
Chapter 1

ARABIC LITERATURE FROM ITS
ORIGINS TO 132/750

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'When the Arab makes his first appearance on History's stage, he comes bearing a precious and formidable gift: his profound sense of the beauty of the Word,¹ and it is through the Word that he reveals his creative abilities.

It is regrettable that, as a result of long years of selective, oral transmission, many of the literary works from this past, and the oldest in particular, have been lost to us, and that those which have survived are fragmentary and often of doubtful provenance.² We are thus condemned to ignorance about both the beginnings and the early stages of the development of this literature.

It is not until the sixth century AD that the texts become sufficiently numerous and their provenance sufficiently clear, so as to constitute valid documentation.

Analysis does, however, suggest that they are part of a tradition that had long since established its own formal rules and thematic tendencies. It is one of the paradoxes in the history of Arabic literature to begin with what can with no hesitation, and full justification, be called 'classicism', a classicism that reigned for two and a half centuries. Even the message of Muḥammad and the resulting upheaval of ideas and mores could not separate the Arabs from an aesthetic tradition inherited from their distant past. It was not until 132/750, when the Banu-l-ʿAbbās succeeded the Banū Umayya, that Arabic literature began to innovate on a large scale.

1. R. Blachère, 'Le classicisme dans la littérature arabe', in G.E. von Grunbaum (ed.), *Symposium International d'Histoire de la Civilisation Musulmane, Actes*, pp. 279–290, Bordeaux, 1957, p. 280.
2. On this subject see N. al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shiʿr al-Jāhili wa-qīmatubā al-tārīkhīyya*, Cairo, Dār al-Maʿārif, 1962, and R. Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe des origines à la fin de XV^e siècle*, 3 vols., Paris, G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1952–1964, I, pp. 85–186.

The defeat of the Umayyads, which ended the dominance of the traditional ethical and aesthetic ideas which they had tried to perpetuate for a whole century, opened the door to creative innovation.

Although it remained faithful to the norms of classicism, Arabic literature had nevertheless begun to evolve before 132/750, and this evolution was accelerated by the historical events preceding and following the tragic death of ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān.

Shattering the consensus achieved by the Prophet and his early successors, the revolt which culminated in the assassination of the third caliph in 35/655 plunged the Muslim world into theological debates which it could neither resolve nor transcend, and provoked internal schisms with decisive consequences for its future.³

Caught up in the controversies produced by this state of affairs, Arabic literature was forced to create new forms of expression which were better suited to the public's preoccupations. The years 35–40/655–660 thus form a 'watershed' in both the literary and the political history of the Arabs, a time which divides the classical period into two clearly demarcated phases.

Arabic literature from its origins to 40/660

Although it continued for some decades after the appearance of Islam, the hallmarks of the first phase of the classical period are the spirit of Arab bedouinism and paganism, or, to use the stock phrase, the spirit of *Jāhiliyya*.

Jāhiliyya is the term which Muslim authors use to designate the period before Islam. Based on a fundamental opposition between pre- and post-Revelation – that is, between ignorance and irrationality on the one hand, and knowledge and wisdom on the other – this term not only tended to disparage the period in question, it also, by presenting it as an undifferentiated whole, obscured any achievement prior to the message of Muḥammad. This thesis does not withstand scrutiny, however. On the contrary, social and religious development in the Arab world was progressive and continuous.

Although there is every indication that the Arabs – like all 'primitive' people – considered blood ties sacred and originally organized themselves in clans, they were able at each stage of their economic and cultural development to adapt their social system to the imperatives of change. Adopting extensive nomadism as a way of life, they used the concept of a real or mythical common ancestry to extend the concept of blood solidarity (*ʿaṣabiyya*), by the clan with the tribe, and by the tribe with the tribal confederation. When converted to caravan mercantilism, they established pacts of fraternity and mutual assistance (*ahlāf*) between the various tribal groups

3. Cf. in particular Ṭ. Ḥusayn, *al-Fīṭna al-kubrā*, Cairo, 1962, and H. Laoust, *Les schismes dans l'islam*, Paris, Payot 1965.

in order to ensure the conditions necessary for the harmonious expansion of their new activities.

Similar changes marked their religious history. As one author put it, "To each socio-political stage of pre-Islamic Arab society, there corresponds a renewed concept of the individual and a specific stage of religious life."⁴ These changes took the Arabs from animism and the cult of the ancestor to polytheism and the cult of the idol and then, once the divinities had been brought together in the same sanctuaries and the rites had been unified, to a sort of religious syncretism, of which the pilgrimage to Mecca, the mercantile metropolis *par excellence*, is one of the most significant examples.⁵

Although they introduced innovations and religious practices to their social system as a consequence of constantly changing economic and political circumstances, the Arabs of the pre-Islamic period never doubted that their present was the natural continuation of their past. There was no contradiction in their eyes between

their membership in the clan, that building-block of society that was small but made strong by its ethnic cohesion and the spirit of solidarity that motivated its members, and their adherence to a larger political entity, the tribal confederation, whose strength lay in the number and prestige of the tribes it comprised and the multiplicity and solidity of the alliances that it established.⁶

Nor did they see any contradiction between worshipping their divinities in a familial or tribal setting, and worshipping in communal sanctuaries such as the Ka'ba, since the practices were identical and their idols were present in both places, either alone or 'in the shadow of more powerful gods'.⁷

A second factor that helped convince the Arabs of the eternal validity of their ideals was their attachment to a moral code called honour. This code of values, which was deeply rooted in paganism and 'united all Arabs in a communion of acts',⁸ developed in successive generations of this community a sense of belonging to a culture with immutable principles.

Proud of his status as a free man (*hurriyya*), as a member of a powerful and respected social group (*'izzā*), the purity of his lineage (*nasab*) and the illustriousness of his forefathers (*basab*), the young Arab (*fata*) strove at all times to show himself worthy of his glorious history (*majid*) by being loyal,

4. J. Chelhod, *Introduction à la sociologie de l'Islam: de l'animisme à l'universalisme*, (Islam d'Hier et d'Aujourd'hui, 12), Paris, G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1958, p. 15.

5. M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1957, p. 34.

6. M. Abdesselem, *Le thème de la mort dans la poésie arabe des origines à la fin du III^e/IX^e siècle*, Tunis, Université de Tunis, 1977, p. 36.

7. J. Chelhod, *Introduction...*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

8. B. Faris, *L'Honneur chez les Arabes avant l'Islam*, Paris, G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1932, p. 191.

helpful, brave, generous and hospitable – in a word, by demonstrating a constant desire to surpass himself.

It is easy to see why the Arabs would consider the call to renounce all their divinities save Allāh, to replace the multiplicity of tribal solidarities by the solidarity of faith and their proud assurance by an ethic of humility, as a radical break with their past, and why most of them would, at least initially, fiercely reject such a call.

Monotheism was not completely unknown in Arabia, however. Having escaped the dominant imperialisms elsewhere, the Arab world was a haven of liberty and a refuge for persecuted Christians and Jews who settled in Taymā², Khaybar, Yathrib (later Medina), al-Ḥīra and Najrān. The influence of these communities was very limited, however, being restricted to the urban centres where they had settled.⁹

It would be left to the Qurʾānic message to convert the Arabs to monotheistic concepts and the moral ideas they implied; and it would take a long time to eradicate the traces of ancient beliefs from the collective mind. In the early years of the Islamic era, the spirit of the *Jābilīyya* would continue to determine how the Arabs acted and thought, and provide the central themes for their creative artists.

On the strength of the recensions prepared by the Muslim logographers of the second-third/eighth-ninth centuries, it would appear that the literary heritage of the *Jābilīyya* and the first decades of Islam included not only numerous collections of poetry, but also a rich store of maxims and proverbs, a significant narrative genre and a few sequences of rhetorical prose. However, while this belatedly established *corpus* provides a more or less accurate portrait of Arabic literature in that period, many of the texts it contains, and, in particular, the prose texts, do not withstand critical analysis.

We must remember, first of all, that the current scholarly opinion is that the specimens of ‘divinatory prose’ (*sajʿ al-kubhān*), attributed to pre-Islamic magicians, are fakes.¹⁰ These deliberately abstruse and ambiguous texts are written in a ‘modulated’ rhythmic and rhyming prose, and are clumsy ‘counterfeits’ of the cultic discourses, whose existence is historically documented but which are forever lost. There is nothing surprising about that. For one thing, the Muslim authors did not show great zeal in codifying this category of discourse. Then, it would appear that, as early as the sixth century, the magicians relinquished all power to the tribal chieftains (*sayyid*), who left the

9. R. Blachère, *Histoire*, *op. cit.*, I, pp.51–58; see also T. Andrae, *Les origines de l’Islam et le Christianisme*, trans. J. Roche, Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1955.

10. R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, pp.189–195, and A. al-Maqdisī, *Taʿannur al-ʿasālib al-nathriyya fi-l-ʿadab al-ʿarabī*, Beirut, Dār al-ʿIlm li-l-Malāyīn, 1960, pp.13–16. Examples of this oratorical prose may be found in al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. ʿA. M. Hārūn, Cairo, 1960, I, p.290.

clergy with nothing except the honorific title of ‘guardians of the sanctuary’.¹¹ A few decades before the appearance of Islam, political discourse thus took the place of cultic discourse, and it was the *sayyid* who, in addition to his political and martial duties, was called upon to assume the prestigious role of tribune (*khaṭīb*).

Fervent defenders of Arabic eloquence, the Muslim historians of the third-fourth/ninth-tenth centuries describe some of these *sayyid*-tribunes in glowing terms,¹² but they often neglect to provide us with examples of their work. The paradoxical result is that they have convinced us of the importance and quality of this oratory prose while leaving us in almost total ignorance as to its aesthetic qualities. The sparse documentation that has come down to us¹³ only allows two observations:

1. These ‘discourses’ are usually no more than brief improvisations, appropriate responses to ‘exceptional situations’, and their value lies in their suitability for, or against, the circumstances that inspired them.
2. Forcefulness and concision are the dominant traits of this prose, which stressed ‘lapidary formulas and the balance of phrases, with cadences rich in vocal tones’.¹⁴

Alongside this political prose, a prose of religious inspiration seems to have developed shortly before the appearance of Islam. The monotheistic churches, and particularly the Christian ones, appear to have had their acknowledged orators, some of whom, such as Quss b. Sā‘ida,¹⁵ achieved fame. Few in number and of varying quality, the texts attributed to them underline the importance of this literary genre, which received a great impetus through the message of Muḥammad, as can be seen in the admirable specimens of oratory prose attributed to the Prophet or his Companions, and in particular the famous Sermon of Farewell (*khuṭbat al-wadā‘*).¹⁶

Although the sermon assumes new dimensions through a change of subject and tone, the oratory style retains the same characteristics. The sim-

11. J. Chelhod, *Introduction...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 61–64.

12. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 365.

13. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 317, and II, p. 135; al-Qālī, *al-Amālī*, Cairo, 1953, I, pp. 167–229, and II, p. 168.

14. R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 728 and A. al-Maqdisī, *Tatawwur...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–23.

15. R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, p. 727; Quss b. Sā‘ida of the Iyād seems to have been an itinerant Christian orator who lived until the end of the sixth century AD; al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 308f; Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi, *al-‘Iqd al-farīd*, ed. A. Amin *et al.*, Cairo, Lajnat al-Ta‘līf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1944–1954, IV, p. 128; cf. also *EI*¹, II, p. 1228.

16. Sermon delivered by the Prophet in the year 10/631. See the text of this speech in al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 31–33, and Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi, *al-‘Iqd al-farīd...*, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 57. Other examples of oratorical prose attributed to the Prophet and his Companions may be found in al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 45, 50–56, and in Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi, *al-‘Iqd al-farīd...*, *op. cit.*, IV, pp. 58–81.

plicity of expression, use of concrete metaphors and skillful arrangement of sonorities and rhythms give these texts a remarkable persuasive power.

Pithy and incisive, some of the sayings of the *sayyid*, the *khaṭīb*, the Prophet and his Companions were also integrated into the popular fund of adages, maxims and proverbs known under the generic term *amthāl*.

The vehicle of a people's wisdom, this proverbial literature was effectively preserved by collective memory before being codified by the philologists of the second-fourth/eighth-tenth centuries, and we can confidently say that the most reliable examples of ancient Arabic prose are to be found among these texts. Whichever collection¹⁷ we turn to, we are struck by the amount of space allotted to pre-Islamic proverbs, which, despite later additions, remain predominant. The importance of pasturage, the sacred character of tribal solidarity and the praise of prudence, patience, frugality, courage and generosity, constitute the essential themes of these proverbs, whose expressive language clearly bears the mark of the desert.

From the point of view of form, the texts in the *amthāl* collections are quite diverse. In addition to the proverbs as such, there are maxims, adages, a few fables and a large number of proverbial expressions, in particular comparisons using the relative *af'alu min* followed by the name of a famous man or a wild animal: *akram min Khātim* (more generous than Khātim)¹⁸ next to *akbath min dhi'bin* (more cunning than a fox (wolf)).¹⁹

Finally, it should be remembered that very few of these *amthāl* are attributed to specific speakers, historical or legendary personalities such as Luqmān²⁰ or Aktham b. Ṣayfī.²¹ The majority of these sayings are, on the contrary, anonymous. This is, of course, normal, since proverbial expression is by definition the consensual expression of a people's wisdom.

Denying the obvious, the exegetes of the *amthāl* strove to determine the circumstances in which these proverbs were uttered. They thus gathered a

17. The oldest collections of the *amthāl* are those of al-Mufaḍḍal al-Dabbī (d. 170/786) in the recension of al-Ṭūsī (d. 263/876); al-Mu'arrij (d. 204/819), transmitted by his disciple Abū 'Alī al-Yazīdī (d. 263/876); Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 224/838); Abū 'Ikrima al-Dabbī (d. 245/860); al-Mufaḍḍal b. Salama (d. 250/864); Abū Bakr b. al-Anbārī (d. 328/940); Ḥamza al-Isfahānī (d. after 350/961) and Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī (d. 395/1005). Cf. the analysis of these collections in the article 'Mathal' by R. Sellheim in *EI*².

18. This refers to Ḥātim al-Ṭa'ī, the *sayyid* of the Ṭayy, who supposedly lived until the dawn of the sixth century; see R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 267.

19. *EI*², IV, p. 809; see examples of these proverbial expressions in al-Qālī, *al-Amālī*, *op. cit.*, II, p. 11.

20. On this hero of southern Arabian legends and wise man quoted by the Qur'ān, see R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 748–749 and *EI*², art. 'Luqmān'.

21. Aktham b. Ṣayfī, a wise man whose speech was condensed into sayings and succinct expressions, was a native of the Tamīm and reportedly lived until the year 9/630. Cf. R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, p. 726 and *EI*², art. 'Aktham b. Ṣayfī'.

mass of historical and pseudo-historical accounts supposedly narrating the events that inspired them.

This narrative literature, which often reveals the preoccupations of the thinkers of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, must be clearly distinguished from the *amthāl* proper. While the latter are valuable examples of archaic Arabic prose, the texts that accompany them probably belong to the narrative literature of a later period.

If the anthologists of the third-fourth/ninth-tenth centuries are to be believed, Arabic narrative literature from the period before 40/660 constituted a rich and varied corpus. Authors as serious as al-Jāhīz,²² Ibn Qutayba²³ and al-Qālī²⁴ did not hesitate to attribute to this period many enjoyable stories about fools and cowards, particularly crafty or gifted individuals, and marvellous accounts of fabulous animals or mythical creatures.²⁵ Historians as celebrated as Ibn Hishām,²⁶ al-Ṭabarī²⁷ and al-Masʿūdī²⁸ reflect upon these ancient times in many of their historical or semi-historical accounts, such as the *chanson de geste* of al-Iskandar Dhu-l-Qarnayn, the adventures of al-Zabbā²⁹ and the glorified tales of battles between Arab tribes, known as the *Ayyām al-ʿArab*, 'the Days of the Arabs.'³⁰

Although some elements of these legends, stories and accounts probably date from that period, it has nevertheless been established that these narrative texts were not written down until the second/eighth century. It was then that

22. Al-Jāhīz is the nickname of one of the most famous Arab writers and thinkers, named Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr b. Baḥr. Born in Basra around 160/776, he died there in 255/868. See the biography and bibliography in the article 'al-Djahīz' by C. Pellat in *EI*².
23. Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. Muslim al-Dīnawarī, theologian and man-of-letters, born in Kufa in 213/828 and died in Baghdad in 276/886. See the article 'Ibn Qūṭayba' by G. Lecomte, in *EI*².
24. Abū ʿAlī Ismāʿīl b. al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī, Arab philologist born in 288/901, died in 356/967; see the article 'al-Ḳālī' by R. Sellheim in *EI*².
25. Such as *al-ʿAnqāʿ* (the long-necked one), a type of unicorn (cf. the art. al-ʿAnḳāʿ in *EI*²), and the evil spirits named *al-ghūl* and *al-Saʿlāt* (cf. the art. 'al-Ghūl' in *EI*²).
26. Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Malik b. Hishām, known mainly for his biography of the Prophet, died in 218/833; see the biography and bibliographical references in *EI*².
27. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, traditionalist and historian known for his exegesis of the Qurʾān and his historical annals, *Taʾrīkh al-risul wa-l-mulūk*. Born in 224/838, died in 310/923.
28. Abu-l-Ḥasan ʿAli b. al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī, author of an important historical work entitled *Murīj al-dhabab*; born in 280/893, died in 345/956. Cf. the article 'al-Masʿūdī' in *EI*².
29. On Iskandar Dhu-l-Qarnayn, probably Alexander the Great, see the article by W. Montgomery Watt in *EI*²; on al-Zabbāʿ (=Zenobia?) see R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 785; on the various pre-Islamic legends see M. Agina, *Asāfir al-ʿArab ʿan al-Jābilyya*, unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of Tunis, 1991.
30. On the literature devoted to these 'Days', see the art. 'Ayyām al-ʿArab' in *EI*², and M. al-Yaʿlawī, *ʿAdab ayyām al-ʿArab*, *Hawliyyāt al-Jāmiʿa al-Tūnisīyya*, 20, 1981, pp. 57–135.

they lost the fluidity and instability which are characteristics of oral transmission and were set in fixed forms.

Since these works date from a later period, they cannot be used to help us determine the formal characteristics of the ancient narrative prose.³¹ Moreover, the story-teller, however talented he might have been, would not have been considered an 'artist of the Word' by the ancient Arabs – this status was reserved for the *khaṭīb* and, especially, the poet.

The poet enjoyed immense public prestige because of his essential social rôle and his almost magical gift. First acquired at a time when poetry was in the service of cultic practices, this esteem continued and was consolidated when the poet, renouncing his religious role, became the interpreter of his ethnic group, dedicating his verses to the defence of his tribe, immortalizing its exploits, glorifying its chiefs and mourning its dead.

Transmitted orally for three centuries or more, the poetic works of that era came down to us in fragmentary form, profoundly altered and inextricably mixed with a significant amount of apocryphs.

The state of the *corpus* – first mentioned by some critics in the second/eighth century, and in particular Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī in his admirable work entitled *Ṭabaqāt al-shuʿarā*³² – was used by some historians of Arabic literature at the beginning of the twentieth century as a pretext to express a radical scepticism about pre-Islamic poetry, which they challenged in its entirety. Following the example of D. S. Margoliouth, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn maintained that almost all the texts attributed to the pre-Islamic poets were forgeries.³³

This extreme position, which aroused the indignation of Arab intellectuals profoundly attached to their heritage, has since been declared unfounded because 'based on false premises.'³⁴

By demonstrating the inconsistency of the arguments used by the proponents of systematic doubt and by providing proofs that the majority of the pre-Islamic *corpus* available to us is, if not authentic, then at least 'representative' of the works of the era, recent studies are based on a more accurate and detailed textual analysis, free from methodological assumptions and hence, of great importance for the history of Arab literature.³⁵

31. See W. Marçais, 'Les origines de la prose littéraire arabe', *Articles et Conférences*, Paris, 1961, pp. 49–57.

32. See Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarā*, ed. M. M. Shākīr, (Dhakhāʿir al-ʿArab, 7), Cairo, Dār al-Maʿārif li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1952, pp. 21–24; on Muḥammad b. Sallām al-Jumāḥī (139–231/756–845) see the article 'Ibn Sallām al-Djumāḥī' in *EI*².

33. D. S. Margoliouth, 'The Origins of Arabic Poetry', *JRAS*, 1925, pp. 417–449 and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Fī-l-shiʿr al-Jāhili*, Cairo 1926, republished in a toned-down version under the title *Fī-l-adab al-Jāhili*, Cairo, Maṭbaʿat al-ʿIṭimād.

34. H. R. Gibb, art. iArabiyya' in *EI*².

35. See the exhaustive accounts of these viewpoints in R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 166–186, and N. al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 352–478.

The resolution of this issue was particularly crucial, because pre-Islamic poetry, with its very elaborate poetic form, served as the model for many generations of Arab poets.

Apart from the *arāḥīz*, short improvisations in the *rajaḥ*-metre with no pretensions to being considered works of art, ancient Arabic poetry used two very elaborate structures: one reserved strictly for the funeral elegy, the *marthiya*, and the other, the *qaṣīda* (the ode), serving as the framework for all thematic developments.

Heir to the rhythmical chanting during the lamentation for the dead – one of the funeral rites of paganism – the *marthiya* retains the bipartite composition and specific tonality of its origins.

An analysis of the examples passed on by the anthologists as models of the genre shows that the themes developed in these elegies are organized around two focuses. The first brings together the themes describing the pain which the poet and his companions feel and the event's great impact; the second is dedicated to the evocation of the deceased's eminent social rôle. The *marthiya* could thus be described as lamentation-glorification.

Noticing that the poets did not hesitate to use stereotyped formulas in these elegies, some critics decided that the sentiments expressed were pure convention, which seems a somewhat hasty conclusion. In general, the poet was bewailing the death of someone close, whose loss was deeply felt by the group. While not always original, the formulation of this distress is often moving.

It is also worth noting that it is quite common to find – interspersed in the *marthiya*'s lyrical developments – meditations on the inevitability of death and the patience necessary in the face of the unfathomable reasoning of the al-mighty *dabr* (Time-Destiny). Set in a proverbial mould, these reflections give ideas dealing with personal events a universal scope.³⁶

Except in unusual circumstances when he was called upon to mourn a death, the Arab poet used a tripartite poetic structure called the *qaṣīda* to communicate his thoughts and transmit his emotions.

In the first part of the ode, he recalls his youth, the loves of yesteryear and some of the special moments from his past. In these passages, in which he evokes the 'passing of time', his tone is naturally lyrical.

The second part is, by contrast, descriptive – of the space surrounding and challenging him, the desert, and of the animal best adapted to this environment, the camel, his mount and ally in his struggle with the forces of nature.

The third part of the *qaṣīda*, which is, in fact, the core (*gharaḥ*), is dedicated to immediate and concrete matters relating to the daily life of the poet

36. On the problems posed by the *marthiya* and the characteristics of this thematic structure, see M. Abdesselem, *Le thème...*, *op. cit.*, passim.

and his group; celebration of the martial exploits of his tribe and its allies; refutations of the accusations of hostile tribes; or expressions of his gratitude to a generous and hospitable lord.

It is also the thematic content of this last part which determines the 'genre' of the entire poem – *madḥ* (panegyric), *hijā'* (epigram), *fakbr* (boasting poem), or *ḥamāsa* (epic poem). Whatever the genre, though, the *qaṣīda* had to be tripartite and, despite the thematic diversity of its constituent sequences, to achieve a perfect unity of tone.

By what secret alchemy did the ancient Arab poets, setting off with such heterogeneous elements, produce such homogeneous wholes? That is the question which continues to fascinate critics to this very day – although for long they accepted without debate the interpretation offered in the third/ninth century by Ibn Qutayba, who maintained that the introductions to the *qaṣīdas* were merely exercises in verbal virtuosity designed to impress the patron to whom the poetic work was dedicated, and that the description of the perils encountered during the imaginary crossing of the desert had no other purpose than to justify the presented request and the desired recompense.³⁷

This explanation, based solely on the relationship between the poet and the patron as the primary, and indeed exclusive, audience for ancient Arab poetry, seems too restrictive to be valid. In fact, it applies to only one genre, and that is a relatively late one, the court panegyric.

Ibn Qutayba's erudite analysis – while fairly suitable as a 'recipe' for beginner poets – is of no help to those seeking to penetrate the secrets of Arabic poetic art and it is surprising that such absurd statements satisfied numerous generations of critics.

Putting an end to this surprising state of affairs, the modern studies of this question formulated new theories based on a symbolic interpretation of the various sequences of the *qaṣīda*. It is, of course, unfortunate that some authors could not avoid excessive theorizing and textual interpretation, but there is no question that challenging the traditional point of view had a salutary effect. It brought to light the extent to which ancient Arabic poetry was rooted in its spatial and temporal realities, and it focused attention on the web of correspondences that gives each *qaṣīda* a perfect homogeneity of style and tone.³⁸

An artistic triumph such as this would not have been possible had the poets not had a fully developed linguistic instrument and a highly elaborate poetic art.

37. Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shi'r wa-l-shu'arā'*, Beirut, 1964, I, pp. 20f.

38. See, for example, Y. Khulayyif, 'Muqaddima li-dirāsāt al-qaṣīda al-Jāhiliyya', *al-Majalla*, 98, 1965, pp. 100, 104; A. al-Zubaydi, *Muqaddima li-dirāsāt al-shi'r al-Jāhili*, Ben Ghazi, Manshūrāt Jāmi'at Qaryunis, 1978; A. Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974; A. al-Battal, *al-Sūra al-fanniyya fi-l-shi'r al-ʿArabī*, Beirut, 1980.

It appears to be well established that, in the late pre-Islamic period, the Arabs used both their own dialects and a common language that enabled them to communicate and be creative.³⁹

With its rich and concrete vocabulary, its syntactic system which allowed multiple and varied derivations, and its phonemes of contrasting sonorities, this poetic *koiné* was the best tool poets could have had to produce their creations while at the same time respecting a rigid method of versification characterized by uniformity of rhyme and metre – a metre whose hallmark was the alternation of long and short syllables – and, as a result of the prosodic accent, strong and neutral beats.

Three successive generations applied this poetic art and imposed it as a literary model on their successors.

The first generation (AD 500–550) apparently deserves the credit for perfecting the thematic structure of the *qaṣīda*. The most famous of these pioneers are al-Muhalhil ‘Adī b. Rabī‘a of the Taghlib, al-Muraqqish ‘Awf b. Sa‘d of Ḍubay‘a and Imru’ al-Qays b. Ḥujr of the Kinda.

The poets of the second generation lived during the second half of the sixth century and died before the appearance of Islam. It is among this group that we find the most celebrated masters of pre-Islamic poetry, such as Ṭarafa b. al-‘Abd of the Ḍubay‘a, Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā of the Muzayna, al-Nābigha Ziyād b. Mu‘āwiya of the Dhubyān, ‘Amr b. Kulthūm of the Taghlib, al-Ḥārith b. Ḥilliza of the Bakr, ‘Antara b. Shaddād of the ‘Abs, al-A‘shā Maymūn of the Qays and al-Shanfarā of the Azd.

The third generation (turn of the sixth century AD) is the generation of the *mukhaḍramūn*, those who knew both paganism and Islam. The most famous are Ka‘b b. Zuhayr of the Muzayna, Labīd b. Rabī‘a of the Kilāb, Ḥassān b. Thābit of the Aws, Abū Dhu‘ayb Khuwaylid b. Khālid of the Hudhayl, al-Ḥuṭay‘a Jarwal b. Aws of the ‘Abs, Tamīm b. Ubayy b. Muqbil of the ‘Ajlān and the elegiac female poet al-Khansā Tumāḍir bint. ‘Amr of the Sulaym.⁴⁰

The works of all these poets are admirable examples of classical poetry, but they are still varied, and indeed singular, compositions which express the concerns and temperaments of their authors – individuals whose social status, way of life and character diverge to the point of being antipodes. Whereas ‘Amr b. Kulthūm and Imru’ al-Qays were lords, al-Shanfarā was a beggar.⁴¹ While Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā and Tamīm b. Muqbil remained tribal poets their entire lives, al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī and Ḥassān b. Thābit were court poets,

39. R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, 1, pp. 79–82 and pp. 365–368.

40. Biographies and bibliographies of these various poets may be found in R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 248–329.

41. On the subject of poets such as al-Shanfarā, who were forced to live on the fringe of tribal life, see Y. Khulayyif, *al-Shu‘arā’ al-sa‘ālik fi-l-‘aṣr al-Jāhili*, Cairo, 1959.

and al-A‘shā Maymūn was a ‘wandering poet’, forever seeking a generous patron. Where the tone of ‘Amr b. Kulthūm’s ode is angry, al-Ḥārith b. Ḥilliza adopts a measured tone in response. While ‘Antara b. Shaddād’s *Mu‘allaqa*⁴² on the conflict between Dāḥis and al-Ghabrā⁴³ resonates with martial accents, Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā’s ode on the same event is distinguished by its sage appeals for harmony and peace.

The same diversity is evident when we examine the introductions to these poems. For example, the amorous prologue to Ka‘b b. Zuhayr’s *qaṣīda*, in which he begs the Prophet’s forgiveness, expresses great anguish, while the prologue to the *Mu‘allaqa* of his father is marked by its perfect serenity.

We can thus say with confidence that, despite the demands of a rigid poetic tradition animated by a common spirit of glorification, the *mufaḥkhara*, the poets of the first classical period succeeded in imprinting the original accents of their individual sensibilities on their poetic discourse, and therein lies the value of these works, admired for many centuries, and held up as an aesthetic model.

Arabic literature from 40-132/660-750

Unanimously respected poetic forms, the *marthīyya* and the *qaṣīda* acquired considerable prestige and became recognized as classic structures of Arabic poetry.

However, while the *marthīyya*, which was perfectly adapted to its purpose, was never really challenged or subjected to any notable change, the *qaṣīda*, which was quickly deemed too complex and too clearly marked with the imprint of bedouinism, soon became more and more restricted in scope, gave way to new forms of poetic expression and was no longer used except for official compositions such as court panegyrics, or certain genres of typically ancient inspiration such as the *mufaḥkharāt* (poems of glorification).

Nevertheless, the majority of famous poems from the first/seventh century used the *qaṣīda* form. This is mainly due to the policy of the Umayyad caliphs and their powerful governors, who made it their responsibility to maintain the Arab cultural tradition, of which they had proclaimed themselves the guardians. On the one hand, they required their bards to depict them as perfect desert lords; on the other, they encouraged the poets in their service –

42. This is the laudatory term applied to ten or so pre-Islamic odes; see M. Abdeselem, ‘Fi-l-qaṣā’id al-sab‘, *Ḥawliyyāt al-Jāmi‘a al-Tūnisīyya*, 2, 1965, pp. 5–15.

43. A sixth-century conflict between the ‘Abs and the Dhubyān, who belonged to the same tribal group of Ghaṭafān; Dāḥis and al-Ghabrā were the cause of this war, which seems to have lasted nearly forty years.

in particular the celebrated trio of al-Akḥṭal,⁴⁴ al-Farazdaq⁴⁵ and Jarīr⁴⁶ – to hold poetic jousts amongst themselves, lauding the merits of their tribes and denouncing the infamies of their adversaries.

To read the *naqā'id*, poems in which boasting goes hand in hand with satire, is to be whisked back to pre-Islamic times. Fortunately, however, these works perpetuating the spirit of bedouinism constitute only a portion of the poetic corpus of the first/seventh century.

In order to respond to the concerns of a society undergoing a profound change – a society marked by the teachings of Islam, by the cultural symbiosis produced by its rapid expansion and by the political and religious controversies dividing the Muslim community at the dawn of its history – poetic discourse had to find a new subject and invent new forms.

Rejecting what they saw as the yoke of the *qaṣīda*, the poets most sensitive to the realities of their era took poetic expression in three new directions: exploration of the self, political commitment, and deeper meditation.

This produced a total renewal of the themes of Arabic poetry and, most importantly, it produced three new genres, the love poem (*ghazal*), the political poem (*shi'r siyāsī*) and the ascetic poem (*ḡhūdīyya*).

A minor theme of Arabic poetry, love was dealt with, before 40/660, only within the confines of the poetic developments that served as a prologue to the *qaṣīda*. Halting his mount at the place where he met his beloved, the poet recalls their passionate adventure, celebrating the beauty of the one who had seduced him and recounting the emotion that seized him at the hour of their parting, because, for these nomads, amorous interludes were as fleeting as the stops that punctuated their wandering life. Short-lived passions could inspire only melancholic laments. The only light touches in sombre pictures, the scintillating images of female beauty were barely able to dispel the gloom in these memories of lost loves.

Following the example of their illustrious predecessors, the majority of first/seventh-century poets continued to evoke their amorous experiences in the introductory portion of the *qaṣīda* and used all their skill to reinvigorate the themes inherited from a distant past.

Feeling that this restrictive framework did not allow them to express their amorous emotions fully, some poets decided to free themselves from the

44. Al-Akḥṭal is the nickname of a Christian poet named Abū Mālik Ghayth b. Ghawth, of the Taghlib, born around 20/640, died around 91/709. Cf. R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 466–473.

45. Nickname of Ḥammām b. Ghālib of the Mujāshīf, born around 20/640, died in 110/728; see the biography and bibliography in R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 495–505.

46. Abū Ḥazra Jarīr b. 'Aṭīyya of the Kulayb, born in 33/653, died in 114/732; R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 484–495.

tradition that restricted their inspiration and to give love a specific thematic structure, the love poem.

This new poetic genre was so favourably received by the public that some of the best poets devoted most of their efforts to it. Although all, or almost all were originally from the Ḥijāz, the creators of this new structure did not develop a single, unified discourse. They favoured two divergent concepts of love.

The first was adopted by bedouin poets such as Jamīl,⁴⁷ Majnūn Layla⁴⁸ and Kuthayyir,⁴⁹ who were collectively known as the ‘Udhrites in reference to the ‘Udhra tribe (although, in fact, not all of them belonged to it). This conception took a closer look at the traditional concept of romantic relations – relations which were thwarted by society and condemned to be unhappy. The new aspect which distinguished this group of poets from their predecessors was their insistence on the absolute, exclusive and eternal character of their passion. Intrinsically contrary to the prevailing norms, this sentiment was forbidden, created an impossible situation, subjected the lover to the most arduous trials and led him to madness and death.

This tragic concept of love was not shared by the urban poets such as ‘Umar b. Abī Rabī‘a,⁵⁰ al-Aḥwaṣ⁵¹ and al-‘Arjī,⁵² whom the historians of Arabic literature unjustly labelled with the pejorative term *ibāḥiyyūn* (permissives).⁵³ In fact, seizing the transitory rather than the enduring aspect of love, they depict the pleasant banter, the ephemeral joys and the superficial ‘bruises’. This is badinage love in which the beloved ceases to be simply the object of desire on a pedestal. She is, on the contrary, an active and coquettish

47. Jamīl b. Ma‘mar of the ‘Udhra, born around 40/660, died around 82/705; on this poet and his love for Buthayna, see R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 653–657.

48. Majnūn Layla of the ‘Āmir b. Ṣa‘ṣa‘a, from his real name Qays b. Mulawwaḥ; on this poet transformed into a love hero, see R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 657–660.

49. Abū Ṣakhr Kuthayyir b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān of the Khuzā‘a, born in the middle of the first/seventh century, died in 105/723. The *rāwī* of Jamīl, he composed love poems dedicated to his beloved ‘Azza; a supporter of the Kaysānite Imam Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya, he proclaimed his faith in his verses, but that did not prevent him from extolling the merits of the Umayyad caliphs. Cf. R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 609–616.

50. ‘Umar b. Abī Rabī‘a of the Makhzūm, born in 24/644, died in 103/721; see R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 629–642.

51. Al-Aḥwaṣ is the nickname of a poet named ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad of the Hubay‘a, born in 35/655, died in 110/728; on this Medinan aristocrat, see R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 626–629.

52. Al-‘Arjī is the nickname of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar, grandson of the Caliph ‘Uthmān, born around 75/694, died before 120/738; see R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 642–646.

53. This expression – used by Ṭ. Ḥusayn in a series of articles published in the journal *al-Siyāsa*, September, 1924, and then brought together with other studies in a collection entitled *Ḥadīth al-arbi‘ā* (Cairo, 1962, I) – has since become a recognized term in Arab literary criticism.

partner who knows how to fan the flame of a wavering affection with only an insistent regard or equivocal smile, a vague promise or ambiguous message, but who can also, with no drama or tears, put an end to those sweet but perilous exchanges with feigned anger or leave a meeting leading nowhere.

Delightful portraits of the erotic games of a rich, cultured and carefree social group, these poems, evoking 'the loves of a day', were greatly appreciated by the Ḥijāzian aristocracy, held under the Umayyads in gilded inactivity by a political power which mistrusted it. Put into music by the most famous contemporary musicians in Mecca and Medina and first sung before the idle lords of those two cities, they quickly gained a wide audience not only in al-Ḥijāz but in the various urban centres of the Arab-Islamic world.

And it was thus that the love poem earned its spurs and became a wholly distinct poetic genre.⁵⁴

Unlike the love poem, the political poem was distinguished from the traditional poem, not by the specificity of its theme or the uniformity of its structure, but by the purpose of its discourse, which was one of political commitment. Inspired by an unshakable faith in the justness of their cause, the poets used their works to describe their partners' political positions, eulogize their chiefs and mourn their martyrs.⁵⁵

This new genre was developed primarily among the opponents of the Umayyads, who were condemned for having usurped power, for having transformed the caliphate into an hereditary royalty and for acting, along with their governors, as pitiless tyrants. There were two groups of poets, the Shī'ites, supporters of 'Alī and his descendants, and the Khārījites, former allies who broke away from the first group after the arbitration 'affair' during the battle of Ṣiffin.⁵⁶

The political philosophy of the Shī'ites centres in the concept of the Imāmate.⁵⁷ The 'Chosen One of God', the *imām* is the infallible interpreter of the law and the holder of all power. Welcomed in Iraq but fiercely opposed in the other Muslim provinces, Shī'ism in the early centuries was marked by aborted revolts followed by bloody reprisals.

Even more ready than the Shī'ites to take up arms, the Khārījites were also subjected to terrible repression, which they bore with courage, convinced that their fight was a sacred duty to defend Islam.

54. On this genre, see the article 'Ghazal' by R. Blachère in *EI*², and his *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 661–717, which includes an exhaustive bibliography on the question.

55. On this type of poetry see N. al-Qāḍī, *al-Firaq al-Islāmiyya fi-l-shi'ar al-Umawi*, 1970.

56. Famous armed confrontation in 36/656 between 'Alī and Mu'āwiya who, seeing that he was losing, raised the Qur'ān and declared that he would put his fate into the hands of two wise men, one from each camp. This stratagem merely had the effect of splitting the supporters of 'Alī.

57. On this concept central to Shī'ite thinking see the article 'Imāma' in *EI*².

While the Khārijites demonstrated a remarkably democratic attitude to the caliphate, proclaiming that any pious and virtuous Muslim, regardless of tribal or ethnic origin, could accede to the supreme magistrature, they displayed an excessive and even intolerant rigour on the theological and moral level. They felt that practice was part of religion in the same way as faith; they thus regarded sinners as unbelievers and imposed the same sanctions upon them. Convinced that they belonged to the only sect that had remained faithful to the Qur'anic message, they declared that all those who held a different point of view were not part of the Muslim community and declared a holy war against them.⁵⁸ To die in combat against such heretics was an enviable privilege which God reserved for the most faithful of His servants. This was the source of the fervour and unshakable optimism that inspired their poetical works, whatever the subject.

In this, these works differed radically from the Shī'ite works, in which the tragic tone predominated. Enumerating the sufferings of their partisans and stressing the continued martyrdom of their imams, the Shī'ite poets tried to win the indignant sympathy of their readers.⁵⁹

The works of the political poets differed not just in theme and tone, but also in structure. It must be remembered, first of all, that the court poets felt obliged to back up the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphs and to celebrate their splendid accomplishments by using the traditional form of the *qaṣīda*. The Shī'ite and Khārijite poets adopted less rigid structures, which were more suited to their purpose. In general, the Khārijites chose the short poem centred on a specific subject, while the Shī'ites, such as al-Kumayt b. Zayd al-Asadi,⁶⁰ author of the *Hāshimīyyāt*, showed a clear preference for poems developed at length, combining polemic, epic and elegiac sequences in long pleas for their cause.

The poets' political commitment infused their compositions with a remarkable sincerity, a hallmark of accomplished works.

Faced with the serious socio-political events shaking the Muslim world, the political poets quickly took a passionate stance; others, however, adopted a more basic and balanced attitude. Meditating on the Qur'ān, they came to the conclusion that 'only living a life of piety, and abstinence from all transient things by the extinction of desire'⁶¹ can ensure for mortals peace on this earth and salvation. The exhortation to such behaviour constituted the central theme of a new poetic structure called *zuhdiyya*.

58. On the doctrine and history of this politico-religious party see the article 'Khārijites' in *EI*².

59. See M. Abdesslem, *Le thème...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 245–261.

60. On this poet and his *Hāshimīyyāt* cf. R. Blachère, *Histoire...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 518–521.

61. L. Massignon, art. 'Zuhd' in *EI*¹.

It is customary to situate the birth of this poetic genre in the second/eighth century, and there is no doubt that it was thanks to the poets of this era that the *ḡubdiyya* earned its spurs; yet, a careful examination of the Arabic poetic heritage reveals that this genre was developed several decades earlier. Even if we dismiss the *ḡubdiyyāt* attributed to the Caliph ‘Alī as forgeries, we must accept the authenticity of those attributed to poets such as ‘Imrān b. Ḥiṭṭān (Khārījite chief, died in 86/770), A‘shā Hamdān (Shī‘ite, pro-Yemenite, executed in 82/701 for his part in the revolt of Ibn al-Ash‘ath) and especially Sābiq al-Barbarī (Sunni Qādī of al-Raqqā under ‘Umar II, 99–101/717–720). A point worth noting is that despite their divergent political allegiances, all these individuals were *qurrā’*, ‘readers of the Qur’ān’. It is thus obvious that the Qur’ān recited, meditated on and practised was the source of asceticism (*ḡubd*).⁶² Although foreign influences may well have affected this line of thought during a later period, it is clear from an analysis of the oldest specimens of *ḡubdiyyāt* that the Qur’ānic message was the inspiration for the earliest ascetic poets. It was from this sacred text that they drew the essential themes of their works – the inevitability of death, the ephemeral nature of worldly things, the need to exercise the soul in overcoming desires and the exhortation to live a God-fearing, abstemious life.

The remarkable development of Arabic poetry at the end of the first/seventh century and the beginning of the second/eighth century was accompanied by a major renewal of literary prose which took the form of a diversification of the art of rhetoric, a new definition of the epistle and the acclimatization of a borrowed genre, the fable.

The political conflicts, the theological controversies, the need to address a crowd of believers every week at the Friday sermons and the growing importance of the rôle played by the preachers (*quṣṣāṣ*), were all factors in the thematic and formal development of oratory discourse. Noted personalities – such as the Caliphs Mu‘āwiya b. Abī Sufyān, ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān and ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz,⁶³ and the governors Ziyād b. Abīhī, Rawḥ b. Zinbā‘ and al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf⁶⁴ – often made use of their eloquence to counter the propaganda of opponents whose leaders were often skilful orators. Such was

62. L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, 2nd ed., Paris, Vrin, (Études Musulmanes, 2), 1954, p. 104.

63. The first Umayyad caliph, Mu‘āwiya, reigned from 41–60/661–679; ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān 65–86/684–705; and ‘Umar II (‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz) from 99/717 to 101/719. See examples of their oratorical works in al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 59, 120 and 131, and Ibn ‘Abd-Rabbihi, IV, pp. 81, 83, 87, 88, 90, 92 and 95.

64. Ziyād b. Abīhī was governor of Iraq under Mu‘āwiya, Rawḥ b. Zinbā‘ governor of Palestine during the reign of Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiya, and al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf governor of Iraq under ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān; see some fragments of their oratorical prose in al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 61, 138, 145 and 307.

the case with ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr,⁶⁵ the Shī‘ite Imām Zayd b. ‘Alī,⁶⁶ and the Khārijite Amīr Qutārī b. al-Fujā’a,⁶⁷ to name only the best known.

The moving sermons of a number of preachers respected for their knowledge and their piety, such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Muṭarrif b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥarashī and Muslim b. Jundub al-Hudhalī,⁶⁸ gained the oratory genre the favour of a wide public.

Yet another group of orators, who had no other ambition than to dazzle with their verbal giftedness – including Ayyūb b. al-Qirriyya, Khalīd b. Salama and Khālīd b. Ṣafwān – rivalled the others in the art of discourse.⁶⁹

These convergent factors favoured the emergence of a more conscious and elaborate form of eloquence. Sharing the creative literary space with poetry, it attempted to curb its outpourings, diversify its themes and refine its expression. Like its illustrious rival, it would remain an oral art – that is, an art which sought an immediate effect, and thus favoured concrete images and contrasting rhythms.

It was only in practising a new genre, the epistle, that Arabic prose embarked on paths other than ‘orality’.

The title of ‘founder of the Arabic epistolary genre’ is usually given to ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Yaḥyā b. Sa’d, better known as ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib⁷⁰ or ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kabīr. This attribution is not, however, fully accurate. It has been established that from the founding of the Muslim state, and probably for some decades before then, the Arabs corresponded not only among themselves but also with authorities in neighbouring countries. If the anthologists of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries are to be believed, two or three generations of scribes appear to have applied their talents to this epistolary art and composed very accurate, concise and original missives. What ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd did was to transform what had been considered an administrative exercise – sensitive perhaps, but limited by its dimensions and pretensions – into a literary genre or, to be more accurate, into

65. Born in Medina in 2/624, ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām refused to recognize the Caliph Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiya. Recognized as caliph by numerous provinces after the death of Yazīd, he was finally vanquished by the troops of ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān and died in battle at Mecca in 72/692; cf. the article ‘‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr’ in *EI*².

66. Zayd b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, renowned Shī‘ite imam, chief of the Zaydite sect, put to death following his rebellion in 122/740. See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. Abu-l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo, Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1960, VII, pp. 180–191.

67. Khārijite chief, died in 79/698; see samples of his oratorical prose in al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, II, p. 126, and Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi, *al-‘Iqd al-farīd*, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 141.

68. On these *quṣṣās* cf. al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 363–69, and the article ‘Kāss’ in *EI*².

69. On these orators and their oratorical art see al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān...*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 328, 336, 346, 358 and 392; al-Iṣfahānī, 1927–1950, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 16 vols., Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, VIII, pp. 80f.

70. See the article ‘‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Yaḥyā b. Sa’d’ in *EI*².

a literary structure adaptable enough to serve for centuries as a model for prose works.

Two factors would appear to be decisive in the genesis of this genre: the Arabization of the government (the *dīwāns*) on the order of the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān and the rapid assimilation of the non-Arab elite by Arab society. In fact, it was because they wished to retain the major administrative positions which they had occupied before the Muslim conquest that this elite was quick to learn and master the Arabic language. It is therefore not surprising that the first great prose-writers were non-Arabs.

First, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib himself. After a few years of teaching, this *mawlā* of the ‘Amir b. Lu’ayy became a public servant in the central government. He ended his career as secretary to the last Umayyad caliph, Marwān b. Muḥammad, whose tragic fate he shared in 132/750.

Reflecting the political and social situation at the beginning of the second/eighth century, the epistles attributed to him set out his ideas on power, government and the army, and remind his correspondents of the principles which must guide their conduct and inspire their actions. Written in a generally fluid and direct style, these epistles are not completely free of the characteristics of the oratorical and poetic style, in that they use picturesque expressions and strongly accented rhythms.

Such influences are less noticeable with the second of these prose-writers, ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Muqaffa^c (102–139/720–56). Like his elder and friend, Ibn al-Muqaffa^c was a *mawlā* and worked as a secretary, first to certain Umayyad governors, then to ‘Īsā b. ‘Alī, uncle of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Manṣūr, and it was on the orders of this sovereign that he was executed at the age of 36.

Despite his premature death, he left a significant *corpus* of work. His best known work is *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, ‘a collection of Indian fables for princes [...] translated from Sanskrit to Pahlavi by Burzōē and from that language to Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa^c, who did not hesitate to insert numerous additions setting out his political and religious ideas. This book’s immense success among a readership unfamiliar with this genre of fables somewhat eclipsed the other works of Ibn al-Muqaffa^c. Two of his epistles, however, deserve special mention: *al-Adab al-kabīr*, a series of practical counsels for the sovereign and his coterie, and *al-Risāla fi-l-Ṣaḥāba*, in which he developed daring ideas on social problems similar to those of his own era.

Through the originality of their content, the diversity of their sources of inspiration and the subtleness and elegance of their style, the works of Ibn al-Muqaffa^c⁷¹ inaugurated a new literary period which was the expression of an Arab culture renewed by the various contributions of all Islamicized peoples.

71. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 524.