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A Typology of Medieval Islamic Poetics

Elements of a Comparative Analysis between Islam and the West

Contemporary globalisation contains a primary contradiction between a tendency towards world economic unity on the one hand, and a tendency towards world political, social and cultural fragmentation on the other. The recent flourishing of comparative studies seems to be a reaction to this contradiction. There are two main kinds of comparison: comparison between different things, and comparison between similar things. Several contemporary scholars give preference to comparison between heterogeneous cultural traditions (e.g. between the West and the Far East) rather than comparison between analogous cultural traditions (e.g. between the West and the Near East). Emphasising cultural differences, as a reaction to globalisation, is indeed one of the main traits of contemporary philosophy. Our comparative analysis between Islamic and western medieval poetics is based more on their cultural similarities than on their cultural differences. We would like to substitute post-modern fragmentation with the shaping of new, open and critical forms of universalism. Moreover, as the subject of this congress is »aesthetics as philosophy«, we are going to use a theoretical approach to poetics in preference to an empirical-literary one.

First of all, to touch on the methodology, we shall expose the historical basis of our comparative analysis. Constant references in the mass media to the danger of Islamic fundamentalism make people think that there is a deep opposition between Islam and the West. So, why do we maintain that in the Middle Ages Islam and the West had a common cultural background? In spite of their religious differences, during the Middle Ages the Islamic East and the Latin West, as »the twin sons of Hellenism«, belonged to a unitary cultural system. The unity of the civilisations that flourished around the Mediterranean Sea was broken at the end of the XVth century. After the discovery of America, the axis of international trade moved from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, leading to the decline of the mercantile Islamic civilisation and to the flourishing of modern Europe. It is precisely on the basis of their common Hellenistic background that we have developed a comparative analysis between Islamic and western medieval poetics. Of course, as far as the Middle Ages are concerned, one should not understand the word »Islam« in its narrow, religious (that is to say »modern«)

sense. In its Medieval and broad sense, the word »Islam« refers to all the aspects of the cosmopolitan civilisation that flourished from the Atlantic Ocean (Spain and Morocco) to the river Hindus (today's Pakistan).

We suggest developing a comparative analysis between Islamic and western medieval poetics on the basis of a typology of the Islamic medieval poetics itself. But medieval Islam, just as the Medieval West, had a structured and universal understanding of knowledge. For this reason, it would be inappropriate to analyse Islamic medieval poetical thought independently of the general Islamic medieval order of knowledge. A typology of Islamic medieval poetics should then be related to a very general typology of Islamic medieval culture. In our opinion, it is possible to distinguish, within the medieval Islamic culture, between three main religious and cultural paradigms:

1) *the dominant paradigm* of religious orthodoxy which provided a largely literal and anthropomorphist interpretation of the Scriptures. The religious orthodoxy preferred a legal approach to religion to a metaphysical one;

2) *the neoplatonic paradigm*, which spread mostly in the eastern parts of the Islamic world and can be exemplified by the thought of the Iranian philosopher Avicenna (X-XIth century);

3) *the protomodern paradigm*, which opened the way to an historical and a scientific approach to knowledge and can be exemplified by the thought of the Arab philosopher Averroes of Cordoba (XIIth century).¹

On the basis of this very general typology of Islamic medieval culture, we propose a typology of Islamic medieval poetics, which nevertheless should not be considered related to the former either in a mechanic or in a direct sense. Such a typology would consist of: 1) the dominant poetics, 2) the neoplatonic poetics, and 3) the protomodern poetics. But let us see in more detail what is the meaning we attribute to these categories, both from an Islamic and a comparative perspective.

1) *the dominant Islamic poetics* is characterised by a mainly grammatical and rhetorical approach to poetic questions. Texts as treatises of rhetoric concerning style figures, or *belles-lettres* and letter-writing handbooks played a very important role in the education of the Islamic intelligentsia. Another important trait of the dominant poetics in the Islamic world is that, since the

¹ As far as cosmology is concerned, such a typology of Islamic medieval culture has been proposed by the prominent orientalist Alessandro Bausani, who distinguished, within Islamic culture, between a *legal* attitude, a *gnostic* attitude and a *scientific* attitude. Cf. Bausani, Alessandro, *L'Enciclopedia dei Fratelli della purità. Riassunto, con Introduzione e breve commento, dei 52 Trattati o Epistole degli Ikhwân as-safâ*, Napoli, Istituto Universitario orientale, 1978, pp. 21 ff.

very beginning of its development, it was closely related to the holy exegesis (theologians wondered whether they should give a literal or an allegorical interpretation to the Scriptures).

From a comparative point of view, we may point out evident correspondences between Islamic and western poetics in the Middle Ages. The medieval West also had a mainly grammatical and rhetorical approach to poetic questions, which were also closely related to the holy exegesis;

2) *the neoplatonic Islamic poetics*. Apart from those concrete literary works that can be considered perfect specimens of neoplatonic poetics (for example, a large part of Persian poetry), the oriental trend of Hellenistic Islamic philosophy (the »oriental *falsafa*«) was characterised by a neoplatonic interpretation of Aristotle. This approach was rooted in the Hellenistic sources (e.g. Alexander of Aphrodisias) of the Islamic philosophers. The oriental Islamic philosophers (such as al-Farabi and Avicenna), apart from their original writings, commented on most of the Aristotelian corpus, including the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*. The most apparent characteristic of these commentaries is that, according to them (as a result of the influence of the Hellenistic commentators on Aristotle), the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* were considered a part of Aristotle's Logic. The neoplatonic interpretation of Aristotle on the one hand, and the logical approach to the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* on the other, largely influenced both the poetics and the aesthetics of medieval Islam. But we are unable to go into further detail.

From a comparative point of view, we should point out that the medieval West also gave, in its turn, a neoplatonic interpretation on Aristotle, which was likewise influenced by Hellenistic sources. Nevertheless, in the West, neoplatonism had larger influence in the general field of aesthetics than in the specific field of poetics.²

From the XIIIth century onwards, as a result of the translation movement from Arabic into Latin, the logical approach to poetics also spread in the West. But what we would like to stress here, without going into detail, is that it was not because of the translation movement that Islam and the West came closer to one another, rather it was because they were already close (on the basis of their common Hellenistic background) that the translation movement could be achieved;

3) *protomodern Islamic poetics*. We understand the word »protomodern« in the sense of a tendency towards an historical approach to literature. Nevertheless, modernism is a typically western phenomenon (related to Humanism and the Renaissance), while the Islamic world, in spite of various important cultural movements, until now has not produced an analogous histori-

² Cf. Eco, Umberto, *Arte e bellezza nell'estetica medievale*, Sonzogno, Bompiani, 1987.

cal process leading to a truly historical interpretation of its classical tradition. For these historical reasons, it might be interesting to find, within medieval Islamic poetics, the protomodern elements which could culminate in a modern approach to literature. In our opinion, it is possible to find such elements in various genres of texts, such as philosophical texts (e.g. the Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*), books concerning the education of the perfect *homme de lettres* (similar to Baldassarre Castiglione's *Uomo ideale*), and others.

The typology of medieval Islamic poetics that we have just proposed should not be understood as a catalogue for texts, nor as a triad of absolute hypostasis. On the contrary, the three categories we listed above are paradigms, and they do not exist in a pure state. There are texts in which the dominant poetic paradigm prevails, while there are other texts in which the neoplatonic or the protomodern paradigms are predominant.

Conclusion

The aim of our comparative, typological analysis of Islamic and western poetics of the Middle Ages is to encourage medievalist scholars both from the Islamic and the western disciplines to cooperate with the ultimate goal of a wider interpretation of the Middle Ages. The contemporary crisis of modernism makes us think about the roots of modernism itself. The traditional historical view which draws a straight line from classical Greece to Romanticism (through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment), could give way to a wider, non-eurocentric view of historical development. Ernst Robert Curtius, in his masterpiece *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948) has already criticised the classicist approach to the meaning of western culture.³

As Curtius pointed out, Late Antiquity represents a crucial moment in the shaping of the unity of western culture, which was mostly based on its literary and rhetorical tradition. We believe that Curtius' interpretation of western cultural identity might be enhanced by a discussion about a global notion of the Middle Ages, including both Islam and the West as two inseparable parts of a whole. Medieval comparative poetics is no more than an element of an analysis that should involve all the aspects of the civilisations rooted in Hellenism that flourished around the Mediterranean Sea.

³ Curtius, Ernst Robert, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern, A. Francke Verlag, 1948.