

ARAB CONTRIBUTION TO LITERARY CRITICISM

By

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Since we are to make the Arab contribution to literary criticism our issue, we must bear in mind that it is at times difficult to disentangle it from the chaos of the general sciences of language especially Balagha. We want to stress the fact that the really valuable material in literary criticism existed before literary criticism became corrupted into the dry science of Balagha.

By criticism here is meant all the writings which either attempt to analyse, appreciate and judge a literary text or offer a significant theory of literature. Balagha, however, is primarily a formal science which is concerned exclusively with formal distinctions and classifications of the various figures of speeches. We shall have to exclude a priori any book which has other objectives than literary criticism especially if the aims it pursues are theological. When we say Arab contribution we mean by the word Arab all the writers who wrote their books in the Arabic language irrespective of their race.

In a hurried survey of Arabic literary criticism like this we need not linger long at its primitive stage. In the second half of the sixth century A. D., when Arabic poetry was in its flowering period, a sort of elementary criticism can be observed. For sometime before Islam, there was a great number of markets over the desert where many people of different tribes used to assemble and recite poetry.

The courts of kings in Hira und Ghassan used to encourage ancient poets to recite their poems in the presence of kings. The judgments which were usually passed on poetry at these assemblies can be considered a sort of rudimentary criticism. In that period the Arabs, induced by sudden admiration, used to pass quick judgments on poets so that a poet might be considered the best of all thanks to one verse or one poem only. Every judgement passed on

poetry, its meaning, construction or music represented, at that period, a sort of criticism, but one, which was purely arbitrary, not based on argumentation or an investigation into peculiar artistic qualities of the work.

With the appearance of Muhammad the Quran was so completely different from all the existent forms of literature and poetry that is absorbed, both as a new form of literature and as the religious creed of the Prophet, all the minds in its contemplation. This brought about a natural pause in poetic activity.

In the times of Muhammad's caliphs, groups of arábians used to go to Almadina where they discussed and admired the great poets of the pre-Islamic period. Sometimes the Caliphs themselves took part in the discussions. Omar the second Caliph, considered "Al Nabigha" the best poet and when he was asked why, he said, "It is because he never inserted unnecessary words, always avoided the uncouth in poetry and never praised a man unworthy of praise."

But whatever we may say, criticism remained primitive and made little progress until the last years of the first century of the Hijra.

We can say that criticism entered, at that time, a new phase and began, as it were, a new life. By the end of the first century, the new Islamic way of life had bred a certain kind of people, and the way was paved for them to do researches in a number of different directions. Amongst these scholars there were grammarians and philologists. Work on the Arabic grammar was begun, and non-Arabs welcomed the new science and began to study it. It was not long before the new science grew and branched out, so that two main schools of thought appeared: one in Basra and the other in Kufa.

The two parties studied Arabic literature and tried to deduce and bring to light rules of grammar, different derivations of words, metres and rhymes. Most of these grammarians were not only concerned with the linguistic aspects of words and syntax but they also passed occasional judgments on certain poems. 'Aubasa el Fīl, for instance, was a relator of the poetry of Jarir and Farazdaq; Abu 'Amr ibn al 'Ala' and Yunus ibn Habib made many good observations in literary criticism. We cannot neglect mentioning the great work of Al Asma'ī and Abu 'Amr ibn-el 'Alā' in collecting most of

the pre-Islamic poetry and preserving it from loss. In so doing, they collected also all the observations and judgments that had been passed on poetry before their time. These grammarians went much deeper in the enjoyment and appreciation of poetry than their predecessors.

One of these grammarians and philologists was Ibn Sallām al Jumahī d. 231. (A. H.). He was not merely a grammarian but also a relator and critic. His book *Ṭabaqat Al Shuʿaraʾ* is considered to be the first book on literary criticism and is largely representative of the critical observations of his contemporaries. He possessed some of the qualities that every critic must have, and was aware of some of the principles on which criticism should be based. It needed in his opinion long training and experience. A critic must be an expert on his subject and well-versed in the practice of his art. In other words taste alone does not meet the requirements, but must be supplemented by experience and long study.

The second and most important point stressed by Ibn Sallām is the importance of verifying the poetical texts and of ascertaining their origin. This is, in fact, the first step in textual criticism and must be the foundation on which any such criticism is based. He directed a violent attack at the manner in which the Arabs had collected their poetry and also questioned the correctness of many of the texts.

The other important point in Ibn Sallām's book is the division of poets into classes. With regard to time poets were either Islamic or pre-Islamic. He tried to classify the poets of either era in classes according to the abundance and excellence of their poetry. Also the place of origin found consideration in his divisions.

Ibn Sallām, however, like all the previous critics, failed to support judgments he passed on poets and poetry by analysing the texts or describing the qualities of each particular poet.

Thanks to the attempts of Ibn Sallām, criticism certainly made a step forward, especially as regards questions of verification and the classification of poets. What we miss in his book however is criticism in the sense of a discerning study and a methodical approach. The first attempts at method are not to be found earlier than the fourth century after Hijra.

Al Jahiz (d. 255 A.H.) who was one of the leading Mutazilites and writers of his time tried in his book *Al Bayan wal Tabyyin* to give a picture of criticism in the pre-Islamic period and the first century after Hijra. The criticism of that time, he maintained was elementary, but to a marked degree sound and convincing as it emanated from good and practical literary taste. The critics of that period, according to time, managed to discover a number of real artistic defects in verses and to give valuable advice to orators and poets.

The other part of Jahiz's book was an echo of the intellectual life of that period. At that time, the mosques of Kufa and Basra were not only places for worship and administration of justice, but also schools for the teaching of language, grammar, tradition (Hadith) and jurisprudence, as well as places for orators and narrators to relate, to the audience, the story of the Prophet's life and conquests. The leaders of theological schools and religious divisions used to go there for dialectical discussions, and numbers of people attended to learn about the different branches of knowledge. Anyone who spoke before the audience in the mosque had to possess the ability to express himself clearly, to attract listeners and persuade them. Thus a new kind of study came into being to show the qualities an orator needed, and to point out the defects of different speeches. Many observations on speeches were registered in the book of Al Jahiz which can be divided into four main sections, discussing all these principal points namely :

1. The correctness of pronunciation and the defects caused by deformities of the vocal organs.

2. The correct use of language and the musical relations existing between words, with consideration of the defects resulting from the use of dissonant words.

3. Syntax and the relation between words and their meanings; clarity, conciseness of speech; words suitable for different audiences and finally the relationship between the speech and its subject.

4. The appearance of the orator and his gestures. In the theoretical observations of his book literary criticism is latent, but not explicit. His book does not deal with the different speeches, fails to define the qualities of a good poem and to develop a method of practical literary criticism.

As for Ibn Qotaiiba (213—276 A.H.) we notice that is a certain measure of independence and originality in the apparently reasonable ideas which he expounds in his book "Al Shi'r Wal Shu' ara'. Unfortunately, however, he does not apply these ideas in his actual criticism. Still he had a really scientific spirit and urged people to form independent judgments and to use their own powers of appreciation. He attacked the philosophers' method of criticism, or rather the attempts they made to use formal logic in the appreciation, the criticism and the writing of the language. Very concerned about literary taste, he tried to save and protect it from the rigidity and formalism of logic and philosophy.

The obvious defect of Ibn Qotaiiba's writings is his excessively rational method. His thoughts on the theory of literature are richer and more fertile than his sensitivity to language. Most of these general thoughts on the theory of literature are found in the introduction of his book. Yet when he begins writing about poets all he has to offer are biographical notes, adorned with examples he adduces from different poets.

In the same period, mention must be made of the Prince Poet Ibn El Mu'tazz, not because he was a critic but because the influence of his book "Al Hadi" on the general trend of Arabic criticism was considerable. He was the first to bring to light the real nature of the dispute between the moderns and the traditionalists which originated since the century of Hijra.

Ibn El Mu'tazz divided the principal elements of the science of Badi' into three different sections, each dealing with a different subject :

1. The metaphor which is pillar-stone of poetry.
2. Ways of expression connected with the form only and not with the essence of poetry itself. There are three of them in his book :
 - (a) The "Tajnis" which is the complete or partial conformity of letters or pronunciation of two or more words.
 - (b) The "Mutabaqa" which is the use of words and their opposites in one verse or sentence.
 - (c) The similarity between the first word of the verse and its last word.

3. The dialectical style which takes the form of a logical argument.

In his book, the metaphor which is called "Isi'ara" is considered the most important element of poetry in general. Poetry is threaded through with metaphors which are to poetry what grammar is to language. The natural disposition of the Arabs lends itself to metaphorical expression. This tendency enhanced by the great poetical talent of the ancient poets has achieved great effects referred often to as 'oriental imagery.'

It has been suggested that he assimilated some of Aristotle's ideas on metaphor. This can be partially accepted. For, Ibn El Mu'tazz had a pure and unadulterated Arabic taste, and his attempt at elucidating the artifices of Badi' had the unmistakable stamp of originality.

Qudama Ibn Ga'far (272-337 A.H.), on the contrary, however, was completely enthralled by the new philosophical manner of thought. It is obvious that he was extremely fond of logic which made its appearance in this period.

He says of poetry, in his book "Naqd el Shi'r", that it is regular speech with metres, rhymes and meanings. Then, proceeding to an explanation of this definition he says that it is a kind of speech because poetry is a form of speech; that it is in metres to distinguish it from that which is not metrical, in rhyme to distinguish it from metrical speech which is unrhymed, and has finally meanings to distinguish from that which has all these elements without expressing a meaning.

He further states the four elements of poetry which are in his opinion (1) words (2) metre (3) rhyme (4) meaning. But then he finds that he ought on the relationship of some of these simple elements to one another, and introduces new elements which he calls complex elements, and which are also four in number.

1. The suitability of words and meanings.
2. The suitability of words and metre.
3. The suitability of meaning and metre.
4. The suitability of meaning and rhyme.

Having set up this plan, which is appallingly like a statistical arrangement, he proceeds to explain both the simple and complex elements of poetry.

The reader of his book "Naqd il Sh'ir" will see that the attempt of Qodama remained formal and was influenced by the new current of philosophy and logic to which a certain type of mentality was subject in his time. However, those who followed Qodama's system were not the critics of the fourth century, but the Rhetoricists who came after the fifth century.

The first products of methodical criticism are to be found in the fourth century A.H. in the "Mowazana" of Al'Amidi (d.371 A.H.) and the "Wasata" of Al Jurjani (d. 366 A.H.)

The new systematic treatment exemplified in Al'Amidi's book relies for its critical approach on pure Arabic taste and on an essentially practical way of analysing and criticising literary texts.

Al'Amidi's method in the comparison between Abu Tammam and Al Buhtori is to adduce the arguments of the supporters of each poet and the reasons they gave for their stand, followed by a study of the faults and the poetic plagiarisms of both. He usually checked the correctness of the texts before he proceeded to criticise them.

Critical comparison thus begins to be worthy of consideration and study with Al'Amidi. His criticism was wholly governed by the nature of the poetry of Abu Tammam and Al Buhtori, a poetry which represents a new attempt to enrich classical poetry by new features but merely results in squeezing traditional thoughts and ideas into new forms and constructions. Al'Amidi restricted his comparison to artistic and poetic features. What gives his comparison its value is his success in going beyond the poetry of the two poets compared to a sort of comparative study in general. The method of adducing comparable exumparable from the poetry of the forerunners enlarges the scope of his comparison and gives it the scientific value of accuracy. The criteria which guided him in his work were the traditional models, his wide knowledge of Arabic poetry and his cultivated literary taste. His "comparison" stands unique among works of its kind.

‘Alī Ibn ‘Azīz Al Jurjānī’s study in his book “Al Wasata bain al Mutanabbi wa Khussumihi” can be regarded more as a logical defence of Al Mutanabbi than a practical study in criticism. He followed the method of mentioning the merits of his poet beside the defects of others without going beyond that to the appreciation of the subtleties and hidden minutiae of poetry. In pleading on behalf of Al Mutanabbi, in affording arguments and in overcoming those of his antagonists, Al Jurjānī overlooks the necessity of interpretations and analyses. We owe him many important and useful ideas on the theory of literature. Moreover, his honesty, his fair judgment and his impartiality have increased the value of his study and imparted to his work the qualities of scientific research.

We may safely say that Al Jurjānī’s purpose in dealing with plagiarism was the same as that of his predecessors in criticism, namely to seize opportunity for a thorough comparison between the ancients and the moderns, illustrated by an abundance of useful details in the form of quotations from ancient poetry. The last part of his book represents the essence of all he has written in the field of criticism. Here the reader finds himself confronted by a real attempt at mediation between Al Mutanabbi and his antagonists. As far as criticism is concerned it depends on textual and practical studies. Al Jurjānī tries to examine, one by one, the main censures passed on Al Mutanabbi’s poetry by his antagonists. He applies here a direct, practical and analytic method of criticism which has, in contrast to the dry theoretical approach we have observed in the preceding chapters, proved a complete success in handling the subject matter of this part of his book.

After the successful endeavours of Al’ Amidi and Al Jurjānī one would expect Al Askari’s book “Alsinā’atāin” to be at least, a continuation of the ascending line of progress in criticism. Yet Al Askari (d. 395 A.H.) undertakes a different attempt. Off the direct road of practical criticism which depends on parallelism, comparison and analysis, his book constitutes a reversal to the dry classification of the various kinds of Badi and to the interpretation of the different subjects of the science of Balagha. Al ‘Askari’s book is, to a great extent, the same type of work as Qudama’s Naqdishi’r. Both of them represent a systematic method and the didactic manner which is interesting in its definitions. His extensive knowledge of previous Arabic poetry helps him in interpreting Qudama’s classifications by giving examples of each kind.

However, Al 'Askari sometimes hits on the right idea, but that happens only when he detaches himself involuntarily from the conception of Qudama and the Balaghists and summons all the literary talent he has. He is really quite successful on the problem of poetical plagiarism and utters the following, quite sensible view: "The meanings of poetry are common among the rational. The good meaning may occur to the vulgar, Nabatean and Negro, and the choice and distinction between them come to light in form and poetic expression". It is a successful idea not to attempt to trace plagiarism in common ideas that occur to different poets but in constructions that give the common ideas their peculiarities and their characteristic features.

All in all, we can say that abu Hilal Al 'Askari has followed, in his book, the method of the Balaghists who depend on the didactic approach, giving directions by means of definitions and explanations of the terms of rhetoric.

This successful contributions of the fourth century will lead us to a triumphant climax in the fifth century in 'Abdul Qahir Al Jurjani's theory of construction (d. 471 A. H. 1078 A. D.) in his two book "Dala'il Al'ijaz" and X "Asrar Al Balagha". We are entitled to call it a climax because everything preceding 'Abdul Qahir is a sort of rising and ascending, and what comes after him is like going down a steep. 'Abdul Qahir's achievements in criticism and the character of his research have led us to regard him as a land mark in the history of literary criticism.

It may appear, from the title of 'Abdul Qahir's book "Dala'il Al'ijaz", that it is a book on the dogma of ijaz or a book written to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Quran. It may also be true to say that the emergence of the research on Balagha was due to the tendency dominant in theological circles which was intent in proving that the superiority of the revelations is literary as well as spiritual. Moreover Moslim theologians have always been in need of the best literary style possible in order to be able to explain to the people, in expressive and attractive words, the meaning of the Quran. The fact that the Quran is the source from which different kinds of science such as philosophy grammar and rhetorics have emerged, is also true, but this does not mean that each of these

sciences has remained independent and restricted by one aim only, which is to show the dogma of I'jāz, and that have no objectives which transcend their primary purpose.

In *Dala'il Al'ijaz*, 'Abdul Qahir shows that researches aimed to prove the uniqueness of the Quran ought to be based on a general method of literary criticism as it is applied of the analysis of any other literary text. Abdul Qahir found that the only way of dealing with the inimitability of the revelations was to depend on the right conception of the nature of literary expression. He also drew our attention to the importance of poetry and grammar as to the two keys by which to lay open any hidden literary problems and obtain their correct situation. In 'Abdul Qahir's opinion, literature is the art of language. Therefore the method of its study should be philological and artistic. He states that language is not an incoherent mass of words, but a connected system of relationships between forms. Without morphological factors the individual words of the language are meaningless and are unable to provide any defined sense. Thus the uniqueness of the Quran and the superiority of literary expression are not, in 'Abdul Qahir's opinion, due to the suitability of words, whether simple or compound, but to the merits of certain traits of the composition itself. He intends to deny the opinion current among his predecessors in criticism and particularly with Aljahiz (d. 255 A. H.) when he considers that eloquence is due to some qualities of the words themselves. Dwelling on the point of words and meanings, 'Abdul Qahir asks the reader to contemplate, along with him, the use of a particular word in more than one construction, and he led to the admission that the value is not latent in the word itself, but a consequence of the suitability of its use in the context. This is what our modern critics of today used to say.

Words are, therefore, as 'Abdul Qahir says, receptacles of meaning, are, as it were, servants and attendants of the meanings. When 'Abdul Qahir speaks about the meaning, he does not mean mere intellectual and emotional activity, but does mean in intellectual and emotional activity that provides the pressure against which the author achieves artistic effect.

'Abdul Qāhir insists, therefore, that when the Qurān states that it is inimitable it does not mean that it is inimitable in its words or in the succession of its sounds, but that it is inimitable in its meanings, that is to say, in the features of its composition and the superiority of its construction.

From here what we call the theory of construction emerges : It is the context in itself that is the only repository from which every possible shade of beauty in literature comes forth. To prove that 'Abdul Qāhir depends on a thorough investigation of the philological traits and tries to show, through interpretation and analysis, that literary expression varies aesthetically and emotionally according to the differences of these philological traits.

'Abdul Qāhir's philosophy of language has established the general foundations of Arabic criticism. It is the only theory which can be safely applied in our modern days, without any sense of hesitation or fear. It has established a general criterion which, in very brief words, is the process of scrutinising and making out the meaning of the context by the power of perceiving emotional and artistic features that lie in the structure of the language itself. This is the general criterion in 'Abdul Qāhir's theory. But the theory alone did not satisfy him. On the contrary, his superiority as a critic is due to the fervour with which he pursues every problem by submitting it to analysis and explaining it. The organic unity characteristic for his work consists in absolute reliance on a general theory of language.

In spite of the considerable differences between *Dalā'il Efi-jaz* and 'Abdul Qāhir's other book *Asrār Al Balāgha*, the latter contains the elements of both his method of criticism and his practical analysis. *Asrār Al Balāgha* gives the interpretations. What gives *Asrār Al Balāgha* its value is that its author displays his great literary skill in the interpretation of the terms of *Balāgha*, and depends before all, on a practical analysis and cultivated literary taste.

After 'Abdul Qāhir criticism entered a new phase in which one can rarely find the practical study that depends on accurate criteria even in the work of Ibn Rashiq (d. 463 A. H.) or *Diya'* ad *Dīn* Ibn al Athir (d. 637 A. H. (d. 1239 D. C.)). The progressive

evolution of a safer and more elaborate system of criticism has been transformed in Al Sakaki's book "Miftah Al 'Ulum" into the barrenness and sterility of dry classifications and didactic laws of Balagha.

In this research we have tried to distinguish between criticism and the science of Balagha. Our aim, it will be remembered, was to dissociate criticism from other sciences of language which were used, at the beginning of their existence, as tools of criticism.

The word Badi 'which primarily meant "The New" and from which Abu Tammam's school derived its name became, after Ibn Al Mu'tazz had characterised its main features in his book Al Badi, a new independent science which acquired traits of the didactic classifications of Balagha the first branch of which it became. In Asrar Al Balagha, 'Abdul Qahir distinguishes between the simile, the metaphor and the analogy (tamthil) on the one hand, and the embellishments of Badi on the other. He has found in the first group (the simile, the metaphor and the analogy - tamthil) the tools which render the expression clear and explicit. Misunderstood by the following generation he is also, though involuntarily, the father of Al Bayan (clarity) which became in Sakaki's book the second branch of the Balagha.

The origin of the third branch goes to another misunderstanding. In denying the value of words as individual words and considering the inimitability and superiority to lie in the nonconstruction of the context which is the only way of deciding the meaning (ma'na), 'Abdul Qahir has unintentionally paved the way for Al Sakaki who established, on the base of his evidential examples, the third branch of the science of Balagha called the science of Ma'ani (Semantics).

The definite separation of these three branches does not take place until Al Sakaki (d. 626 A.H.) writes his book "Miftah Al 'Ulum": Since then our literary criticism remained in the captivity of dry classification of Balagha until our modern literary rebirth came into existence at the past century. This rebirth depends on the revival of the classical Arabic heritage and its imitation.

The traditional school of rhetorical criticism which limited its subject to the formal branches of Balagha : Badi, Bayan and Ma'ani, was prevalent in the first stages of this modern re birth. The leader of this school was Al Sheikh Hussein Al Marsafi (d. 1307 A.H.) the author of "Al Wasila Al Adabiya". His book is not only a study of the three branches of Balagha but it includes as well, a large collection of quotations from poetry and prose the interpretation of which paves the way for practical analysis and literary taste. A quite large number of the greatest men of letters of the past generation e.g. Dr. Taha Hussein, Mustafa Sadiq Al Rafi and others were influenced by this book. They learned how to distinguish by means of rhetorical methods of criticism, between different kinds of linguistic expressions, and how to compare ancient and modern poets, tracing the plagiarism of the latter.

Our writers and critics, who had a European culture were not satisfied with rhetorical conventional linguistic criticism and they started making avail of the European conceptions of literary criticism in studying and attacking traditional poets such as Shawqi and Hafiz. In their applied criticism they dealt with the form of the Arabic poem, its contents and the way it develops. The leaders of this school were Al'Atqad, Al Mazny 'Abdul Rahma Shukri. In their opinion amongst the requisites of a good poem were: organic unity, sincerity, the avoidance of exaggeration, artificiality and inflated language. This school, however, did not give any consideration to the new literary forms which had begun to appear gradually, at the beginning of this century, like the novel, the short story, the essay and the drama.

Being influenced by French and European culture, Taha Hussein was the first to establish the new scientific method in studying history of the Arabic literature. He also unchained criticism from the captivity of the rhetorical method and paved the way to aesthetic analysis of poetry.

One should not forget what the Lebanese dispersal in the United States and South America produced. The Lebanese poets aided in the revival of a new conception of literature and criticism. The essays of Na'ima in his book Al Ghurbal were an effective factor in attacking the non-literary criteria which were prevailing in the 19th. century and were threatening to stifle imaginative thought.

In the early thirties of this century when literary criticism became dissociated from *Balagha* and taught as an autonomous subject in the university the interest of scholars was directed to it with a result that a number of academic theses and dissertations were written on the subject.

After the death of Taha Ibrahim who was the lecturer in literary criticism at Cairo University, his lectures were published in a book called "The History of Arabic Criticism until the Fourth Century of Hijra". Taha Ibrahim's book is the first to make the fundamental distinction between the Arabic literary criticism and the science of *Balagha*. In 1940 A.D. Mandur published his Doctoral thesis on the methodical criticism of the Arabs which mainly depends on the fourth century of Hijra and in particular on Al'Amidi and 'Abdul 'Aziz Al Jurjani. His is, in fact the first academic study to deal with our history of criticism in a mature and scientific spirit. Few years later, influenced by modern French aestheticians, Mandur called for the aesthetic method in criticising literature. At the same time, Khalafallah pointed out the necessity of applying the psychological method in criticism. Many useful and detailed discussions between the two scholars can be found in Mandur's book "Fil Mizan Al Jadid" and Khalafallah's book "Min Al Wijha al Nafsiya".

We must not forget to mention the stiff ideological tendency noticed in some of the younger generation of critics like, for instance, M.A. Al 'Alim and A. Anis in their book "Al Thaqafa Al Haditha" which reveals an over valuation of content and undue neglect of aesthetic considerations.

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