



the | inimitable | qur'an

Aesthetic Reception of the Qur'an

By Hamza Andreas Tzortzis

“Anyone who heard it had no option but to surrender to the Qur’an...every single part of his mind was touched by the pure sound of the languages music, and portion by portion, note by note, he embraced its harmony, the perfection of its pattern, its formal completion. It was not much as if something was recited to him by rather as if something had burned itself into him.”

Arbuthnot explains in his book “The Construction of the Bible and the Koran” this effect of the Qur’anic style:

“It is confessedly the standard of the Arabic tongue... The style of the Koran is generally beautiful and fluent... and in many places, especially where the majesty and attributes of God are described, sublime and magnificent ... He succeeded so well, and so strangely captivated the minds of his audience, that several of his opponents thought it the effect of witchcraft and enchantment.”

The aesthetic reception of the Qur’an is not a literary device as such, but it is a manifestation of its literary beauty on the human psyche. This aesthetic element may seem subjective but it highlights all the other objective literary structures and places them in the context of life, experience and humanity; thus making the Qur’an real.

The aesthetic reaction to the Qur'an has been seen throughout history which is perhaps best described by the following episode taken from Kermani’s article ‘The Aesthetic Reception of the Qur’an as reflected in Early Muslim History’:

“Abu Ubaid, a companion of the prophet mentions that a Bedouin listened to a man reciting ‘so shalt that thou art commanded’. After this he threw himself to the ground worshipping and said, “I threw myself down for the eloquence of this speech”.

Montet in his translation of the Qur’an explains this unique Qur’anic feature:

“All those who are acquainted with the Qur'an in Arabic agree in praising the beauty of this religious book; its grandeur of form is so sublime that no translation into any European language can allow us to appreciate it.”

Another great conversion story as handed down by the famous Islamic historians, Ibn Hisham and Ibn Kathir was that of the famous companion of the prophet, Umar. On the very day he had intended to kill

the prophet he had heard that his sister Fatima and her husband had converted into the religion of Islam, infuriated he went to their house. Just in front of the entrance he heard someone reciting the Qur'an to them. Umar being a strong and tall man, stormed into the room, the reciter tried to hide away as fast as he could while his sister Fatima took the pages of the Qur'an and tried to hide them away "what is this balderdash I have heard?" Umar screamed, "you have not heard anything" Fatima and her husband tried to calm him down. Umar exclaimed "By God, I have been told that you have followed Muhammad and his religion." After saying this Umar went to hit his brother-in-law, but his sister stepped in between them and Umar unintentionally hit her badly. "Yes we are Muslims and believe in God and His Apostle and you can do what you like". Fatima and her husband Said exclaimed. Umar, however, already regretted his behaviour, and by looking at the blood on his sister's face he asked to read the scriptures she had tried to hide away. Fatima convinced him to perform a ritual washing, upon doing so she handed the pages to him. Umar started to read surah Taha and after only a few verses he stopped and cried "How beautiful and noble is this speech!".

Umar the second Caliph of Islam had converted to the religion of Muhammad. Guillaume suggests the reason for the Qur'an's aesthetic qualities:

"It has a rhythm of peculiar beauty and a cadence that charms the ear. Many Christian Arabs speak of its style with warm admiration, and most Arabists acknowledge its excellence. When it is read aloud or recited it has an almost hypnotic effect..."

This effect of the Qur'an was changing the hearts and minds of many Arabs at the time of revelation. The Non-Muslim Arabs at that time had realized its power and had tried to lessen the effect by shouting, clapping, singing and loud chatter. Abu-Zahra comments on this reality:

"The greatest among Muhammad's enemies feared that the Qur'an would have a strong effect on them, while they preferred lack of faith to faith and aberration to right guidance. Thus, they agreed not to listen to this Qur'an. They knew that everyone listening was moved by its solemn expressive force that exceeded human strength. They saw that the people – even great personalities, the notables and mighty – one after another believed it, that Islam grew stronger, that the faithful became more numerous, polytheism became weaker, and their supporters became less."

Historians and linguists have agreed that the Arabs at the time of revelation were the greatest in their use of the Arabic language. The following quotation from Ibn Rashid illustrates the importance attached to language. He writes:

“Whenever a poet emerged in an Arab tribe, other tribes would come to congratulate, feasts would be prepared, the women would join together on lutes as they do at weddings, and old and young men would all rejoice at the good news. The Arabs used to congratulate each other only on the birth of a child and when a poet rose among them.”

Ibn Khaldun, a notable scholar of the fourteenth century, remarked on the importance of poetry in Arab life:

“It should be known that Arabs thought highly of poetry as a form of speech. Therefore, they made it the archives of their history, the evidence for what they considered right and wrong, and the principal basis of reference for most of their sciences and wisdom.”

An earlier scholar Ibn Faris elaborated on the same theme, but went further to comment on the quality of the poetry that was composed during the pre-Islamic era:

“Poetry is the archive of the Arabs; in it their genealogies have been preserved; it sheds light on the darkest and strangest things found in the Book of God and in the tradition of God's apostle and that of his companions. Perhaps a poem may be luckier than another, and one poem sweeter and more elegant than another, but none of the ancient poems lacks its degree of excellence.”

If a whole nation that excelled in the use of its own language failed to challenge the Qur'an then this reality should then make one think, as Gibb put it:

“Well then, if the Qur'an were his own composition other men could rival it. Let them produce ten verses like it. If they could not (and it is obvious that they could not) then let them accept the Qur'an as an outstanding evidential miracle.”

And as Hirschfield comments:

“The Qur'an is unapproachable as regards convincing power eloquence and even composition.”

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