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CONTENTS

CATEGORIES OF PROPER LANGUAGE IN CLASSICAL ARABIC LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

When we discuss Islamic aesthetics, we combine two fields – the study of Islam and the discipline of aesthetics – both of which have received major attention and cover a wide range of associations, involve long historical traditions, and include a variety of phenomena. When I today add a third field – language/literature – I do so to focus on the point at which the concepts central to those three fields meet, and to explore some of the ways in which those concepts influence one another. Three issues are important in this respect:

1. The role of language and literature in the classical period of Islam
2. The concept of beauty in Arabic literature
3. The relation between Islam and aesthetics in Arabic literature

In his otherwise noteworthy study, *Beauty and Holiness. The Dialogue Between Aesthetics and Religion*, James Alfred Martin Jr. admits frankly that, for limitations of time and space, discussion of Islam was omitted from the book.[1] (To be fair, he does state that Islam has celebrated the riches of the Arabic language, both as a medium of conceptual expression and as possessing a physical form of aesthetic excellence.) But he is not the only one to omit Islam. A most important book on the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy starts with Aristotle and ends with Paul de Man and Derrida, without any mention of Arabic theories which deal with roughly the same subjects as the Western theories of rhetoric, semantics and semiotics.[2] In Western research on the history of thought, we often find that Islamic concepts are, if not neglected, at least not as valued as they could be. This is primarily due to two causes: overviews and basic works being written by scholars who are unfamiliar with either Islam or the Arabic language, and narrowness in specialized fields of research precluding real interdisciplinary experience.[3]

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1 Martin 1990: 138.
2 Braun 1996.
3 The first version of this paper was presented at the symposium Islamic aesthetics, organized

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1. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE CLASSICAL PERIOD OF ISLAM

In the first centuries of Islam, we can observe an almost obsessive effort to preserve, collect and categorize forms of oral transmission and works of written literature. On one hand, we find detailed analysis of the Arabic language, triggered by the canonization of the Qur'an, catalyzing works on grammar, lexicography, and etymological approaches. On the other hand, we find compilations of poetry, rhymed prose, and sermons – that is, the works of poets, authors, and preachers – and the need to evaluate or judge these products.

Both sides are connected, and they sometimes meet each other, even in the same work. Already at this point we can see that there are at least two motivations for paying such special attention to language: One is the uprising of Islam, a new religion which is successful especially because of its book, the Qur'an. The other is a deeply rooted sense in Arab society of the value of having a special talent for the artistic use of language.

Let's take one well-known example for each motivation, beginning with the former: the notion outlined in the Qur'an itself that the miracle sent by God has manifested through language, the very special language of the Qur'an that cannot be imitated. This is suggested, for example, in sūra 17, verse 88:

> *Qul la'in ijtama'at al-uns wa-l-jinn 'alā an ya'tū bi-mithli hādhā l-Qur'ān lā ya'tūna bi-mithlihi wa-lau kāna ba'ḍuhum li-ba'ḍin ẓahīran.*
>
> Say: if man and jinn would together try to create something similar to the Qur'ān, they could not do it, even if they helped each other.[4]

As regards the second motivation, the natural talent for poetry and refined speech among the Bedouins is mentioned in classical Arabic literature, though not always with reference to religious impact.[5] Despite the apparent difficulty of finding the two motivations at work in a single approach, there are clear examples. For instance, Bedouins are credited with a very pure and special form of piety, prompting al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868) to say that the Arabs have obviously been prepared by God for His gift and miracle, the Qur'an, with the gift of a special talent for poetry.[6] Only for this reason, it might be said, were they capable of

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4 See also Qur'an 52:34, 10:38, 11:13.

5 Binay 2006.

6 al-Jāḥiẓ 1986 III: 27 ff.

acknowledging the divine quality of Muḥammad's revelations and verses. We will return to this interesting point at the end of the paper.

If we concentrate on the second motivation, the oral tradition of poetry, the giftedness of the Arabs with regard to artful language, and the role that rhetoric played in the first centuries of Islam (and even before), one could say that those early compilers, writers, scholars, and chancellors were merely collecting and writing down what was already available to them. But there was a third strong motivation for their efforts: the desire to see themselves as, and for others to see them as, sociocultural equals to the other people with great books (i.e. the Jews and Christians), and the desire to do what was necessary to ensure administrative and cultural achievements similar to those of the strong neighbouring empires (e.g. the Byzantines and especially the Iranian Sassanids). It was realized that such accomplishments would require the preservation of cultural treasures. Already in these early times there was a sense of awareness that every human community needs a cultural heritage (or, as we would say today, a repository of cultural memory). Ibn Sallām al-Jumaḥī (d. 846) lamented the first Islamic decades of wars and conquests that distracted the Arabs from preserving and developing their own culture.[7] The popular *ṭabaqāt* books (or 'books of the classes') reflect a belief in the virtue and necessity of classification. By arranging material according to certain categories, the authors try to answer such questions as "Why do we need to memorize and preserve the verses of this special poet?" and "How can we distinguish authors and poets from each other?" The introductions of works by Ibn Sallām al-Jumaḥī, Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), al-Mubarrad (d. 899), al-'Askarī (d. 1005) and others inevitably include justifications for their choices. While due to the voluminous nature of what has been preserved it may sometimes seem as if there has been an overriding effort to keep everything, of course choices had to be made. And if there was preference for one poet or verse over another – preferences which were intended to be more than merely subjective – then criteria needed to be presented to justify the preference. While al-Aṣma'ī (d. 828) could state that someone is a *faḥl* (a master) without explaining why (asked what he meant by the word *faḥl*, he answered that it means a person who stands out, like the full-grown stallion (*faḥl*) next to a younger animal),[8] his later colleagues were obliged to present arguments in relation to their methods of selection and the choices which the application of these methods resulted in.

Poetry and rhetoric are Arabic traditions which the first scholars working under the aegis of Islam found sufficiently worthy to lay claim to, in terms of both their

7 Al-Jumaḥī 1974 I: 25.
8 Al-Aṣma'ī 1971: 9.

intrinsic worthiness and the instrumental worth they offered as integral parts of the new framework these scholars hoped to build. Successfully assuming possession of this heritage required both explanation and glorification of the unique language of the Qur'an, but also that practical conditions be met: consensus had to be reached about an overall aesthetic framework, criteria for evaluation, and specialization of language and literature. One further condition was necessary for these criteria to be set: a conscious awareness of the urgency and necessity of the establishment of something that today would perhaps be called literary criticism. As I have pointed out (p. 24), the majority of books written in the second and third centuries after *hijra* (aside from works connected to the exegesis of the Qur'an) are collections of knowledge and of personalities and authors. Scholars who had been trained in writing were secured to serve as secretaries (*kuttāb*) in the chancelleries or as entertainers (*nudamā'*) for the increasingly numerous court nobility. However, they were often still seen as mere supporting staff for the serious sciences (which were Qur'anic studies, Islamic law, history, geography, etc.). Only gradually did there arise an awareness of the singular value of the science of language and literature, not only as receptacle of the holy word but also as a general authority for the establishment of criteria used to validate claims about the artistic use of language.

There developed the idea, then, that occupation with linguistic material such as poetry and rhetoric should be granted the same due respect and appreciation as any other honourable craft and trade. Ibn Sallām compared the critic (*nāqid*) to other kinds of specialists, who are able to assess dates, slaves and so forth. Accordingly, he provides a helpful analogy:

> Someone told Khalaf b. Ḥayyān al-Aḥmar: "When I hear a poem and I like it, I don't care what you and your people have to comment on that."
>
> He answered: "When you get a Dinar and you like it, and the money changer tells you that it is worth nothing, what's the use of your liking it?"[9]

Ibn Sallām's point here is, of course, that despite the all too commonly held idea that there is no accounting for taste, there are reasons for the existence of standards for the assessment of artistic works. The increasing realization of the need for literary criticism leads to our second topic.

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9 Al-Jumaḥī 1974 I: 7. The notion to define language as artwork that can be learned can be found across different times and cultures. While the early Arabs tried to establish rhetoric skills as *ṣinā'a* (handicraft), Wittgenstein (1971: 20) describes language as a toolbox.

2. THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY IN ARABIC LITERATURE

One of the most commonly discussed aesthetic concepts is beauty, although different and varying definitions of this exist in each time and culture. The aesthetic concept most often used in classical Arabic literature is not "beauty" (*jamāl*) per se, but rather correctness (*faṣāḥa/ faṣīḥ*) and rhetorical refinement (*balāgha*). *Balāgha* does mean something similar, however: namely, 'language without fault'. As we will see, it also means a wish to do or to produce something good. In the process of collecting and compiling traditions and pieces of poems and stories and songs, important questions remained: How to arrange the material? Which materials will best survive the test of time? Which verses and sermons should be ranked as superior? And how to distinguish between good and bad language, motifs, pictures, and metaphors?

2.1 Grammatical standards

The first attempt to shed light on the overwhelming volume of the oral tradition was a linguistic standard: nothing could be beautiful that was grammatically, syntactically, and semantically incorrect. As Sībawaih (d. 796) put it, for example, a grammatically correct sentence can make no sense if it says: "Yesterday I will come to you (*wa-sa-ātīka amsi*)."[10] (He was, by the way, one of the many Iranian converts who contributed significantly to the immense cultural and academic activity of that time.)

There is, in general, unanimity about correctness (*faṣāḥa*). Works on that subject began quite early on and were transmitted from one generation to another without major fundamental changes; what can be observed instead is a stronger focus on systematics (that is, presenting theories and categories for collected material). One late-classical key work with a particularly fitting title is *miftāḥ al-ʿulūm* (The Key of the Sciences) by al-Sakkākī (d. 1229). Edited by one of his successors, al-Qazwīnī (d. 1338), it sums up the consensus position of scholars of classical Arabic literature and rhetoric:

> A single word (*al-mufrad*) is correct when a) it has no difficult pronunciation, b) it is not a strange or foreign word, and c) it has no form opposed to a common analogy. A sentence or phrase (*kalām*) is correct when, further, d) there is no mistake in the syntactic construction, e) no accumulation of similar or nearly similar words which could bother the audience, and f) there is no

10 Sībawaih 1977: 25.

> unclearness with respect to the meaning as a result of a faulty relation between words and meaning.[11]

Many further examples are given by scholars who commonly cite the *Asrār al-balāgha* (Secrets of the Art of Rhetoric) by ʿAbdalqāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) and, more specifically, chapters on grammatical aspects and different forms of metaphorical language (*istiʿāra*, *tajnīs*, *tamthīl*, *tashbīh*, *ʿaks al-tashbīh*, etc.). While *faṣāḥa* (or correctness) is a concept used mainly in the assessment of linguistic phenomena with regard to the above mentioned criteria and the absence of contradictions, *balāgha* (or rhetorical refinement) takes as a precondition for the objects of its study that they meet the criteria of *faṣāḥa*. Beyond that, it also includes the further consideration of words: their appropriateness of meaning, situation, context, and their impact on the reader or the reader's possible reactions to them.

2.2 *Faṣāḥa*

Although al-Jāḥiẓ is often said to be a compiler rather than a systematic writer, I take him to be the most important pioneer in the promotion of a semiotic and rhetorical awareness. In his *Kitāb al-bayān wal-tabyīn* (The Book of Clarity and Clarification), he starts with practical examples to illustrate his point of view. When he tries to clearly demonstrate one of the above mentioned criteria for *faṣāḥat al-mufrad* (the correctness of the single word) – that the word should not have a difficult pronunciation – and a parallel criterion for the correctness of the phrase (*faṣāḥat al-kalām*) – that there be no accumulation of overly-similar words in one phrase – he uses a well-known tongue-twister: *wa-qabru ḥarbin bi-makānin qafrin/wa-laisa qurba qabri ḥarbin qabru* ('The grave of Ḥarb is at a waste place/and there is no grave near Ḥarb's grave').[12]

But before giving an abundance of examples of good or bad language, al-Jāḥiẓ elaborates on pronunciation in general, and so emphasizes the correctness of oral language. He notes that some sounds are more difficult than others, like *qāf* and *rā*. He amuses his readers with examples of faulty pronunciation (most commonly due to speech defects). Furthermore, he mentions the following: *lajlaja* (stuttering), *tamtama* (stammering), *luthgha* (to have a lisp), *faʾfaʾa* (stammering with *fā*'), *ḥubsa* (a sort of paralysis), *rutta* (a handicapped tongue), *lafaf* (slow speech), *ʿajala* (if someone speaks too fast), *lukna* (the use of wrong expressions or foreign words), and *ḥukla* (the inability to express a meaningful phrase). Beyond that, he lists many defects connected with one sound. Some

11 See for example the excellent study by Simon 1993: 33 ff.
12 Al-Jāḥiẓ 1986 I: 65.

people, al-Jāḥiẓ writes, cannot properly pronounce the sound *rā*'; instead they say *ghayn*, *dhāl* or even *yā*'. Giving examples of the lisp, he distinguishes between the lisp of a child and the lisp of an adult or an old man. Not only does this cause an aesthetic defect – to Arab listeners, it sounds ugly or incomplete or just not beautiful – but it can also lead to complete misunderstandings and even blasphemous interpretations: instead of *bismillāh* ('In the name of God'), one can hear *bithmillāh* ('In the sin of God').[13]

Continuing on the subject of physical handicaps, al-Jāḥiẓ refers to his famous colleagues and predecessors (al-Aṣmaʿī, al-Wāqidī (d. 823), al-Jumaḥī, and others) to corroborate his observations. In some cases, such a handicap can even lead to a new form of creativity (as it did, for example, when a preacher presented a complete sermon without using the sound *rā*' even once).[14] Nevertheless, speech impediments can sometimes have serious consequences; al-Jāḥiẓ reports them once being taken as a reason for a divorce because a man feared that the defect would be transmitted to his future offspring.

Another aspect of the debate is based on what was apparently common knowledge that correct pronunciation depends on the condition of the teeth. The general statement by al-Jāḥiẓ is the following: "If the teeth are perfect, then the sounds are, too; and if the teeth are defective, then the sounds are, too (*idhā tammat [asnānuhu] tammat al-ḥurūf, wa-idhā naqaṣat naqaṣat al-ḥurūf*)."[15] He goes on for several pages with examples of how the condition of the teeth influences speech (e.g. the front teeth especially are connected with good speech or with a lisp, muttering and hissing). There is a report about Muʿāwiya, the first Umayad caliph (reigned 661–680), that he refused to mount the pulpit when he lost his front teeth. Only after reassurances that his age was not a factor for him to be acknowledged as a good preacher, and that from the audience's point of view it was much more important to see and hear him than lament the condition of his teeth, is his mood said to have improved. In those times (as they still are today), beautiful teeth were a sign of youth and health. Furthermore, as a status symbol, their value was assessed not only as an instrument for the chewing of food. ʿAbdalmalik, the fifth Umayad caliph (reigned 685–705), who fixed his teeth with gold, is supposed to have said that, "If there were no pulpits and women, I would not care when they fall out (*lammā shadda ʿAbdulmalik asnānahu bil-dhahab qāla: lau-lā al-manābir wal-nisā', mā bālaytu matā saqaṭat*)."[16]

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13 Al-Jāḥiẓ 1986 I: 34.

14 It seems to be an allusion to the muʿtazilī theologian and preacher Wāṣil b. ʿAṭāʾ (d. 748/49) who is said to have had difficulties in pronouncing the *rā*'. See also van Ess 1992 II: 245 ff.

15 Al-Jāḥiẓ 1986 I: 59.

16 Al-Jāḥiẓ 1986 I: 61.

Nevertheless, it still seems possible to be a good preacher and rhetorician even without perfect teeth. Al-Jāḥiẓ mentions several persons whose rhetorical competence approaches *bayān* (the divine quality of clarity) even though they were missing some or all of their teeth (in passing he shares his experience that the loss of all one's teeth is better than having a few remaining teeth that spoil pronunciation). Most essential is the tongue, its formation, and how it moves.

Al-Jāḥiẓ, at the beginning of his book, mocks those who cannot pronounce difficult Arabic sounds, especially foreigners. Constructing a hierarchy of languages in terms of more and less beautiful, he observes that non-Arabs cannot pronounce some Arabic sounds: the Romans did not know *ḍād*, the Persians were unaware of the *thā'*, and the Syrians remain ignorant of *dhāl*. Of course he acknowledges that Arabs also (including well-known personalities) can have difficulties pronouncing sounds requiring difficult physiological actions in the mouth and throat; this has obviously been embarrassing for those with Arabic as their mother-tongue. It seems of no interest for al-Jāḥiẓ, however, to elaborate on the possibility that Arabs might have difficulties with other languages.

Apart from his considerations of physically correct pronunciation, al-Jāḥiẓ tries to define a standard of beautiful speech by indicating what he does not like: a crude and rough way of talking (due to the voice's being too loud and coarse), the mouth's being open too wide, the lips hanging down, or the voice's being too throaty. Overly guttural speech – and sometimes even guttural speech in general – was thought to be ugly. On the other hand, some Arabic sounds need to be pronounced in a guttural way in order to distinguish them from other similar sounds. For this reason, we sometimes find inconsistencies between aesthetic claims about the need to avoid overly guttural speech and the need to use guttural voicing for the correct pronunciation of certain words. Even here, at this rather basic level of aesthetic values, we can find an awareness of how different periods and social circumstances change the scales of values.[17]

From these examples, al-Jāḥiẓ explains in a step-by-step manner that each language and even each linguistic system has potentially different and even inconsistent rules establishing valid utterances within that system or language. This statement is rather surprising and remarkable, because al-Jāḥiẓ is here anticipating modern linguistic theory, according to which the only criteria for utterance validity is the relation between the signifier and the signified. The strongest example given by al-Jāḥiẓ is the language of birds, given in his *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (Book of the Living Beings), where he says that, in principle, the

17 About normative quality and social significance, see Gruendler 2009: 197ff.

sounds of birds represent a language and a clear expression, even if we humans do not understand them.

2.3 *Balāgha*

Much more bothersome to al-Jāḥiẓ than speech handicaps is carelessness with regard to the use of language. Here we touch upon the other facet of beauty: *balāgha*. Grammatically and phonetically correct words and sermons are not necessarily beautiful, entertaining or witty for an audience. More is needed for that: the communication of not just any meanings but particular meanings (*maʿānī*), the right combination of words and meanings, and – last but not least – there needs to be concern for the circumstances and for the addressee or audience. Although al-Jurjānī is often credited for having invented the *naẓm* – the category of context in language and literature – we can find reference to ideas that prepare for a more straightforward handling of context in earlier works, too.

If carefully considered, what first sounds funny (examples of faulty speech and embarrassing sermons etc.) can be thought of as preparation for a broader approach that includes consideration of issues addressed by some of the following questions: What is it that makes some speeches, sermons or poems more beautiful or interesting than others? Why do we like the speech of this person more than that person? Why do we prefer one poet to another? What is it that – given the correctness of grammar, spelling, syntax, rhyme, metre, etc. – forms the quality of a piece of literature?

Those who put the question of aesthetics first were the collectors and critics of poetry – and here I come back to the beginning of my paper. Al-Aṣmaʿī (mentioned near the end of Section 1 for pronouncing someone a master without giving specific justification for that) implicitly used reasons of age, experience and tradition to justify his evaluations of works and authors. For him (like for many others), something new and unknown could never be better than something established and old. This is the ground on which the debate on *badī*ʿ (innovation) took place. Very soon, however, other scholars acknowledged that tradition alone is no justifier for claims of quality. The two groups were absolutely at odds on this question of the legitimacy of the appeal to tradition as the basis of judgement of the artistic or aesthetic quality of literary works. While Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 908), for example, rather soberly thinks that Abū Tammām exaggerates with his innovate style of introducing novel tropes and figures, and even cites instances of Abū Tammām's writing as specimens of how people should not

write,[18] al-Ṣūlī (d. 946) is positively overwhelmed by poetry: "The poets before Abū Tammām used to introduce something new in one or two verses of a qasīda; they understood this to be something extremely beautiful."[19]

We can also consider Ibn Qutayba. Though mainly interested in famous poets, he nevertheless tried to leave that predilection behind by the time of his *Book on Poetry and Poems* (*Kitāb al-shiʿr wal-shuʿarā'*), in which he states that, "I have seen scholars who approved a weak poem just because it was old [...] God did not prefer a certain age [...] Al-Akhṭal, Farazdaq, and others, too, counted in their time as innovators (*muḥdathūn*); but now, as time has gone by, they have become the old ones (*qudamā'*) [...] and this is what will happen to those who come after them."[20] Ibn Qutayba wants to make clear why he ranks different poets according to his four classes of poetry (*aqsām*): the first class is the combination of good formulations and good meaning (*ḥasuna lafẓuhu wa-jāda maʿnāhu*); the second class contains very good words, but lacks an appropriate and useful meaning (*lam tajid hunāka fā'idatan fī l-maʿnā*); the third class includes poems with good motifs and ideas, but uses a poor choice of words (*qaṣurat alfāzuhu*); and the fourth class includes poems whose words and meanings are insufficient (*ta'akhkhara maʿnāhu wa-ta'akhkhara lafẓuhu*). Rarely in Ibn Qutayba's writings, though, do we find articulation of any aesthetic category which would allow the reader to infer, compare and understand the specific reasons behind the evaluations Ibn Qutayba makes. In general, he recommends poetry in which an original and highly approved motif is shown with the utmost clarity and conciseness.[21]

The most important question with regard to the aesthetic evaluation of language, literature, and poetry remains unanswered: Why are some people more capable than others of right pronunciation, correct use of language, and the fitting choice of pictures and words for verses? Ibn Qutayba mentions the (at that time popular) distinction between the gifted poet (*maṭbūʿ*), for whom the creation of poetry feels natural and requires little effort, and one who learns the craft only consciously and with great effort. Al-Jāḥiẓ applies a similar distinction to the use of language in general. He gives examples in which the naturally-gifted Bedouin either cannot understand a phrase because it has a minimal mistake or refuses to answer a question unless it is grammatically or syntactically correct:

18 Ibn al-Muʿtazz 1935: 11–12.
19 al-Ṣūlī 1940: 62.
20 Ibn Qutayba 1967: 5–6.
21 The lack of "real" reasons here for categorizing poetry is perhaps connected to what Montgomery (2009: 149) calls the "self-reflexivity" of a "closed system".

Mā taqūlu fī dajājatin dhubiḥat min qafā'ihā?
Aḥsin.
Min qafā'uhā.
Aḥsin.
Min qafā'ahā.
Mā annaka bi-hādha? Qul: Min qafāha wa-stariḥ.

In the face of natural or even divine talent (*ṭab*ʿ), efforts appear to be in vain. What can someone do when he does not belong to the *maṭbūʿūn*?

Classical Arabic literature is full of debates and discussions on the establishment of literary criticism as a craft (*ṣināʿa*) and the quality of language. This brings us to the other crucial question with regard to aesthetic criteria: What is beautiful in artistic language?

2.4 Beautifying (*taḥsīn*)

As we have seen, in the field of poetry, critics were often divided into two camps: those who favoured the pre-Islamic and traditional poets, and those who argued in favour of the avant-garde. Beauty here is mostly discussed as a matter of themes and ideas (i.e. either traditional, established ideas or new, original motifs).

In letters and sermons, beauty was also found in motifs; this was even more the case in overall artistic and aesthetic formulations. And here again we can find at least two lines of thought: praise for artistic language as decoration for an idea (*tazyīn*) or condemnation of ornamental language as superfluous and injurious. This is a point on which another debate had started, a debate centred on the question of whether or not the linguistic form (*lafẓ*) or the underlying meaning (*maʿnā*) is essential for the expression of an idea.

More often than not, the concept of beauty was replaced by the concept of mastery in a field. While the bar of appropriateness of a phrase might seem to be high with regard to intended meaning (e.g. noble speech for a noble meaning and base speech for a base idea, as al-Jāḥiẓ put it), another criterion for the aesthetic approval of a literary piece was the measure of an author's ability to express an idea independently of literary form. As a result, a new genre evolved in which writers proved to be able to argue in favour of and against the same thing with convincing formulations and poetical tricks. Geert Jan van Gelder presented this art of the doxon and para-doxon in his article on the so-called *maḥāsin* and *masāwī*, "Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful". His title suggests that this is the first task for any ambitious writer and poet, if one believes that there is nothing that cannot be beautified (*taḥsīn*). As a paradoxical consequence,

however, it might then be thought that because this manoeuvre of beautifying in effect collapses the distinction between ugly and beautiful, there is then no objective beauty at all; instead, beauty arises by means of the artistic use of language. A good poet should be able to think of positive or negative aspects at will (for example, al-Thaʿālibī's *Taḥsīn al-qabīḥ wa-taqbīḥ al-ḥasan*).[22] For such writers, it is not just a game but a way to show artistic creativity, to worship the manifoldness of creation and to sharpen the mind.[23]

Increasing numbers of scholars at that time began to discover that the perception of something as beautiful or ugly lies, as we now say, in the eye of the beholder. This does not mean that there is no beauty, but rather that there is no objective beauty, valid at any time and any place. Al-Jāḥiẓ, when writing on speakers and orators, relates an astonishing story about a man who was very ugly. This led his audience to not expect much from him, but then his speech was received with surprise and enthusiasm. That, al-Jāḥiẓ concludes, would not had been the case had the speaker been pretty. Beautiful speech here is perceived as something that emerges from the gap between expectation and reality.

3. THE RELATION BETWEEN ISLAM AND AESTHETICS IN ARABIC LITERATURE

The ethical component of Islamic aesthetics was mentioned in other contributions at the above mentioned symposium, as well as throughout academic discourse. It can helpfully be thought about in terms of the following questions: Is something beautiful automatically good, or vice versa? Does the term "beauty" refer to a merely shifting aesthetic category whose conditions for inclusion can radically change with circumstances (or, per language in Islam, is the concept of better thought connected with piety, religion and the "good")? And can one get access to God or "holiness"[24] by using beautiful and proper language?

Al-Jāḥiẓ tells us that the Bedouins not only spontaneously have access to a religiously pure or inherently pious language, but that they themselves are also very pious and devout. On the other hand, he gives examples where Bedouins are described as being rather simple persons who sometimes have a rough and ugly

22 Van Gelder 2003: 344: "Studying al-Tha'ālibi's Tahsīn may sharpen the mind and teach that virtually everything may be considered from more than one side; it may even help a person to come to terms with the imperfections of the world." See also p. 323.

23 Van Gelder 2003: 346: "Besides the doxa, common opinion or expectation, there is the paradoxos, that which goes against the general expectation: not so much in order to overthrow or subvert the doxa, as to sharpen the mind. Things are known and enhanced through their opposites."

24 Martin 1990: passim.

pronunciation and who make mistakes. Paradoxically, he claims, these faults can be excused because of their supposed piety![25] It seems to be unclear which has priority: proximity to God or beautiful and faultless language. Al-Jāḥiẓ strongly warns against underestimating the consequences of language, not only artistic language and literature but especially the language of daily life. Good words promote good ideas, he says, and bad words stick longer in the heart, slowly spoiling and ruining a man's character. To him, it is clear that words and meanings influence each other. And since language is the instrument of perception, given to us by God, we must handle it with care.[26]

Discussed implicitly in classical Arabic literature is the question of whether aesthetic categories are normative categories in the sense of an imperturbable ground of judgement.[27] Those early authors already saw that principles of taste and the evaluation of quality are a matter of agreement, history and discussion, and can be shaken by new approaches, generations and insights. What they were looking for – especially because of the proximity of language and religion in Arab-Islamic history – is the normative character of judgement.

The most significant value-rendering aesthetic category found by al-Jāḥiẓ is perfection or equivalence between words and meanings (*bayān*). An object fitting into this category is not necessarily one that pleases us or evokes agreeable feelings. Rather, the literary object achieves a relation of complementariness between sign and the thing or idea it represents. The crucial question here is, "How do we achieve this perfection and where is it to be found?" Interestingly, the two main ways I have presented for answering this question – one emphasizing the religious and the other emphasizing the aesthetic – offer, as I have shown, inconsistent responses to the problem of determining what might best be thought the ultimately most significant element for the artistic evaluation of language. Could the conclusion to this exploration, then, be that both religion and aesthetics offer equally valuable ways of approaching this matter? This is something that our classical authors would not agree with, at least not if it is taken to imply a thoroughgoing relativism about artistic evaluation. They tried to find a ground and an end, as does even al-Jurjānī. He may be famous for his contextual theory, but he also states that in the ideal communication process the appropriate word will reflect the appropriate meaning, however that might take place (here he leaves the resolution to an unspecified metaphysical process).[28]

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25 Al-Jāḥiẓ 1986 I: 299 ff.; III: 281; IV: 92.
26 Al-Jāḥiẓ 1986 I: 136 ff. See also Chapter 3.6 in Behzadi 2009: 107–113.
27 Mothersill 1984: 226, 245 ff.
28 Al-Jurjānī 1954: 13 ff.

The initial state of creation has been thought by Islamic authors to be a state of aesthetic perfection, by which they mean that all aspects of that state were in harmony without any disturbing elements. Man, because of his forgetfulness, has lost this condition and – with the help of aesthetics, literary criticism, philosophy, and theology – is faced with the never-ending task of trying to approximate this original state. On one hand, aesthetics is an instrument to acknowledge God's creation; on the other, it is a tool to improve one's expression in order to approach the perfect state.

To understand the dilemma in which our authors were trapped, we should perhaps return to a concept I mentioned at the beginning: *i'jāz*, the inimitable quality of the Qur'an. To say that one wants to reach this level of expression (or, further, to claim that one can achieve it) would for al-Jāḥiẓ and other Islamic authors have been blasphemous and presumptuous. At the same time, without this striving for perfection, the relationship between man and God seems unthinkable, because such a relationship is based on communication.[29]

The awareness of cultural and methodological pluralism[30] among authors of classical Arabic literature does not imply their embracement of a tendency to abstain from setting criteria to judge language and literary works. Rather, we can find very different concepts of relatively strict aesthetic categories beside the concept of ideal – albeit theological –communication. Authors distinguished between the taste of the moment (including some rules of communication) and general aesthetic concepts of perception and expression. The rules often seem quite arbitrary, apart from a general instinct for an aesthetically balanced expression. Al-Jāḥiẓ's call for this balance while using language is not the search for a common denominator, but rather a permanent sensitivity for the richness of the language and the responsibility of the person using it.

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29 Perhaps one could link this thought to Bakhtin's concept of "outsideness", a form of dialogism which "allows for potentialities to emerge *between* words and utterances" (Waugh 2006: 378).

30 To be found, for example, in al-Jāḥiẓ (1986 III: 376), where he states that God has created the world without giving an eternal commentary.

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