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Language

A Serious Business and a Game

*People talk the most incomprehensibly
when their language is meant to serve nothing but
to make themselves comprehensible.*

—Karl Kraus, *Beim Wort genommen*

WORDS WITH OPPOSITE MEANINGS

In the Arab-Islamic world, the juxtaposition of secular and religious discourses as described in the previous chapter is not the *result* of a protracted development, but it is its *starting point*. In fact, Arab culture has two roots (if one disregards Roman–Greek and Iranian antiquity). One is indeed a religious one, Islam, represented by the Quran and the actions of the Prophet. The other root, however, is a secular one, namely ancient Arabic poetry. Each is *equally significant*, and each triggered a comparably large measure of cultural energy in the first centuries of Arab-Islamic culture. However, as a result of the “Islamization of Islam” described in the previous chapter, the secular root of the Arab-Islamic culture received less and less attention over the course of the twentieth century. Most works published today on the origin and early times of Islam make no mention of it.

Ancient Arabic poetry may be a cumbersome subject, but without taking it into cognizance, no understanding of the history of early Islam is possible. The

image of the Arab desert tribes incited to religious fervor by Muḥammad's preaching—much cultivated by present-day's accounts—cannot be maintained when one considers the cultural conditions of the Arab peninsula at Muḥammad's time. In fact, the course of the Islamic raids may be read in pre-Islamic poetry. The Arabs were then a divided people, wedged between the two great powers of East Rome and Persia, and dependent on both in manifold ways. There had been several attempts made at unifying Arabs. Imra' alqays, the son of the founder of the Lakhmid dynasty, calls himself "King of all Arabs" in an Arabic inscription dated 328 AD.¹ Toward the end of the fifth and in the beginning of the sixth century, all the Arab tribes were widely unified, but their power ended up disintegrating as well. Still the political fervor of the Arab leaders did not cease. Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry offers lively testimony for this, for instance when the poet and leader of the Taghlib tribe, 'Amr b. Kulthūm, hurls defiance at the Lakhmid prince 'Amr b. Hind (reigned 554–570), the Arab vassal of the Sassanid king, issuing, in his *Mu'allaqah* poem, a declaration of war which culminates in the verses: "The prince may want to subject the people to abasement—but we are not willing to be humiliated! We have filled the mainland until it became too tight for us, and some day we shall fill the surface of the sea with ships!"² The threat to fill the seas with battleships—remarkable for a "Bedouin" of the central Arabian highlands—was doomed to stay unaccomplished for some time to come, because the Arab tribes' loyalties to competing superpowers were too strong to allow them a coherent course of action. Consequently, the Arabs of the seventh century were observers of, rather than actors in, the theater of war in which Romans, Persians, Ethiopians, and Yemenites performed. The advent of Islam altered the situation considerably. By accepting Islam, the Arabs were in possession of their own, Arabic Holy Scripture, and a "modern"—that is, a monotheistic—religion, which was neither Jewish nor identical with any of the diverse Christian schools that rivaled one another. Now it was possible for the Arabs to revoke the old, religiously based loyalties, to conduct a common Arab agenda under the banner of Islam, and to confront the old superpowers as an independent force. Only after the Islamization of the Arabs, partially by force, could the program formulated by 'Amr b. Kulthūm and other pre-Islamic poets be put into practice. Thus the religion of Islam did not *cause* the campaigns of conquest; it only *made them possible*.

The historical moment was favorable, and the success was sweeping. Within a few decades, large parts of East Rome and the entire Persian Empire became part of an empire that, in its early stage, presented itself as an Arab successor to the ancient empires. The conquerors were not interested in the conversion of the

non-Arab population—quite the contrary. Anyone who wanted to become a Muslim had to be affiliated with an Arab tribe as a “client”: one had to become an *Arab* before being allowed to become a *Muslim*. This alone shows that religious fanaticism can hardly have been the driving force behind the raids of conquest.

In view of the premodern structures of communication and administration, the tempo with which the newly conquered empire developed into an *Arab* empire was breathtaking. In the decade between 690 and 700, barely fifty years after the death of the Prophet, the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik had already implemented comprehensive administrative and monetary reforms. For this, an efficient administration was indispensable. Such a thing apparently still existed in the East of the Roman Empire and in the Sassanian Empire, while the imperial administration in the Western part of the former Imperium Romanum had collapsed long before. In this area, almost no coins were struck anymore; in the East Roman and Sassanian realms, coins continued to be available. The Arabs first took over without change both the Greek and Persian administration and the ancient coins, whose forms they changed only slightly. There followed a period of experiments, until under ‘Abd al-Malik, the coins were completely Arabized and Islamized, and Arabic was introduced as the official language in all offices of the now-huge empire.

‘Abd al-Malik’s reforms are among the most successful ones in history. Within a few years, the coinage was aligned to a new standard, and minting facilities from Turkmenistan to North Africa struck gold and silver coins that displayed only writing and no images, something that had never existed before. This was only possible due to a smoothly functioning administration. The astounding efficiency with which this reform was carried through shows that the old administrative and economic structures in East Rome (in contrast to West Rome) and in Persia had weathered the storms of Late Antiquity, that the Arab takeover had not put them out of business, and that the relevant clerks who were not Arabs actively supported the Arabization.³

Even more amazing than ‘Abd al-Malik’s monetary reform is the transition from Greek and Persian to Arabic as the official language. It is not possible to change the official language of a state “just like that.” As the example of modern states shows, the creation of a standard language requires intensive planning in several phases:⁴

(1) It must be decided on what basis the written language should have its origin. As a rule, that decision is made in favor of a dialect that is particularly prevalent or prestigious. Arabic was divided into several dialects; however, one

could fall back on the language of poetry, which already possessed a high degree of standardization.

(2) The language has to be standardized and shaped according to norms. The former happened speedily; early Quran manuscripts and papyri, however, show that the later norms of orthography, and in part those of grammar, gained currency only gradually.⁵ A fixed norm in written form can apparently be observed only in the grammar of Arabic by Sībawayh (died around 177/793), a hundred years after ‘Abd al-Malik’s reforms.

(3) Even if a suitable writing system has been found and has gained currency, and the dialectal differences are negotiated by a homogeneous standard language (all of these being quite improbable processes), a given language still does not yet possess the vocabulary necessary to match the requirements of an efficient administration. Therefore, an extension of the vocabulary is the next important step. But even an elaborate and homogeneous lexicon is not sufficient. Forms for documents and charters have to be devised that are applicable in all regions in a comparable manner.

(4) This norm has to be implemented in the community of speakers. Before the first written schoolbooks existed, in the beginning of the ninth century, instruction must have been primarily oral and on the basis of learning by doing—with noteworthy results even in these modes.

(5) The fully developed standard language requires cultivation, a task undertaken by multitudes of linguistic scholars from the beginning of the eighth century onward.

The difficulties of such a process can be observed very well in sub-Saharan Africa. Very few of the indigenous languages in this region can be regarded as more or less fully developed standard languages,⁶ first among them Swahili and Hausa. Not by chance, these are languages that adopted Arabic writing, even before the colonial era. Most other language areas are still dependent on English or French as languages of administration—a remarkable testimony to the failure of colonialism in this domain.

It is startling to note that the military success of the Arabs has occupied the interest of many historians, while the Arabization of the administration, which is actually a much more amazing achievement, is hardly ever taken into account. But the Arab empire was founded at least as much on the basis of the pen as of the sword. In Europe, the replacement of Latin as the language of administration by the various vernacular languages took many centuries, with consistent languages of administration gaining acceptance only in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. What in Europe required a millennium needed only a few decades in the Arab empire of the Umayyads. By the end of the seventh century, the entire administration of the empire, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus, used a homogeneous written language that not only had standardized forms for documents but also soon produced, in the person of the administrative officer ‘Abd al-Hamīd al-Kātib (around 66–132/685–750), an authority who was able to compose letters with supreme stylistic mastery, furnishing an aesthetic model for centuries to come. Scarcely a hundred years after the death of the Prophet, the Arabs had succeeded in establishing throughout their whole empire a homogeneous, functioning, and, moreover, an aesthetically shaped language of administration. Of all the wonders of Arab-Islamic conquest, this is perhaps the greatest.

All this would not have been possible had the Arabs not done the necessary preparatory work in pre-Islamic times. Although their material culture was by no means as primitive as prejudice would have it, the fact remains that pre-Islamic Arab culture was first and foremost a *culture of language*. From around 500 AD at the latest, poetry in Arabia had attained the level of a highly sophisticated art that in its complexity and artistic refinement surpassed the poetry of the ancient civilizations. For Arabian tribes, poetry was the most important medium for communicating their interests. But early on, we also encounter poems (often quite long) whose purpose is mainly artistic.⁷ The linguistic difficulty of these poems, which were not easily comprehensible even at the time of their composition, testifies to a highly developed language consciousness.

The *Qurān*, itself a stylistically demanding text, was revealed in a milieu in which people were used to linguistic works of art that often required a more detailed explanation in order to be understood. It is much less striking than often assumed, therefore, that over long periods, the *Qurān* not only suggests an aesthetic reception, but also contains passages that we must assume were in need of a commentary even for the contemporaneous listener.

But this factor, which for contemporaneous listeners increased the appeal of the texts, gradually evolved to become a problem. The focal places of the new and fast-evolving Islamic culture were in the cities outside Arabia, and those who maintained this culture and were their carriers, often of Iranian or Aramaic origin, were no longer familiar with the language and literary tradition of the ancient Arabs. So they were not able to readily understand either the ancient Arabic poems or the *Qurān*, let alone to speak the Arabic of these texts.

The emergence of an Arab empire, and eventually an Arab-Islamic culture, would not have been possible had they not been able to cope with this linguistic problem. But the Arabs were successful in precisely this area. In a strikingly

short time, a linguistic science developed, almost from nothing, that outdistanced everything existing in this field—be it in India or in Greek–Roman antiquity—and became one of the fundamental disciplines of Islamic scholarship. In fact, the first “real” Arabic book, which has no further title than simply *Kitāb Sībawayh* (Sībawayh’s book), is the first Arabic text conceived in a form that fully corresponds to our ideas of a book as a fixed, consciously structured, extensive text between two covers. The norms Sībawayh used for the Arabic language he found not in the *Qurān*, but in the language of the Arab Bedouins.

Arabic lexicography originated at the same time, initially in the form of brief word lists that were devoted to individual areas of the Arabic vocabulary. The ineradicable thesis persists that Arabic lexicography owes its existence to the endeavor to properly understand the *Qurānic* text. But even a cursory glance over the titles of the earliest works of this discipline shows the opposite. Abū Khayrah (died around 150/767) compiles terms for crawlers; Abū ‘Amr Ibn al-‘Alā’ (Baṣrah, died 154/771) collects the ancient Arab heritage in all its breadth (proverbs, among other topics); Abū ‘Amr ash-Shaybānī (Kūfah, died 213/828) leaves behind, along with a roughly alphabetically arranged collection of ancient Arab Bedouin vocabulary,⁸ monographic collections on the human body, the horse, and the date palm. From the pen of the Baṣrian Abū ‘Ubaydah (died 213/828), we will mention only the treatises on horses, camels, the rein, and the bucket; of the work of his contemporary al-Aṣma‘ī (died 213/828), who worked in Baṣrah and Baghdad, we mention lexicographic treatises on the human body, wild animals, the horse, sheep and goats, plants, the game of chance with arrows (*maysir*), and so on.⁹ All these treatises on crawlers, parts of the body, camels, horses, sheep, goats, and well fixtures, almost never contain a word that also figures in the *Qurān*, and if such a word is mentioned, we find almost always a lexeme that is most common and least in need of a commentary. When the devout Aṣma‘ī treats in lexicographic detail the ancient Arab game with arrows that is forbidden by the *Qurān* (n.b., without using any words requiring explanation), it becomes fully clear that Arabic lexicography initially did not serve religion, but helped to safeguard and understand the Arab secular heritage. In a time when much nonsense is being written about the allegedly “holy” Arabic language,¹⁰ it cannot be strongly enough stated that the sensational and historically unique upsurge of the Arabic linguistic sciences *did not have any religious reasons*. It was not a “holy” language (which Arabic never was), or the endeavor to understand a holy text, that spurred the early scholars of Arabic to peak performances, but rather their interest in the Arabic language itself and in the secular heritage of Arabic poetry and folklore.

Those who wanted to interpret the Quran were ultimately confronted with the problems of those who wanted to explain ancient Arabic poetry, and thus, in parallel to the explanation of the old Arabic vocabulary of the Bedouins, evolved the explanation of the Quran text and the hadith.

At first these enterprises happened independently of each other, even if now and then, one and the same person (who would have been one of the experts in difficult texts) was tapping both the profane and the religious traditions. Not until one-and-a-half centuries later was a dictionary compiled that united the work of understanding old Arabic poetry and its world, and the work of understanding the Quran and the hadith.

This work is the *Tahdhīb al-lughah* (Sieving of the vocabulary) by al-Azhārī (died 370/980), a dictionary that is still indispensable today. In its modern two-columned print, the dictionary comprises 15 volumes, with 7,600 pages in all. This achievement of Arabic lexicographers in their fourth century (our tenth century), which they would far surpass in the following centuries, was unmatched anywhere in the world.

Religions cannot originate and revelations cannot happen independently of the culture surrounding them. Just as Christianity cannot be conceived of without classical antiquity, and has developed in constant dispute with it, Islam cannot be understood without its secular-Arab roots, which evolved in their own manner and entered into a dynamic and constructive mutual interaction with the religion. The Western view of the Islamic world has studiously avoided looking at the secular roots of that world, as well as its achievements in the linguistic sciences. Even well-meaning accounts praising the accomplishments of Arab scholars in the fields of philosophy, mathematics, and the natural sciences concentrate precisely on those fields that are important for modern Western Europe. In Europe, linguistic sciences developed beyond the ancient level only at a late stage, and reached the level of reflection of the classical Arabic linguists only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whereas Arab scholars had already gained many of the insights of modern linguistics centuries ago.

Another factor is that Western linguistics, in contrast to the fields of philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and the natural sciences, did not owe the Arabs any thanks. In the Middle Ages and early modern times, there was no linguistic science in Europe on a level that would have allowed for receptivity to Arabic theories. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when such a reception would have been possible, the West was so convinced of its superiority over all other cultures that it could cast only an ethnological glance on Arabic linguistics; it did not take into account the possibility of learning something in a scientific area from another culture.

There is still another reason why the field of linguistic sciences so central to the understanding of Arab-Islamic culture is not addressed, even with a single word, in any Western survey of the history of the Arab or Islamic worlds known to us. The linguistic sciences never had that central position in the West—despite the linguistic boom of the sixties and seventies in the twentieth century—that the *truth generating* sciences occupied (of which, as we shall see from the linguistic skepticism of Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī, the linguistic sciences were no part).

The Arab-Islamic world presents a totally different picture. The beginnings of conscious reflection on the capacities and limits of linguistic expression must date back to pre-Islamic times. This is indicated not only by the quick start performed by linguistic scholars after the consolidation of the Arab empire—a feat that is hardly explicable without a precursor—but also by ancient Arabic poetry itself.

A poet of the seventh century brags that the rare and *recherché* expressions in his poems will bring his transmitters (who, after all, will have to explain them) to tears.¹¹ Even the earliest poets known to us endeavor to borrow from a demanding, nonquotidian vocabulary. One of the most important stylistic devices of pre- and early Islamic poetry is the “proxy word,” which means that a living being or a thing is referred to not by its common term but by an expression signifying a quality of the living being or thing. A poet would not have said, “I mounted a camel and took up a sword,” but “I mounted a light brown one, a desert-traversing one, and grasped a cutting one, a bluish-glistening one.” In choosing his proxy words through a dexterous combination of conventional and newly coined words, a poet could show his prowess.¹² It is said that Arabic knows several hundred words for the camel; to understand this, we have to think of such poetic proxy words, or of the technical terms of camel breeders, which were collected by the Arabic lexicographers with the same diligence they showed in gathering the literary expressions they encountered in the poems.

The works of early lexicographers who transmit and explain this vocabulary find practical uses in quite varied ways. Collections of technical terms of Arab cattle breeders and oasis farmers retain the memory of the *material* heritage of the ancient Arabs. This heritage was cultivated for reasons of antiquarian interest and out of pride for Arab traditions, but had lost its practical use. The commitment to the *literary* heritage, however, met with broader interest; for a long period, ancient Arabic poetry formed the core of the educational canon of intellectuals and administrative officers. For a time, it was cultivated less in the form of lexicographical works than in the form of commentaries on poems. Of immediate practical interest were those treatises that helped students acquire a better

Arabic, that is, books on how to avoid dialect forms, how to correctly apply expressions that are often wrongly used, how to put the right short vowels in problematic words, and so on. Instruction with the help of such treatises helped to establish norms for the Arabic written language and to standardize and stabilize its usage in the entire, newly conquered language area.

There are also quite a number of works that are conceived in the pattern of such didactic books but do not reveal any practical usefulness, other than a general enhancement of a linguistic consciousness. The driving force behind the composition of such treatises can only have been the fascination with language as such.

All in all, we may discern four motives that promoted the speedy development of Arabic lexicography during the eighth and ninth centuries:

- (1) An *antiquarian* interest directed at the conservation of knowledge on the material culture of ancient Arabia;
- (2) a *literary* interest that strives for the right understanding of ancient Arabic literature, first of all poetry;
- (3) a *language-cultivating* interest that is concerned with the formation and implementation of a standardized, homogeneous, and efficient language of administration and scholarship;
- (4) a *playful* interest fueled by a fascination with the structure of the lexicon, which leads to investigating the relations between words and meanings in ever new forms.

Especially revealing, for this last group, are books with the title *Kitāb al-Addād*. *Addād*, a plural form of *didd*, means “antithesis, opposite,” and also signifies a “contronym,” or a “word with contradictory meanings”—that is, a word that signifies a fact and simultaneously its opposite. Such a word, for instance, would be the verb *shāma*, purportedly meaning “to put a sword into a sheath,” but also “to draw a sword from a sheath.” The first treatise devoted to this topic was written by a lexicographer and grammarian from Baṣrah. As a student, he used to turn up at his class with his venerated teacher Sībawayh at dusk in order to be there ahead of his fellow students. This earned him his nickname *Quṭrub al-layl*, “nocturnal werewolf,” which eventually stuck to him. The bibliography of this Quṭrub (died 206/821) reflects all the various interests of the early Arabic linguistic sciences.¹³ His best-known work helps to distinguish between words that differ only by a single short vowel, and to explain how to use them correctly. Then there are treatises on ancient Arabic terms for parts of the human body and weather phenomena, which open up the

indigenous heritage. He is interested both in poetry—he writes poetry himself—and in the *Qurān*, and he comments on both. But why does he collect in one treatise more than two hundred words that—allegedly—designate a fact and its opposite?

Quṭrub himself gives the answer. In the introduction to his collection, he writes that he has composed this monograph on the phenomenon of *addād* because it is so rare and so charming (*li-qillatibī wa-ẓarāfatibī*).¹⁴ That is, he found *addād* nice, interesting, sophisticated, and fascinating. He does not claim any practical usefulness for his book.

Many of his contemporaries shared his fascination with the ambiguity of words. There is no other explanation for the fact that Quṭrub's most useless book, comparatively speaking, triggered a downright avalanche of imitators. With a speed remarkable for premodern conditions, there followed further *kutub al-addād* by important lexicographers of the century. In the ninth century, al-Aṣmaʿī (died 213/828), at-Tawwāzī (died 230/845 or somewhat later), Ibn as-Sikkīt (died 243/857), and Abū Ḥātim as-Sijistānī (died 255/869) wrote on the same topic.

Then there was a longer pause, perhaps caused by general doubts about the viability of the *addād* concept. The grammarian Ibn Durustawayh (258–347/872–958) had written a work (not extant) in which he denied the existence of words with contradictory meanings.¹⁵

Perhaps the background for this was an unexpressed discomfort with Arab hubris. A later author, in any case, defends the Arabs against allegations that their language lacks precision, as might be observed with the *addād*. Words, he counters, always function in context—which, in the case of the *addād*, ensures a disambiguation.¹⁶ The writer of this defense is Ibn al-Anbārī (271–321/895–940), one of the best-known grammarians and lexicographers of his time, and the author of the most thorough *addād*-work of the Arabs. He and Abū ʿ-Ṭayyib al-Lughawī (died 351/961) are responsible for bringing to an end the series of books on words with contradictory meanings (if one disregards a few latecomers).¹⁷

It seems there are three reasons for this. First, the subject, in the form of the two last-named comprehensive works, was pretty much exhausted. Second, the lexicographers of subsequent generations concentrated their efforts on the composition of comprehensive dictionaries. The old-style monograph on a selected topic was widely defunct. And thirdly, the *addād* topic was absorbed into a more comprehensive discussion on homonyms. Such homonyms became topics of proper writings such as the books on *al-wujūh wa-n-naẓāʾir*, which we have already met in the chapter on the *Qurān*.¹⁸

In the West, the problem of “words with opposite meanings” made quite a stir. Here, the early Arabic treatises were often regarded with condescension.¹⁹ Fault was found with an insufficient analysis of single cases and a mixing of variant phenomena. To a certain degree, this critique is justified.

In fact, we meet with quite diverse cases. We are presented, for instance, with a verb *ʿafā*, whose primary meaning “to cover” expands to “sprouting densely” (said about growing plants), on the one hand, and to “laying waste” (namely by being covered by sand, said about a stretch of land) on the other. Here, we seem to be speaking of a word with opposite meanings. But less clear is the case with a word such as *jawn*, which means “intensely colored, monochrome,” and is used by the ancient poets for totally black and totally white objects, but also for brown ones.²⁰ Another category is that of euphemisms, for instance when a blind person is called *baṣīr*, “clear-sighted,” or of the ironic use of a word in verse. Still another category is that of different meanings of the same word in different dialects. For example, *wathaba*, “to jump up,” means “to sit” in a south-Arabian dialect—a *didd* which lends itself to anecdotes.

Many of these phenomena were well known to the Arab lexicographers, who mention them from time to time but do not make them the object of a systematic analysis. Beginning with Quṭrub, there are words in his work on *addād* that he himself does not deem to be real *addād*.²¹ Ibn al-Anbārī presents around twice as many *addād* as does Quṭrub, because he is primarily interested in the completeness of the tradition. However, Ibn al-Anbārī differentiates between *addād* words and quasi-*addād* words; it becomes clear that he does not share the assessment of his predecessors, even if he protests against their views only occasionally.²²

It is clear that all Arabic authors were interested in unearthing as many words as possible that could pass in some manner as *addād*. Their motivation to compose collections of *addād* was pure fascination with the phenomenon of ambiguity. After all, the most extreme and least probable case of lexical ambiguity is a word with contradictory meanings. Quṭrub wrote during an era in which literature was feeling its way only gradually toward stylistic means *plus risquées* of ambiguity—when Quṭrub died, the eccentric scholar of metaphors Abū Tammām wrote his first youthful poems. There was not yet a developed theory of rhetoric. But in contrast to later periods, when one could rely on a range of competent and comprehensive dictionaries, in Abū Tammām’s time, lexicography was a key science that had to do hard pioneering work for science, literature, religion, and the state. And so it is only natural that it was the first discipline to confront the phenomenon of ambiguity. The seven works on *addād* of the ninth and tenth centuries present intriguing and curious testimony of the early fascination of Arabic scholarship with ambiguity.

Strangely, the not-insignificant number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western scholars who have looked into the *aḍḍād* works have mostly failed to ask these questions of cultural history. In a collected volume with the promising (promising too much) title *L'ambivalence dans la culture arabe*,²³ the Arabic *aḍḍād* works serve as a basis for discussion, but none of the essays asks the question why, after all, Arabic scholars had the idea of addressing the somewhat dubious category of words with contradictory meanings—of all lexicographical topics—in no fewer than half a dozen monographs.

Instead, the essays examine whether the phenomenon of words with contradictory meanings actually exists. There are explanations for the semantic conditions responsible for these (real or purported) contradictory meanings, and many words from the Arabic *aḍḍād* works are debunked as not properly belonging to this category. The conclusions of this study (and others) are convincing: One can, in fact, state that Arabic has no more words with contradictory meanings than other languages have. The contrary impression is due to the lexicographers and their fascination with an ambiguity that seems to diametrically contradict the common mechanisms of language.

The thrust of the Arabic lexicographers and their modern Western successors, respectively, is the other way around. The Arabic authors are fascinated by the possible existence of words that can simultaneously denote “high” and “low,” or “strong” and “weak,” and try to collect as many of them as possible, including those they themselves count as dubious and those whose contradictory meanings are only rarely alleged.

Western scholars feel unsettled by the existence of such words, and attempt to validate as few of them as possible (and perhaps none). In reality, a single lexeme cannot be said to have contradictory semantic meanings; there are other semantic relations, such as the operation of mutuality, which means that in concrete usage, either one meaning or the other is actualized (compare in English “sanction” = “to permit by law” and “a penalty for disobeying the law”).

If one has analyzed these relations, nothing remains for the category of *aḍḍād*. The Arabic lexicographers presumably would not have been impressed by such an analysis, because in actual usage (the so-called surface structure) there are words that may be used in apparently contradictory meanings, even if the contradictoriness is only secondary or imaginary. To charge the Arabic lexicographers with the accusation that they did not classify and analyze the *aḍḍād* thoroughly enough overlooks the fact that none of the *aḍḍād* presents a practical problem. There are few cases in which the lexical meaning of a word with an (alleged) contradictory meaning would have been relevant for the interpretation of the Quran or a hadith text; in any case, these would not have been open to such an analysis.

Such problems of interpretation can be traced to contradictory statements of earlier philologists and commentators. A more precise knowledge of the mechanisms behind the *addād* would not have helped here. In common usage, none of the *addād* are used with contradictory meanings. There were no difficulties of mutual understanding caused by words with contradictory meanings. It was unnecessary to remove the ambiguity by analysis. Therefore, one conclusion remains: treatises on *addād* were composed not in order to *eliminate* ambiguity, but to *play* with it. This also explains why *addād* treatises originated in a series. Games assume a competitive character. Qutrub had initiated the game, and the best philologists of the rival Basrian and Kūfan schools wanted to participate in it. This is further proof that “culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning.”²⁴

This practically useless game with lexical ambiguity proved to become eminently useful for culture. Ultimately, the Arab-Islamic world owed its political achievements and intellectual flourishing not least to the existence of a well-structured and functional language of administration, literature, and scholarship. Such a language does not assert itself if no advanced linguistic conscience exists in wide sections of the population. The game of *addād* was one of the training tools that contributed to the formation of such a linguistic conscience. The treatises on *addād* may be only a facet of this broad linguistic formation, but they also may be a proof of the fact that the acceptance of ambiguity can well help to enhance efficiency.

The Western eagerness to debunk the phenomenon of the Arabic *addād* shows up as arrogant, because it overlooks this *playful* aspect. In the end, however, the job of debunking became necessary, because in Europe, the thesis of the existence of words with contradictory meanings produced strange effects. In 1884, the German linguist Carl Abel devised a theory on the “contradictory meanings of the primeval words”: he took the idea of words that denote both a thing and its opposite and developed it, in a typically European manner, toward a comprehensive theory on the progression of language (an idea that the Arabs, of course, would never have entertained). According to Abel, when men first began to develop language they did not yet have terms for “strong” and “weak,” and similar semantic pairs, because they were able to experience and communicate the phenomenon of strength only in relation to its opposite, weakness. The primeval word for *strong/weak* “in reality denotes neither ‘strong’ nor ‘weak’ but only the relation between the two, and the difference between them which created both of them simultaneously.”²⁵ Only later, Abel goes on, had men learned to conceive each side of the antithesis without consciously measuring against the counterterm. Words with contradictory meanings in modern languages are thus, according to Abel, remnants of archaic ways in which humans perceived

the world. Among these remnants are the Arabic *aḍḍād*, of which Abel gives a list taken from Ibn al-Anbārī.²⁶

Abel could not convince his linguistic colleagues of his theory. But Sigmund Freud seized on it and used it for his theory of dream interpretation.²⁷ What a subtle revenge of the ambiguity of *aḍḍād*—to let itself be expelled from linguistics and find asylum in psychology!

For Arabic linguists, engagement with conceivably the most extreme case of ambiguity must have constituted an important stimulant. It helped them to expedite lexicography as a means to domesticate the semantic variety of the world. Later on, they returned only sporadically to the concept of *aḍḍād*. In the meantime, the fascination with ambiguity had found other and more interesting playgrounds.

REFINEMENT AND PIETY

The Psalter begins with the well-known saying: “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers” (Ps 1, 1). This verse is also mentioned in the Quran, where we read (4: 140): “He has sent down upon you in the Book: When you hear God’s signs being disbelieved and made mock of, do not sit with them until they plunge into some other talk.”²⁸

Is it therefore permitted to mock this very verse, putting it into a totally different context? A poet in the Mamluk era had no compunctions about doing this when he composed a love epigram in which the favored topic of concealing one’s love appears:²⁹ the lover wants to keep his love secret, but alters his outward appearance so visibly (for instance, by losing weight) that his fellows become attentive and urge him to admit that he has fallen in love. That is the theme of the epigram, in which a quotation from the Quranic verse quoted above forms the punch line. In freely adapted form, it runs as follows:

My critics all pounce when tears flood my eyes:
Tell us why, friend! What is the matter?
But I keep our love secret; I give no replies
“Till they pounce somewhere else with their chatter.”³⁰

It is a pretty epigram that derives its fun from the fact that the last half-verse constitutes a Quranic quotation known to every listener—which, however, is

brought here into a totally different context, and thus gains a meaning quite different from its original one. But is this allowed? May one misuse a phrase of God by inserting it, in an explicitly frivolous manner, into a love poem, thereby giving it a meaning that the divine originator—even considering all the semantic diversity of Quranic speech—certainly did not intend? Probably not. It is not difficult to find Islamic texts that censure the stylistic device of willful misuse of a Quranic quotation (*iqtibās*) when it is not used for an edifying purpose.³¹ Is one really not allowed to do this?

Yes, one is! Hundreds, indeed thousands of similar examples of *iqtibās* crowd the anthologies of Arabic poetry, and among the authors there are many writers who are not at all of dubious reputation, but are the most respectable and pious religious scholars of their time. The author of the epigram quoted above is none other than the most significant hadith scholar of postformative Islam, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, whom I have mentioned several times. No other official held the office of the Shāfiʿite supreme qadi in Cairo—the highest religious post the Mamluk empire had to offer—as long as he did.

But more was to come. Badr ad-Dīn al-Bulqīnī (821–890/1419–1486), a religious scholar of equal renown, particularly in the field of law, and for a short period the successor to Ibn Ḥajar in the office of the Shāfiʿite supreme qadi of the empire, utilized a Quranic verse that tells the happenings of the Judgment Day. On this day, when the dead who have turned to dust will be raised and given a body again, the unbelievers, in the face of the punishment they must await, will wish they had remained earth and dust: *Yā laytanī kuntu turāban* (“O would that I were dust!,” Q 78: 40). Of course, this verse would have fit very well into an exhortative religious poem, but it must be admitted that a Quranic quotation within a religiously tuned text does not produce a real punch-line effect. This is achieved only if a contrast emerges between the sacred text and its profane usage. So we should not be astonished to encounter the Quranic passage in an epigram that can hardly pass as religious, although it had a religious occasion: as sometimes happened, one Mamluk sultan felt compelled to demonstrate his religious seriousness by ordering the pubs to be closed and their wine supplies spilled.³² Badr ad-Dīn al-Bulqīnī witnessed this and rhymed:³³

kassarū l-jarrata ʿamdan, saqawū l-arḍa sharābā
qultu wa-l-islāmu dīnī “laytanī kuntu turābā”

They broke the jug deliberately and soaked the earth with the wine,
 I spoke—and Islam is my religion—“O would that I were dust!”

Despite its brevity, this epigram unites several layers of ambiguity. First of all, a stylistic device of ambiguity is used, namely the *iqtibās*, the Quranic quotation that obtains a different meaning in its new context, but as a literary measure is effective only because a contrast emerges between its original meaning and its present use.

A second element of ambiguity arises from the manifest discrepancy between the positive evaluation of wine drinking in the poem and the prohibition of wine in the Quran, from which the quotation of the last verse is taken. On this second level, we seem to be confronted with a phenomenon of norm and deviation: the Quran prohibits the drinking of wine, but the poem celebrates it as a good thing, thus contradicting the norm. But this alone does not create ambiguity. Ambiguity is attained by the violation of the norm only by presenting it, on a further, third level, as the *fulfillment of a norm*.

This is possible because in the life of religious scholars—similar to other fields—different norms are valid side by side, which cannot be harmonized without mutual contradiction. I have characterized the two most important guiding principles orienting the lives of classical period scholars as “refinement and piety.”³⁴ The poet al-Mutanabbī formulated this double ideal in a poem praising a Mālikite qadi:³⁵

tafakkurūhū ʿilmun wa-manṭiqūhū ḥukmun
wa-bāṭinuhū dīnun wa-ẓāhiruhū ẓarfū

His thought is knowledge and his talking is wise judgment.

His inner side is religion, his outer side is refinement.

In al-Mutanabbī's time, the worlds of the secular elite—that is, the court and the administration—and of the religious elite were still rather clearly separated. But they were beginning to approach each other. Only a little later, the training to be a judge, often in a madrasah, began to be the usual first step for both a career as a civil servant in the administration, and a career as a religious scholar. The common course of training for both the secular and religious elite from Seljuqid times onward, however, did not result in a weakening of the secular side of culture. On the contrary, it became more and more important for religious scholars to distinguish themselves not only by piety and learnedness but also by worldly elegance and literary learning. Al-Mutanabbī's verse shows that this quite secular ideal of *ẓarf*, “refinement,” was firmly rooted in the minds of religious scholars by the first half of the tenth century.

Soon thereafter, we meet ambitious religious scholars who are not content with just having a literary training, but who actively participate in the literary

arena. Precisely by their linguistic brilliance, and their ability to compose letters and poems that were stylistically polished and aesthetically effective, they could demonstrate their *ẓarf*.³⁶ In this arena, they were obliged to prove themselves in the genres that were most popular—that is, primarily in amatory poetry. From then on, we have love poems (but also panegyric and nature poems, poetical riddles, and many other kinds of poems) in vast numbers from the pens of legal scholars, Quranic exegetes, and transmitters of hadith, a tradition that has partly held into the twentieth century.

Even a poem such as the following was composed by an established religious scholar:

The creaking of the waterwheel in early morning and the sound of flute
and chord
And the places which, when they smile, bare teeth of white and
many-colored flowers
Have made me a neighbor of a wine press where I never wake up from
my drunkenness.
That is my way of life to which I shall stick as long as I am given life!

The author of this wine poem is a highly respected hadith scholar by the name of ʿĀṣim, who died in his eighty-seventh year in 483/1090.³⁷ There are no reports on his way of life being dissolute—quite the contrary. But that is not the point. It is not important to know whether real experiences are hiding behind the eroticism and the wine drinking of these poems. Rather, it is important to note that these poems reflect an ideal that peacefully coexisted with the ideal of a religious society. In all these love, wine, and nature poems, a worldly utopia finds expression that praises the good life in this world, a life full of eroticism and intoxication in an Arcadian landscape. This utopia exists side by side with the utopia of a society that wholly follows the laws of God.

The poems of the religious scholars address both utopias. We often encounter poems on renunciation from this world and asceticism (*zuhd*) next to erotic poems. Most beautifully, both aspects converge in poems that lament the passing of time and invite the reader to relish the moment. In this vein, the Ḥanafite legal scholar and preacher from Damascus Muḥammad b. Asʿad (died 567/1171–1172) wrote:

You who heedlessly live from day to day and do not know when you will
die and be buried:
Do not be careless, for life is too short for that!³⁸

What lesson is to be learned from this epigram? Since the poet was a preacher, one might understand it as an appeal to lead a God-fearing life and to be prepared for death at any moment. In fact, there are a great number of sermons and poems that say exactly this. But many poems proceed in a different direction and request the listener instead to enjoy every moment of life with wine and love, before it is too late. Muḥammad ibn Asʿad's poem—like many such poems—leaves the end open. The text might go on to request the listener, in the light of the transience of life, to strive for the ultimate reward. But it could also advocate cherishing every moment with earthly pleasures. The poet does not make the decision for us. It is left to the listener what conclusions to draw from the realization that his existence is transitory.

Muḥammad ibn Asʿad's profession of preacher does not allow for deducing the lesson to be learned from the epigram. In fact, a continuation of the poem that would prompt the listener to enjoy worldly life would be quite conceivable. For Ibn Asʿad is also the author of the following poem:

O my boon companion: Bring wine (*rāḥ*), because the evening (*rawāḥ*)
has come,
And pour it for me in the darkness of night, for the morning is already
approaching!
A wine which is mixed with tears is nothing sinful.

Note the touching final verse of this wine poem, in which the poet postulates the compatibility of the religious and the secular ideal, since it is true that the secular ideal, given its transitory nature, is never to be realized completely.³⁹

The poems by religious scholars on love, wine, and nature show to what a large degree the ideal of a this-worldly, secular happiness was also accepted in religious circles. As authors of secular poems, they strive for an ideal of learning that consists in the refinement of *ẓarf*. In many respects, it resembles the Renaissance ideal of the *gentiluomo* and is not perceived as being in contradiction to the ideal of the *homo religiosus*. Rather, both ideals exist side by side (if not together) from the period of the "Sunni revival," at the latest, until the nineteenth century. In their coexistence, they furnish a considerable contribution to the humanism of classical Islam.

There were times and places in which the coexistence of an ideal of piety and learnedness and an ideal of refinement and elegance was not restricted to Islamic scholars. Exactly the same phenomenon may be observed with the rabbis in al-Andalus. Ross Brann has devoted an extensive study to the "court rabbis" of the so-called golden era (around 950–1150) in al-Andalus, in which he shows how

the Jewish scholars of that period were deeply connected with their tradition and carefully observed their law, and at the same time absorbed Arabic culture and wrote poems on wine and love poems devoted to young men and women:⁴⁰ “The ideal man lived in both worlds and found the ambiguity highly attractive.”⁴¹

This attractiveness of ambiguity, however, has its roots not in a courtly ideal, as Brann thinks, but in the ideal of Islamic scholarship, which cultivates exactly this ambiguity.

AMBIGUITY AS STIGMA

The psychologists S. Budner and A. P. MacDonald advance the hypothesis that people with a high degree of tolerance of ambiguity not only do not avoid ambiguity, but also search for it and enjoy it; when they are confronted with problems involving ambiguity, they solve such problems with particular skill.⁴² If we apply this hypothesis to our topic of cultural ambiguity, we might expect that in cultures in which ambiguity was *tolerated* to a relatively strong degree, ambiguity was also *produced* with zeal and joy. For instance, many texts would have been created that were consciously ambiguous and confronted their readers with the opportunity to solve ambiguity and have fun with it.

It is hardly conceivable to find a better confirmation of the Budner–MacDonald hypothesis than in the literatures of the precolonial Near East. In fact, the tolerance of ambiguity that we find in a number of different fields corresponds with an incredible abundance of texts that consciously employ ambiguity, play with polysemy, and baffle, fascinate, and entertain their listeners and readers by their range of possible interpretations. It is probably not too risky a statement to say that among the literatures of mankind, the literatures of the Near East between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries offer the greatest wealth of ambiguity.

Perhaps one could write the history of the literatures in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish languages in the precolonial period as one of progressively complex ambiguity. However, Western literary historians and many of their indigenous postcolonial colleagues interpret this history differently. In their eyes, the history of the Near Eastern literatures was a history of decay. The “prevalence” of “linguistic wordplay” was seen as the most characteristic sign of this decay. In 1851, for instance, when Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer, a professor of Arabic in Leipzig, presented a work by the Lebanese Christian poet and scholar Nāṣif

al-Yāzījī (1214–1287/1800–1871) to a German audience, he did not fail to issue a warning against “sterile artistic play.”⁴³ Shaykh Nāṣif was one of the most important representatives of Arabic literature in his time. A Greek-Catholic Christian, he was very receptive to Western culture. But in his writing and scholarship he unwaveringly continued to follow his own classical tradition—much to the chagrin of Western authors like Fleischer, who basically valued al-Yāzījī but deemed his persistence in the tradition a grave mistake. For Fleischer, the most problematic point was precisely al-Yāzījī’s delight in ambiguity—in Fleischer’s own words, the “sterile artistic play”—that marks all of the author’s works. For Fleischer, these “sterile artistic games” not only are a flaw of al-Yāzījī’s works but also constitute a real danger to the entire Near East:

The vain delight in this technique, and the incommensurate appreciation devoted to it, present all Oriental peoples affected by a stagnant education system with a heavy obstacle to the creation of a taste for fresh scientific realism and an elevation to serious intellectual labor. May the humane and reasonable men of the West who nourish and guide that new life of our Oriental friends devote the deserved attention to this object! It is part of an old, tenacious, intricate malady inflicting the Orient; it cannot be remedied overnight and in one stroke; but it must be remedied, if the Oriental spirit, now still captured in the fetters of barren scholasticism and self-pleasing rhetoric, wants to gain the power to embrace the scientific horizon of the West, to enter into its ideas, and to participate independently in its works.⁴⁴

Fleischer’s polemic against the shaykh Nāṣif is a prime example not only of modern Western condemnation of ambiguity, but also of the Western bent for universalization. Arabic literature receives a right to exist at all only if it is Western, if the “Oriental spirit” dissolves in “the ideas of the West”—in other words, ceases to exist. In this same vein is the obituary of al-Yāzījī composed a few years later by the Austrian Arabist and diplomat Alfred von Kremer:

True, it also becomes apparent . . . how misguided is the course that Arabic poetry has taken: everything rests on the vain pomp of rare and often unintelligible words, word play . . . , and inimitable poetic artificialities. . . . Among those who were active in this field, Nāṣif deserved to be named in first place. However, he overdid things in attributing to purely linguistic studies an exaggerated importance, compared to realistic ones. For the modern Arab, it is indeed the latter studies that are necessary to extract him from the *circulus*

vitiosus of old Arabic fake learning and introduce him into the halls of modern European civilization.

All our newspapers call him a great poet, but according to European cultural standards, he was not that.⁴⁵

Quotations from German Oriental studies such as this one could easily be multiplied simply by consulting French and English Oriental scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These quotations show that the Orient as a culture of ambiguity was a central topic of colonialist discourse. In the eyes of the West, the immaturity of Orientals and the stagnation of their culture are manifested precisely in their passion for ambiguity. Only when Orientals renounce this culture, leave ambiguity behind, and advance to the “fresh realism” of the West, can they enter “the halls of modern European civilization.” In the nineteenth century, a tolerance of ambiguity was not appreciated. Further, the tolerance of, and love for, ambiguity of the Near Eastern people were taken to be an argument for cultural imperialism. “Reasonable men of the West” had the task of casting out ambiguity from the Oriental. As we know, the British and the French have not stopped at this merely cultural imperialism.

Western propaganda against ambiguity was successful. With the growing influence of the West, indigenous elites soon adopted foreign literary standards of value and distanced themselves more and more from their old enthusiasm for ambiguity—at least when they wanted to be regarded as “modern” authors and intellectuals, and to be acknowledged by the West. Soon the Western view prevailed, according to which Arabic literature, after a flowering up to the tenth century, suffered a steady process of decay. The numerous works saturated with ambiguity that originated during this period of “decay” were seen, and are often still seen, as the main characteristics of decadence. (Other works, often completely devoid of ambiguity, were simply ignored.) Every figurative device, every ornament, every pun, and every riddle is a charge against a literature that constantly offends the dogma of the antiambiguity modern era, which pronounces, as does the architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933), ornament and crime in one breath.⁴⁶ The “ornament,” in the form of stylistic figures and linguistic play, becomes the stigma of a literature, indeed of a whole culture, that resists modernity and remains in utter stagnation.

This thesis of stagnation and decadence became nothing less than a dogma. Especially in nationalist discourse, all literature originating in a time when rulers were not purebred Arabs was regarded, and is still regarded, as decadent and worthless. Islamists as well regard this literature as decadent, although for moral

reasons, not nationalist ones. In the Near East, it still requires courage to study the Arabic literature of the Mamluk and Ottoman eras. As late as in 2006, in a standard English-language work, authors of Arab origin deplore the decay of Arabic literature: its alleged “mannerism,” the prevalence of “stylistic embellishments” and “word play,” the lack of “unaffected” expression of “natural, true feelings,” the lack of moral seriousness, and even a deficit of “virility.”⁴⁷

TRAINING IN AMBIGUITY

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the impact of the imperialist discourse of the West meant that the literary tradition of cultivating ambiguity—the beginnings of which date back to pre-Islamic times—came to an end. If one wanted to trace the history of ambiguity in Arabic literature (not to speak of Persian and Turkish literature), one would have to do nothing less than write a complete history of this literature. Even this would not be sufficient, since Arabic authors at an early stage had already begun to reflect on ambiguity and to compose literary-critical and theoretical works about it. Hence one would also have to write a history of Arabic rhetoric and literary theory. But even this would not suffice. For joining these texts, both *full of* and *about* ambiguity, are those that address the ambiguity of existence, reflecting again and again the idea that everything has two sides. We can offer here only a very incomplete outline of these, in note form, which nevertheless will show that a mature tolerance of ambiguity was constantly accompanied by training in ambiguity.

In *ancient Arabic poetry* (beginning around 500 AD), the most important stylistic devices are comparisons and the *substituting word* (proxy word) mentioned above. This gives pre- and early Islamic texts a certain amount of ambiguity (which, in the Quran, is enhanced by other devices). But another ancient Arabic institution is perhaps even more important for the development of the culture of ambiguity, namely the *mu‘āraḍah*, the “contrapoein,” or “emulative poem.” This is a poem that answers another poem and is exactly identical in meter and rhyme. Just as Jacob Burckhardt views the spirit of contest as a central characteristic of the ancient Greeks, the Arab of the pre- and early Islamic era must also be described as an “agonal person” (in the sense of the Greek *agon*, referring to contest and competition).⁴⁸ Along with armed fights between clans and tribes, there were contests of hunting, racing, and shooting. Even more important were the contests among poets, who were often, at the same time, the speakers of their tribes. Contests between poets were staged in front of an

audience and were occasions for the composition of “contrapoems” of the sort described.

The agonal character of poetry survived Islamization. In the Umayyad period, in fact, the tradition of the “contrapoem” reached the climax of its popularity, when the greatest poets of the time gathered at the caliphal court in Baghdad or on the Mirbad, the large plaza outside the gates of Basra, to insult each other in long poems. Such “contraorations” (*naqāʾid*) are full of exaggerations and are not reluctant to use coarse obscenities. The best-known polemics were those between Jarīr (died 111/729) and al-Farazdaq (died 110/728), who entertained audiences with their *naqāʾid* for almost forty years.⁴⁹ Above and beyond the entertainment value of the “contrapoems,” it should be emphasized that they served to playfully recreate political and societal conflicts. The collapse of the traditional tribal order and the eruption of new tribal conflicts presented a serious challenge to Umayyad society, a challenge that found its outlet in the wild insults launched by star poets in their “contraorations.” In the agonal culture of the Umayyad and the early Abbasid period, of which the *naqāʾid* are only one feature among others, there was an intensifying awareness that all groups could present their own respective deeds of glory—and also their own respective infamies.⁵⁰

The urban culture of the Abbasid period no longer viewed public insult contests as a suitable means to conduct and settle conflicts as a game. Instead, scholarship developed its own art of disputation, first in theology, and then in other disciplines, especially in the methodology of jurisprudence.⁵¹ The agonal and playful element of contest enters into a synthesis with the quite serious quest for truth, respectively probable truth, and Johan Huizinga is certainly right when he states: “This mixture of rhetoric, warfare and play can also be found in the scholastic competitions of the Muslim theologians.”⁵²

Literary disputations also are to be found close to the very beginning of Arabic prose literature. The first genius of Arabic entertaining-edifying prose, al-Jāḥiẓ (died 255/869), demonstrates that he is wholly pervaded by the awareness of the relativity of human judgments and valuations. In many of his works, he collects arguments for praise or blame of objects and groups of people or professions, without having the ideology of his presentations “work out” cleanly. For example, he composes epistles in praise of the Turks and the Blacks that portray him as a partisan of peoples for whom the dominant status of the Arabs was like a thorn in their side. At the same time, he sings the praises of the Arabs, in a book which may be counted as the oldest Arabic book on rhetoric.⁵³ On some topics, al-Jāḥiẓ has written two straightforward treatises (on state secretaries, merchants, silence, and talking)—one in praise, the other in censure. Some

works present a veritable literary debate, for instance the debate on whether love for young women is preferable to love for young men.⁵⁴

This tradition, in which the literature of *rangstreit* (rank dispute) has its place, continued into modern times. Preferred topics were disputes between different plants and animals (e.g., rose and narcissus), seasons of the year (winter and summer), specific cities, different fields of scholarship, or, in modern times, between donkey and bicycle, streetcar and bus.⁵⁵ Of political significance is the popular dispute between pen and sword, which reflects the dualism between the civil and military elite. Ibn Nubātāh's dispute between pen and sword, from the year 729/1329, is probably the most stylistically brilliant (and most elaborate) composition upon this topic.⁵⁶ It is small wonder that the dispute ends in a draw.

Works on *al-mahāsin wa-l-masāwī* (the good and the bad sides of things) constitute another literary tradition to which al-Jāhīz belongs.⁵⁷ The best-known author in this field is ath-Tha'ālibī (350–429/961–1038), who spent his life in the Iranian East, where he upheld the banner of Arabic literature. One of his numerous anthologizing works is titled *Tahsīn al-qabīḥ wa-taqbīḥ al-ḥasan* (Making the ugly beautiful and the beautiful ugly).⁵⁸ In the first part of this book, ath-Tha'ālibī collects arguments that support things normally regarded as ugly. These include lying, insolence, poverty, being in jail, being fat, being stingy, the word “no,” the farewell, old age, sickness, and death. In the second part, subjects that are vilified include intelligence, books, the office of vizier, gold and wealth, wisdom and courage, asceticism and frugality, the bath, youth, friendship, rain, roses and narcissi; even the moon is not spared this transvaluation. A student of ath-Tha'ālibī endeavored to complement this work with statements from the author's other books, which treat the good sides of good things and the bad sides of bad things. The result is a work (mostly ascribed to ath-Tha'ālibī himself) in which we may learn about all these things in succession what makes them loveable and what makes them hateful.⁵⁹ This book offers perhaps the finest introduction to the history of mentalities of the classical Arabic world.

The genre of “the good and the bad sides of things” was represented down into Mamluk times by the author al-Waṭwāṭ (632–718/1235–1318).⁶⁰ However, another literary form had attained even more vitality long before, a genre that also dealt with the relativity of human value judgments: the *apologetic epigram*. Its beginnings lay in the love poetry of the end of the second/eighth century, when poets such as Abū Nuwās were seeking excuses for their love of youths whose beards are beginning to sprout (about which more in greater detail later).⁶¹ The panoply of topics expanded rapidly, and soon almost any contradiction of conventional value judgments could serve as a topic of such an epigram.

But the most frequent and most beautiful apologetic epigrams are to be found in love poetry, when a poet apologizes for a “defect” of the beloved person and proves, with the whole repertoire of stylistic devices containing ambiguity, that the defect is no defect at all. For instance, Ibn al-Wardī (691–749/1292–1349) makes use of the fact that a pretty person is often compared to the sun or the moon. In defense of his love for a girl with conspicuously short legs, he writes:⁶²

For a long time I am in love with a small one
Who in her delicacy is like a gazelle.
People malign her: “She has no legs at all,”
To which I reply, “Neither do the moon and the sun.”

Apologetic love epigrams frequently concern pockmarked people. Ibn Makānis (745–798/1344–1392), another poet of the Mamluk period, similarly finds the appropriate comparisons for this, which are then reinterpreted until the pockmarked appearance turns out to be the very cause for love:

I love the one with pockmarks which now
Adorn as stars the sky of my heart.
No wonder that he catches all the hearts—
With a net of pockmarks on his cheeks!⁶³

One may dismiss such epigrams as playing around, and in fact they were meant to amuse rather than to deal with actual everyday problems. But: “We must emphasize yet again that play does not exclude seriousness.”⁶⁴ The apologetic epigram has taught whole generations to question ideals of beauty and conventional value judgments in all areas. For many, it has opened their eyes to the ambiguity of human existence and saved them from accepting their judgments or prejudices as certainties. The texts on *rangstreit*, the collections of the “good and bad aspects of things,” and the apologetic epigrams could originate only in a culture that tolerates ambiguity. And all these texts are formed so attractively that they are bound to exert a great fascination on their listeners and readers, whose awareness of the multilayered nature of the world is thereby sharpened—which helps to perpetuate tolerance of ambiguity. This process functioned until the West, precisely in the era of its strongest intolerance of ambiguity, gained power over the Near East. The Near East was confronted with the economic and technological supremacy of the West exactly in the latter’s “ornament is a crime” phase, in which the principle of play had reached the nadir of its appreciation. The Near East learned the lesson thoroughly. Even today, there are quite a few

intellectuals in the Arab world who consider poems such as the ones quoted above to be regrettable errors.

As the play with images in the quoted epigrams shows, Arabic poetry gained considerably in stylistic refinement during the Abbasid era. In the second/eighth century, the ancient Arabic stylistic device of the proxy word went out of fashion. In its stead, the metaphor gained increasing importance, and it was used by the poet Abū Tammām (died around 231/845) to such an extent that a veritable poetic controversy ensued, dividing the entire cultural elite. The partisans of Abū Tammām were confronted by those of his disciple, al-Buḥturī (206–284/821–897), who avoided the stylistic excesses of his teacher and found the way to a more balanced style, which was regarded for a long time as classical. The controversy over Abū Tammām's poetry had an important side effect. The writer of poetry and Abbasid prince Ibn al-Mu'tazz (247–296/861–908), to whom Arabic literature owes several of its most beautiful similes, composed a small booklet in defense of the "new style" as it was represented most radically by Abū Tammām. This book on the "New Style,"⁶⁵ from the year 274/887, is commonly seen as the charter of Arabic stylistics; later on, it would come to be a pivotal element of the theory of rhetoric. In the sixth/twelfth century, theoreticians writing in Arabic—most prominently as-Sakkākī (555–626/1160–1229), from today's Uzbekistan—developed a theory of the indirect and figurative use of language that even today offers an analysis of the metaphor that is much more adequate than can be found in Western theories.

In poetic practice, the play with metaphors attains its climax not in Arabic but in Persian literature. Here, the so-called Indian style, beginning with the tenth/sixteenth century, displays unique fireworks of metaphor.⁶⁶ The West, which had learned from Hobbes that metaphors are "delusive lights" (*ignes fatui*),⁶⁷ could not but see this as a phenomenon of decadence.

Arabic poetry after the controversy over Abū Tammām is more reticent regarding experiments with metaphors. Instead, linguistic means of expression are developed that are based on the polysemous character of single words. The most important among these is the *tawriyah*, the stylistic device of ambiguity par excellence. The term roughly corresponds with the French double entendre. In European languages, it was used mostly for jokes or satirical sayings, as for the instance discussed earlier in the book when Karl Kraus gave his judgment on the press: "The bigger the boot, the bigger the heel." Here, the meanings intended in the first place ("boot" [Stiefel] in the sense of "idle prattle," and "heel" [Absatz] in the sense of "sold copies") are "hidden" behind the "shoe" meanings (hence *tawriyah*, "hiding") that one primarily associates with these words.

From the middle of the sixth/twelfth century onward, Arabic literature likes to make use of the *tawriyah* to end epigrams with a witty punch line. But it is also used more and more in serious literature, especially in the stylized letter. In poetry, Ibn Nubātah is regarded as its great master. Starting with his earliest poetry, he played with multiple layers of meaning in order to furnish the texts with a measure of semantic concentration and an abundance of mutual relations that had not been seen before.⁶⁸ In his later poems, he also makes frequent use of the *tawriyah*, through which he opens up yet another level of meaning. Needless to say, such poems ultimately defy translation.

Tawriyah has also been the object of theoretical investigation. Both aṣ-Ṣafadī (died 764/1363) and Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī (died 837/1434) wrote treatises on this stylistic device and its various subspecies, which remain unsurpassed.⁶⁹

Intellectuals of the Mamluk and Ottoman era were confronted with the accusation that their sophisticated play with words addressed only a small elite.⁷⁰ It may be correct to say that the stylistic device of ambiguity found great interest within the learned elite, which consisted largely of legal scholars. This is not astonishing, since legal scholars, as interpreters of normative texts, were charged with the task of domesticating the ambiguity of these texts. Their awareness of ambiguity kindled a delight in playfully creating ambiguity in texts of all sorts. Ambiguity is regarded here not as a defect, but as artistry.

However, it would be entirely wrong to think that this pleasure was confined to the elite. Quite the contrary: it is linguistic play that forms the common denominator between elite and popular literature, and indeed represents the bridge to the oral literature of the peasants and the Bedouins. In the eighth/fourteenth century, a popular poet who was by profession a stonemason and architect (al-Mi‘mār) became so famous for his mastery of the *tawriyah* that his poems were collected and presented to a large literate audience.⁷¹ The popular literature of the rural population was known for its great fondness for the *tawriyah* well into the twentieth century, and perhaps up to today. For this literature, linguistic play is no less than “the salt in the soup,” and poems that do not contain dexterous linguistic play are disregarded.⁷² It is only Western critics and members of the pro-Western indigenous elite who, since the beginning of the twentieth century, have considered Arabic linguistic games to be worthless.

This audience reacted with special condescension to all the varieties of Arabic literature that were particularly popular in Ottoman times.⁷³ Their most distinctive genres are: (1) the riddle, (2) the chronogram, and (3) the *badī‘iyyah*. *Riddles* were already present in ancient Arab times. In the Mamluk period, they became a popular game in which every participant could show his or her linguistic dexterity. The *chronogram* makes use of the fact that each letter of the Arabic

alphabet has a numerical value. To commemorate a historical event in literary terms, the task was to figure out an epigraph that yields the date of the event if the numerical values of all the letters used are added up. Chronograms are also to be found in postmedieval Europe, but the Arabic chronogram is much trickier than the Latin one, and it attained a greater cultural significance, particularly in the nineteenth century. A Christian poet like al-Yāziji, composing chronograms on the occasion of events that are equally important for Christians as for Muslims, takes into account the dates according to both the Christian and the Islamic calendar.⁷⁴

The *badīʿiyyah*, finally, is a literary variety in which ambiguity itself assumes center stage. Its inventor was Ṣaḥī ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī (667–750/1278–1330). He had originally wanted to write a treatise on stylistic devices, but then he contracted a serious illness. During this illness, it seemed to him more appropriate to devote himself to a religious subject rather than pursue a scholarly one, so he composed a poem in praise of the prophet Muḥammad. This was a *muʿārāḍah*, a “counterpoem” to another praise of the prophet, the extraordinarily famous poem by al-Būṣīrī (died around 694/1294). Al-Būṣīrī himself had written his poem during an illness and had miraculously recovered afterwards. So Ṣaḥī ad-Dīn took this poem as a model, imitating its meter and rhyme, but introducing one decisive modification. Since he had already accumulated so much material on the stylistic devices of Arabic poetry, he wanted to incorporate this knowledge into his poem. So he did not merely compose a “counterpoem” to that of al-Būṣīrī, but took for each verse the opportunity to exemplify (at least) one stylistic device of the discipline (*ʿilm al-badīʿ*). He then wrote a commentary in which he explained all the stylistic devices that he had illustrated in the course of his poem.

Al-Būṣīrī’s poem consists of two parts, an introductory love poem and a poem in praise of the Prophet. This structure is imitated by Ṣaḥī ad-Dīn, and most later *badīʿiyyah* poets follow him in this. Thus Ṣaḥī ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī’s *badīʿiyyah* is both a love poem and a poem in praise of the Prophet; both a work of art that claims to be appreciated aesthetically and a prayer, a work both secular and religious; an aesthetic and a scientific text; and finally, a text that not only expresses ambiguity but also reflects it, since a large part of the exemplified stylistic devices represent those of ambiguity—thus offering a reflective ambiguity.

Al-Ḥillī’s work was a great success and stimulated more than a hundred imitators during the following centuries. Some of them, however, found his poem much too simple still, and endeavored to also incorporate the technical term of the stylistic device illustrated into each respective verse (of course, with a

different meaning). Eventually, other authors added commentaries to their *badīʿiyyah*, and some commentaries were augmented by a comprehensive anthology of verses and poems in which the respective stylistic device played a role. The first author who composed such a *badīʿiyyah* with a commentary and a comprehensive anthology was Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, mentioned before; the last one was probably the Damascene aṣ-Ṣalāḥī (died 1265/1849).

Each of these *badīʿiyyāt* has its own focus. The poetess ʿĀʾishah al-Bāʿūniyyah (died 922/1516), for instance, places greatest importance on the aesthetic features of the poem, and extends the amatory part of the poem by more than half. Other poets find it more important to discover stylistic devices that are not yet analyzed by older authors. The most artistic *badīʿiyyah*, however, is probably the work of al-Yāzījī, who not only is able to compose a palindrome over a whole verse, but also creates a truly ecumenical work by writing a *badīʿiyyah* that may be read both as a Christian and an Islamic text.⁷⁵

Whatever the focus of a given *badīʿiyyah* may be, one point is common to all of them: they are, to use Huizinga's words, "played cultures."⁷⁶ However, it must be emphasized that by no means does the entire Arabic literature of the Mamluk and Ottoman eras fall under this category, as its adversaries have contended again and again. On the contrary, about a hundred *badīʿiyyāt*, several thousand chronograms (which amount to just one verse in the context of a longer poem), and several hundred extant poetic riddles stand in contrast to a multiple number of poems that display no exorbitant rhetorical design whatsoever, and are often astonishingly simple and direct in their stylistic expression.⁷⁷ The simple form was appreciated too, but it always was situated *alongside* the complex. All attempts to identify *periods* of classicism and mannerism in the history of Arabic literature are bound to fail, due to the fact that both styles, "classically" tempered on the one hand and highly stylized and mannered on the other, are always encountered alongside one another, often even by one and the same poet.⁷⁸

The awareness of ambiguity achieved by the world of Arabic literature by the third/ninth century (at the latest) did not allow for a return to innocence. This awareness did not preclude pleasure in seemingly unambiguous simplicity, but always endeavored to cope creatively with a world full of ambiguity. There was a constant fascination with artistically enacting the ambiguity of the world, which may be domesticated but never eliminated.

The resulting works of art are the opposite of superficial baubles. Rather, they are "played culture," and they extend down into much deeper cultural levels than their modern critics, who are victims of the illusion that a world without ambiguity is possible, want to acknowledge. However, the culture of ambiguity

could be “played” not only in the form of works of art; there were also written scientific works that display a more or less strong element of play. At the end of this chapter, I would like to present a work of “played science” which allows us to visually realize how seemingly definite scientific statements are grounded in ambiguous material.

The author is a Yemenite scholar and man of letters by the name of Ibn al-Muqri’ (754–837/1353–1433), also a writer of a *badī‘iyyah*, whose highest ambition was to attain the position of the supreme judge in the Rasūlid dynasty. In order to impress the ruler, he decided to write a book that in terms of artistic sophistication would surpass all its predecessors. This work is a collection of five short books,⁷⁹ each giving a succinct but instructive introduction to a scientific or literary discipline. One is a short but comprehensive presentation of Islamic law, according to the Shāfi‘ite school; another is a conspectus on the history of the Rasūlids; there is also an introduction to Arabic grammar, an introduction to Arabic prosody, and an introduction to Arabic rhyme. So far, this is nothing exceptional. The extraordinary point of this work is that Ibn al-Muqri’ presents these five books not one after another, but *simultaneously*. And that is how it works: If the text is read in the usual direction—that is, horizontally, from right to left—it yields the presentation of Shāfi‘ite law. If one reads the first letter or letters of each line vertically from up to down, the introduction into prosody emerges. This is followed in the next column to the left by the history of the Rasūlids, and in the next by the introduction into grammar, and at the end the theory of rhyme. The letters and words of all four books to be read vertically are also a part of the book on law. Letters and words that belong to two books have a different function and meaning according to the direction of reading, or to the context in which they are read. The illustration below shows a page from the work in which the horizontal columns are set against each other. This work, which Ibn al-Muqri’ completed in Muḥarram 804/August 1401 in Ta‘izz, found several emulators. As for that supreme judge position, though . . . Ibn al-Muqri’ didn’t get it.

In the precolonial Near East, ambiguity was not only tolerated, but also considered worth striving for. The exegete had the ambition of finding in a text as many meanings as possible. Collecting words with contradictory meanings became a sport for lexicographers. Men of letters continued to produce ambiguity with the greatest passion. They endeavored to create texts that encompass as many meanings as possible in the narrowest space possible.

Finally, this endeavor is transferred to scholarship, as Ibn al-Muqri’'s example shows. In a playful manner, a text is produced that breaks through linear dimensions. A work on law that at first glance looks no different from other books on

والقلب مى كالزجاج واذ سريغ العطب	١٣	الريق منه كالزجاج ولحظه يحكي الزجاج
١	من الوجهين في ارض السوادانها	هذا الجاسوس ومن خا
٢	تخذ الولاة منها اختلاف	زمن فتحها وقفها للقائم
٣	امور المسلمين ومصالحهم وحدها	جزم الاكثرون تدقيقاً وانجا
٤	من القادسية حتى تصل	من حديقه الموصل إلى الا
٥	حالة التكليف بلا سكر	حلوان كل ذلك لايجوز فيه
٦	بث في المحسن الرجم سنة الرسول	ذميا كان أو مسلما فان
٧	المكافئين الاحرار واوجوا	واسم المحسن ينسا
٨	بالدماسة القصر والاختلاف	في غير المحسن اذا زنى
٩	الاكثرون ولو سأل	وقع في تغريب المرأة و السير
١٠	الحد في العبد خمسون واثي	في ذلك اجرة اعطى والذى
١١	مقالات اصحاب سنة اشهر وقاس	الخلافة أيضاً في تغريبه و قد
١٢	الزنى سواء والبهيمة ليس	رفيقاً بعضهم بحر وبعضهم
١٣	مرة كفى لكـ	جزاء من اتاها الا التعزير على
١٤	الاصحاب يعزر وكذلك اذا	ما فعل حد واحد ومن حصن
١٥	جه التصديق دينار ان كان	خالط حائضاً عزز و الحمر
١٦	لن يقول ان المرأة اذا	باول الدم وان جر
١٧	ح ونحوها ورجل	واقعت المرأة عزرتا ووطء
١٨	في وطئه إلى قول ثابت	نكح محرماً بملكها كله غير
١٩	وستر نفسه فـ	مقطوع به عن امام
٢٠	ع المولى البيعة ولا بأس	واقر بالزنى حد فان رجع فا
٢١	صبره ففهر لم تنبعه وليس	باقامته الحد والتعزير على عبد
٢٢	لا يجده ابوه واستجبوا	عندنا من يقيم الحد غير
٢٣	العلماء الحضر للرجل	دفن المرأة إلى صدرها وسا

law actually contains within it four further books—books that become discernable, however, only in a quite specific, unalterable formal structure.

Often has the Western or Westernized view discounted the production of such texts that condense ambiguity, labeling them as scholastic nuisance, even as a symptom of decadence. But in fact these are highly complex forms of literary

and scientific play that train the awareness of ambiguity. Due not least to this *training in ambiguity*, the people of the precolonial Near East were aware of the fact that ambiguity can never be eliminated, only domesticated. In this area, classical Islamic culture achieved a mastery that was never surpassed anywhere. The producers of literary and scholarly texts were able to domesticate the ambiguity with which they were confronted, as well as to produce ambiguity in a playful manner and in great abundance. Play with ambiguity was “played culture.” People want to play what their culture achieves. Conversely, a culture can achieve only what is played in it.