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The Ancient's View of the Poet and Poetry

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The poet's position in society has always been much discussed throughout the ages and in all civilizations. Thus the poet is accepted and receives praise sometimes, but is rejected and banished from society at other times. The poet's oscillation between these two extremes has always existed and will exist, it seems, as long as there is poetry. However, these two contradictory attitudes towards the Poet and Poetry have never received complete consensus from the different classes of society. The absence of this agreement, no doubt, denotes the necessity of the poet's voice for some and its danger for others.

The aim of this paper, then, is to look at the poet's position in two of the oldest civilizations namely that of the Greeks and that of the Arabs. I will confine myself to the earliest stages of their literary heritages, to the first texts that came to us from these two civilizations. Thus in the case of the Greeks, I will survey the position of the poet and Poetry from Homer down to Aristotle. In the case of the Arabs, I will deal with the pre-Islamic age which lasted about two centuries before the appearance of Islam in the seventh century A.D.

This investigation of the ancients' view of the poet and poetry reveals the nature of this poetry which had a great impact on subsequent literary productions. Both the Greek and Arabic literary heritages have been used as indispensable sources for the Europeans and Arabs respectively. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that most themes and structures of poetry were laid down by these ancestors. Suffice it to remind ourselves that the Greeks knew different genres of poetry (1) which are still currently adhered to, and that pre-Islamic metres and structures of poems are still in vogue in the Arab world, to confirm this argument (2).

However, any student who attempts to deal with a literature written in a language s/he is alien to is likely to be confronted with some obstacles, the most important of these being the problem of translation. The difficulty of this problem lies in the fact that one is lost in the great number of translations provided for one single text. This is the case of some of the Greek texts which will be discussed in the following pages. The ultimate solution for this problem, then, is to choose from these translations those which are believed to be authoritative ones, such as Aristotle's *Poetics* by S.H. Butcher or Plato's *Republic* by John L Lewelyn Davies.

As I have already pointed out, my concern here is to look at the ancient Greek and Arabic outlooks to the poet and poetry. It seems that the best way of treating this problem is by bringing in these two outlooks together under some major headings so as to see the differences and similarities involved in these two views. Under the first heading, then, I will look at the ancients' view of the poet and poetry as it is revealed through the name given to the poet by both the Greeks and Arabs.

Under the second heading "The poet and the role of festivals", I will try to examine the nature and aim of the festivals that were organized both in

(1) Tragedy and Comedy, it should be pointed out, were considered by the Greeks a genres of Poetry

(2) For a confirmation of this argument, see "Litterature de la Grèce Antique", *Histoire des litteratures*, Vol. I (Paris : Gallimard, 1977), p. 136 & 166. See also Badawi Tabana, *The Arab's Suspended Poems* [in Arabic] (Beirut : Dar Attakafa, 1974), p. 4.

Greece and in the Arabic Peninsula for poets and their works. The third heading is "Poetry and imitation". Here, I shall see the reason why much importance was given to the ancient poets and to the function of their poetry within society. In the final heading stress will be laid on the association of poetry with the supernatural, along with the similarities and differences between the Greek and Arab views concerning this point.

1. The "poet" : a name revealing society's view

An investigation in the name given to the poet in ancient Greek and Arabic societies yields some basic differences which reveal, as it were, two different views of the poet and poetry. The Greeks named the poet "maker" whereas the Arabic name was, and still is, *Ashaair*, that is "that who knows by instinctive perception" (3). The difference, then, is obvious and striking between these two titles in the sense that the Greek name stresses "making or creating" and the Arabic one emphasizes 'knowing'. Our concern here is to look at the nature of these two names in connection with the general view as it was held by these two societies.

The first remark that deserves attention is that the word "maker" was not explored by the ancient critics. Although Aristotle was the first critic to mention the word in chapter I in his *Poetics* (4), he did not explore its origin or its meaning. We do not know, for example, who was the first thinker to give this name to the poet, nor do we get an answer to the question of why the poet was called a "maker".

As an answer to the first question, we could say that since this name was the title by which the poet was known and agreed upon by all the members of society, it is perhaps wise to believe this very society to be the originator of the name. It seems, however, that the question of the nature and meaning of the

(3) See J.M. Cowan ed. *The Arabic-English Dictionary* (New York : Spoken English Service, Inc., 1976).

(4) See Chapter I In *Poetics*. Trans. S.H. Butcher in his *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (new York : Dover Publications, 1951).

title is more important than that of who created the name for the first time. The importance of this question lies in the fact that it tells us a lot about the poet and his/her art.

According to Sir Philip Sidney this title given to the poet "cometh of this word poiein, which is, to make..."⁽⁵⁾. In an attempt to illustrate the meaning of the term under discussion ⁽⁶⁾, Sidney observes that "there is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object..."⁽⁷⁾. After giving an evidence of the dependence of some practitioners such as the astronomer, the lawyer and the philosopher on nature for their arts, Sidney reminds the reader that

*Only the poet, disdainng to be tied to any such subjection,
lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in
effect another nature, in making things either better than
nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never
were in nature... So as he goeth hand in hand with nature,
not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts but
freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit.*

A careful study of this passage yields a considerable explanation of the word "maker". Sidney tries to convey the poet's freedom from the "subjection" to nature. The poet, according to him, is not "tied" to nature because s/he attempts to create something better than what it actually provides for the seer, or again and more importantly, because s/he invents completely new pictures and worlds which transcend the works of this nature. All this the poet achieves thanks to his/her invention or to his/her imagination.

(5) Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* ed. G. Robinson (Bloomington : the Bobbs-Merill Company Inc., 1979), p. 12.

(6) It is interesting to point out that Sidney was the first English writer to try to explain the meaning of the name "maker".

One could say that "imagination" is in fact the clue to the explanation of the term "maker". It is the power of his/her imagination that allows the poet to transcend nature and create other worlds which in their turn appeal to the imagination of the reader or listener. In this sense, then, the poet is a maker of new forms and worlds, and it is this fact which probably made the Greeks give him this name.

In his "Preface" to his translation of Homer's *Iliad*, Pope also stresses the importance of imagination in Greek poetry. In his attempt to demonstrate Homer's greatness, Pope explains that "he (Homer) opened a new and boundless walk for his imagination, and created a world for himself, in the invention of fable"⁽⁹⁾. Thus referring to this maker whose poetry is the first to come to us, Alexander Pope mentions three words - "imagination", "created" and "invention" - which mean nearly the same and denote the reason why the poet was believed to be a "maker".

Although Aristotle alluded to the name without further elaboration, we have to acknowledge that this critic's various and interesting points about Greek poetry reveal the significance of the name in the Greek context. When Aristotle says that "Art finishes the job when nature fails" ⁽¹⁰⁾, he tries to convey what Sidney calls "making things... better than nature bringeth forth" in the passage quoted above. These two assertions by both critics in fact purport the same view because in order to "finish" what nature has failed to achieve, the poet has to create, that is s/he has to use his imagination.

However, it is in his *Poetics* that Aristotle conveys more clearly this idea of imagination which explains the word "maker" and its function in the Greek outlook. In one of his important definitions of poetry, Aristotle says that the poet should delineate or imitate "things as they ought to be"⁽¹¹⁾. It is this

(7) Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, p. 13.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 14.

(9) Alexander Pope, *Pope's Homer's Iliad* (London : Milner and Sowerby), Preface, p. VII.

(10) Quoted in William K. Wimsatt & Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism A. Short History*, Vol.1, (London : Routledge & K. Paul, 1970), p. 26.

(11) Aristotle, *Poetics*, Trans. S.H. Butcher, Ch. XXV.

"ought to be" which seems to be relevant to our argument because here again if the poet is to imitate something which "ought to be" s/he has to use his/her creative ability, that is his/her imagination. In this sense the poet creates things which do not exist and in this act he is a maker.

Imagination, however, is not the only aspect which makes the poet take this name. The poet creates and invents new situations in his/her imitation of human nature, but s/he also invents the language with which s/he conveys these newly born situations and experiences. Thus another kind of creation is added to the act of imagination and which contributes, no doubt, to our understanding of why the poet was called a "maker". It is the creation of the medium of expression.

It is then images, similes and metaphors, among other devices, which enchant the reader/listener and make him/her recognize that the poet's language is different from that used in day-to-day life. In this sense, then, the poet not only invents new worlds but creates the language with which s/he conveys these worlds as well. Homer, for example, is believed by Pope to have

*derived that harmony which makes us confess he had not
only the richest head, but the finest ear, in the world...
whoever will but consult the tune of his verses, even without
understanding them... will find more sweetness, variety,
and majesty of sound than in any other language or poetry* ⁽¹²⁾

The Arabic poet seems to be distinguished for his knowledge and perception. As we have already pointed out, the Arabs called the poet *Ashaair* or "that who knows by intuitive perception" ⁽¹³⁾. But here again, we are confronted with the question of who was the first to give this title to the poet. Among the first Arabic critics who seem to have given much attention to the name is Ibnu Rashiq (died 1085 A.D.) when he explained that "the poet is

(12) Alexander Pope, *Pope's Homer's Iliad*, Preface.

(13) See this definition in the *Arabic-English Dictionary*, ed. J.M. Cowan, op. cit.

called so because he feels what nobody else can feel" (14). Hence the passive voice used in this statement (the poet is called so) allows us to say that here again it is society as a whole which is the originator of the name.

On another occasion, Ibnu Rashiq explains that

All speech was in prose but as the Arabs needed singing and expressing their values through song... they created metres for speech and when this was achieved, they called it poetry because they felt it, that is became conscious of it (15)

As it appears, these lines express the other meaning suggested by the word "feel" which is "being conscious of, or knowing". In what follows we shall see how these two meanings work together in Arabic poetry and how the Arabic view of the poet and poetry is expressed through the name *Ashaair*.

A cursory reading of pre-Islamic poetry - especially those poems which are called *Al-mualaqat* (16) reveals the fact that their opening lines express what the poets felt about life around them. Indeed, the seven poets who produced these - poems Imru Alkais, Tarafa, Zuhair, Labid, Am'r Ibn Kalthum Antara and Al Harith Ibn Hiliza - all began their poems by what is called *Al-Atlal*, that is by brooding over the relics of their lovers' houses in order to express their love for them and their strong desire to meet them again.

By brooding over these relics, these poets were in fact concerned with an existential question (17). They were aware of life with all its aspects as they were also conscious of death and its pursuit of Man. In other words, their poetry tried to express human experience as these poets saw it. But what is important for us here is that from the opening lines we are introduced to what

(14) Ibnu Rashiq, *Al-Umda* [in Arabic] (Beirut : Dar Al-Jil, 1972), p. 116.

(15) Ibid. p. 20.

(16) This name *Al-mualaqat* was used to denote the best poems which had been chosen by the Arabs and were (the poems) hung on the walls of the Caabah, at Mecca. "The hung poems" were seven in number, written by seven different poets.

(17) For a detailed comment on this point, see Ibrahim Abdurrahmane, *Problems of Poetry in Arabic Criticism* [in Arabic] (Beirut : Dar Al-awda, 1981), p. 115-20.

the poet felt about life before getting into his feelings as a lover. In this sense, then, one could say that the name given to the Arabic poet had two meanings according to his feelings, as Ibnu Rashiq's definition suggests. First, what he (the poet) felt about what was going on around him, that is his awareness of the different aspects of human experience and of life in general. Second, his feelings as a lover of the opposite sex and of nature in the largest sense of the word.

Concerning the first meaning suggested by the name given to the poet, the best example is to be found in Tarafa who distinguished himself by his philosophical observations about life and death. In his *mualaqa'* (poem) he says :

*I see death tarrying among men the generous and kind
And selects the best of the miser's fortune
I see life a treasure reduced every night
And as days are reduced time fades away (18)*

As to the second meaning of the name, a cursory reading of pre-Islamic poetry reveals the dominance of the poet's love feelings in this poetry. Indeed, all the above-mentioned poets tend to mention their lovers' names in their poems and express their longing for them. It is no exaggeration, then, to say that Arabic poetry is mostly lyrical. The Arabic name, as we have argued, involves two meanings : the poet is believed to have the power to know by intuitive perception as he is also able to express his emotions and feeling in his poetry.

Thus far we have tried to look at the Greek and Arabic views of the poet and poetry as it is revealed through the name that was given to the poet in both civilizations. The Greek name "maker", we have argued, stresses creation by

(18) This is my translation of the original lines which read.

عقيلة مال الفاحش المتشدد	أرى الموت يعتام الكرام
وما تنقص الأيام والدهر ينفد	ويصطفى

For the original text, Badawi Tabana, *The Arab's Poems*, op.cit., p. 124.

dint of imagining and language, whereas the Arabic name emphasizes the poet's feelings. These names, we have tried to demonstrate, were compatible with the spirit of poetry that suffused the poetical production in these two literary heritages. Thus the name "maker" was in accord with classicism which prevailed in Greek poetry of the period we are concerned with, and the Arabic name *Ashaair* expresses the lyricism of Arabic poetry.

However, it should be pointed out that although the poet's feelings are not suggested by the name given to the Greek poet, these feelings are not absent from the poetical works of the period. It is true that Homer is praised for his objectivity by Aristotle (19), but this does not mean that the Poet composed his poetry without having felt what he produced. Another important fact is that his symbolic expressions, no doubt, move the reader or listener. Hence the Greek poet is a maker who feels what he creates.

The same argument could be used in dealing with the Arabic name. The poet was not only concerned with his feelings, he was also a "maker" in the sense that he too, like the Greek poet, created worlds by dint of his imagination and invented also the language with which the introduction his readers or listeners to his poetry. These two arguments, then, lead us to believe that these two names - the Greek and the Arabic - do not express every side of the poet but stress only the prevailing aspect of his poetry. But since our aim is to look at the Greek and Arabic view of the poet as it is revealed through his name, let us emphasize again the fact that the Greeks looked at their poet as a "maker" whereas the Arabs saw theirs as "that who knows or feels". Hence according to these two different views, Greek poetry seems to be an art more than anything else, whereas Arabic poetry is mostly an expression of feelings. It is, then, obvious that the first kind of poetry is classical in its spirit while the second is primarily romantic (20). Let us now consider the role of ancient festivals and how the ancients' view of poetry is revealed through them.

(19) Aristotle says that "Homer in all respects has the special merit of being the only Poet who rightly appreciates the part he should take himself. The Poet should speak as little as possible in his own person..." See his, *Poetics*, Ch. XXIV.

(20) By "Romantic" I mean that the Arabic Poet is primarily concerned with his personal feelings in both senses that I tried to demonstrate above.

2. *The poet and the role of festivals*

The poetic gatherings which were organized in both civilizations are likely to reveal the Greeks' and the Arabs' attitude towards the poet and poetry. History tells us that these meetings were held each year to celebrate the poets and choose the best among their productions. Thus the aim of these gatherings was not only celebration but evaluation as well. We shall look at the Greek festivals and see whether there were any criteria by which poetry was evaluated and discuss the same problem in the Arabic festivals.

The poet is among the first subjects to win the kings' favor and be accepted in their palaces regardless of his social class so long as he excels in poetry. Palaces, then, could be considered as a part of these festivals that the poet took part in. Homer tells us in the *Odyssey* (1.325-8) that "the famous bard (aoidos) sang to them, and they sat quietly listening" (21). This happens in Odysseus palace while the king - Odysseus - is absent. But the importance of these quoted words lies in the fact that they denote the presence of the poet in ancient Greek palaces, which was an honor for the poet and for his poetical productions.

However, it should be noted that it is the function of the poet within these palaces which secured him this position. He was expected to give pleasure to the aristocratic audience and at the same time to serve as a kind of propagandist for this very aristocratic class. When Odysseus comes back safe to his palace and wants to kill Phemius the bard, the latter implores him for mercy and says "I am fit to sing at your side as at a god's" (22, 324 FF). These words, no doubt, reveal the importance of the poet in making public the deeds and words of ancient Greek heroes and kings.

In one of his interesting observations about the origin of poetry, Thomas Peacock illustrates this point of the connection of the poet with the palace by stating that.

(21) See this passage in D.A. Russel & M. Winterbotton, éd. *Ancient Literary Criticism* (London : Oxford Uni. Press, 1972) p. 1.

The successful warrior becomes a chief, the successful chief becomes a king : his next want is an organ to disseminate the fame of his achievements and the extent of his possessions ; and this organ he finds in a bard... (22)

Thus poets were in close connection with the palace from the earliest stages of human civilization. The poet was honored because of the two functions he fulfilled within these palaces. However, the public festivals that were held in ancient Greece seem to be more important than these palaces since they brought poetry down to ordinary people.

The first king to establish the Dionysiac festivals in Greece was Peisistratus in 535 B.C. c. ca. Peisistratus is believed to have given much attention to literary productions. In these festivals he revived the Homeric epics and collected them, and established also the poetic contests in which the Greek tragedies were presented and put to the test for the first time (23). The role of this festival was of course important in the sense that poets were encouraged to do their best in their poetic productions, especially that these competitions involved considerable prizes. Hence the Greeks saw poetry not only as a thing to be enjoyed but to be evaluated as well.

However, little is known about the criteria by which this poetry was judged. Here again we have to rely on Aristotle who mentions some of these criteria even though these are not necessarily based on what was going on in the Greek festivals. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle states that.

In examining whether what has been said or done by some one is poetically right or not, we must not look merely to the particular act or saying, and ask whether it is poetically

(22) H.F.B. Brett Smith, ed., *Thomas Peacock the Four Ages of Poetry* (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1972), p. 4.

(23) For a detailed analysis of this point, see Ahmed Et-man, *Greek Poetry [in Arabic]* (Kuwait : Aalam Al-maarifa, 1984), p. 202.

good or bad. We must also consider by whom it is said or done, to whom, when, by what means or for what end ; whether, for instance, it be to secure a greater good, or avert a great evil (24)

Along with this competition of poets, there was also another organized for rhapsodies. In Plato's *Ion*, we learn that Ion of Ephesus has been to Epidaurus in Asclepieia where he won the first prize as a rhapsode (25). Hence the importance given to the way poetry was delivered even though the deliverer was not necessarily the originator of the poetry s/he recited. In the same dialogue, we are told that there were other festivals or competitions such as that in Panathenaea (26). This is important because it denotes the fact that these festivals were scattered all over Greece with the aim being the same : to rejoice in and evaluate Greek poetry, which secured fame for the celebrated poets.

Now almost all that has been said about the Greek poets and their relation with palaces is true of the Arabs. The best and famous among Arabic poets were accepted and catered for by the kings and nobles of the Arabic peninsula. As a matter of fact, these poets were expected to compose panegyric poems praising these kings and nobles. Al-hira and Al-ghassassina were two kingdoms that received and encouraged poets and their productions. Among the Arabic poets who won the favor of Al-ghassassina was Labid, who was closely connected with their palace (27), whereas the poet Al-harith Ibn Hiliza was known to be closer to the kings of Al-hira (28).

Arabic poetry, then, prospered and was honored within these palaces because of the functions the poet was supposed to fulfil : to give pleasure as

(24) Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ch. XXV.

(25) Plato, *Ion*. Trans. in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D.A. Russel and M. Winterbottom, p. 39.

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 39.

(27) Badawi Tabana, *The Arab's Poems* [in Arabic], p. 156.

(28) *Ibid.*, p. 192.

well as fame to the owners of these palaces. As Badawi Tabana explains, the role of these palaces was also important in making these poets known to subsequent generations and in preserving their poetry (29). But the importance of the public festivals organized throughout the Arabic peninsula is greater than that of palaces in revealing the attitude towards the poet and poetry.

The most popular among these festivals was the one held at Ocaadh in the south of Arabia. Ocaadh in fact was a kind of market where various kinds of merchandizing were done among different tribes-which used to buy and sell different products. The meeting of these tribes was an opportunity for their poets to display their poetical talents, and this shows the importance the Arabs gave to their poets and poetry. By presenting their poems in this literary gathering, Arabic poets wanted their poetry to be celebrated and evaluated as well.

In order to distinguish between "good" and "bad" poetry, some umpires were chosen. The best know of these umpires was Anabigha Adubiani, who was one of the most renowned poets and a connoisseur of poetry. He used to sit in a leather-tent and listen to different poets and then pass on his judgement on the poems (30). Rhapsodies also used to attend these meetings in order to learn the trade and memorize poems which were judged the best and recite them.

It is likely that the poems Al-mualaqat had gone through this process of evaluation in Ocaadh before they were chosen to be hung on the walls of Caa-bah, as Said Al-Afghani believes (31). Thus Arabic poets had the opportunity to be known and appreciated beyond the limits of their own tribes thanks to this festival and to the poetic contests it involved.

(29) Ibid., p. 192.

(30) See Said Al-Afghani, *The Arab's Markets before and during Islam* [in Arabic] (Damascus : Dar Alfik'r. 1960), p. 277)

(31) Ibid., p. 340.

However, the criteria used to evaluate poetry in this festival remain unknown. The Arabs had surely critical views with which they evaluated their poetry, particularly those umpires who had to give evidence whenever they accepted or refuted certain poems. But unfortunately, this criticism was lost and what remains is not enough to allow us to see clearly and discuss the nature of this criticism (32). Among the few critical observations of the umpire Anabigha that came to us, his criticism of one of Hassane Ibnu Tabit's lines(33). What is important in this criticism is that it reveals the fact that much attention was probably given to the choice of the right words and their order, among other aspects of poetry.

The other kind of festivals which reveals the great esteem that the poet enjoyed in the Arabic civilization was that organized within the tribe whenever a poet showed signs of poetic genius. As Ibnu Rashiq explains,

Whenever a poet distinguished himself by his poetic abilities within a tribe, the other tribes came to express their congratulations. Feasts were organized and women sang as they did in weddings... because he (the Poet) defended their honor and their noble descent, immortalized their outstanding deeds and made them known among the other tribes. What people enjoyed most was a newly born boy, a distinguished poet or a good horse. (translation mine) (34).

The Poet and Poetry were honored because of the functions they accomplished in the tribes that produced them.

(32) For a confirmation of this argument, see Ibrahim Abdurrahmane, *Problems of Poetry in Arabic Criticism*, p. 129.

(33) *Ibid*, p. 160.

(34) Ibnu Rashiq, *Al-Umada*, p. 65.

3. *Poetry and imitation*

The importance of the concept of imitation lies in the fact that it answers partly the question of why the poet and poetry enjoyed such a high esteem. However, it should be pointed out that since Plato coined the word in his Republic, imitation has been given many interpretations and has been taken both as an attack on and a support for poetry. Plato and Aristotle are the representatives of these two contradictory views respectively. We shall look at these two views and shall also see whether Arabic poetry is imitative or not, along with the function of the poet.

To elaborate the concept of imitation is beyond the scope of this paper. Our primary concern is to look at this concept in relation to the main theme we have been discussing so far : the ancients view of the poet and poetry. In one of the important passages in his *Poetics*, Aristotle states that

Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals beings that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons ; and no less pleasure felt in things imitated...

Next, there is the instinct for "harmony" and rhythm...(35). According to Aristotle, then, imitation is an essential part of poetry. It is not important only for the poet who imitates but also for the reader, or listener, who sees this imitation at work. Hence it is not surprising if it is considered as one of the causes of any poetic or artistic production.

It is imitation which gives pleasures to the poet and the audience because by imitation the artist tries to represent or imitate "men in action" in their

(35) Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ch. IV.
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relation to nature (36). It is this representation that gives pleasure "for the pleasure is not just pleasure in the object ; instead there is an inference that "this is that", so that the result is our coming to understand something" (37). Here lies the power of imitation in the Aristotelian sense, and this explains why human beings have always been pleased and enchanted by poetry and have given the poet the respect s/he deserves.

If we go back to Homer's *Odyssey*, we realize that imitation was recognized to be among the moving aspects of poetry from the early stages of human civilization. When Penelope says to the poet Demodocus, "Very beautifully you sing the fate of the Achaeans, their deeds and sufferings and toils, as if you were there yourself..." (38), she was perhaps suggesting what was to be called later on "imitation". The poet's greatness manifests itself in his power to represent Man in different situations "as if (s/he) were there". However, it should be remembered that imitation is not the only aspect that makes poetry pleasurable. There is also the language which is usually highly symbolic, along with feelings and imagination, as we have already suggested.

Thus, with Aristotle, the poet and poetry were highly esteemed through imitation. But with Plato it was this very concept that made him reject the poet. In his *Republic*, he states clearly that "we ought on no account to admit that branch of poetry which is imitative...", and later on he adds that "the imitator understands only the appearance, and not the reality", and so the poet's productions "are twice removed from reality" (39). Poetry, then, was attacked through imitation, which was, in the Platonic sense, achieved when the Poet used the first person "I", and then let another person or character speak for himself, but if he (the poet) narrated using the third person "he" this was no

(36) Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. II. as S.H. Butcher explains, "everything that expresses the mental life, that reveals a rational personality, will fall within this larger sense of "action". As to the word "nature", Butcher points out that "... nature in Aristotle is not the outward world of created things, it is the creative force, the productive principal of the Universe". See S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Arts*, p. 123 and 196 respectively.

(37) Aristotle, *Rhetoric in Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D.A. Russel & M. Winterbottom, p.134.

(38) *Ibid.*, p. 2.

(39) Plato, *Republic*, ch. X., Trans. John Lewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan (London : Macmillan, 1929).

imitation but mere narration (40). Thus Plato saw imitation in tragedy, comedy and to some extent in epic poetry. By this technique, Plato seems to suggest, poets make gods say things that render them base in the eyes of the audience, which he (Plato) could not accept. Like Aristotle, Plato agrees that poetry provides pleasure through imitation and this is what he is against. For Plato, pleasure is not allowed in his ideal state because of its bad effect on the zeal of his guardians. This argument leads us to discuss the different functions of poetry and see how the view of poetry is reflected in the attitude towards these functions.

Broadly speaking, the Greeks saw the function of poetry as being two-fold : to please and to teach (41). Plato acknowledges that poetry provides pleasure for the audience but he does not see that it can teach the values and ideas that he wants it to teach (42). The teaching of poetry is not valid in his ideal state because poetry - especially Homer's - brings men and gods down to the same level, and Plato wants this hierarchy to be respected.

It is on the point of pleasure that we detect a great difference between Plato's view and Aristotle's. While Plato condemns pleasure because his guardians may give vent to their feelings instead of using their reason, Aristotle believes that it is this very pleasure as derived from poetry that should make us realize the greatness of poets (43). However, it should be remembered that any reader of the Republic would not find Plato's attitude to poetry surprising in the sense that he treats poetry from a political point of view. In fact, it is the poet's freedom from different institutions which worries the statesman Plato : poets do not respect even sacred things such as gods. Hence the validity of the argument that the attitude to poetry depends on the socio-political position of that who attacks or advocates it.

(40) Ibid., ch. III. It seems that Aristotle agrees with Plato on this point. See his *Poetics*, ch. XXIV.

(41) The word "teach" is used to denote anything pragmatic about Poetry.

(42) Among Plato's contradictions is that he says at one time in ch. III : "on those points we may take a lesson even from Homer..." and quotes some lines from his epic, which shows that after all Homer does actually teach Plato something.

(43) For a confirmation of this argument, see s.H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Arts*, p. 206-7.

An instance of this attitude is to be found in Hesiod who came after Homer and in a different age. Hesiod's poetry is believed to be didactic and personal at the same time. But what is important for us here is that Hesiod is said to have competed with Homer in one of the poetic contests that were organized in Greece, and won the first prize. Hesiod's victory over Homer was due to the fact that the first was no longer concerned in his poetry with the aristocratic world that Homer depicted in his epics. Hesiod looked at life from the standpoint of a poor peasant who was struggling to survive amid the problems of society and so the poet dealt with reality more than Homer had done before.

Thus the first prize that Hesiod was given by the king Paneides was closely connected with the political situation of Greece during the seventh century B.C. At the time, Greece moved from the reign of kings to that of some lords who were scattered all over the country, establishing what was known as "oligarchies". But more importantly, these new "kings" needed total divorce from the past, its values, and literary genres⁽⁴⁴⁾. Hence the victory of Hesiod who exemplified this divorce in the literary field by deviating from Homer and his aristocratic tendencies, which shows the impact of the socio-political situation on the view of poetry at the time.

However, if we consider imitation in Arabic poetry, we notice that the latter is not imitative in the Greek sense. As noted above, Arabic poetry is essentially lyrical or personal in the sense that the poet is never absent from the poem. He expresses his feelings and his state of mind, but never brings in another person or character and lets him speak as Homer does or as the Greek tragic poets do. In this sense, Arabic poetry could be compared to the English romantic poetry of the nineteenth century since the concept of imitation ceased to be valid with the appearance of the romantic theory, as M.H. Abrams believes⁽⁴⁵⁾.

(44) For a detailed analysis of this historical background, see Ahmed Etman, *Greek Poetry* [in Arabic], p. 76-81.

(45) M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York : Holt, Reinchart and Winston, 1981). p. 81.

Arabic Poetry had various functions in ancient Arabic society. In his expression of his attitudes and wishes, the poet was believed to express those of his tribe as well. The members of the tribe were delighted by their poet's works and used them also as a kind of teaching. Zuhair, for example, was concerned with the war that broke out between the two tribes *Aabs* and *Dubiane* and composed his "*mualaqā*" in which he advocated peace between these two tribes. Hence the poet was respected for the wisdom expressed in his poem, which would also include some moralistic views about how behavior and interaction among the members of a tribe should be. Arabic poetry in fact is known to abound in proverbs which were intended to teach, and which have been used since these poets first mentioned them in their poems.

Because of these two functions - providing pleasure and teaching - the Arabic poet was generally respected and honored. The Arabs were delighted in their poetry thanks to its poetic technique which created harmony and rhythm ; as they were also taught by the poet whose words were taken for granted. In the ancient Arabic world an attitude such as Plato's towards poetry did not exist. But one could say that Islam's attitude may be compared to that of Plato in the sense that Islam too had a negative attitude towards poetry. This is not surprising because poets tend to deviate from any institutional restrictions, and Islam, as a new religion then tried to impose some of its restrictions on the Arabic poet ; except of course those poets who composed within a religious framework.

4. Poetry and the supernatural

In its early stages, poetry was perceived as a mysterious activity, and poets were looked upon as extraordinary human beings. Thus the poet and poetry were always associated with the supernatural. But this association involves at least two different views, one positive and another negative.

In the Greek outlook, three different viewpoints emerge concerning this association : that of poets, that of some critics, and that of society at large. It is by looking at these different standpoints that we could get a whole picture of the role of the supernatural in poetry as the Greeks saw it.

Homer, as we know, begins his epics with an invocation of the Muses. In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he implores the goddesses of poetry for help and inspiration. In the *Iliad*, Homer asks the Muses to inform and inspire him :

Tell me now, Muses who dwell on Olympus - for you are goddesses, you are there, you know everything, while we hear only repute and know nothing... (46)

The poet, then seems to believe that his success depends on these goddesses. From the start, the poet suppresses himself and lets the Muses be responsible for his poetic achievement. Thus the poet believed, and tried to make his readers or listeners believe, that it was the Muses that gave him inspiration, otherwise he would not have achieved what he actually did.

It seems that Homer's view about this divine inspiration affected the subsequent poets and their view of poetry as a thing inspired by the Muses. During the several centuries that elapsed between Homer and Aristotle, poets believed in this divine power and began their poems with an invocation, asking the goddesses of Poetry for help. Hesiod makes it clear that it is by the Muses that he should begin his poem (Theogony I-II, 21-34).

With the muses of Helicon let us begin our song. They dwell on the high and holy mountain of Helicon and dance on their dainty feet...

It was they who taught Hesiod once their beautiful song as he kept his sheep under holy Helicon. Yes, me, whom you hear, the goddesses spoke to unbidden,

The Muses of Olympus, the daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus :

"Shepherds dwelling in the field", they said, living beandals, greedy guts we know how to tell many lies that resemble the truth, but we know to tell the truth when we wish..."

*And they breathed divine song into me
That I might tell of the past and of the future, and they
commanded me to sing of the race of the immortal, pleased
Gods,
And always to sing of themselves, both first and last (47).*

Like Homer, Hesiod believed that poetry was a divine inspiration and that it was the Muses whom he met that "breathed divine song into" him. This confirms again the idea that the Greek poets believed in the supernatural and in the role of the gods in the poetic creativity and in making them almost prophets who could "tell of the past and of the future".

Pindar, too, saw poetry as a gift from its goddesses and goes so far as to consider himself a prophet of the Muses. In one of his poems, he asks "Prophecy, Muse, and I will be your interpreter (Prophateuso) (48). From these words we realize that Pindar, who appeared centuries after Homer, did not deviate from the tradition that the latter had established. This is not surprising since the Greeks believed in the power of the gods and depended on them for inspiration. The three poets quoted here reveal a general belief that poetry could never exist without help from the Muses.

Plato's view of poetry and the supernatural as expressed in his *Phaedrus* and *Ion* reveals that Plato, like all the Greeks, firmly believed in the relation of the poet with the gods. Accordingly, the poet is possessed by the Muses and that he "is a light, winged, holy creature, and cannot compose until he is possessed and out of his mind" (49). The description of the poet as "a light, winged, holy creature" makes us realize that Plato is expressing a different view of the poet from that expressed in the tenth Book of his *Republic*. It is undoubtedly this association of the poet with the gods that forced Plato to change his mind and acknowledge the "holiness" of poets and see them as "servants" and "interpreters" of these gods, although his attitude to the supernatural could be said to be negative.

(47) *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

(48) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

(49) Plato, *Ion*. See the text translated in full in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D.A. Russel & M. Winterbottom.

In his *Phaedrus*, Plato sees that this possession or divine madness, as he calls it, is essential to poetic creation. As he puts it in his reference to the possession by the Muses,

When this seizes upon a gentle and virgin soul it rouses it to inspired expression in lyric and other sorts of poetry... But if a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his compositions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman (50)

"Madness" perhaps sounds a negative word to be used for the poet, but this passage illustrates the point that Plato believed firmly in this association of poetry with divine forces, which led him "to respect" the poet as we have already suggested.

Like Plato, Aristotle looked at "poetry [as] a thing inspired" (51). This is not surprising since, as we have already explained, the poet was associated with the gods by all the Greeks. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle also mentions this divine madness and says that "poetry implies either a happy gift of nature or a strain of madness. In the one case a man can take the mold of any character ; in the other, he is lifted out of his proper self" (52). We realize, then, that Aristotle agrees with Plato on saying that at the moment of creation, the poet loses his control.

It is beyond doubt that Greek society believed in the relation of poetry with gods and that the Greeks respected their poets for this reason, among others. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope observes at one time that "Bards earn honor and respect among all men on earth, because the Muse has taught them the ways of

(50) Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, Trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1985), p. 48.

(51) Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, ch. III., Quoted by S.H. Butcher in his *Aristotle's theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, p. 396.

(52) Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. XVII.

song, and loves the race of bards..." (*Odyssey*, 8.477 FF)⁽⁵³⁾. This honor and respect that the poet received among the Greeks was sometimes accompanied by a kind of fear. When Odysseus intends to kill Phemius the bard, the latter reminds him that "you will suffer hereafter if you will kill a bard who sings to gods and men" (*Odyssey*, 226 342 FF) ⁽⁵⁴⁾. The idea which is implied by what Phemius says here is that poets are protected by the gods.

Nevertheless, whereas the Greeks believed in poetic inspiration from the Muses, the Arabs thought that it was devils which helped them in their poetic creativity. Like the Greeks, the Arabs were so dazzled by the magnificence of the worlds the poet created with his imagination that they associated him with devils. These devils, then, were believed to inspire the poets and dictate to them the different legends that they presented in their poems. The Arabs also believed that these devils lived in tribes in two important valleys : "*Wabar*" and "*Abkar*" and that it was in these valleys that poets used to meet them ⁽⁵⁵⁾.

Arabic poets also believed strongly that they were inspired by those devils. Hence every poet believed that he had one of these devils to inspire him. Thus *Imru Alkais'* devil was said to be "*Lafid Ibn Lahid*", *Anabigha's* was "*Hazer*" and the devil of *Al-aacha* was called "*Mishal*" ⁽⁵⁶⁾. *Hassan Ibn Tabit* also had his own devil which he mentions in two of his lines :

I have a friend from Ashaysibane

Sometimes I speak and at other times he does ⁽⁵⁷⁾

In fact, this poet is not the only one who mentioned his devil in his poetry- other poets, such as *Al-aacha*, mentioned their devils and acknowledged their dependence on them for inspiration.

What concerns us in this argument is that the Arabs, like the Greeks, associated poetry with the supernatural. By this association, both the Greeks and

(53) See D.A. Russel and M. Winterbotton, *Ancient Literary Criticism*, p. 2.

(54) *Ibid.*, p. 2.

(55) See Ibrahim Abdurrahmane, *Problems of Poetry in Arabic Poetry*, p. 179.

(56) See Ahmed Mohamed Al-houfi, *Arabic Life from Pre-Islamic Poetry* (Cairo : Dar Annahda, 1972), p. 478.

(57) This line is quoted by Ibrahim Abdurrahmane in his *Problems of Poetry in Arabic Criticism*, p. 179. (Translation mine).

the Arabs were in fact attempting to understand what was going on within the poet's imagination. For a modern reader, this association may perhaps appear odd, but we have to acknowledge that poetic inspiration has always been a mystery which Man has tried to understand. Even when psychoanalysis finds the answer to this question in the subconscious, it is just an endeavor which could be compared to that of the supernatural in the ancients' view. As a modern poet and critic says :

It has often been pointed out that the poet, in the act of writing, is almost never using only his conscious intelligence. It appears to him that his conscious... mind is augmented by promptings from the depths of his unconscious... (58)

What we have here is an attempt by a modern writer to find an answer to the experience that the poet undergoes at the moment of creation, and this answer he finds in the unconscious. But whether this answer is definite and accurate is a question which is always interesting to ask.

The least conclusion that we can draw from this investigation is that some views to the poet and poetry are universal. We have already pointed out that the Greeks and Arabs had similar views of many questions. It is this fact which makes us say that the response to poetry is universal. We have pointed out some slight differences in these two outlooks, but the prevailing element is similarity. In nearly all the four headings that we examined above, we tried to show that the poet and poetry were esteemed, because poetry in the first place is an attempt to understand life and come to terms with the universe. This is what the poet tried to provide for the ancients. But this importance given to poetry does not belittle the negative attitudes held by some such as Plato. Suffice it to remind ourselves that many critics and poets have found themselves forced to defend poetry in order to realize that this poetry has always had its enemies.

(58) Robin Skelton, *Poetic Truth* (London : Heinemann, 1978), p. 1.

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