
This is no doubt the most serious attempt up to now to present the three most important literatures of the Near and Middle East, Arabic, Persian and Turkish, within a comparative framework. It is one of the two dozen volumes of the Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft describing mainly European literatures from Antiquity to the present day. Non-European literatures have a small but assured place in this plan; volumes on East Asian and Ancient Near Eastern literatures are companions to the Oriental Middle Ages being reviewed here.

As is frequent in such cases, decisions about the scope and organization of the volume have been taken by different people. The term "Orientalisches" in the sense of "Near and Middle Eastern" Middle Ages, rather than "Islamic" Middle Ages, was one which the volume's editor, Professor W. Heinrichs, was asked to work with. As a result, not the coming of Islam, but the rise or re-emergence of indigenous Middle Eastern languages and cultures in the later Roman empire are taken to determine the beginning of the period. The onset of European penetration of the area, most obviously in the Arab world and India, would have been the most satisfactory moment to conclude it, but since space was restricted, the limit was fixed at around 1500, the time of the rise of the last great Muslim empires.

The book's contents fall into several sections: the intellectual and literary history of the pre-Islamic Middle East; the central texts of Islam, Islamic eschatology and legends, followed by an excursus about Islamic influences on Dante; the poetic forms of qaṣīda, ghazal, the epic and the quatrain; the literature of adab and ethical writings; the use of conceits in Islamic literatures; prosody; popular literatures, to which the muwashshah and zajal are appended; theories of love and the literature of Sufism; mediaeval Jewish literature in the Muslim world; Oriental influences on German literature. Most of the authors of the contributions are German or Swiss by origin, but one Dutch and four American scholars also participated in the enterprise.

A book like this calls forth responses on two levels, that of the individual contributions and that of the concepts underlying the plan of the whole. The different chapters are inevitably uneven in quality, but they mostly provide competent and coherent accounts of the subjects to which they are devoted, within the limits imposed by each author's understanding of the nature of the study of literature and the aims of this volume. Some, especially those covering topics on which a considerable amount of research has been done, concentrate on description, while others are more orientated towards theoretical questions and problems. The chapters on the popular literatures are a case in point in the latter category, and they raise some extremely interesting issues, not least the question to what extent a distinction should be made between "elite" and "popular" literature.

Among the treatments of more familiar subjects, many are excellent. The presentation of Quran and hadith (William A. Graham) covers not only their origin, history, content and theological significance but also their style and literary form, and all this in twenty lucid pages. The discussion of ethical writings (Dimitri Gutas) not only enumerates the principal genres, such as

Journal of Arabic Literature, XXIV
wisdom literature, popular philosophical ethics and mirrors for princes, but traces them into the Ottoman period; it also demonstrates the link between ethical positions and specific politico-social conditions. Benedikt Reinert examines the quatrain not only in its Persian, but also in its Arabic and Turkish manifestations in a masterly survey which establish the place of this short form in the overall system of poetic genres. Hartmut Fähndrich's analysis of *adab* and its reflection in literature marks a clear advance on the earlier work of Nallino and Pellat, and is more rooted in social reality than Bonebakker's study of the term. In the most original contribution to the volume, conceits in Islamic literature, Benedikt Reinert traces the emergence and development of this approach to literature and reality, and transcends the boundaries of written expression in its literary form to discuss calligraphic conceits. Given the place of writing, and especially calligraphy, in the culture of the Muslim world, such an unusual development is thoroughly justified.

A few contributions are disappointing. The survey of Islamic legends and Iranian mythology, very misleadingly referred to as *Islamic mythology* (Wheeler M. Thackston), is generous with quotations but scarcely goes beyond this elementary presentation of texts. The discussion of love theories (J. Christoph Bürgel) devotes far too much space to love poetry, and ignores some fundamental books on the subject, for instance al-Washsha'ī's *Kitāb al-muwashshā*. The investigation of Oriental influences on German literature (Annemarie Schimmel) suffers from a lack of methodological rigour; questions such as why German writers were so attracted to the Persian ghazal but not to the epic, unlike Matthew Arnold who borrowed from the *Shāhnāmeh* for his *Sohrab and Rustam*, or why it was Persian, rather than Arabic or Turkish, literature which appealed to them are not addressed.

As far as the general plan of the volume is concerned, the decision to begin the period in the first centuries A.D. is very welcome. Anyone who works through Carsten Colpe's detailed surveys of the cultural and intellectual history of the centuries preceding Islam will be cured for ever of the temptation to make comparisons between Arabic and Greek learning and literature which ignore the developments in between. The end of the period is far less felicitous; it is certainly artificial when applied to Turkish literature, since some of the most important developments—the full integration of ghazal and qasida in the literary scheme, the substitution of prose for poetry as the medium of narrative—occur later. The time lag between the different literary traditions of the Middle East is an essential feature of them and should be accepted as such, even if it makes for a less tidy definition of the period.

The abandonment of the conventional approach to writing literary history is also a great advance. Orienting the reader towards the main literary genres and forms, and juxtaposing chapters on their manifestations in Arabic, Persian and Turkish encourages comparisons and leads to a better understanding both of the specific character of each tradition and of the processes of borrowing and transmission between them. And this idea can be carried further. One could imagine a presentation in which themes such as the relation between prose and poetry or the concept of originality could be treated in the different literatures; both the similarities and the differences would be extremely instructive. The three chapters on popular literature are already pointing in this direction, thanks to the theoretical issues they raise.

But such a thematically oriented presentation of literatures requires that all