SPENGLER'S THEORY AND MIDDLE EASTERN LITERATURE

In the introduction to his 'Iranische Literaturgeschiehte', J. Rypka mentions the difficulties which meet the European reader who tries to understand Persian poetry. On page 86 of this work, he refers to the »abstract nature of Persian lyric poetry». He even speaks of the »impossibility of comprehending Persian verse» (Rypka, p. 89). Evidently, such features are to be found in all the literatures of the Islamic cultural sphere. Remarkable, in fact, is the uniformity with which peoples differing completely in their traditions, racial origins and language embraced a common outlook upon being brought into contact with it after entering the Islamic fold. The Arabians and the Persians appear to be the originators of this tendency, as brought out in studies dealing with the relations between the Arabic and Persian literatures and the influences exchanged by them (Browne, Bertels, Ritter; see Rypka, p. 108).

The problem of what makes Arabic and Persian literatures different from our own can be approached in several ways. *One way* is to examine some given author representing another literary culture in a comparative light (hitherto, the choice has invariably been some European author). Comparisons along such lines usually carry a certain general validity, offering characteristic examples of the literatures considered as a whole. H.H. Schaeder used this approach in his work 'Goethes Erlebnis des Ostens'. The following passage summarizes the ideas expressed in the book about the common poetical ideal shared by Goethe and Ḥāfiẓ: »Ḥāfiẓ is characterized, according to Goethe, by 'rhetorical transmutation'... This is an attitude that does not result from direct experience but from stylization, indirection» (Schaeder, p. 108).

Wolfgang Lentz has studied what the old Goethe received from the Arab and Persian writers, notably Ḥāfiẓ, observing: »Goethe finds in Persian aesthetics, from underneath the surface of 'rhetorical transmutation', an unsystematic type of composition that links together various motifs based upon the associations between them» (Lentz, 'Goethes Noten und Abhandlungen zum west-östlichen Divan', Hamburg 1958, p. 152).

Common ground has thus been found in Schaeder's and Lentz's studies between an Eastern and European author. Analysis of their differences leads, through ultimate synthesis, to the end of mutual understanding between the two literary cultures.

The *second* approach is to study some limited feature of the Arabian and Persian literary culture with the object of demonstrating its relationship with a similar feature in a different literary culture. H. Ritter's 'Über die Bildersprache Niẓāmīs' (Leipzig 1927) deals with the metaphors of Niẓāmī and Goethe. A study belonging to this category has also been written by the German philosopher G. Misch (The Arabian Hero's Picture). Ritter's findings may be summed up as follows: The peculiarities of the Persian mentality manifest themselves clearly in any comparison with the European poet. In his study Ritter chose Goethe for such comparison and contends that in the German master the relationship between man and nature is communicated quite directly. The poet places the reader in the same situation with himself, and thus the phenomena of nature have the same impact upon the reader as they have had upon his own sensibility. When the Persian poet shatters the night, for example, into diverse phenomenal components, he is not really interested in the immediate emotional effect, which he might communicate to the subsequent reader; he does not seek to place his reader in the same condition. He reaches his goal via a detour. He transforms the world of the senses in so doing, eliminates the immediacy of the effect; it is only through the power of metaphor that he recaptures the experience. Thus he gains the freedom to discover novel phenomena, even of a fantastic nature, that cannot be correlated to reality. The German poet, by contrast, feels no compulsion to break with reality in favor of metaphorical devices for self-expression.

The *third* and widest approach is to analyze the aesthetic base of a given literary area, as Gustave von Grunebaum has done in his study 'The Aesthetic Foundation of Arabic Literature' (Comparative Literature, 1952, No. 4).

Another and still wider approach would be a comparative study of different literary cultures, which could be done on the basis of a general comparative study of cultures. Comparative studies of cultures have been carried out by Vico, Goethe, Oswald Spengler, Arnold J. Toynbee, Pitirim A. Sorokin, A. L. Kroeber, Alfred Weber, Berdyayev, Ortega y Gasset, Huizinga, Jaspers and others. In our own time, Spengler appears to hold a most important place among these scholars. It has been said (Y. Massa, 'Kulttuurin ongelma Oswald Spenglerin historian filosofiassa' (The Problem of Culture in Oswald Spengler's Philosophy of History),

Helsinki 1954, p. 319) that the other scholars have been able to bring in comparatively little that is new into the cultural problem dealt with by Spengler in his works — a problem which is engaging men's minds with ever greater urgency. This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that many contemporary critics, after picking Spengler's theory to pieces, have used his points of departure to cope with the same cultural problems and embraced his masterful thinking to buttress their own ideas, which frequently move on a far more superficial plane than his.

In an effort to comprehend matters seemingly inaccessible to the human mind, matters making for the differences between cultures, Arnold Toynbee rejected the methods of natural science and took recourse to myths.

Oswald Spengler, too, invented several prime symbols (Ursymbole), which from time to time ignite the flares of new cultures in different parts of the globe.

It might be sensible at this point to recall briefly some of Spengler's main ideas:

World history, properly speaking, is the history of various cultural spheres, or so-called high cultures. Including our own Western Culture, there have existed to date eight distinguishable cultures. That any given culture is born at all depends on chance; but once it has come into existence, its development, along with the development of all the life forms belonging to it, must conform strictly to certain laws — and even its temporal span is rather rigidly limited. All cultures are thus alike with respect to their formal structure: the same phases recur in them all. In this sense, it may be said, for example, that Alexander the Great and Napoleon, Cromwell and Mohammed are 'contemporaries' of each other, whereas Buddha, for example, in his own Indian cultural sphere represents a later phenomenon than does Mohammed in his particular sphere.

Internally, each higher culture signifies a common tendency, which, being based upon long-experienced mass psychology, penetrates all the facets of life. Everything receives a symbolic form according to the common tendency of the cultural sphere: popular customs, native costumes, music and other art forms, religion, political life. The different cultural spheres do not actually take impulses from each other. It has been said, for example, that Greek mathematics never got past integral numbers. The Greeks and other ancients nevertheless knew the 'more advanced' Babylonian mathematics — but did not regard it as important from the standpoint of their own conception of the world. We of the Western world have likewise probably left unutilized certain branches of

mathematics developed in other cultures but have closed our eyes to them and are not even aware of their existence. Positivistic historians have written that Western culture is the creation of the Germans, the English and the French. According to Spengler, on the other hand, this statement should be inverted to read: Western culture has created the Germans, the French and the English.

Different cultures are separated by different prime symbols, which, in Spengler's mind, are projected by the basic form of the concept of space held by each of the cultures. To us, the people of the Western, 'Faustian', culture, space extends into infinity in every direction, and its emptiness is for us a meaningful entity. To Greeks and Romans, the world was a solid body; they did not even recognize the existence of empty space between solid bodies. The prime symbol of Chinese culture takes the form of a path, that of the Egyptian culture a road in a different sense. The prime symbol of the Arabian, or Magian, culture is a world cavern or cave (Welthöhle). Spengler calls this culture Magian, which means the culture of the Persian Magi.

By the Magian culture Spengler means the culture that around the time of Christ's birth burst into existence throughout the area and eventually was brought into the fold of Islam. In elucidating the nature of the Arabian culture, Spengler, who was originally trained in natural science, makes use of the geological concept of pseudomorphism, which signifies that under certain external circumstances a mineral perforce receives a crystal form other than its internal structure would presuppose. The Arabian culture developed to a large extent in the area where the culture of antiquity had held sway. Its adherents thus for a long time failed to recognize the new culture and therefore imitated the old culture. The Byzantines, who belonged wholly to the Arabian cultural sphere, thought of themselves as existing in the culture of antiquity.

This explains in part the explosive force of the expansion of Islam. In Spengler's view, Islam represents the puritanical movement of the Arabian cultural sphere, having been born at the relative juncture during which the religious development of every cultural sphere correspondingly reaches the puritanical stage. Upon the appearance of Mohammed, everybody — the Arabian pagans, Monophysitic Christians, Manichaeans, Mazdaists — underwent the experience of being puritans. At the same time, the new Islamic movement released their consciousness from the bonds of imitation of antiquity.

In harmony with the prime symbol of the Arabian culture, the world or cave, the cupola is the typical form of the Arabian temple. The cupola

has no windows, and the roof is unnaturally gilded to differentiate the earth from the sky. Thereby is realized the original dualism typical of the Arabian cultural sphere. Dualistic thinking was likewise characteristic of early Christianity, which according to Spengler was an early Magian religion; it differs completely from the Gothic Christianity, which sprang from the Faustian culture. The most characteristic art form of antiquity was sculpture; to us of the Western countries, it is music; to the Arabs, it is the arabesque and the mosaic.

The world cave is also expressed in the concept of time and history. The Arabians had no historical sense as we Westerners understand it. Time begins and ends; that is why the idea of the creation and end of the world holds a central place in all the Arabic religions. To this is linked the idea of Providence, too, as well as the Arab's famous fatalism.

In order that we might be able to give Spenglerian interpretations to certain problems of Arabian and Persian aesthetics and criticism, let us chart those features that strike us as strange. These features certainly overlap, and evidently Spengler would not have hesitated to deduce them all from one source, or a few prime symbols in which 'the Magian soul' expresses itself. We hope that the application of Spenglerian concepts to the literatures of the mediaeval Middle East will give a unified idea of seemingly random features of these literatures, features listed here as separate.

1. According to Ibn Khaldūn, both poetry and prose work with words, not with ideas. The ideas are *secondary* to the words. The words are basic.
2. Sticking to the old subjects is a moral rule (v. Grunebaum). It is not proper to go outside the bounds of these subjects. Conservatism.
3. The predominance of the Koran in Arabian criticism.
4. Detachment from reality (Ritter).
5. A decorative tendency.
6. The presence of personal creative power and the concept of superhuman ecstasy in poetry, yet the denial of its existence in criticism to all except Mohammed.

1. The gap between words and ideas in Islamic criticism might be paraphrased as a gap between grammatical explanation and philosophical conclusions which are not made; between sorting out the devices and understanding aesthetically that which is behind the words, which belongs to the ideas. This gap seems to be unbridged in the

Arabic and Persian literary criticism. Even in those critics who have the broadest outlook, like Ibn Khaldūn and al-Ǧurǧānī, we find incipient perception of the importance of psychological or aesthetic understanding on the pages where the greates poet is admired as greatest liar.

The point is that Islamic *criticism* was inclined to say: poetic beauty lies in the poetic device; it was not concerned with what poetry could ultimately be or signify. In Greek and Roman antiquity such aesthetic implications of enjoying beauty were realized by, e.g., Plato. In Phaedrus he leads us to his highest heaven, which is identical with beauty, in the carriage of an ecstatic driver. In Longinus' critical views poetic ecstasy has an important role. According to Aristotle, the poet is an imitator of universals, not of accidental phenomena. He is the lucky one who fulfils the latent possibilities of nature.

In Islamic *poetry*, notably in the Sufistic poetry of various countries, there is a bold transcendence from everyday things to ecstatic visions. The contradiction lies in the fact that Islamic literary criticism never got rid of the habit of classifying the poet's tricks instead of following the poet in his quest for the boundaries of experience.

2. The symbol of the cavern-feeling can serve as an explanation of the enigma of why Arabic and Persian literature stuck with such amazing persistence to old literary motifs. The world-cave idea helps one to understand the dualism of the Islamic culture and poetry, as it helps one to understand the self-imposed restriction upon the power of a critic to go beyond stylistic devices. Let us have a closer look at Spengler's ideas about the world-cave as expressed by the basilica and the mosque.

»The Magian felt all happening as an expression of mysterious powers that filled the world-cave with their spiritual substance and he shut off the depicted scene with a gold background, that is, by something that stood beyond and outside all nature-colors. Gold is not a color. Colors are natural; but the metallic gleam, which is practically never found in natural conditions, is unearthly. It recalls impressively the other symbols of the Islamic culture, Alchemy and Kabbala, the Philosophers' Stone, the Holy Scriptures, the Arabesque, the inner form of the tales of the Thousand and One Nights. The gleaming gold takes away from the scene the life and the body of their substantial being« (Oswald Spengler, 'The Decline of the West', London 1961, p. 140).

In the sphere of Arabic and Persian literary criticism, this differentiation of poetic vision from everyday reality was followed through in a most splendid manner. Word and device constituted the sacred Mosque out of which the Arabian and Persian critic never came.

A catalogue of subjects suitable to the poet was in the mind of every poet and critic in this area. In his essay 'The Aesthetic foundation of Arabic Literature', v. Grunebaum (p. 325) notes how after the 11th century there occurred deviations from these subjects, with the result that a bad conscience followed. Likewise, he observes how adherence to old subject matter was a virtue in this area: »Similarly, literary forms or kinds are conceived as entities with a life of their own beyond their representation in the individual work and their preservation is invested with a certain ethical value« (v. Grunebaum, p. 331).

Conservatism and the catalogues of permissible topics, dīvān al-maᶜānī, provided the unnatural gilding of the basilica's cupola that cut off the landscape from the beholder-critic. Moreover, in an amazing way it not only cut the critic off from the poets' landscape but from his personality and emotional life, too. The Islamic critic is a rational being and knows nothing of the poet's raptures. Persian mysticism, which suffused all Persian poetry, represented a kind of revolt of a conquered people, whereby it forced a way outside the cavern-thinking and mocked it with its direct and emancipated pantheistic oneness with Divinity. This poet's mystic wine, which offered direct in lieu of indirect communication, was under a ban quite as much as was the drinking of material wine, and what is more important here, it never entered literary criticism. As v. Grunebaum points out (pp. 335—336), Arabian critics have nowhere analyzed aesthetic problems. They have had no interest in the beautiful as such. Why this should be so, puzzles even v. Grunebaum, although Neoplatonic thought was deeply rooted in Arabian culture.

3. The predominance of the Koran in Arabian criticism. As we will note in considering the ideas of al-Bāqillānī, the aim of his work was to demonstrate how the Koran is superior to earlier or later poetry as literature. The liberal-minded Ibn Khaldūn, who at many points is indifferent to the Arabian system of values, also joins this tradition and contends that the poetry after Mohammed is nobler than the pagan poetry because it has been influenced by the Koran. In Western countries the Bible has likewise been treated as literature, even as the model for all literature. This conservatism is twofold: it stuck to old genres, but we may also notice with what striking ease goof literary works became 'canons' or new genres. This brings to mind certain of Spengler's thoughts about words as matter, as substance, as visible divinity, a phenomenon that is typical of the Magian cultural sphere.

»Only so, can we realize with what eyes the religious man of this Culture looked upon his sacred book: in it the invisible truth has entered into a visible kind of existence, or in the words of John i, 14: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. *'Koran' means 'reading'.* Mohammed in a vision saw in Heaven treasured rolls of scripture that he (although he had never learned how to read) was able to decipher 'in the name of the Lord' « (Spengler, p. 296). This veneration accorded the Word of Allah and its visible appearance was so great that it was impossible to elevate any verbal productions to the same exalted plane even in a literary sense.

This is in direct contact with the fact that in the Arabian-Persian world there has been a strong tendency to begin to honor certain writings as 'Korans', which should later be imitated. Ǧalāleddīn Rūmī's Maṯnavī became the mystics' Koran, an honored literary scroll. Inasmuch as Niẓāmī had written five epic poems, innumerable poets in different Mohammedan countries wrote 'quintets', ḫamsa.

The world of the Islamic critic was not a dynamic process in which every new literary generation created its own new literary values. He rather looked upon the old forms of masterpieces as some priceless treasures, once happily found, sacred Talismans, which were not to be touched, let alone altered. The critic had the tendency to look upon literary mastepieces with the same rigidity as the religious man of this sphere looked upon his sacred book. This inclination to see literary canons everywhere did not come suddenly to the moslems. It has a long history, like the practice of the flowery arabesque, and in fact the cavern-feeling itself, dating back to late Greek antiquity.

4. Detachment from reality. We must fall back in this connection again on H. Ritter's study, in which he shows how Niẓāmī achieves realism only by metaphoric means, whereas Goethe's words are in direct relation to the phenomenal world. Adapting Spengler, we might say that Goethe's use of words is an example of the world-longing reflected by Western letters. The expression 'world-longing' may seem vague, even romantic, but a comparison between Arabic literature and the different stylistic periods of European literature, in which realism has always held a firm position, is bound to give it some justification.

Whereas the European poet experiences and depicts the natural world dynamically, the Persian poet experiences and depicts it optically — he gravitates strongly to decorative expression. Spatial, temporal and physiological relations undergo a fantastic transmutation, and this new order of things affects the Persian poet more strongly and more

'naturally' than our Western order of nature. This fantastic manner of perception is to be found also in the poetry of the Arabs from as far back as the time of the Abbasids. (Rypka p. 111). The word 'Magian' in connection with aesthetics has been used after Spengler not only by me but by literary scholars and art historians. I quote Wellek's and Warren's standard work, 'Theory of Literature' (London 1949, p. 211): »Magical metaphor is interpreted... as an 'abstraction' from the world of nature. Egyptian, Byzantine, Persian arts reduce organic nature, including man, to linear-geometrical forms, and frequently abandon the organic world altogether for one of pure lines, forms, and colors.» So much for the Islamic critic's detachment from reality.

5. The decorative tendency. The decorative tendency of Persian and Arabic poetry is closely linked with phenomena discussed in chapter 4, the detachment from reality of the poetry of this region. Spengler regards the arabesque as a typical basic phenomenon of Arabian art. »What is true of architecture is even truer of ornamentation, which in the Arabian world very early overcame all figure-representation and swallowed it up in itself.» The Magical metaphor is seen likewise as an abstraction from the world of nature. Typical features of the art of the Magian, or Islamic, sphere are, in Spengler's view, the cupolas of Mohammedan mosques, arabesques and mosaic ornamentation. In the verse and poetics of Islam, we can behold the domed ceiling of the mosque, which blocks off the vistas of the natural world and inhibits inquiry into the motives and effects of poetizing — into the problem of what makes a writer put words together and the problem of how his writings affect other people. Thus, the domed barrier acts as a roadblock to a study of the processes preceding and following the composition of a poem. The domed ceiling of the mosque is covered with the ornamentation of the mosaics and arabesques of Arabic-Persian poetics.

If we transfer Spengler's ideas about the arabesque to the field of Islamic poetry, we obtain a very well functioning concept, *the literary arabesque*. The most idiomorphic concept of Islamic literary criticism is precisely the arabesque, although it is not called by that name by the critics. The poetry of the Arabians and the Persians does not imitate nature, as does the poetry of antiquity or European poetry; rather is their typical vehicle of expression the taḫyīl, phantasmagoria. This concept was cultivated at its purest by al-Ǧurǧānī. The method of the phantasmagoria with the poet is the fantastic etiology, which means that the poet contends that phenomena have original causes, which he has not obtained from observations but which he has found out for himself. Here we come to an important property of phantasmagoria or literary

arabesque: it constitutes an independent entity, one that is detached from reality. The Arabian or Persian poem oozes and radiates knowledge of reality as it exists in the poet's life environment, but it is not communicated directly. A poem is a cupola full of flecks of color; it is experienced as a new entity. Those flecks of color begin to lead an independent life, and the pattern formed by them offers a new aesthetic experience, although that pattern represents but weakly the world beyond.

Important to the arabesque is also the fact that it is a closed system, which has neither a beginning nor an end. It may further be said that its every point is a beginning that might also be an end. We remember that, according to Spengler, imitative art has a beginning and an end, whereas the arabesque is a duration rendered to a visible density but torn loose from time. The arabesque is a phenomenon of space, not time. The arabesque is thus a closed sphere, like a cupola or the world cave. In 'Theory of Literature' by Warren and Wellek, we saw the following statement: »Ornament detaches itself as something which does not follow the stream of life but rigidly faces it.» This conception fits the literary arabesque and is plainly derived from Spengler, who has numerous pairs of opposites, polarities: becoming-become, time-space, organic-inorganic, life-death. In Spengler's view, there is something petrified, inorganic, about the arabesque.

Just as easily might we, however, see organicism as one characteristic of the arabesque: it is determined by its own internal laws, and not by any operating from the outside. It is fairly certain that all the great literary genres, such as Alexandrian poetry, pagan Arabic poetry, metaphysical poetry, etc., are organic, regulated by their own internal life. All that is needed is to go back from the realm of theory to the poems of Abū Nuwās or Ḥāfiẓ to become convinced of this.

The poetry of Iran was born with the silver spoon of flowery language in its mouth. Ritter points out, accordingly, that the Persian style originated in the court of the Abbasids, in the 9th century cosmopolis of Baghdad, where the Iranians, who had been subjugated by the Arabs, for the first time gained the status of master in the cultural sphere of Islam — at first, albeit, in the language of the Arabs. Thus, when the Iranian literature really broke down the language barrier toward the end of the 10th century, it was by then a couple of centuries old. Was it characteristic of the Iranian folk temperament? Ritter takes the view that the ornamental manner of using this language is a gradual outcome of the evolutionary process taking place in the same area, a process that, as he notes, was not affected by temporary changes of language.

Ritter shows the relationship between the late-Hellenistic literary style in the Greek language and the modern Persian literary style, which was seemingly born full-blown. Thinking along such lines would have satisfied Spengler and shows that the literary arabesque has some of its roots in Antiquity.

6. The presence of personal creative power and the concept of superhuman ecstasy in poetry, but its denial to Arabic-Persian literary criticism. The demand for concepts of superhuman ecstasy from men of letters sounds awfully romantic but it sounds awfully Persian too. What else do we meet in Persian poetry? In the poetry we meet with both the pride of authorship and the concept of the power of superhuman inspiration in abundance. The ghazal form required that the poet's name be mentioned in the last pair of lines of a poem. This demand in itself contains an expression of the poet's pride of authorship. Since the poems were disseminated without the protection of any copyright law, both in writing and by word of mouth, the poet wished, by mentioning his name, to identify the lines composed by himself and those by others. Pride of this kind shines through a large part of Ḥāfiẓ's ghazals as well. »Why should poetasters be jealous of Ḥāfiẓ? To please by subtleties of speech is the gift of God.«

According to v. Grunebaum, even the pagan Arabs held the idea that a poet was compelled to speak by this demon, 'ǧinn' or 'šaitān', but later it was not possible to set alongside the word from Heaven any human verbal art requiring special talent or inspiration likely, perhaps, to reveal ability comparable to the prophetic, after the manner of Plato or Longinus. Inspiration was the sole prerogative of Mohammed, although dozens of generations of poets in Persia, provided with the wings of Sufism, followed Mohammed on his flight to Heaven. We are not acquainted with a Sufistic literary theory that would give a poet leave to do so. According to Arabian literary criticism, the art of poetry might be learned by anybody at all. Our later citations from the works of al-Bāqillānī and Ibn Khaldūn indicate what the means were: the industrious memorization of poems written by others and the practising and imitation of the devices used in them in one's own writing. This denial of inspiration in criticism contains a dualism, which can be explained by the fact that Arabian literary theorizing never passed over from the awareness of 'We' to 'I'-awareness. »Whereas the Faustian man is an 'I' that in the last resort draws its own conclusions about the Infinite; the Magian man, with his spiritual kind of being, is only a *part of a pneumatic* 'We' that, descending from above, is one and the same in all believers« (Spengler, p. 291).

In European literatures, notably since the Romantic period, this worship of the poetic self, to which is connected the requirement of a personal style, one different from everybody else's, has been absolute in Western countries. Even in earlier European literature, it is possible to follow the development of this 'I'-awareness. That development has gone on through the eternal demands of constant stylistic change. In Europe the changes of fashion in literature have always been more dramatic than in the Islamic East. Even though the individual self, the 'I', and the requirement of individualism in aesthetics and criticism were invented only later, at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the 'I' was evident in literature earlier, too: J. Warton, G. Campbell, Thorild, Goethe, Schiller and others. In this connection, it is pertinent to recall Bergson's statement: »Nothing is more nearly unique than the character of Hamlet.«