CHAPTER 7

Shades of Our Predecessors

1 A Martyr for Arabic Literature (1910)

Arabic literature possesses many anthologies devoted to love and lovers. They are composed according to various systems; some are in prose, others in verse. They cover the rich gamut of human emotions, beginning with the tales about the Banū ʿUdhrā tribe who “die when they love”—which have been retold by Heine and set to music by Rubinstein. But side by side with these are some which in our days would be included in treatises on pathology and even psychiatry.

Such anthologies often contain a chapter on love engendered by a portrait—a subject which has inspired many works of world literature, both in the lofty and the popular style. This feeling of attraction aroused by a copy of the original is familiar to all who work on manuscripts, for in our generation one is often obliged to work on photostatic reproductions, something which was unknown to our predecessors, who always worked either on the originals or on copies made by hand. However skilfully made, these latter could not reproduce many of the details and from them one could learn only the contents of a work without actually feeling the “live” manuscript with all its unrepeatable individual traits. Of course the photographic copy also leaves the scholar helpless before complicated problems of palæographical analysis, and yet in the same way as a portrait permits one to sense a long departed presence, so does a photostatic reproduction give some idea of the author of the original. It reproduces strictly and dispassionately, on a different material and in different colours, with infinitely greater precision than the most skilled human hand, every annotation and correction in such a way that often this “secondary” document clearly reveals the personality of the student who had worked on the manuscript and who was overlooked in their haste by those who later dealt with the document.

During my last winter season in Beirut in 1909–1910 my teacher, the Arab Professor L. Shaykho, was completing a many years’ work on the edition of the anthology of the ninth-century poet, al-Buḥturī. Unlike other anthologies it did not speak of love and lovers, but partly of military valour—hamāsa—which gave it its title by analogy with the work of the poet’s contemporary and rival Abū Tammām,—and partly of various moral principles which reflect the ideals of the first centuries in which Arabic culture flourished.
This anthology had a curious destiny: for some reason it was unpopular among the Arabs and known only to few. Even the industrious seventeenth-century commentator ʿAbd al-Qādir of Baghdad, who spent most of his life in Cairo (though he also travelled to Adrianople and Stamboul) and who in his huge compendium *The Treasury of Literature*\(^1\) has preserved a number of priceless quotations from lost works, confessed that he had not heard of al-Buḥturi’s *Ḥamāsa*. Fate had her little joke with him. It was in that same seventeenth century that the *Franjis* ("Europeans"), who had already largely sampled the treasures of Oriental literature, began systematically to collect manuscripts. The Dutch Resident in Turkey, a worthy pupil of the Leyden school of Arabic scholars, presented to his native University his *Legatum Warnerianum*, an important collection of manuscripts, including the *Ḥamāsa*, which he had brought from Stamboul. This manuscript has remained unique to our own days; Shaykho was preparing his edition from it, having copied it out in Leyden in the eighteen-nineties.

As I used to meet him nearly every day either at lectures or in the cosy Bibliothèque Orientale of the University of St. Joseph, I was kept informed on the progress of the work and sometimes saw the proofs. Shaykho gave me as a parting gift the pages which had already been printed so that I was able to study them on the boat on my way to Odessa. The publication was completed in the second half of 1910 after my return to Russia. Somewhat earlier a fine phototype reproduction of the unique manuscript had appeared in Leyden which gave me a good idea of the elegant original of the Beirut edition and allowed me, when necessary, to check the latter with complete accuracy.

As I absorbed myself in the anthology, still under the vivid impressions of my recent studies in Beirut and the Lebanon, I soon noticed that the margins of the manuscript bore many annotations in a handwriting different from that of the original. The majority of these notes were in Arabic, but some were in Latin, and both appeared to have been made by one and the same person. Much to my astonishment neither the Beirut nor the Leyden editors had paid the slightest attention to them. Shaykho had taken them for the usual notes of an Oriental scribe or reader and had automatically utilised them for the critical study of the text without noticing the Western character of the handwriting or the Latin annotations. The editor of the Leyden edition did not even mention them, and yet these notes could not have been made by a rank-and-file reader. Many of these were happy conjectures, but for the greater part they reproduced variants from other sources which were usually indicated in the Latin quotations. It was evident that the author of the notes was thoroughly familiar

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\(^1\) *Khizānat al-adab.*