Aesthetic Perception and the Definition of Beauty in Classical Arabic Thought

As I announced at the beginning of this book, awareness of aesthetics as an independent science came late to Arabic philosophy. In classical Islam aspects of it could be found in many kinds of discourse beyond the traditional forms of knowledge, and it has only recently been subsumed under the heading of “the science of beauty” (ʿilm al-jamāl or al-jamāliyya), which contemporary Arab thought equates with Aesthetics. In the long history of classical Arabic thought other fields of knowledge, especially ethics, poetics, and metaphysics (but also erotics, the theory of knowledge, and optical physics) have been full of reflections and theories about the vocabulary and concepts of the beautiful; in this culture, therefore, it is impossible to reduce aesthetics to its artistic and literary products. Arab-Islamic culture developed a rich aesthetic terminology together with a complex idea of the beautiful, making the subject difficult to study because of the richness of its roots and variants, the lack of systematic arguments in its literature, and the paucity of serious research on the topic. At this point in our project, however, we are not entirely without resources. In Chapter 1 we studied the basic concepts and early lexicon related to beauty in Arabic and found definitions rooted in sensory perception and light, with hints of a transcendent dimension. The Quran essentially retained pre-Islamic notions of beauty while offering a new vision of the world; it marked the birth of a new culture that would reframe and redefine beauty in accordance with evolving philosophical thought in Islam. In speaking of concepts and theories of art in Islam we have explored several aesthetic theories: (1) the Neopythagoreanism of the Brethren of Purity, whose notion of beauty is based on the musical and geometrical order of the universe; (2) the Neoplatonism of al-Tawḥīdi’s circle in Baghdad, whose multiform concept of beauty tends to see any unified and harmonious work as an overcoming of nature; (3) the most characteristic and most often discussed view in Arab-Islamic culture, which understands beauty as a brilliant integration of individual elements to form a perfect whole, whether in textiles, geometry, calligraphy, goldsmithing, poetry, music, or architecture; (4) and concepts of imaginative representation and mimesis developed by Eastern and Andalusi falsafa. We have witnessed these ideas increasing in complexity up to the point where Ḥāzim al-Qarṭājannī brought together all the terminology generated by the Arabic rhetorical tradition and falsafa, especially from al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā; his aesthetics unites
the idea of harmony in the decorative arts (as a whole made up of repeated elements) with the Arabic version of Greek mimesis and the concepts of light and reflectivity. In the preceding pages we discussed all these ideas of beauty in direct relation to the definition of the arts and allied subjects, such as aesthetic pleasure and the connection between the arts and Islamic religious morality. While in succeeding chapters we shall mention some details of all these, we will now focus on the definition of beauty itself, which tends to move beyond the arts and enter the sphere of ethics, theories of perception, and metaphysics. We shall return to certain authors whose concepts art we have already examined, turning now to their ideas about beauty and their theories of aesthetic perception, while delving deeper into the work of other thinkers whom we have mentioned only in passing. We shall explore Ibn Ḥazm’s aesthetics based on fiqh, morality, and his theory of love; the metaphysical views of Ibn Bājja and Ibn Ṭufayl in dialogue with al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā, and falsafa in general; Ibn Rushd’s reframing of aesthetics based on Aristotelian rationalism; Ibn al-Haytham’s optics; al-Ghazzālī’s mystical theology; Ibn Khaldūn’s remarks on artistic beauty; and finally the thrilling and deeply Sufi aesthetics of Ibn ʿArabī, which inverted and reimagined the symbols and concepts of an entire culture. All this will allow us to appreciate the fundamental character of Arab-Islamic aesthetics in al-Andalus: its constants, its limitations, and its individual features in relation to the Arab-Islamic thought of the East.

3.1 Theory of Knowledge and Definition of Beauty in the Thought of Ibn Ḥazm of Cordoba

Ibn Ḥazm’s views on aesthetics, unlike those of classical Arab writers, have been studied closely by contemporary scholars. They are multidimensional, encompassing a theory of perception and knowledge that is intimately connected to his theology and theory of language, an interesting definition of the various degrees of beauty, and a related concept of spiritual beauty that also involves his theory of love. On the latter subject, this faqīh devoted to the sciences of Bayān finds common ground with Neoplatonism. This last circumstance perhaps prevented the Arab scholars Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī and Sālim Yafūt from discussing Ibn Ḥazm’s aesthetics, since it was his rationalist stance that sparked their interest. Other historians, like Henry Corbin, have ignored his rationalism and his theory of knowledge entirely in order to concentrate on his Platonism. A study of his aesthetics will clarify both the

1 Al-Jābirī, al-Mashrūʿ al-thaqāfī; Yafūt, Ibn Ḥazm.
2 Corbin, History 226-7.