echo in this instance except that a remarkable allusion to, and citation from, the Mishnah is embedded in the Qur'anic text just prior to the discussion of penalties. At 5:32, immediately following its recitation of the story, the Qur'an continues: "On account of this [*min ajli thalik*], We prescribed for the Children of Israel [*katabna* (the Divine authorial voice of the Qur'an is acknowledging a past accomplishment) '*ala bani Isra'iyla*] that he who takes the life of an individual soul"—then comes an ambiguous qualification, *bi-ghayr nafsin*, which I will leave untranslated³²⁴—"or

³²³ Likewise, the mere fact that the Qur'an does not explicitly mention the names "Cain" and "Abel" in its telling of the story of the "two brothers" ought not to lead a reader to conclude that this story is not allusive.

³²⁴ I choose to leave this phrase untranslated because it is not at all clear what it means. Employing the Classical technique of Qur'anic intra-textual interpretation (*al-Qur'an yufassiru ba'duhu ba'dan*) sheds little light on the phrase. Comparative philological investigation may bring to light a Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Greek or Persian cognate idiom, but would distract from the issue at hand. The phrase is usually taken to mean something like "without the justification of *lex talionis*."

for spreading viciousness in the land, it is as if he had killed the whole of humanity; and whoever grants it [an individual soul] life, it is as if he grants life to the whole of humanity.” Parallel to this, the Mishnah follows *its* exegetical paraphrase of the same Biblical story with the words: “For this reason was man created alone, to teach thee that whosoever destroys a single soul of Israel, Scripture imputes [guilt] to him as though he had destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single soul of Israel, Scripture ascribes [merit] to him as though he had preserved a complete world.”³²⁵ I consider this allusion to be a citation and not a direct quotation (which is not allusive at all)—a distinction intended to reflect what I would argue is a periphrastic translation into Arabic from the Hebrew text of the Mishnah with an Arabic editorial gloss inserted into the middle of the translated portions of the cited phrase.

This is a complex appropriation of a prior text if ever there was one; but regardless of its complexity, it is also a *semiosis* sent out to a full-knowing reader to pause and reflect upon the text in which it originally occurs (the Mishnah), the texts in which it later recurs (the Babylonian Talmud and the Qur’an), and the meaning that can be made in allusive space from such labor. I will only add that one meaning that allusive space makes available to the full-knowing reader of these texts is that the Qur’an may well be engaged in offering ways to limit the opportunities to impose capital sanctions upon specific crimes. The alternative sanction of exile included by the Qur’an (5:33—also discussed by the Rabbis and

³²⁵ Babylonian Talmud, p. 233 ff.

also the sanction imposed upon Cain in the Genesis story) and the promise of clemency for timely repentance (5:34) support my reading.

Further Complications

The complexity of the foregoing example should serve as fair warning of the careful explication required if a reader should desire to move beyond the commonplace that the Qur'an "contains Biblical and para-Biblical materials"—and do so in a way that avoids beating a retreat to the "dueling" Qur'ans of Orientalist and inter-sectarian polemic. As my reading of the example seeks to show, "contains" is not an adequate metaphor for what takes place in the discursive clearing that the Qur'an discloses. The Qur'an is no more a "bucket" in which someone has tossed scraps of Scripture and Scriptural exegesis than the New Testament or Hebrew Bible or extra-canonical para-Biblical literatures are or were passive receptacles of the heritage of Near Eastern prophecy. "Engages" would be a better word for what all of these texts are up to; "allusively appropriates and transforms," better still.

In a recent paper, "Lukan and Johannine Tradition in the Qur'an: A Story of *Auslegungsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*," New Testament scholar Vernon Robbins painstakingly traces the textual record of the "modifications and elaborations" (or, as I would say, "repetitions and revisions" or, simply, "intertextuality") that traditions about Jesus underwent "from the second through sixth centuries in the world east of Palestine and Western Syria."³²⁶ He

³²⁶ Vernon K. Robbins, "Lukan and Johannine Tradition in the Qur'an: A Story of *Auslegungsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*," p. 2. This essay is scheduled for publication in *Prospects for a Story and a Programme: Essays on Räisänen's Beyond New Testament Theology*, edited by Todd C. Penner, Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2004. As of this writing, the

identifies these traditions as “Lukan” and “Johannine” because, by the second century C.E., the distinctive “voices” of these two gospel writers (and their distinctive versions of the Jesus story) were identifiable as *traditum*—though, as we have seen with all Biblical and para-Biblical *traditum*, they were themselves the products of *traditio*. Robbins demonstrates how, over a discreet time period, the Lukan and Johannine voices of the canonical New Testament came to inflect one another in interesting ways as they were appropriated in the course of their interpretation. The evidence for this mutual inflection is preserved in a variety of extra-canonical works whose geographical provenance moves steadily eastward in response to the hardening of the See of Rome’s heresiological rhetoric (enforced, with Constantine’s rise to power in the 4th century, by the Imperial State apparatus).³²⁷

Beginning in the second century, “a busy time in early Christian Gospel traditions,” Marcion, the son of a Bishop from Pontus, “a harbor-city on the Black Sea...founded his own church and established a hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons...There were many Marcionite communities especially in Syria through the fifth century, and some were still in existence at the beginning of the Medieval period.” After a “careful reading of the epistles of Paul, Marcion decided that Christians should have only two documents of faith, which he called the *Gospel* and the *Apostle*. The Gospel was a version of the [canonical] Gospel of Luke with Old Testament passages eliminated from it, which he was convinced was the ‘my

edited volume has yet to appear; page numbers appearing herein reference a copy of the paper kindly supplied for my use by the author.

³²⁷ A succinct account of this history may be found in J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd (1975), pp. 1-2.

gospel' to which Paul referred in his letters." According to Robbins, Marcion's privileging of Luke's gospel over its canonical (and non-canonical) competitors set in motion a "process of subtracting from, adding to, interpreting, and reconfiguring Lukan tradition about Jesus" that persisted for the next several centuries among intellectuals located in the eastern reaches of the Byzantine Empire.³²⁸

Robbins identifies the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, probably "written during or shortly after Marcion's activity in the second century CE," as a significant site of Scriptural inflection of Luke. "The earliest existing manuscript for this Gospel is a sixth century Syriac manuscript in the British Museum. The existence of this manuscript exhibits the popularity of this Gospel in eastern Christianity during the time of the emergence of Qur'anic tradition about Jesus." From a comparative perspective, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas is particularly intriguing because, like the Qur'an, it accords "special prominence" to Mary, Jesus' mother.³²⁹ Moreover, "topoi central to the Gospel of John energize and 'theologize' Lukan tradition throughout the Infancy Gospel of Thomas."

The Infancy Gospel opens with a depiction of Jesus as a child, busying himself on the Sabbath by molding sparrows from clay. "When Jesus is confronted with violation of the Sabbath, he claps his hands and brings the sparrows to life and to flight through a command to them."³³⁰ Robbins regards this act as "an extension of [the canonical Gospel of] John 1:1-4 into the

³²⁸ Robbins, "Lukan and Johannine Tradition in the Qur'an," pp. 1-12.

³²⁹ The mother of Jesus figures prominently in parts of the Qur'an, e.g., 19:16-34.

³³⁰ Cp. Qur'an 3:49; 5:110.

childhood of Jesus. In John, Jesus, who is the Word (*logos*), caused all things to 'become' (*egeneto*), because life (*zoe*) is in him." The Infancy Gospel calls such miracles of Jesus "signs (*semeia*) in the mode of Johannine tradition, rather than powers (*dynameis*) in the mode of Synoptic Gospel tradition." Indeed, Johannine vocabulary is fairly conspicuous throughout the Infancy Gospel on Robbins' reading, endowing it with what he calls "Johannine dynamics." Summarizing his readings, Robbins remarks that "from the perspective of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas," it appears that "Marcion's omission of material at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke" created an opportunity for the writer of the Infancy Gospel to supply Johannine elements to fill the vacuum. "During the second century, then, both the editing of the Gospel of Luke by Marcion and the backfilling of the Gospel of Luke by the Infancy Gospel of Thomas move Lukan tradition in the direction of Johannine tradition."³³¹

Robbins continues to trace this Johannine-inflected-Lukan Jesus narrative through the Mesopotamian Tatian's 2nd century Diatessaron or "harmony of the four gospels," which was popular enough to appear, by the 4th century, in an Arabic edition:

This Arabic Harmony exists in full, and in it we see a place of privilege for the Gospel of Luke at the beginning of the Diatessaron. After John 1:1-5, the Arabic Harmony recites Luke 1:5-80, which contains not only the opening scenes of promise of the births of John and Jesus (1:5-56) but also the birth, circumcision, and blessing of John the Baptist (1:57-80) before it inserts the story of the birth of Jesus from Matthew 1:18-25. After inserting the Matthew birth story in the Lukan context, it continues further with Luke 2:1-39 (the birth, circumcision, and purification of Jesus, plus the accounts of Simeon and Anna) before inserting Matthew 2:1-23. Immediately it returns again to Luke 2:40-3:6, then to John 1:7-28 and Matthew 2:4-6 which

³³¹ Ibid, pp. 7-12.

links to Matt 2:7-10/Luke 3:7-9 before continuing with Luke 3:10-18:39.³³²

Robbins adds, “Clearly, then, the principle of organization in the opening parts of Tatian's *Diatessaron* privileges the Gospel of Luke over the Gospel of Matthew at the beginning,” and concludes from this that

not only [do] Marcion's Luke and Infancy Thomas establish a dynamic relation between the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John. The opening chapter of Tatian's *Diatessaron* embeds the first chapter of Luke in a context established by the first five verses of the Gospel of John.³³³

Robbins then moves on to yet another infancy Gospel, the Protevangelium of James “for which there are multiple manuscripts in Syriac, Ethiopic, Georgian, Sahidic, Old Church Slavonic, Armenian, and Arabic in Syriac script, as well as Greek and Latin. While Infancy Thomas backfills the Lukan miracle activity of Jesus, the Infancy Gospel of James backfills the Lukan birth stories by telling the birth of Mary, the mother of Jesus.” In his essay, Robbins elaborates on the ways in which he sees this “backfilling” take place, but the crucial point for the literary history he constructs seems to be the role played by the canonical Gospel of Luke as a template for further revisions of the Jesus tradition. Each of these revisions represents a literary elaboration and partial stabilization of the canonized Lukan *traditio*-turned-*tradtum*-returned to-*traditio* and, in the canonical codex of the Qur'an, to *tradtum* once again. Reading that codex in light of this tradition-history, Robbins finds a remarkable incidence of agreement between the way in which ‘*Isa ibn Maryam* (Jesus, son of Mary) is portrayed in Qur'anic discourse

³³² Ibid, p. 15.

³³³ Ibid.

and the way in which this figure was portrayed among participants in a Johannine-inflected thread of Lukan tradition.³³⁴

Beginning with the 3rd *surah*, *al-‘Imran*, Robbins observes how the Qur’an presumes a Lukan, rather than a Matthean, genealogy for Jesus—tracing his lineage through Mary back to Adam.³³⁵ Moreover,

When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary in Luke, he tells Mary that her "relative" (*sungenis*: kinswoman) Elizabeth "has also conceived a son" (1:36). Qur’anic tradition accepts the assertion by the angel Gabriel that Mary and Elizabeth are part of the same extended family, and it follows the logic of Gabriel’s assertion. If Mary is part of the family of Elizabeth, then she shares in the priestly lineage of Elizabeth, who is "a daughter of Aaron" (Luke 1:5), back to Aaron, whom Moses appointed, along with his family, as priests (Exod 28:1).³³⁶

In other words, the Qur’anic account parallels the Lukan one in remarkable particulars. These parallels shift, however, from the canonical Luke to the non-canonical Infancy Gospel of James and Tatian’s Harmony:

Qur’an 3 moves from the ancestry of Jesus (Q 3:33-34; Luke 3:23-38) to the prayer of Anna (Hannah), when she vows to name the child in her womb Mary and to consecrate her child as an offering to God to protect her from Satan (Q 3:35-36; InfJas 4:2). The Lord accepts Anna’s gift of her child Mary and assigns Mary to Zechariah, the priest in the Temple, as her guardian (Q 3:37; InfJas 7:7). When Zechariah comes to the Temple and asks Mary from where the food which is continually before her comes, Mary answers: "It is from God. God gives without measure to whom He wills" (Q 3:37; InfJas 8:2). When Zechariah sees the generous goodness of God to Mary, he prays to his Lord, "the Hearer of Prayer," to give him a child out His bounteous goodness (Q 3:38). The angels call to Zechariah as he is praying in the sanctuary and report to him the "good news" of a son to be named John (Yahya). It is emphasized that John will come as a

³³⁴ Ibid, pp. 16-30.

³³⁵ Of the four canonical Gospels, only Matthew and Luke provide a genealogy for Jesus. The two genealogies do not agree.

³³⁶ Robbins, "Lukan and Johannine Tradition in the Qur’an," pp. 19.

"lordly, chaste, prophet of the righteous" (cf. Luke 1:15, 76) to "confirm a word from God." In Q 3:38-39, one sees Qur'anic tradition related to the Lukan scene where the angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah in the Temple (1:8-20). The last part of Q 3:39 is worded in such a manner, however, that it seems not only to refer to the birth of John the Baptist as confirmation of the word that Gabriel brings from God to Zechariah (Luke 1:19-20), but it points toward the function of John the Baptist in John 1:6-15 as a witness who testifies that Jesus is the "word" from God who comes as light that gives people life in the world.³³⁷

Robbins then rehearses the interesting manner in which the Qur'an (3:39) appears, in his terms, to "merge" the "Word" of the canonical Gospel of John 1:1 ("In the beginning was the Word")

with the 'word' which Gabriel brings to Mary in Luke 1:35-38 and makes her pregnant with Jesus. The key verse occurs in Luke 1:38, where Mary says, "Let it be according to your word." After Mary says this, the angel Gabriel departs from her and Mary is pregnant with Jesus in her womb (1:38-45)

adding that "a thesis of this essay is that this merger of 'Word' in John with 'word' in Luke has been encouraged in Christian and Muslim tradition both through Tatian's Diatessaron and the Infancy Gospel of James."³³⁸

This focused study of parallels between the Qur'anic *Isa* and the Jesus of Johannine-inflected Lukan tradition continues for another ten pages as Robbins builds a case for what he regards as the documented presence of a "remarkable interest in, energizing of, reconfiguration of, and supplementing of the Gospel of Luke through the centuries"—an energizing, reconfiguration, and supplementation to which, in his view, the Qur'an was both party and active participant.³³⁹ Indeed, Robbins nowhere suggests that he views the Qur'an as a

³³⁷ Ibid, pp. 19-20.

³³⁸ Ibid, p. 20.

³³⁹ Ibid, p. 30. My copy of Robbins' essay is thirty-one pages; I hope that my reduction of his argument to a few paragraphs has managed to do it no serious injustice.

passive receptacle of a Scriptural tradition that rightfully belongs to someone else. To the contrary, he has publicly expressed an interest in seeing the development of

a new direction for qur'anic study that places the Qur'an within the same discourse environment as Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Through the use of social and rhetorical analysis, the three scriptures and their related interpretive writings can be treated as commensurable without being reductionist or assuming a discourse of "borrowing/lending," which always privileges the antecedent tradition...it is our hope that other scholars will see the utility of the method we have outlined here and help us with our project of analyzing just how the Qur'an is the third partner in this conversation about God's Word.³⁴⁰

In my view, Robbins' research is exemplary of a "good faith" approach to the literary historical study of sacred texts. By "good faith" I mean an approach that is free from the unwarranted belief that articulating the horizontal elements of Scriptural discourse *proves* anything (one way or another) about the Divine provenance that the adherents of a given tradition claim for their own canonical writings. The mere fact that a transmission history can be traced for a given Scripture has no more bearing on whether or not God has communicated with humankind in this particular fashion than any scientific fact adduced about the natural world has upon God's very existence.³⁴¹ All such polemics amount to nothing more (or less) than attempts on the part of one convictional community to gain a rhetorical (if not political) advantage over another. Considering the fact that scholars have been developing transmission histories for the various books

³⁴⁰ Vernon K. Robbins and Gordon D. Newby, "A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qur'an and the Bible," Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality, edited by John C. Reeves, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature (2003), pp. 23-42.

³⁴¹ Absent a scientific test capable of detecting the presence of the Divine, all attempts to prove or disprove God's existence or attributes by appeals to natural science are specious.

of the Bible over the last three centuries, one might have assumed that Jews and Christians would have abandoned such polemical strategies long ago. This does not appear to be the case—at least where the Qur'an and the personality of the Prophet Muhammad are concerned.³⁴² I regard this situation to be quite regrettable, but not one that justifies retaliatory polemics returned from the Muslim side, nor one that could justify the suppression of scholarly attempts—like those of the Egyptian School—to move beyond verticalist theologized polemic and to claim a horizontal dimension for the Qur'an.

Full-Knowing Reading

In the essay which was the focus of the previous section, Vernon Robbins described his methodology as one of viewing the history of Lukan tradition “backwards” from Jesus tradition in the Qur'an.³⁴³ Another way to put it would be to say that he brought to the Qur'an the background knowledge necessary to recognize the discursive traces that he, as a “full-knowing” reader, is expected to disclose in the course of studying the sacred text. This re-wording raises an important question: *expected by whom?* According to Joseph Pucci's account, this expectation resides in the alluding text's original “author.”³⁴⁴ Authors employ allusion as an economical way to freight or charge their utterances (Robbins speaks of an “energizing” discourse) with multiple meanings.³⁴⁵ In the case of

³⁴² See Carl Ernst's discussions in his book Following Muhammad, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press (2003), pp. 13-18; 97-102.

³⁴³ Robbins, “Lukan and Johannine Tradition in the Qur'an,” p. 7.

³⁴⁴ Nevertheless, as Pucci stresses, authorial expectations do not diminish the role of the reader; allusions are co-created by author *and* reader. See Pucci, pp. 40-41.

³⁴⁵ Robbins, “Lukan and Johannine Tradition in the Qur'an,” p. 30.

Scripture, adverting to the “author” of the text creates special problems insofar as it often involves the invocation of the *e mente auctoris* principle—and the bramble bush of theological speculation. This is not the case, however, with modern Qur’anic hermeneutics. Consider, for example, J. J. G. Jansen’s discussion of Amin al-Khuli’s prerequisite of historical research for Qur’anic study:

...al-Khuli’s emphasis on the importance of the historical background for the true appreciation of the literal meaning of the Koran [*sic*], would lead us to expect a reference to something like the *e mente auctoris* principle. According to this exegetical rule, it is illegitimate to read into the text implications that could not have been envisaged by its author. However, Moslems [*sic*] believe that what the Koran says about its own nature is true, viz. that the Koran is not the inspired work of a prophet or apostle, but that God himself is directly its author. Hence, the *e mente auctoris* principle has little meaning as an instrument to purge commentaries from far-fetched interpretations, since it is not humanly possible to decide whether anything can or cannot be the hidden intention of the Almighty. A near approach, however, to the *e mente auctoris* principle is Amin al-Khuli’s much stressed tenet that the Koran ought to be comprehended in the way its first hearers comprehended it.³⁴⁶

Jansen appears to have been disappointed by the Islamic exegetical tradition to the extent that it does not hand him an “instrument” with which to “purge” what he considers to be “far-fetched interpretations” from the commentaries—a rather dry, one might say “Protestant,” expectation that does no justice to the history of Muslim exegesis of the Qur’an or, for that matter, certain schools of Christian and Jewish exegesis of the Bible.³⁴⁷ Be that as it may, Jansen does suggest an important insight with regard to the exegetical procedures of modern Qur’anic

³⁴⁶ J. J. G. Jansen, The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt, Leiden: E. J. Brill (1974), p. 66.

³⁴⁷ See, e.g., Raymond B. Blakney, Meister Eckhart, New York: Harper & Row, 1941; Zohar, the Book of Splendor, edited by Gershom G. Scholem, New York: Schocken Books, 1949; Both Literal and Allegorical: Studies in Philo of Alexandria’s Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus, edited by David M. Hay, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991.

hermeneutics: in principle, there is no reason for Muslims to believe that Allah did not intend His (or Her or Its) readers to engage in precisely the kind of full-knowing “reading backwards” that I have illustrated in this chapter. Indeed, since (for the believer) Allah evidently chose to communicate with humankind by means of language, one has to presume that He knew what She was getting Itself into: a semantically “open” relationship with the Revelation’s readers and/or auditors, from the 7th century C.E. until the end of time.

Jansen offers a valuable follow-up insight as well: “That Amin al-Khuli’s view does indeed come close to the *e mente auctoris* principle ... when we realize that in the Islamic system the first hearer of the message of the Koran is the Prophet Mohammed, whom skeptical minds sometimes suppose to have been the author of the Koran.”³⁴⁸ Open hermeneutics is not a semantic “free-for-all” whether one views the Muslim sacred text from within the “Islamic system” or from without. As Robbins’s meticulous literary history of the Johannine-inflected Lukan Jesus tradition exemplifies, full-knowing reading may involve the interpreter in a complex weave of text-based evidence. That very complexity raises interesting questions about aspects of traditional Muslim prophetology that, in light of Jansen’s remarks, strike one as irrelevant rather than incorrect.

What I have in mind is the traditional assertion of Muhammad’s illiteracy, an interpretation of the Qur’anic phrase *nabiyyun ummi* which, presumably, applies to the Prophet himself.³⁴⁹ As with much of the Classical commentary tradition, this reading of the phrase is reactive—i.e., it arose from a context of

³⁴⁸ Jansen, The Interpretation of the Koran, pp. 66-67.

³⁴⁹ Qur’an 7:157-158.

inter-sectarian polemic, where the “authenticity” of the Qur’an was called into question precisely because the Revelation is highly allusive. The accusation is that the Prophet’s allusive Recitation suggests that he himself was a “full-knowing reader” of ancient traditions. As we have seen, in the Near Eastern prophetic tradition that the Prophet’s detractors presumed to be authentic, vision came by way of re-vision. The prerequisite of re-vision was an insightful grasp of the precursor Scripturalist tradition.³⁵⁰ Therefore, those among the Prophet’s detractors who pointed to the Qur’an’s highly allusive nature as “proof” that the Revelation was not genuine were, in fact, unwittingly providing evidence to contradict their claim.³⁵¹ Ironically, the Prophet’s defenders were just as ignorant of the “mechanics” of Near Eastern prophecy and, consequently, were not in a position to deal this particular criticism a mortal blow. Instead, they unnecessarily placed in circulation a belief that the Prophet, a successful merchant, was illiterate—not inconceivable in his day and age but, rather, beside the point. Indeed, even if one accepts the theory that the Prophet was simply a passive vessel of Divine speech (alluded to by Jansen, *supra*), it really ought not to matter whether he was literate since he would have had no input whatsoever in the contents of the Qur’an anyway.³⁵²

³⁵⁰ The title of Benjamin Sommer’s book on Deutero-Isaiah, A Prophet Reads Scripture, says it all.

³⁵¹ The Qur’an depicts the Prophet’s detractors as characterizing his preaching with phrases such as *asatir al-awwalin* or “tales of the ancients” (83:13; 46:17) and *ifkun qadim* or “hoary falsehoods” (46:11).

³⁵² On this issue I would again refer the reader to Fazlur Rahman’s discussion in Islam, 2nd edition, pp. 30-33. Moreover, it should be noted that the belief that the Prophet was illiterate has never achieved universal acceptance among Muslims. See, e.g., Mawlana Rumi’s take on this issue as discussed in Annemarie Schimmel, “Reason and Mystical Experience in Sufism,” Intellectual Traditions in Islam, edited by Farhad Daftary, London: I. B. Tauris (2000), p. 140.

Jansen's observation that Amin al-Khuli's view approaches "the *e mente auctoris* principle" may prove most productive if we allow it to take us back to the implications of open hermeneutics, rather than to where this phrase traditionally leads—an attempt by sectarian elites to "close down" the spectrum of potential available meaning to something they can manage. According to the version of open hermeneutics articulated in these pages, the author of any given text, sacred or secular, human or Divine, "means" what He/he, She/she, or It has uttered. Where a human author is concerned, an utterance may, of course, be a "misstatement."³⁵³ Such linguistic events do occur in the normal course of communication and, where noticed, are amenable to correction. But it would be highly problematic to suggest that any sustained discourse consisted entirely, or even largely, of misstatements. Sustained discourse may consist of statements based upon mistaken assumptions, or incorrect information, etc., but the intention of the utterer is, presumptively, to say what is said—or something very nearly approaching what is said.

Beyond this general intention, what must also be presumed is that the receiver(s)-in-context of a given communication are at liberty to do whatever they like in terms of making that communication meaningful. That said, they are constrained by the formal elements of the communication as uttered if they wish to "divine" what connects it to the time and place of its original utterance—for, as Nasr Abu Zayd argues, language-as-uttered encodes such information.³⁵⁴ If one

³⁵³ Presumably, this is not a fault to which Divinity is prone.

³⁵⁴ In addition to Abu Zayd, I am here re-reading Eco through Schleiermacher, though Bakhtin takes a similar position in the essay "Discourse in the Novel" published in M. M. Bakhtin, The

presumes an omniscient Divine author for the Qur'an (like Amin al-Khuli and Abu Zayd), one must likewise presume that Allah meant this communication with humankind to be subject to the "frailties" to which language is itself subject—most notably, that it is semiotically and semantically "open." The only way to avoid making this presumption is to claim that the language of the Qur'an is miraculously unlike any other language—reflecting a desire not so much to "divine" something about the text but, instead, to "divinize" it.³⁵⁵ As we have seen, however, when such a strategy is applied, one returns full-circle to theological verticality and is faced with the embarrassment of the tradition's use of pre-Islamic poetry to shed light on Qur'anic locutions.

Despite this embarrassment, many believing Muslims choose this option because it seems to them to be the "safer" route to take. Certainly it is a choice that will earn them the approbation of sectarian elites and, as one might expect, there is much in the tradition designed to reinforce such choices. Only a few believing Muslims (such as those in the Egyptian School we have been studying) make a hermeneutical choice and admit, with Stanley Fish, that "like it or not, interpretation is the only game in town."³⁵⁶ For those Muslims—and others who would read the sacred text sensitive to historical context—there are plenty more embarrassments to go around. Among the more interesting of these for the "full-

Dialogic Imagination, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press (1981), 259-422 (see especially his discussion of "actual meaning" on p. 401).

³⁵⁵ This claim is made in a variety of ways and for a plethora of reasons but without, in my view, thinking through their logical entailments.

³⁵⁶ Stanley Fish, Is There A Text In This Class?, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1980), p. 355.

knowing” readers who engage the text is the problem of allusion’s elusiveness. It is to this problem that I will now briefly turn.

Mihrab and Echo

As noted earlier in this chapter, the specific form of intertextuality that characterizes Qur’anic discourse is allusion: a complex linguistic and literary phenomenon that is also one of the few forms of intertextuality that is, by definition, diachronic in nature. Allusions look back in time to an earlier text (or, as we saw with Robbins, texts). They are also, by definition, intentional: accidental allusions cannot be considered “allusion proper.”³⁵⁷ Allusions may be periphrastic or involve fragments of quotation; but full, direct quotation is not ordinarily considered to be allusive. I included these various forms of intertextuality under the rubrics of citation, “allusion proper,” and echo, and introduced a passage from the Qur’an that exhibits all three of these forms as an illustration.³⁵⁸ In addition to the foregoing, I discussed Vernon Robbins’s essay on Johannine-inflected Lukan Jesus tradition to illustrate the sort of textual detective work that may be employed to develop a literary history of a specific Scriptural allusion or allusive pattern or cluster—particularly one that appears to have undergone some sort of transformation between the alluding text and the text(s) alluded to—a transformation that begs for an accounting.

Of the three rubrics of intertextuality I have reviewed, Robbins’s would appear to fit best with “echo.” Although he does not himself employ this term, his

³⁵⁷ John Hollander distinguishes echo from “allusion proper” in this way: “echo is a metaphor of, and for, alluding, and does not depend on conscious intention” on the part of the author. Hollander, *Figure of Echo*, p. 64.

³⁵⁸ *Supra* pp. 155-160.

argument for a Johannine-inflected Lukan Jesus as the *‘Isa* of the Qur’an tends to employ metaphors that relate to auditory experience.³⁵⁹ Robbins “listens” to the texts he studies; his attunement to them positions him, like Stanley Cavell, to discover in reading “what is being said to us,” “what we are saying,” and to thereby disclose “the precise location from which it is said.”³⁶⁰ Deep reading is the “sounding out” of a text that does not itself speak but that, like the *mihrab* in the wall of a mosque, serves the dual function of reflecting the recitation of the Imam to the congregation standing behind, while indicating the direction of the *ka’aba* which the worshippers ritually face.³⁶¹ What is heard is not direct speech—like quotation—but speech deflected: a form of echo. Moreover, every *mihrab* echoes differently—depending upon the individual characteristics of its construction and of the space into which it deflects sound. The difficulties of the *textus receptus* are met again in this metaphor: there is no getting around them.

Much allusive communication takes place in this fashion; as mentioned, echo is a tenuous, elusive mode: one requiring a trained ear.³⁶² Even so, no amount of training can make any reader an infallible judge of every allusive echo:

Allusive echo functions *to suggest* to the reader that text B should be understood in light of a broad interplay with text A,

³⁵⁹ E.g., his study of “recitation” as a compositional technique (Robbins, p.2); his employment of “strategies of socio-rhetorical interpretation” (ibid.); his description of canonical Luke “telling about important births” (ibid, p. 7); recitation as a compositional technique in Justin Martyr and reference to what early Christians “say” about Tatian’s *Diatessaron* (ibid, p.13); verses from John’s Gospel establishing the environment for the “recitation” of other Gospels (ibid, p. 14); the Arabic Harmony “recites” Luke (ibid, p. 15); *al-‘Imran* “narrates” the story of Jesus (ibid, p.19); his reference to the repeated ways in which “again the reader hears Qur’anic statement that is a merger of ‘Lukan’ tradition dynamically interacting with Johannine tradition,” (ibid, p. 29).

³⁶⁰ Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, p. 64.

³⁶¹ A *mihrab* is a recessed acoustical niche located in the mosque wall facing Mecca.

³⁶² See Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*.

encompassing aspects of A beyond those explicitly echoed. This sort of metaleptic figuration is the antithesis of the metaphysical conceit, in which the poet's imagination seizes a metaphor and explicitly wrings out of it all manner of unforeseeable significations.³⁶³

Metalepsis (also referred to as “transumption”) is a diachronic trope where the “figurative effect” of a given echo subsists in the “unstated or suppressed (transumed) points of resonance” between two or more texts.³⁶⁴ Suggestiveness is the reigning metaphor here, because metalepsis “places the reader within a field of whispered or unstated correspondences.”³⁶⁵ “The interpretation of a metalepsis entails the recovery of the transumed material”—a “recovery” that may or may not have been intended by its author, but which cannot, in any case, be guaranteed:³⁶⁶

The volume of intertextual echo varies in accordance with the semantic distance between the source and the reflecting surface. Quotation, allusion, and echo may be seen as points along a spectrum of intertextual reference, moving from the explicit to the subliminal. As we move farther away from overt citation, the source recedes into the discursive distance, the intertextual relations become less determinate, and the demand placed on the reader's listening powers grows greater. As we near the vanishing point of the echo, it inevitably becomes difficult to decide whether we are really hearing an echo at all, or whether we are only conjuring things out of the murmurings of our own imaginations.³⁶⁷

³⁶³ Richard B. Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul, New Haven: Yale University Press (1989), p. 20. Emphasis added.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid. Suggestiveness is also the reigning metaphor in much traditional Chinese reflection upon meaning-making with language. See Ming Dong Gu, Chinese Theories of Reading and Writing: A Route to Hermeneutics and Open Poetics, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005.

³⁶⁶ Hays, Echoes of Scripture, p. 20. This terminology is traceable to Quintillian. See also Hollander, Figure of Echo, p. 115.

³⁶⁷ Hays, Echoes, p. 23.

Consequently, it is important to acknowledge that hermeneutics is an art, not an exact science. It is, as Wittgenstein might say, a language-game. And, like every game (or art for that matter), hermeneutics makes use of rules—but “rules of thumb” or “guiding principles” rather than strict directives. As a general proposition, then, the deep reader of texts proceeds along the following lines (adopted by Richard Hays):

The hermeneutical event occurs in my reading of the text, but my reading always proceeds within a community of interpretation, whose hermeneutical conventions inform my reading. Prominent among those conventions are the convictions that a proposed interpretation must be justified with reference to evidence provided both by the text’s rhetorical structure and by what can be known through critical investigation about the author and original readers. Any interpretation must respect these constraints in order to be persuasive within my reading community. Claims about intertextual meaning effects are strongest where it can credibly be demonstrated that they occur within the literary structure of the text and that they can plausibly be ascribed to the intention of the author and the competence of the original readers.³⁶⁸

In the specific instance where the reader feels that she is in the presence of allusive echo—Pucci’s “allusive space”—Hays has developed seven “tests” to keep in mind:

1. Availability: It is important to consider if the “proposed source of the echo” was “available to the author and/or original readers” or auditors of the alluding text.³⁶⁹

Is it probable that the “literary environment” or horizontal dimension of the alluding text accommodated the text(s) alluded to in some form? Recall how Robbins made a point to locate the authors of the texts in his chain of transmission in the general vicinity of the Hijaz.

³⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 28.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 29.

2. Volume: What Hays terms the “volume of an echo” is a function of the “degree of explicit repetition of words or syntactical patterns” that a comparison of the alluding text and the text alluded to may disclose.³⁷⁰

The volume of an echo may be one factor to take into consideration when determining the likelihood of availability. For example, as we have seen, the Qur’anic *‘Isa* struck Vernon Robbins as echoing the Lukan Jesus, but in a *Johannine-inflected way*. In order to account for the precise manner in which this echo struck him, Robbins felt obligated to construct a literary history for this distinctive Scriptural figure.

3. Recurrence: How often does a trope or passage alluded to recur in an alluding text?

Hays suggests that repetition of this sort may be an indication that the author of the alluding text places particular importance upon such tropes or passages and, therefore, “proposed echoes from the same context should be given additional credence.”³⁷¹

4. Thematic Coherence: Is the meaning that one can make by identifying an instance of allusive echo “consonant” with the general meaning one can make from the text absent recourse to allusion?

Here, Hays rightly observes, the reader “begins to move beyond simple identification of echoes to the problem of how to interpret them.”³⁷² In the case of Qur’an interpretation, there is a long history of neglect where Biblical and para-Biblical allusion is concerned. An important question to ask, then, in the case of Qur’anic interpretation is: does the identification of a particular allusion help to resolve persistent puzzles with the inherited interpretation of the sacred text? Is

³⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid.

new light shed on an old problem? Does the recognition of allusion offer a more satisfying exegesis than its neglect ever did? “Satisfaction” is, in fact, Hays’s seventh test (see *infra*).

5. Historical Plausibility: Could the author have “intended the alleged meaning effect? Could his readers have understood it?”

We are reminded that not everything which appears in a given communication is “readily intelligible” to its actual readers—whether those readers are contemporaneous with the utterance of the communication or removed in time and/or place from the original receivers-in-context. “This test,” Hays observes, “historical in character, necessarily requires hypothetical constructs of what might have been intended and grasped by particular” members of its original audience.³⁷³ Of course, deciding whether or not a Divine author intended His/Her/Its audience to develop a particular interpretation is a matter best left to theologians; what a given audience in the past might well have understood, however, is a historical question and, as such, is fair game for the practitioner of modern hermeneutics.

6. History of Interpretation: “Have other readers, both critical and pre-critical, heard the same echoes?”

This is a particularly interesting test in light of the relative neglect of Biblical and para-Biblical allusion in the Qur’an by the *mufasssirun*. Hays notes that while the “readings of our predecessors can both check and stimulate our perception of scriptural echoes” and represent “a possible restraint against arbitrariness,” they are “also one of the least reliable guides for interpretation.” He understands this problem first-hand because, as a scholar of the New Testament, he must cope

³⁷³ Ibid, pp. 30-31.

with the fact that “Gentile Christian readers at a very early date lost Paul’s sense of urgency about relating the gospel to God’s dealings with Israel and, slightly later, began reading Paul’s letters within the interpretive matrix of the New Testament canon.”³⁷⁴

As we have seen in the case of Islamic history, the rise of a distinctive and successful Muslim empire set in motion waves of re-Arabization and the eventual suppression of the *Isra’iliyyat*, with the resulting exegetical “amnesia” designed to conform with the new place in the world assigned to non-Muslim “peoples of the Book.” Hence, what Hays calls “a historically sensitive exegesis can recover echoes previously dampened or drowned out.”³⁷⁵ He then quotes Hollander at some length:

The reader of texts, in order to overhear echoes, must have some kind of access to an earlier voice, and to its cave of resonant signification, analogous to that of the author of the later text. When such access is lost in a community of reading, what may have been an allusion may fade in prominence; and yet a scholarly recovery of the context would restore the allusion, by revealing intent as well as by showing means.³⁷⁶

Hollander and Hays both recommend the development of this hermeneutical art as a “process of reclamation” that ought not to be held hostage to what the literary critic Frank Kermode deems “the interpretive inadequacy of our predecessors.” Hays argues that “an investigation of the history of interpretation can extend the range of possible readings” of a given Scripture, “but it can also lead us to a narrowing of the hermeneutical potential” that allusions coined in the

³⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 31.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

ordinary course of linguistic communication are designed to exploit. He concludes: “this criterion should rarely be used as a negative test to exclude proposed echoes that commend themselves on other grounds.”³⁷⁷

7. Satisfaction: “With or without clear confirmation from the other criteria listed [above], does the proposed reading make sense? Does it illuminate the surrounding discourse? Does it produce for the reader a satisfying account of the effect of the intertextual relation?”³⁷⁸

For Hays, this seventh “canon” of echo identification presents the most important “test” of all; for, as a deep reader of sacred texts, he values above all else the ability to address them with “a critical penetration” that could not have been achieved otherwise.³⁷⁹

It merits repeating that critical penetration—whether of this or any variety—is not tantamount to readerly infallibility. “There are always only shades of certainty when these criteria are applied to particular texts. The more of them that fall clearly into place, the more confident we can be in rendering an interpretation of the echo effect in a given passage.” Not only that, but “there will be exceptional occasions when the tests fail to account for the spontaneous power of particular intertextual conjunctions. Despite all the careful hedges that we plant around texts, meaning has a way of leaping over, like sparks.” Hays therefore appends to these canons a caveat which I wish to re-word only for the sake of making it apply more clearly to the case of the Qur’an: we must be careful to avoid falling into the trap of thinking that the search for and identification of

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 32.

Scriptural allusions in the Qur'an exhausts the meanings the sacred text makes available. Modern Qur'anic hermeneutics, as a meditation upon time, does not come to a resting place so long as time itself continues. We as readers, wandering in the forest of the text, may well find ourselves exhausted; but the hermeneutical task remains self-renewing and vigorous long after this reader, or any reader, has passed from the scene.³⁸⁰

Further Prospects

In order to avoid setting up a kind of "cook-book" approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics, I chose to defer the discussion of Richard Hays's criteria for judging the likelihood that one has entered "allusive space" until *after* I had offered two examples of "full-knowing" readings (my own and that of Vernon Robbins). Hays himself cautions his readers that he does "not use these criteria explicitly in [his] readings of the texts, but they implicitly undergird the exegetical judgments that [he has] made."³⁸¹ Wishing to follow in his footsteps in this respect, I am tempted to conclude this study without further ado. However, I think that the reader who is new to this kind of inquiry deserves a little further consideration before being sent out into the world and instructed to "go thou and do likewise." Consequently, I offer one final, brief example of the kinds of interpretive satisfaction that modern Qur'anic hermeneutics, conducted as I have indicated here, can provide.

³⁸⁰ Ibid, pp. 32-33.

³⁸¹ Ibid, p. 29. Readers of rhetorical criticism may wish to reflect upon the travesty that has been made of Kenneth Burke's "pentad" by well-meaning disciples who apply his criteria as if they were a formula.

Beginning in 2001, Brill began publication of the Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an (EQ)—a milestone in modern Anglophone scholarship on the sacred text and a profoundly valuable contribution to its genre (comparable to the Anchor Bible Dictionary). As with any production of its kind, the EQ presents a “snapshot” of the state of Qur'an scholarship at the close of the 20th century: a scholarship largely innocent of the hermeneutical approach I have outlined in the foregoing pages. An example of what I mean can be found in Andrew Rippin's article “Isaiah,” in the 2nd volume. Rippin opens his article with the observation that Isaiah was the “Son of Amos and a prophet who was sent to Israel. Isaiah (in Arabic, Sha'ya or Asha'ya) is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an, although exegetical works” (Tabari, Mawardi) do mention him in connection with a particular verse of the Qur'an (17:4). He is mentioned in those works because the *mufasssirun* regarded his life story “as an illustration of how the acts of ‘corruption’...” referenced in Qur'an 17:4 “demanded the coming of the prophet.”³⁸² Rippin then moves quickly away from the Qur'an to post-Qur'anic Muslim literature presumably because the Revelation itself has nothing more to tell us about the prophet Isaiah—if it had anything to tell us about him at all.

Yet, if one returns to the *ayat* that Rippin cites (indeed quotes in translation), one encounters what appears to be *itself* a citation to previous Scripture. Qur'an 17:4 reads: “And We revealed [*qada + ila*] to the Children of Israel in the Scripture [*fi al-kitab*] that you [plural] will spread corruption in the land twice...” The remaining phrase [*wa lata'lunna 'uluwwan kabiran*] admits of

³⁸² Andrew Rippin, “Isaiah,” The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an, vol. 2, Leiden: Brill (2001-), p. 562.

alternative renderings. Rippin's translation reads: "and you shall ascend exceeding high."³⁸³ John Penrice argues in his A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran that the phrase should be rendered "and you will be 'elated with great insolence.'" Penrice suggests that *ta'alunna* "is here put for *ta'aluwnna*, the radical *waw* being suppressed because of the quiescent *nun* contained in the teshdeed [sic]; it being contrary to the rule to have two quiescent letters together after the same vowel...."³⁸⁴ At least one modern translator of the Qur'an, Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, agrees with Penrice or has adopted his rendering.³⁸⁵

One way to attempt to resolve this ambiguity would be to engage in a "battle of the grammarians"—a method favored both by Muslim tradition and, somewhat ironically, by Orientalists. Another way would be to listen to what the text is saying in the portion of the phrase that appears relatively unambiguous: "We [Allah] revealed" (Rippin renders *qada* "decreed") "*in the Scripture that...*" and to recognize what follows as a citation of some kind. Admittedly, the remainder of the phrase is ambiguous, fragmentary, and rather general. And, as I showed above, Qur'anic citation involves a broad range of possible appropriations including interpolated quotations and paraphrase. Nevertheless, the text is pointing the reader to a previous Divine communication; it may well presume enough familiarity with this prior speech act that such a reference was deemed sufficient to trigger recognition in a full-knowing reader from the past.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ John Penrice, A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications (2004; originally published 1873), p. 100.

³⁸⁵ See The Qur'an, trans. by Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, New York: Olive Branch Press (2003), p. 264.

That “full-knowledge” is evidently lost to us; but it is not out of the realm of possibility that it may be, to some extent, recovered.

It is entirely possible that the reference is to a portion of Israel’s Scripture no longer extant. It is intriguing, however, that the Muslim exegetical tradition associated this *ayah* with the prophet Isaiah. Therefore, the canonical book of Isaiah would seem to be a reasonable place to undertake a search. The matching of a similar phrase to the one found in the Qur’an could conceivably shift the burden of proof in favor of one particular rendering. The happy coincidence of a Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, or LXX Greek cognate with *ta’alunna* (for, in searching, we must not neglect the targum) would make the task that much easier.

The foregoing investigation represents one of the possibilities that a hermeneutical deep reading of the sacred text affords; but even if the trail from Qur’an 17:4 fails to lead us convincingly to Isaiah, son of Amos, our options are not exhausted. For one thing, Biblical scholarship knows not one Isaiah (the aforementioned son of Amos) but two—and, depending upon the scholar—possibly three. In this respect, Rippin’s approach strikes me as Biblical-literalist—a posture that, as a self-identifying disciple of John Wansbrough’s, I truly doubt he would consciously assume.³⁸⁶

The first 39 chapters of the canonical book of Isaiah are, indeed, generally ascribed to the authorship of the son of Amos. Chapters 40-66, however, betray evidence of composition by at least a 2nd hand (known in Biblical scholarship as

³⁸⁶ See Andrew Rippin, “Literary Analysis of *Qur’an*, *Tafsir*, and *Sira*: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough,” *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, edited by Richard C. Martin, Oxford: Oneworld (2001), pp. 151-163.

Deutero-Isaiah/II Isaiah/Second Isaiah). In the view of some scholars, chapters 56-66 are the work of a “3rd” or “Trito-” Isaiah.³⁸⁷ Without entering into the technical details mustered to support one argument or the other—as an Islamicist, I have no dog in this fight—it is generally acknowledged in the literature that the first 39 chapters of canonical Isaiah were composed by someone (presumably the son of Amos) who lived in Palestine prior to the Babylonian exile in 587/6 B.C.E. The remainder of the text is usually dated—on the basis of internal evidence—to the final years of the exile or just after (roughly early 540’s/late 530’s B.C.E.).³⁸⁸ This places the authorship of Deutero-Isaiah in the area of Mesopotamia where, as a consequence of the exile, a large and eventually influential Jewish community developed and prospered.³⁸⁹ Indeed, one result of the exile was that, from this time forward, more Jews would live outside of Palestine than within.³⁹⁰ It should not be too surprising, then, that by the early 7th century C.E. (when the Qur’an is traditionally believed to have been revealed), the Rabbis of Mesopotamia were putting the final editorial touches upon one of

³⁸⁷ Those interested in pursuing these distinctions and the scholarly arguments behind them may wish to consult the appendix to Benjamin Sommer’s A Prophet Reads Scripture, pp. 187-195 as well as the introduction to Klaus Baltzer, Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55, translated by Margaret Kohl, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2001), pp. 1-44.

³⁸⁸ See Baltzer’s introduction, *op. cit.*, note 345 *supra*.

³⁸⁹ For convenience, I will simply refer to Isaiah chapters 40-66 as “Deutero-Isaiah.” I intend this merely as shorthand and do not wish thereby to be understood to be expressing an opinion as to whether 2 or 3 hands were involved in the composition of this book. What is important for my purposes is that more than 1 hand was involved in the composition and that at least 1 of the authors (or the author) of chapters 40-66 prophesied in Mesopotamia during the Babylonian exile or shortly thereafter.

³⁹⁰ Richard C. Foltz, Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World’s Religions, Oxford: Oneworld Press (2004), p. 52.

the most important collections of Rabbinical literature: the Babylonian Talmud.³⁹¹

At some point in time subsequent to the exile, the material that is now chapters 40-66 of Isaiah was combined with what are now chapters 1-39 of the same book and copies of this combined work circulated in Palestine. The manufacture of this “book” has created the illusion of “unity” that so scandalized Foucault. In recent years, however, Biblical scholars have begun to produce studies and exegetical works devoted to Deutero-Isaiah as a distinct author and codex. Were Foucault still among us, I presume he would be unimpressed by this development but, in Scripturalist circles, such a move is nigh revolutionary.

Among the consequences to follow from this change is the opportunity for scholars to regard Deutero-Isaiah as a “book” with its own distinctive “personality” and characteristic concerns. One of the theories to emerge about its “personality” is its identification as a “liturgical drama”—a genre of cultic performance known throughout the Ancient world.³⁹² If this theory is correct, it opens up new horizons of possibility for the ongoing oral transmission of this work long after its textual reification through inscription and Scriptural canonization was complete.³⁹³

³⁹¹ Peter Schäfer, Jesus in the Talmud, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2007), p. 1.

³⁹² This notion tends to undermine the sense of Deutero-Isaiah as a “codex” even though, ironically, it was its construction as a separate “book” that made this further conceptualization possible. See, again, the introduction to Baltzer’s Deutero-Isaiah and also Inge Nielsen, Cultic Theatres and Ritual Drama, Aarhus, Norway: Aarhus University Press, 2002.

³⁹³ Nielsen prefaces her book with a remark by historian of drama T. P. Wiseman: “If one starts from the assumption that anything not directly attested in a literary source cannot have happened, without asking whether such attestation can be expected anyway..., then one’s range of possibilities is automatically restricted.” Nielsen, Cultic Theatres, p. 9.

As for its characteristic concerns, Deutero-Isaiah stands out from the rest of Hebrew Scripture on a number of grounds. One is the universalism of its message. Deutero-Isaiah re-envisioned the role of Israel upon the world's stage. Jerusalem is to become a place of pilgrimage not only for Judean monotheists, but for the peoples of all nations. Baltzer writes:

I think it possible that the play [Deutero-Isaiah] was not written in Babylon but was performed for the *gola* [diasporic Jewry] there. For the work is also "publicity" for Jerusalem as a place of pilgrimage. This publicity could have had its place not only in Babylon but in other places in the Diaspora as well. It is Israelites and sympathizers to whom [Deutero-Isaiah] addresses his work. "The islands and their inhabitants...the desert and its towns" are to join in raising a new song (42:10-13). That includes Greeks and Arabs.³⁹⁴

Baltzer singles out "Greeks and Arabs" because Biblical scholars have come to understand textual references to "the islands" as indicating Greece in the West and to "the desert and its towns" as indicating the Arabs to the East and South.³⁹⁵

Deutero-Isaiah's "internationalism" and its relationship to the historical figure of the Persian king Cyrus have been well documented.³⁹⁶ The fact that Isaiah 45:1 mentions Cyrus by name and identifies him as a "messiah" comes as a surprise only to those who are unfamiliar with the role that this Persian conqueror of Babylon came to play in the religio-political imaginary of the Ancient Near East.³⁹⁷ The significance of his personality and rule for the sudden

³⁹⁴ Baltzer, Deutero-Isaiah, p. 24.

³⁹⁵ Baltzer, Deutero-Isaiah, pp. 140-141.

³⁹⁶ See, e.g., Diana Edelman, The Origins of the "Second Temple": Persian Imperial Policy and the Rebuilding of Jerusalem, London: Equinox (2006), pp. 163-165.

³⁹⁷ Cyrus had admirers even among the Greeks whose fledgling democracy was threatened by his imperial ambitions. Xenophon, a student of Socrates, authored the utopian *Cyropaedia* or "Education of Cyrus" to offer the Persian king as the model of an ideal ruler. Xenophon's fellow

appearance of a universalistic strain in Near Eastern prophecy cannot be accommodated in a brief excursus. An assertion that their impact was considerable will have to suffice for now. The point I wish to make is that the more one knows about the Biblical Isaiahs, the more one has reason to expect Isaianic elements to make an appearance in the Qur'an. This reasonable expectation makes one less willing to settle for seeing the potential Qur'anic presence of such a significant prophetic figure as Isaiah given short shrift. While it is true, as Professor Rippin notes, that "Isaiah ... is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an," it is equally true that no mention is made of Cain and Abel either.³⁹⁸ Yet few (if any) readers would argue that the fratricide discussed in *Surah al-Maida* is not part of a complex allusion to those Biblical figures.

As discussed above, in the absence of an explicit reference, one can engage in careful textual comparisons to see whether a phrase from Scripture X has been quoted or paraphrased in Scripture Z. But, again, this technique does not exhaust the possibilities for hermeneutical inquiry. The presence of echo in Scripturalist intertextuality is far more pervasive—if not always more persuasive—than explicit citation. In the final pages of this chapter, then, I will present preliminary evidence from echo that, I believe, justifies further pursuit of Isaianic presence in the Qur'an.

disciple, Plato, argued in his *Republic* for rule by "philosopher-king"—a probable allusion to Cyrus. I. F. Stone's *The Trial of Socrates*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1988, provides a compelling account of the fate of the pro-Cyrus party among the ancient Athenians.

³⁹⁸ Rippin, "Isaiah," p. 562.

Deutero-Isaiah and the Prophetic Genre of Satirical Iconoclasm

In an article that is too seldom mentioned in Qur'anic scholarship, Mustansir Mir broached a number of important issues in the “literary” approach to the Qur'an. Among these is the presence within it of “humor, satire, and irony”—what I would term “carnivalistic” aspects of the sacred text.³⁹⁹ Mir wrote:

Some of the satire in the Qur'an is blunt. The affluent wicked, when they receive punishment in the hereafter, will be told: “Taste it [boiling water]! It is you who were the noble dignitary [in the world]!” (44:49). On other occasions, the satire is moderate in tone, but no less pungent for that. Abraham, finding his opportunity, is about to smash the idols in the temple. But, upon noticing the offering of food laid out before them, he decides to take his time. “Won't you eat?” he asks them in mock seriousness (37:91). Receiving no response, he pretends to be angry: “What is the matter with you that you are not speaking?” (verse 92). Humor and satire blend when, after destroying all but one of the idols in the temple, Abraham, questioned by the temple custodians, denies that he destroyed the idols, saying, “O no, it is their chief god over here [the one Abraham had spared] who did that; ask them [idols] *if they can speak*” (21:63). The point is driven home and the idolators are put to shame.⁴⁰⁰

The mockery of idols and idol-worship is a recurrent theme in the Qur'an. It is also a theme that appears repeatedly in the course of Deutero-Isaiah's liturgical drama. In the section of the “book” that Baltzer identifies as Act I, the audience witnesses the smiths hard at work, fashioning idols that will not “shake/totter” (Isaiah 41:5b-7). Baltzer explains that this is an important aspect of idol manufacture: “a frequent *topos* in polemic against idols is that the idols ‘fall’ or ‘topple over’; so we are then immediately told that they are pinned or

³⁹⁹ See the first section of the present chapter.

⁴⁰⁰ Mustansir Mir, “The Qur'an as Literature,” *Religion & Literature* 20:1 (1988), p. 57.

pegged, so as to make them firm.” An infirm idol was no doubt an embarrassment to the worshipper and the manufacturer as well.⁴⁰¹

Interestingly, this scene gives way immediately to Divine address, in which Israel’s God refers to His people as the “seed/offspring of Abraham, my friend” (41:8)—“friend” being an epithet applied to Abraham by God in the Qur’an as well.⁴⁰² The reference to Abraham in Deutero-Isaiah is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that “only a few passages in the prophetic books [narrowly defined] mention [him]...”⁴⁰³ Given the Qur’anic passage cited by Mir, Abraham’s mention in close proximity to idol manufacture ought to give the reader pause: are we entering “allusive space”? If so, what kind of allusion may be at work here?⁴⁰⁴

The Divine speech continues at length; towards the end of it, Yahweh asserts that He does not share His glory and praise with idols (Isaiah 42:8). At 42:14, Act II commences with Yahweh again speaking. He announces, “They are

⁴⁰¹ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, pp. 91-94.

⁴⁰² See, e.g., Qur’an 4:125. The word appearing in the Hebrew text (root: *a-h-b*) and translated as “my friend” is somewhat ambiguous. According to Baltzer, it can be literally rendered “‘who loves me (Yahweh)’ or ‘whom I (Yahweh) love’” (Baltzer, p. 100). In the Hebrew Bible, forms of this root appear in numerous places signifying various kinds of love, including the love of an inferior for a superior (I Samuel 18:22) and also the love of friend to friend (I Samuel 16:21). The Hebrew root *a-h-b* may be cognate with the Arabic root *h-b-b* (to love). The translators of the LXX settled upon a form of *agape* in referring to Abraham “whom I (Yahweh) loved” in Isaiah 41:8. In the LXX, *agape* signifies “love of God for man and of man for God.” See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996 (1st pub. 1843), p. 6. In the New Testament epistle *James*, Abraham is said to have been called *philos theou*, “beloved friend of God” (*James* 2:23). The Qur’anic epithet for Ibrahim (*khalil*) is a derivation of a quasi-infinitive noun *khallatun* signifying “true or sincere, friendship, love, or affection.” See E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1984 (1st pub. 1863), p. 780. The Qur’anic epithet is enriched when read with these echoes in mind.

⁴⁰³ Baltzer, p. 100.

⁴⁰⁴ The passage cited by Mir is one of several Qur’anic references to Abraham and the rejection of idolatry. See also Qur’an 21:51-70; 26: 69-89; 29: 16-18.

ignominiously put to shame who trust in a statue, who say to a cast image: ‘You are our gods!’” (42:17). According to Baltzer, these references announce “what are to be essential scenes in this act: the description of the manufacture of idols in 44:9-20. This is in fact the most extensive piece of polemic against idols in [Deutero-Isaiah].”⁴⁰⁵

The anti-idol polemic is contained in more direct Divine address (although some of it seems to be apportioned among other speakers as well),⁴⁰⁶ and follows on the heels of a Court Scene in which Yahweh famously rejects sacrificial worship (instituted in the Pentateuch). Baltzer argues that this abrogation of Mosaic ordinance is based upon a complex exegesis of patriarchal traditions (Isaiah 43:22-28).⁴⁰⁷ Yahweh moves directly from proscribing Israel’s cult of sacrifice to the condemnation of idol worship. Here Scriptural exegesis gives way to withering satire:

The makers of images, they are all nothing, and their darlings do not help, and their witnesses <...> do not see and do not perceive, so that they may be shamed. Who has fashioned a god and cast an image that is of no use? See, all its comrades will be ashamed, and <its> fashioners too, they (are descended from) a human being. Let them assemble all of them! Let them all come forward! Let them be terrified! Let them all be ashamed!— Together! A specialist for iron—he cuts off/hammers (?), and works with charcoal, and forms it with hammers, and forges it with his strong arm. He also becomes hungry and (has) no (more) strength. He has drunk no water and has become tired. A specialist for wood—he has stretched a measuring line. He traces it out with a stylus, fashions it with carving tools, with the rounding tool he makes its contours, <so as to make it> like the (ideal) image of a man, like a splendid example of a human being—to dwell in a house...(A man has come) to fell cedars and he took a durmast oak and an oak tree and he made himself strong under the trees of the wood...A man has planted a laurel,

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, pp. 124-146.

⁴⁰⁶ See *ibid*, pp. 190-191.

⁴⁰⁷ An example of Divine interpretation undertaken to revise existing cult practices. *Ibid*, pp. 176-183.

and the rain makes it big, and it can serve someone for a fire. Then he took part of them and warmed himself: in part he kindles (it) and bakes bread, in part he makes (of it) a god <and bows down (before it) in worship>. He has made an image and thrown himself down in front of it...His (one) half he took to burn in the fire, in part he eats meat, he roasts the meat so as to eat his fill. In part he warms himself too and says, "Ah! Now I am warm! I have seen firelight!" And the remainder he has made into a god, into its image. He throws himself down before it <and worships it> and prays to it and says: "Save me, for you are my god!"...They have not perceived and do not understand that their eyes are sealed so that they cannot see, their hearts (are sealed) so that they cannot understand...And he does not take it to heart, and has not the perception and not the insight to say: "His half I have burnt in the fire."... "And on the embers of part of it I have baked bread." ... "I roast meat and eat." ... "And the remainder I turn into an abomination/a horror." ... "Do I throw myself down in front of a block of wood?" ... He grazes on ashes. A deluded heart has led him astray. But he will not save his life, and will not say: "Is it not a lie (which is) in my right hand?!" ⁴⁰⁸

I have quoted this sustained anti-idolatry polemic of Deutero-Isaiah's in full because it echoes broadly throughout the anti-idolatry polemic one finds in Qur'anic discourse. The Qur'an mocks those who would worship the product of their own hands instead of the God who created all things; it argues that idols are helpless to fulfill the requests of those who call upon them; that they are incapable of speech and cannot even help themselves.⁴⁰⁹ Moreover, Deutero-Isaiah's image of idolators as those whose eyes and heart are "sealed" appears repeatedly in Qur'anic discourse.⁴¹⁰

These examples are, again, but echoes and, taken in isolation, they may well be regarded as "mere" parallels; but placed in the contexts of (1) the Qur'anic kerygma as a whole and (2) the historical epoch in which and to which that

⁴⁰⁸ Isaiah 44:9-20 in Baltzer, pp. 190-191.

⁴⁰⁹ Qur'an 21:51-70; 22:73; 26:69-89; 29:16-18; 37:83-111; 43:18.

⁴¹⁰ E.g., Qur'an 30:60; 40:36; 42:25; 63:4.

kerygma was pitched, they strike me as intentional references to an ancient and, for the Qur'an's original audience, potentially compelling message. That message was the universalistic one that Deutero-Isaiah had spread by means of the liturgical drama performed for the peoples of the islands and the desert in the wake of Cyrus' unifying conquest of the Ancient Near East. It was a message of hope for downtrodden communities that previous Empires had divided for the purpose of increasing political control.⁴¹¹

Hermeneutics and the Historicization of the Qur'anic Kerygma

The notion of a Qur'anic kerygma is not one that I have broached before in these pages and, as it is a concept that I am borrowing from New Testament scholarship, may be objected to as inappropriate. The Qur'an itself uses an Arabic term (*bushra*) that, I would argue, may be taken as a synonym insofar as kerygma and *bushra* are both proclamations of glad tidings.⁴¹² I would argue further (as I have done throughout) that both proclamations are to be understood against the shared historical background of the Ancient Near East. Crucial to the exposition of that background is the rise of political figures with universalistic ambitions and the role that new missionary forms of monotheism were to play in the execution of their political designs. I have already mentioned Deutero-Isaiah's fascination with Cyrus who, as noted by Garth Fowden, "created the European and southwest Asian world's first *political world empire*."⁴¹³ Cyrus was followed in the 4th century B.C.E. by Alexander the Great—who appears to have exceeded the

⁴¹¹ See Baltzer, Deutero-Isaiah, pp. 28-30.

⁴¹² See, e.g., Qur'an 57:12.

⁴¹³ Garth Fowden, Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1993), p. 6.

Persian conqueror in territorial ambition, but whose early death resulted in the division of his Empire by his generals. Nevertheless, the dream of a unified world did not pass with the deaths of these ancient heroes and “when Rome adopted monotheism it became [what Fowden terms] an *aspiring politico-cultural world empire*.”⁴¹⁴

In distinguishing between a “political world empire” and a “politico-cultural world empire,” Fowden underestimates the potential influence of Zarathustran preaching upon Cyrus.⁴¹⁵ But this is a small quibble. In my view, Fowden’s most significant contribution to the notion of a Qur’anic kerygma is his correlation of late antique political universalism with the rise of new missionary monotheisms and their strenuous anti-idol/anti-polytheism rhetoric. Pre-modern proponents of “world” unification objected to idol worship because, in the presence of a pantheon, loyalties are divided. Ironically, as Fowden points out, monotheistic attempts to enforce their hegemonic aims generated heresy which, in turn, served to increase social fragmentation.⁴¹⁶ Sensitivity to this ironic state of affairs is evident in Qur’anic discourse.

The 6th “chapter” of the Qur’an, *Surah al-An’am*,⁴¹⁷ presents something of an epitome of the Qur’anic kerygma: it rehearses the planks of a prophetic

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Olmstead notes that Iranian royalty began giving their children Zoroastrian names no later than 550 BCE—a significant benchmark of Zarathustran influence in elite circles. Cyrus conquered Babylon in 538 BCE. See A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1948), p. 103, n. 19.

⁴¹⁶ Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, p. 6.

⁴¹⁷ A phrase which translates as “the cattle”—animals revered in ancient Persian religion (see Mary Boyce’s magisterial *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. I, Leiden: Brill, 1975).

tradition that eschews idol worship in favor of Scripturalist monotheism⁴¹⁸ and then remarks, tellingly, that “those who divide up their religion” (*alladhina farraqu dinahum*) will have to answer to God for their actions (*amruhum ila Allahi*)—implying that it is the prophetic role of Scripturalist monotheism to unite peoples rather than divide them.⁴¹⁹ The notion that such a mission might be appropriately accomplished through political means was modeled for the ancient Near East by the Zarathustran Cyrus, celebrated by the Hebrew prophet Deutero-Isaiah, appropriated by the Roman emperor Constantine and, tradition informs us, was implemented with astounding success by the Prophet Muhammad and the first generation of his followers.⁴²⁰

This history reflects an interpretive trajectory that raises profound questions in our present moment, beset as it is by wars in which antagonists on all sides—even those affiliated with ostensibly secular regimes—claim Divine sanction for their violent actions. While such matters are largely outside the scope of the present study, I think it appropriate to consider, in closing, the recent remarks of the Finnish theologian Heikki Räisänen on the potential role of hermeneutics in our rapidly shrinking “global village”:

Historical exegesis employs ... texts as guides to lost worlds. As Wayne Meeks puts it, it belongs to the job of an historian “to try to protect the integrity of the past, and that often has the effect of emphasizing its strangeness.” The exegete may be needed in the

⁴¹⁸ The Qur’an shares these planks not only with the Hebrew prophets but also the Iranian visionary Zarathustra/Zoroaster. Indeed, potential Zoroastrian connections with the Qur’an deserve further investigation. One place to start may be a structural comparison of the Qur’an with the *Gathas* which are arranged according to the length of their metres. See *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, edited and translated by Mary Boyce, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1984), p. 2.

⁴¹⁹ See Qur’an 6: 155-161.

⁴²⁰ Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, pp. 6-8.

global village as the “historical conscience” in the dialogue, as
one who warns of attempts to make too direct a use of the texts
[we inherit]....⁴²¹

Modern Qur’anic hermeneutics cultivates an understanding of the sacred text which tries to “protect the integrity of the past” by foregrounding the differences between ourselves as its present readers and auditors and those readers and auditors who received it from prophetic lips and scribal hands. Bakhtin’s assurance that every past meaning will have its homecoming festival should be taken as an admonition that the historical conscience bequeathed to humankind by the rise of technicalism must remain ever vigilant. If past meanings are potentially part of our own future, we must prepare ourselves to receive them when they arrive again. Such preparation includes learning to recognize what is past about them. Only then will we know how to accommodate them properly when they meet us upon their return.

⁴²¹ Heikki Räisänen, Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma, London: SCM Press Ltd. (1997), p. 15.

Conclusion

If I have tried to point out ... the occasions where Plotinus is quoting, borrowing, paraphrasing, or alluding to Plato, it is in the hope of calling attention to the subtle interplay of traditionalism and originality that constituted Plotinus' greatness. Far from being an exception for his time ... Plotinus was, in this sense at least, supremely representative of [it]. He lived and wrote in a highly literate atmosphere, where the slightest allusion was likely to call to mind masses of Platonic, poetic, and other texts, by virtue of powers of memory of which we today can scarcely conceive.⁴²²

Centuries of theologized polemic have delivered to the world two Qur'ans—the Borrowed and the Unborrowed. These Qur'ans have been constructed upon the internalized anxieties of competing sectarian elites without regard to the semiotic properties of the language of Revelation. In my view, this is a Hobson's choice. The way out of this dilemma is to recognize the Qur'an for the highly allusive text that it is. By means of this very allusiveness, the Qur'an empowers the full-knowing readers in its audience, converting them into affiliated communities of interpretation it calls "peoples of the Book." Such communities are equipped through the activation of their respective knowledge bases to initiate one another into a fuller engagement with the Qur'an itself and with the precursor Scriptures that the Qur'an repeatedly claims to have been revealed to confirm (*musaddiq*).⁴²³ Thus I find myself in agreement with Israeli scholar Hava Lazarus-Yafeh's assertion that a full appreciation of early Islamic

⁴²² Michael Chase, translator's preface to Pierre Hadot, Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision, trans. by Michael Chase, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1993), p. xi.

⁴²³ Q 2:42, 2:89, 2:91, 2:97, 2:101, 3:3, 3:81, 4:47, 5:48, 6:92, 35:31, 46:12, 46:30.

literature requires one to pay “serious attention to its various predecessors” with the understanding that

... the Near East resembles a palimpsest, layer upon layer, tradition upon tradition, intertwined to the extent that one cannot really grasp one without the other, certainly not the later without the earlier, but often also not the earlier without considering the shapes it took later.⁴²⁴

I would, however, amend the latter portion of Lazarus-Yafeh’s observation to read: “certainly not the later without the earlier nor the earlier without the shapes it took later” because it is *only* through studying the ongoing negotiations of meaning among a given text’s full-knowing readers that one can hope to mine the depths of its interpretive possibilities. To arbitrarily fore-shorten this hermeneutical process adds nothing to the conversation of humankind; rather, it represents one more exercise of the will-to-power over texts. As we have seen in the case of Scripture, sectarian elites historically reserve to themselves a monopoly over the ways in which sacred writ is allowed to mean. The assertion of this exclusive authority produces a hardening of sectarian boundaries that inures to the benefit of those elites and their heirs; at the same time, it deprives generations of potential full-knowing readers of the interpretive empowerment literary allusiveness bestows.

This raises the question: are scholars of the Qur’an and of Biblical and related literatures called to attend only to the needs of sectarian elites? In the past, this has been, by far, the typical scenario. If the present world-historical context is identical with that past, then scholars need not alter their interpretive protocols one iota: they are eminently well-prepared to “fight the last war.” But if,

⁴²⁴ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (1992), p. 4.

perchance, the present context and the past are not identical, then certain adjustments need to be made. The most critical point that I wish to make at this juncture is that the authority to perform this kind of hermeneutics on Muslim Scripture comes from the Qur'an itself. As Nasr Abu Zayd would put it, it is the very structure of Qur'anic discourse that compels hermeneutical reflection.

In a post-Medieval (but aspirantly modern) present, hermeneutics necessarily includes meditations upon history. Such meditations have led this author to conclude that Qur'anic discourse is heavily-laden with citations, allusions proper, and echoes. These literary devices have, in a sense, lain dormant for more than 10 centuries; they await activation and negotiation by the kinds of readers and auditors that populated the Qur'an's first audience—the full-knowing readers which the sacred text invites (*da'a*) to *al-Ma'ida*, the robust religious pluralism of its hermeneutic feast-table.⁴²⁵ If there is a solid, scholarly justification for turning this audience-in-waiting away empty-handed, I would like to know what that justification could be—for it truly escapes my grasp. Indeed, the present moment in world history strikes me as a most propitious time to encourage readers of the Qur'an (Muslim and non-Muslim) to re-discover the many ways (and means) by which this Arabic collection of prophetic discourses connects with the larger and more ancient Near Eastern prophetic tradition as a whole. In an age of conflict, it is all too easy to emphasize how we differ from one another; if there were ever a time to re-learn the many things we share, it would seem to be now.

⁴²⁵ I am tempted to pun here in a Derridean way with the Arabic word *dawa*, meaning to echo.

In the previous chapter, I reviewed three points of contact between the Qur'an and Biblical and parabiblical literatures; in the process, I illustrated the Qur'anic employment of citation, allusion proper, and echo. As discussed, all of these devices were operative in *Surah al-Ma'ida's* complex reference to the Cain and Abel story found in Genesis and its appropriations in the Mishna and Babylonian Talmud. Nevertheless, I emphasized the phenomenon of echo, since echo is the most *elusive* of allusive literary devices. Echo's very elusiveness is part of what makes it rhetorically effective: the less specific the allusion, the greater its suggestiveness. The virtue of suggestion is that it helps to lead an audience to reach new conclusions with an open-hand; suggestion is compatible with the "rhetoric of invitation" that, I argue, underlies much Qur'anic discourse.

Vernon Robbins's recent work on the Johannine-inflected Lukan Jesus demonstrates one method of following the textual traces of literary echoes from canon to canon. In his article, Robbins does not address the Qur'anic treatment of the crucifixion, *vis.*, that it was illusory; this is an added twist to Islamic tradition's depiction of the figure of 'Isa ibn Maryam and one that obligates us to consider ways in which to further inflect his literary history with the writings of Gnostic Christians.⁴²⁶

My own discussion of the Qur'an's anti-idolatry rhetoric as it parallels Deutero-Isaiah's suggests that scholars of the Qur'an could benefit from attending to cues within the text itself. Words like "*katabna*" and phrases like "*qada ila*" flag the reader that allusive space may be opening up before her. A

⁴²⁶ See Qur'an 4:157-158.

review of such linguistic signals as these is, in fact, a practical way to continue the hermeneutical process that I have initiated in these pages.

But there are other ways as well. One is to systematically mine the established scholarship on Biblical and Qur'anic parallels. Some of this may be found in the works of 19th and early 20th century Orientalists. An edition of J. M. Rodwell's English rendering of the Qur'an which contains his annotations may be used as a handy introduction to this body of work. Unfortunately, those who pursue allusive space at the direction of Rodwell and many of his ilk must be prepared to subject themselves to a scholarly discourse that is often deeply offensive to Muslims—and to anyone else who has a fair grasp upon the issues involved in comparative religion.⁴²⁷ This is the scholarship of the Borrowed Qur'an and, insofar as it represents itself as “proving” the Arabic Revelation's inferiority to the Bible or Judaism's or Christianity's inherent superiority to Islam, it is not credible. Nevertheless, the Orientalists did know their ancient and late ancient Near Eastern literature and, no matter how polemical their motives may have been, they could be relied upon to recognize literary parallels.

A more neutral (and far more exhaustive) presentation of Qur'an/Bible parallels is available in German: Johann-Dietrich Thyen's Bibel und Koran, Köhn: Böhlau, 2000. Thyen's collection is thorough (roughly 300 pages in the present edition) and systematic; it also has the virtue of taking into account para-biblical writings. I would emphasize, however, that it is a collection of *parallels* (the subtitle of the book is Eine Synopse gemeinsamer Überlieferungen or “A

⁴²⁷ See Carl W. Ernst, Following Muhammad: Re-Thinking Islam in the Contemporary World, Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press (2003), pp. 38-57.

Synopsis of Traditions Held in Common”) and does not undertake the crucial task of attempting to distinguish between a “mere” parallel and forms of allusion. As I hope to have adequately conveyed in previous chapters, allusions are not given or self-evident. In the absence of explicit authorial admission, they are “established” (to whatever extent they can be “established”) by means of scholarly argument.

Although Thyen’s collection is quite thorough, it is not exhaustive. This is because his focus was on Bible-Qur’an parallels. Where parabiblical literature such as the Mishnah provides a third prong to support allusions between this pair of texts, Thyen acknowledges it. But there are other instances when the Qur’an appears to allude to parabiblical literature without involving the canonical codex of the Bible. One brief example that may be cited is the Qur’anic method for determining the arrival of *fajr*, or the hour in which to commence a day’s fasting in the month of Ramadan: “Eat and drink until the white thread becomes distinct to you from the black thread of dawn.”⁴²⁸ There is no Biblical parallel for this trope, but there is a Mishnaic one: the method for determining the arrival of dawn and, hence, the hour in which to recite the *Shema*’ each morning. In Mishnah Berakoth 1:2 we find: “From what time in the morning may the *Shema*’ be recited? So soon as one can distinguish between blue and white. R. Eliezer says: Between blue and green. And it should be finished before sunrise ...”⁴²⁹

While the Qur’anic and Mishnaic tropes are not identical, they bear what might

⁴²⁸ Qur’an 2:187.

⁴²⁹ *The Mishnah*, translated by Herbert Danby, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1933), p. 2. Several remarks about reciting while standing and reclining follow this line; these remarks represent a citation from Deuteronomy 6:7. But this is also a Qur’anic refrain. See, e.g., Qur’an 3: 191.

be termed a family resemblance to one another suggesting, at the least, echo. This possibility becomes more credible when one considers how little this pair of tropes resembles another found in the ancient world, the Homeric “*rhododaktulos Eos*” or “rosy-fingered” Dawn.⁴³⁰ Moreover, the Qur’an and Mishnah are not only troping, they are offering a methodology for determining the appropriate time to perform a sacred act. Homer, on the other hand, is just troping.

Of course, it is entirely possible that the Qur’an is not alluding to the Mishnah here: both texts may be alluding to a third of which I am not aware; it is also possible that they are referencing a trope for the arrival of dawn once generally understood in the Near East. However, if this *was* a common trope at one time, there should be no difficulty in finding independent contemporaneous attestation of its use. I am not aware of the existence of such independent evidence; moreover, given the fact that there is at least one *hadith* (a post-Qur’anic Prophetic tradition) which purports to explain the meaning of this trope, I infer that the early Muslim community was unfamiliar with it.⁴³¹

Since I have now broached the subject of the *hadith* literature, I am obligated to acknowledge that Thyen’s study almost completely neglects it. Logically, the focus of his book would seem to preclude any substantial consideration of extra-Qur’anic traditional lore and I wish to emphasize that I do not intend to cast aspersions upon his scholarship by mentioning this omission.

⁴³⁰ See, e.g., Homer, *The Odyssey*, book 2, line 1.

⁴³¹ See the discussion of the Qur’anic ayat and the exegetical hadith in As-Sayyid Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunnah*, Vol. 3, translated by ‘Abdul-Majid Khokhar, Muhammad Sa’eed Dabas, Jamal al-Din M. Zarabozo, Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications (1991), p. 113.

He does advert occasionally to that genre of Muslim tradition literature known as the *sira* (or biography of the Prophet Muhammad) but, in so doing, only scratches the surface of a vast body of literature.⁴³²

In previous chapters, I myself have excluded consideration of the *ahadith* on the ground that, from a historicist perspective, it cannot be relied upon to provide incontrovertible evidence of what the Prophet and/or his companions may have actually said or done. Pre-modern tradition literature is, first and foremost, a form of didactic cultural memory; as such, it is an invaluable method of initiating the members of the Muslim community into an earlier generation's understanding of how to acquire a Prophetic consciousness and, hopefully, to lead a life that is commensurate with it. Personally, I cannot begin to measure the extent to which my own reading and meditation upon the *hadith* literature has enriched and expanded my notions of piety. But I do not ask of the *ahadith* something which they were not designed to do: live up to post-Medieval expectations of historicity. This is not to say, however, that no historical use can be made of this material. For, as I have just acknowledged, the *ahadith* provide us with a window upon an earlier generation's understanding of how to acquire a Prophetic consciousness; in other words, it is part of the reception history of the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his circle or at least the life and teachings of the primitive community of Believers (what the Qur'an calls *mu'minun*),⁴³³

⁴³² See references listed in Thyen, *Bibel und Koran*, p. 324.

⁴³³ I am using this designation to purposefully allude to Fred M. Donner's "From Believers to Muslims," an account of the early Islamic movement that I find largely persuasive.

This reception history may have important implications for our study of the allusive Qur'an. As I stated at the beginning of this concluding chapter, "it is only through studying the ongoing negotiations of meaning among a given text's full-knowing readers that one can hope to mine the depths of its interpretive possibilities." Approached with such a goal in mind, the *hadith* literature promises to contain some unforeseen riches. For example, there is an extremely interesting tradition (found in *Sahih al-Bukhari*) which suggests that the early community of *mu'minun* were cognizant of the open nature of Near Eastern prophetic revisionism.⁴³⁴ An apparent paraphrase of sacred writ did not disturb them. But in this particular instance, there seems to be more than just semantic approximation involved.

In Imam al-Bukhari's *Kitab al-Tafsir* or "The Book of Qur'anic Exegesis," we find a pair of traditions in which the Prophet Muhammad quotes Allah (*qala Allahu*) as follows: "I have prepared (*a'adatu*) for My righteous servants what no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, and has not entered the heart of man." The words I have here translated are identical in both traditions. Both narrations then pair this extra-Qur'anic quotation with an *ayah* from the Qur'an: "No soul knows what is hidden [*ukhfia*] for *them* [actual pronoun] of joy [*qurrati a'aunin*, literally, 'delight of the eye,' a variation of the idiomatic *qurrat al-'ayn*], a reward for what they used to do."⁴³⁵ The two narrations differ in that one has the Qur'anic *ayah* recited by a companion of the Prophet (Abu Huraira) and the other has the *ayah* recited by the Prophet Muhammad himself. The latter

⁴³⁴ *Sahih al-Bukhari* or simply "al-Bukhari" is an authoritative collection of Sunni *ahadith*.

⁴³⁵ Qur'an 32:17.

narration also appends to the Prophet's extra-Qur'anic quotation from Allah the elaborative words "a treasure compared to what has been shown to you [plural]." ⁴³⁶

The *hadith's* pairing of the extra-Qur'anic quotation from Allah with the Qur'anic *ayah*—also, presumably, a quotation from Allah—implies that the two quotations are to be understood as semantically equivalent despite the difference in their wording. Perhaps the lesson to be drawn from this is that God is not particularly fastidious about how Divine communication is accomplished, so long as the Prophet gets the point across. From the perspective of the present study, however, what is most intriguing is that the Prophet's statement, *qala Allahu*, should alert the reader that she may well be standing on the threshold of allusive space—indeed, the inclusion of the Qur'anic *ayah* within the *hadith* implies that al-Bukhari was aware of the presence of allusion—not to mention Abu Huraira and the Prophet Muhammad himself.

But one should not rest content with the Traditionist's pairing of this extra-Qur'anic statement with the Qur'anic *ayah* alone. I make this latter assertion as a full-knowing reader who, when he first encountered the Qur'anic *ayah*, was immediately reminded of a verse from a Pauline epistle. I was excited to discover an editorial annotation in the edition of the Qur'an which I was reading at the time directing me to the *hadith* cited above. When I read the *hadith*, however, I became even more excited, for I discovered that the extra-Qur'anic statement "I have prepared for My righteous servants what no eye has

⁴³⁶ *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari: Arabic-English*, Vol. vi, translated by Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Medina, SA: Islamic University (1976), pp. 288-289. The translations appearing in this chapter are my own.

seen, and no ear has heard, and has not entered the heart of man” was actually *more* similar in its wording to the Pauline passage I had in mind (1 Corinthians 2:9) than it was to the Qur’anic *ayah*!

When I revisited 1 Corinthians 2:9, I was reminded of the fact that Paul presents it as a quotation from an authoritative written source—presumably Jewish Scripture. The verse is preceded by Paul’s assertion that “We speak the wisdom of God in secret (*en musterio*) [as one would speak of] a thing hidden away (*ten apokekrummenen*) which God spoke forth from eternity for our glorification (*hen proorisen ho Theos pro ton aionon eis doxan hemon*).”⁴³⁷ He explains that the rulers of the present time—i.e., the first century of the Common Era—were not privy to this wisdom for, had they known it, they would not have crucified Christ.⁴³⁸ Then, in order to emphasize the secret nature of this Divine Wisdom, Paul quotes an unnamed authority; we presume that it is Scripture for he begins with the formulaic phrase “but as it is written (*alla kathos gegrapta*).” The words which follow this allusive signal are: “What eye has not seen and ear has not heard and has not entered the heart of man (*kai epi kardian anthropou ouk anebe*) is what God has prepared (*hepoimasen*) for those who love Him.”⁴³⁹

In comparing these various texts, I noticed not only the near identical wording of Paul’s unnamed authority and the Prophet Muhammad’s extra-Qur’anic Divine statement, but also the theme of hiddenness or secrecy which the Qur’anic *ayah* shares with this set of sayings. All agree that the treasure that God

⁴³⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:7.

⁴³⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:8.

⁴³⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:9.

has in store for his righteous servants (*hadith*) or those who love Him (Paul's authority) is wrapped in mystery.

Researching the matter further, I discovered that Biblical scholars, following up Paul's flagging of this Scriptural allusion, cite to three texts: two from Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 64:4 [LXX] and 52:15) and one from the apocryphal Wisdom of Ben Sira (1:10). None of these texts provides an exact match with Paul's Greek, although Septuagint Isaiah 64:4 shares much of the vocabulary in common and may be fairly described as semantically similar to the Pauline passage.⁴⁴⁰ When the three candidates for Paul's original reference are read *in pari materia* with 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, one can conclude that Paul may have been drawing freely on all of this material and, perhaps, on other material no longer extant, in order to bring to the Church in Corinth a new prophetic Word of Divine Wisdom. Indeed, the gist of the passage taken as a whole is that God was then revealing, through the spirit (*dia tou pneumatos*—verse 10), what had been kept secret through the long ages past.

A host of interesting questions flow from these observations. If the *hadith* reflects actual Prophetic exegesis, to which passage was the Prophet alluding? Was it 1 Corinthians? Deutero-Isaiah? Perhaps the allusion was to more than one precursor saying or text. If so, does the *hadith* accurately reflect a Prophetic allusion but omit a portion of his remarks? If the Prophet was alluding to 1

⁴⁴⁰ Richard B. Hayes notes that Paul's "citations characteristically follow the Septuagint (LXX), a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible dating from the second or third century B.C.E., which was in common use in Hellenistic synagogues during Paul's lifetime. Rarely do Paul's quotations agree with the Masoretic Hebrew text (MT) against the LXX; even the few cases of apparent agreement with the Hebrew can be explained as evidence of variant LXX text forms that have been subjected to 'hebraizing revisions,' a tendency well attested elsewhere by Greek versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion." Hayes, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, pp. x-xi.

Corinthians—as his language suggests—what might this tell us about his attitude towards Paul’s self-ascribed prophetic office?⁴⁴¹ Was the Qur’an *itself* alluding? If so, was the allusion to 1 Corinthians, to Deutero-Isaiah, to some other saying or text? Dogmatic considerations may lead sectarians to one conclusion or another, but scholarship must assert its allegiance to its own methods or be discredited in the eyes of independent inquirers.

In my view, the possibility that Deutero-Isaiah is being alluded to here is significant. In history—though not in Jewish, Christian, or Muslim dogmatics—Deutero-Isaiah is the strong precursor of the Perso-Judean prophetic tradition to which Paul and Muhammad belong. This tradition is also the matrix from which emerged the Judaisms, Christianities, and Islams that, today, collectively claim the largest share of adherents among the religions of the world. It is the tradition that distinguished itself from the Israelite vision that had preceded the Babylonian exile. Richard Foltz summarizes the most salient of these differences succinctly:

The Israelites seemed to have had little clear notion of the afterlife, assuming that souls merely went to reside in a murky underworld known as Sheol. They lacked the elaborate angelology and demonology of the Iranians, and they had no notion of the “devil,” only the gods of others whom the Israelites were forbidden to worship (but who, as the Israelite prophets endlessly complain, they often did anyway). The Israelites’ conception of time, like most ancient peoples, was cyclical, based on the seasons and the agricultural year. The linear time and apocalyptic eschatology described in Zoroaster’s cosmos is absent from the pre-Babylonian Israelite worldview. The Israelite sense of ethics was based on the community, rather than on the individual. Whereas the Hebrew biblical tradition speaks of Yahweh’s covenant with a people and collective guilt and

⁴⁴¹ See Bart D. Ehrman, Peter, Paul, & Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006), pp. 122-129.

punishment, Zoroaster's vision focuses on personal responsibility for choosing good over evil.⁴⁴²

And the notion of a Messiah or “anointed one” that we meet with in the pages of Deutero-Isaiah, identified there as the Persian king Cyrus, may well owe its inspiration to the Zoroastrian savior-figure “Saoshyant.”⁴⁴³

While I cannot begin, in the space of these concluding remarks, to trace the threads which bind the Qur'an to the Perso-Judean religion first attested in Deutero-Isaiah, I can say with confidence that even a casual reader of the sacred Scriptures of Islam has recognized allusions to the tropes Foltz sketched above. What we have, then, in the Qur'an and related literatures is precisely what the words of the previously cited Prophetic *hadith* announce: “a delight of the eye ... a treasure compared to what has been shown to you.” The key to disclosing this treasure lies in our ability, as readers of Scripture, to discard the sectarian blinders with which we are fitted from childhood, and to re-imagine the Near Eastern prophetic tradition as one that includes, at minimum, those Scriptures produced in the Near East from at least the 12th century B.C.E. (to include Zarathustra) to the 7th century of our own era, and from the Iranian plateau in the East to the Nile Valley in the West. The yield of this transgressive, border-crossing activity would be a new prophetic syllabus—or an “anti-canonical canon” if you will—drawn up by scholarly mapping of evidence of intertextual engagements between and among Scriptural traditions.

⁴⁴² Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble*, p. 49. See also Geo Widengren, “Iran and Israel in Parthian Times with Special Regard to the Ethiopian *Book of Enoch*,” *Temenos* 2 (1966), pp. 139-177.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*

Why should we do this? As I have noted previously, language operates by means of thick systems of referentiality; when approached with post-Medieval hermeneutical techniques, the very structure of Qur'anic discourse compels an investigation into its rich allusiveness—as does all Near Eastern Scriptural discourse. Also, as previously acknowledged, there is the need for inter-communal communication in this time of inter-sectarian conflict. But even beyond these considerations is the moral challenge leveled by the late Norman O. Brown:

It is time to discard the time-honored prejudice that treats Koranic [sic] theology as a confused echo of half-understood Jewish or Christian traditions, selected and polemically distorted to concoct a new-fangled monotheism to supply “backward” Arabs with a “cultural identity.”⁴⁴⁴

My argument for a “third” or Allusive Qur'an—a *tertium quid* beyond the Borrowed and the Unborrowed—is, at the end of the day, a moral argument. Moreover, it is not a selective moral argument but one directed to all readers of sacred texts regardless of sectarian affiliation. Let the scholarly community abandon the double-standard that permits to the Biblical canon a creative appropriation of images and tropes drawn from a variety of precursor literatures—without undermining *its* status as Divine communication—while denying this same privilege to the Qur'an. Let us do this *even if the vast majority of the readers of these Scriptures are satisfied with the present polemical stalemate.*

⁴⁴⁴ Norman O. Brown, “The Prophetic Tradition,” *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1991), p. 48.

My personal egalitarian sympathies notwithstanding, the course of intellectual history compels me to concede that the masses never proposed an alternative to the Ptolemaic model of the solar system or to Bishop Ussher's dating of the creation of the world. Come to think of it, neither did the majority of scholars or sectarian elites. In any event, the continued approval of the aforementioned social groups is not a valid reason for maintaining the prevailing discourse of the two Qur'ans. If there is a moral obligation that attaches, without exception, to scholarly labor, it is that one's allegiance does not belong to this or that constituency, but always to the weight of the evidence.

By employing allusion in the manner in which it did, the Qur'an *itself* negotiated the terms of its own belatedness *vis à vis* its prophetic precursors. Scholars should recognize and honor this ancient achievement. In so doing, we may augment it through the formation of new interpretative communities and enact, by its example, a robust intellectual and religious pluralism built upon a foundation of intercultural translation.

To realize such a research protocol will require liberal cooperation among specialists. The Qur'an stands on the shoulders of two thousand years of prophetic activity in the Near East—declaimed and commented upon in a half dozen Classical languages. Despite the continuing prejudice which seeks to hermetically seal the borders of cultures, religions, and even civilizations in that geographical region, the surviving textual evidence—read allusively—discloses a pattern of intimate Persian and Arab involvement in shaping the religious milieu of the Ancient World. Buried “between the lines” of texts that we have been trained to read in particular ways and in isolation from one another are histories

waiting to be welcomed back into the light of day. If, as Bakhtin has taught us, every meaning will have its homecoming festival, modern Qur'anic hermeneutics promises that we may look forward to a future filled with much to celebrate.

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