THE EGYPTIAN MAWWÂL

Its Ancestry, its Development, and its Present Forms

One of many tantalising passages in al-Bayân wa t-Tabyîn comes in the context of the discussion of the superior eloquence of the Arabs, and proclaims the need to examine 'how the Arabs came to tailor measured tunes to measured verses, combining measured with measured, whereas non-Arabs distort words—now contracting, now stretching them—in order to fit them into the measure of the tune, so that they combine the measured with the unmeasured'. Alas, the ebullient but undisciplined author never gets round to elaborating or illustrating his statement, and one is left with little more than an indication—scarcely surprising in an age of tumultuous racial and cultural contacts—that a multiplicity of artistic traditions was forcing itself on the attention of the intellectuals. Any resulting cross-fertilisation was presumably resisted by Arab and Arabised intellectuals of al-Jâhîz's temper. It may nevertheless have played a part in the multi-rhyme experiments ascribed to Basâr b. Burd, Abû Nuwâs,
and other poets of renown; it may account for the appearance in Umayyad times of the *mutaqārīb* metre, soon integrated into ‘classical’ prosody; it may even have played a part in the emergence of the *gazal* genre in poetry. The role of Persians in the development of Arab singing has long been recognized. To what extent the popular literature of Arabic-speaking peoples was an amalgam of different lores and traditions can only be conjectured.

Indeed almost every aspect of this popular literature—its early development, its distinctive features, its extent, its local sources of inspiration as well as its reach across the Islamic world—must remain largely a matter of surmise. The attachment of the educated Arab to his language in its classical form has ensured that compositions in the colloquial have seldom been recorded or described. Verse fared even worse than prose in this respect, for whereas tales—like those of the *Arabian Nights*—were sometimes preserved once the language was recast in ‘grammatical’ form, metrical compositions did not easily lend themselves to such treatment; only now and then do they incidentally break surface in the written sources. The author of *al-Āgāni*, for example, relates with manifest distaste an anecdote about Ibrāhīm al-Mawsili (d. 188/804) which includes a couple of lines he was reputed to have sung when in his cups; they conform neither with classical grammar nor with classical scansion. Even if the story is apocryphal, it provides positive evidence that songs in the colloquial and at variance with the classical prosodic system were current in Iraq by the tenth century if not a good deal earlier.

Andalusian *zajal* is the first such form truly to emerge into the full light of literary history. From the 12th century at least it is sufficiently documented to make a serious study of it possible, and indeed much has been written on its prosody and its possible derivation from either Arab or non-Arab sources. Yet it is by no means unlikely that comparable forms were in use in other regions of the

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2 See Johann Fück; *ʿArabiya*, tr. C. Denizeau; Paris, 1955, pp. 82-5. Also Ibrāhīm ʿAlī Abū Ḥaṣab; *Tāriḥ al-ʿAdab al-ʿArabi fi l-Andalus*; Cairo, 1966, pp. 271-8.
5 Ibn Haldūn; *Mugaddimah*; Cairo, Tijāriyyah, n.d.; Ch. 5, Sec. 32, pp. 423-8.