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## Culture: A Global View

In a post-colonial world, the discussion of culture and its creative phenomena must perforce acquire a new pulse. When I went to America as professor of Arabic literature, I found, whenever Arabic culture was discussed, a solid wall of negation. Something was suddenly ignited. Replete with stereotyped ideas and images, the West needs to learn.

We began.

However, this remains an urgent battle. To present the best of your culture, its essence and its artistic and existential experience, was perforce to nullify the post-colonial mentality of superiority and introversion and go back to the roots of human creativity, to the essential worth of man. As I wrote to a colleague from Mali, Mamadou Diawara, spending, like me, a year of research as a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, "There is no prerogative in art. There is time and opportunity, time and discovery, time and knowledge, time and achievement ... There is no eternal monopoly on anything at all." Mamadou acceded.

The treasures of African art have recently been put on exhibition at the Royal Academy in London's Piccadilly. A European art critic, Waldemar Januszczak, writes, "It is an array of chronologically astounding, heart-stopping, beautiful, relentlessly interesting masterpieces, as thrilling a parade of great art as you are likely to encounter in London this decade... we have completely underestimated the sophistication of various African civilisations."<sup>1</sup>

Not only African civilisations. The colonial mind acted as if civilisation was born Western, revealed to humanity, in its fullness, only twice: first with the classical world of Greece and Rome, and second with the European Renaissance — totally ignoring the fact that the latter was a resurgence of knowledge and artistic endeavour greatly dependent on the fruits and achievements of an advanced Arab/Islamic civilisation that had illuminated the medieval world.

An amazing discovery I made recently, while studying various travel books, was how many medieval Muslim travelers and geographers took on the world with humility. From the Far East to the reaches of the Atlantic, to the heart of black Africa, they, the then bearers of a dominant civilisation that had brought together East and West and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sunday Times*, October 8, 1995, p. 12.

harmonised Arab, Greek and Persian in a magnificent amalgam, acknowledged the community of man wherever their feet touched. One of Islam's greatest virtues. This spirit was carried on to modern times, and Arab travelers of the nineteenth century, both Muslim and Christian, could speak of the "other", here usually the "European", with acceptance, and at worst with amusement.

How did it happen, then, that the many virtues of a civilisation that carried man through at least eight centuries of learning and artistic refinement have been reduced to fundamentalism and bellicose militancy? Or to the comic image of a camel, a desert and a cluster of women in a harem? The West chose to forget, and modern Arabs accepted. This is where the dilemma began, this is what lies at the roots of the present civilisational malaise: the fact that the colonised Arabs accepted; the fact that some of them bowed their heads and acquiesced, the fact that some of them had lost their vision of truth, and cut the cords of memory and took to silent.

Here is where one's duty becomes urgent, a responsibility in the service not only of one's own culture, but of the vast global culture which is served immediately one's own culture is served; the one is an integral part of the other. The world is speeding towards mutual cultural recognition, and it is meet that one should enter the race. The world is on its way to redeem itself, unwillingly and probably unknowingly, from past prejudices, but it must also be taken by the hand and guided to the sites of man's intellectual and creative conquests wherever they have been. What is buried, what has been obscured by ignorance, self-centredness or malice, must be unearthed to sight. Eventually, the world's biases will have to pale in the face of the great race to reach the final meeting place of cultures. Multiculturalism and interculturalism cannot allow the limited, egotistical, myopic vision of the colonial and post-colonial mind to prevail, not any more. No prejudice, no feelings of superiority will ever again endure the multitudinous discoveries of human ingenuity, which will impose themselves everywhere. "Everything will catch up with everything else," I wrote in my letter to Mamadou, "The world is going to turn over in the next century, and what has been will give way to what will be." The world has entered on a path of no return, and entrenched misconceptions and disparaging conjectures will only be the hybrid scion of a defective history of man. Mutilations of cultures can prevail no longer. No one will ever again find it possible, in the multicultural world of tomorrow, to name a book, on the representation of the "white man" through the artistic works of "native" Africans, "native" Australians, "native" American Indians and Eskimos, *The Savage Hits Back* (London: Lovat Dickson Ltd., 1937). What savage? The representations

Julius Lips offers are exquisite, and many belong to the high realm of art. What savage? Lips himself acknowledges the superiority of many of them. Speaking of a work by a native Australian artist, kept at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, he says, "Had [this work] been exhibited in an exhibition of expressionist art as a historical picture, it would perhaps have received a prize."<sup>2</sup> Throughout this handsome book, Lips often acknowledges the superior artistry of the varied examples he demonstrates, an artistry, however, which one does not and cannot connect with "savages". An eminently liberal German professor of the critical thirties in Germany, he expresses the noblest sentiments towards all human endeavour: "As a German university professor I felt it my duty," he writes, "to teach my students knowledge, neither Protestant, Catholic, nor Jewish, neither French nor German, but knowledge in its struggle towards the understanding and exploration of the truth."<sup>3</sup> In fact, this liberal spirit admiringly and affectionately envelops the various artists he calls "savages". It is apparent that his use of the word was not uttered in arrogance. The term felt natural to him, and was loosely used. It had not yet come under the stringent censor of later periods of the twentieth century, sensitised to the semantics of certain words born out of the eras of racist disparagement.

Many of the figures shown in this book seem of genuine artistic merit. The strongest impression they reflect is the bellicose nature of the white man's presence, and, from the expressions on many of the faces portrayed, its essential arrogance. They also show that this relationship, built mainly on force and on the superiority of weaponry, is the issue that preoccupies the minds of the various artists who "recorded their comment with censure, buffoonery, astonishment, ..." <sup>4</sup> At the same time, the almost complete absence of representation of the "seductiveness" of the white woman stands witness to the esthetic preferences of these artists: they certainly do not covet her. The myth of dangerous "primitive" sensuality is immediately belied.

This, however, is now part of the past. The future is decidedly different. "The future", I continued in my letter to Mamadou, "which is not ours personally, but is that of our grandchildren and of the world, is going to bring art, literature, philosophy, ideas and science into a great meeting place where an exchange of unmatched dimensions will take place, an exhilarating exchange that will suddenly discover the hidden

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<sup>2</sup> p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> The preface, p. xxii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi. Lips understandably adds "misunderstanding".

genius of man everywhere, his wisdom and his creativity, and will acknowledge the other, not out of tolerance (God forbid! I am not speaking of 'humility' here, I am speaking of the worth of man), but because the other's achievement imposes itself and celebrates itself."

I must repeat here what I have said before. Man's heritage is for all men. Every poem, every sculpture, every etching and tune is the rightful inheritance of all mankind. The universal acknowledgment of this inheritance will be proof of a civilisation at last achieved.

The unity of human creativity springing from the same fountainhead is proven by classical Arabic poetry. What the pre-Islamic *qasida* of the sixth century AD represented was an amalgam of various modes and styles, some of which are, in one sense, unrelated, i.e. they do not usually co-exist simultaneously, but, all together, represent most of the limited modes in the history of human poetic expression. This simultaneous presence, in the subconscious of the pre-Islamic Arab poet, of equal control over these various modes, of spontaneous affinity with them, must have its legitimacy in the secrets of literary history. It does happen that more than one major trend or mode in poetry coexist. We had this in nineteenth century France where three modes coexisted: romanticism, symbolism and parnassianism. In fact, Baudelaire's early experiment shows how symbolism grew in his poetry in the teeth of romanticism. But this differs from the regular, almost ritualistic presence of many modes, some unrelated, in the same pre-Islamic poem. Yet we have them fully distinct in one ode after another, all equally apprehended, and all fluently released. The subjective, nostalgic overture, full of the feelings of loss and the lament for the passage of time,<sup>5</sup> the sorrow for a past that cannot be retrieved, for the wilting away of youth and the crumbling of its joys, is a romantic expression that is universal. However, what is particularly Arab about it is that it is achieved through the voyaging of the poet, through the eternal mobility of the tribe. Pastures

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<sup>5</sup> A universally important theme that we see, for example, in the poetry of the 15th century poet François Villon. The seven poets known as La *Pléiade* during the French Renaissance (the 16th C) were also quite aware of life's uncertainties, of the destruction of beauty and love that the passage of time brings. Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585), probably the best of them, sang of the change that would perforce happen to his beautiful woman:

When you are old in the evening, by candlelight,  
 Seated near the fire, unwinding and spinning,  
 You will say, reciting my verses and marvelling at them:  
 Ronsard sang of me when I was beautiful.

dried up, water springs became scarce, and life, in order to continue temporally, had to abandon spatial continuity. The Arabs' enforced search, throughout their once nomadic existence, for sources of water and livelihood instilled forever the nostalgic in the spirit of the generations to come, the consciousness of an eternally possible loss always looming on the horizon, of a pervasive feeling of fear of deracination (and the paradoxical capacity to face it with strength), and of the tearing apart of human relations and of love. Hence the Arab capacity for friendship, for gregarious co-existence, for the reassuring presence of the other in one's life.

This spontaneous mutability, which became second nature to the Arab and figures vividly in the poetry, gives this poetry its own "Arab" particularity; hence we have the specific lodged firmly in the heart of the universal, an integral part of the creative process which should describe all good art.

Moving from the romantic, subjective mode, the poet's interest is immediately transferred to a new mode. He focuses his creative energy on a passage of pure estheticism, with nothing in it of the inner self, of existentiality, of human emotion and the memory of things that have negotiated mind or heart. Here, the impersonal demonstration of the power of art begins. A tableau is produced, of fine minutiae of details, concentrating on the outer contours of the depicted object, usually the she-camel or the horse, but sometimes also the desert itself and its fauna. We arrive here at an independent universe, extremely rich within its narrow limitations. The primary focus of depiction, usually the single object, is never a low-plane reality, but is so overfocused and obsessional that it becomes a work of visual ideology. With ever more ambitious skill, various generations of poets competed to produce ever-renewed energies of depiction, so excelling that the final image appears more radiant, more alluring, and certainly superior to its original. The poet's foremost skill lies in his capacity to isolate a purely esthetic space and to aggrandise it at will. Through this idealisation, the object of depiction eventually reaches a symbolic representation denoting, not the object itself, but its ideal. And the rhetoric of realism proves a feigned rhetoric, because it will eventually give way, through idealisation, to symbolisation and archetypal aspirations. This is how the image of the never-vanquished she-camel, incomparable in strength, endurance and persistence, as she straddles the vast expanses of the endless desert, becomes archetypal, and the desert journey itself, with its sandy stretches forever giving birth to new stretches of never-ending sands, is symbolic of man's voyage on earth. Victim to the dense darkness of a night filled with frightening noises that assail the rider from all directions, victim, too, to

the scorching heat of the blazing noonday sun, where even the sand grouse loses its way to the water and the reptiles dare not stop on the burning sands, there is no doubt as to its existential, highly symbolised implications.

This genre of description was to be taken most seriously by later Arab critics and would be regarded as one of the four principal genres of poetry. Then, by the beginning of the tenth century, it would have a great resurgence in the Arab East, and from there would reach Muslim Spain, where, despite the continued dominance of other genres and themes in poetry, much poetic energy would be dedicated to the pure art of estheticism, with the poet depicting small and large objects solely for the sake of description. In these depictions, no tendency towards symbolization would be seen, except rarely, or towards the archetypal representation of the idealised object of earlier poetry. A fully developed process of art for art's sake comes to life here. By removing his object from all functionality, the poet displays a purely esthetic spectacle, acquiescing in the stringent principles of an art dedicated to art alone, anticipating the nineteenth century European experiment by about a millennium.

Urbanised depictions of this kind came later. To return to the pre-Islamic *qasida*, the rest of the poem displays other modes. There is always the realistic that records the annals of tribal history, of battles and events, an integral part of the immense poetic wealth of the recorded history of man's warfare and valour. The Arabic ode was infused with the vaunting declarations of individual or tribal valour, wisdom and superiority, and with a celebration of the dignity of giving. The cult of hospitality is set here forever, uniquely, almost fanatically. And in these early odes dating from the sixth century and beyond, a generosity and a hospitality beyond human will are extolled, at stark odds with the later Protestant (particularly Calvinist) dictum of thrift and economy, the basis of the modern wealthy state. Forever, the Arabs will be one step removed from the modernity of the age of technology and mass production by this heritage of conditioned giving, of compulsive generosity that has, in a strange and paradoxical way, something of a contempt for material considerations.

## II

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz cannot imagine the existence of an art work without a cultural causative. In his view, "local" culture is a primary factor in the make-up of such a work. "If there is any commonality among all the arts ..." he says, "it is not that they appeal to some univer-

sal sense of beauty. That may or may not exist, but if it does it does not seem, in my experience, to enable people to respond to exotic arts with more than an ethnocentric sentimentalism in the absence of knowledge of what those arts are about or an understanding of the culture out of which they come."<sup>6</sup>

This does not ring true for all poetic experiments or even for the arts generally. Geertz's central dependence on cultural and psychological background as a perennial determinant of artistic expression misses the excitement one experiences in discovering the unity of human creativity, the similarity of art forms found at different times in different, often unrelated cultures, and the way the artistic mind engages the stuff of which art is made. For example, Baudelaire's theory of correspondence and his idea of the unity of the universe are not a uniquely French 19th-century initiation. We find both in the medieval Arab mystics. The correspondence of the senses is clearly and astoundingly portrayed in the poetry of Ibn al-Farid (1181-1235): "My eye and my hearing speak, my tongue sees, my hand listens". The idea of the unity of the universe is well celebrated in the vision of the Andalusian mystic, Ibn `Arabi (1165-1240): "I see him in the melody of the lute... in the meadows where gazelles pasture ... [I see him] where the dews fall gently ... and where the breeze trails its skirts ... and when my lips kiss the rim of the cup;" or this: "My heart contains every image and shape; a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for monks; a temple for idols, a Ka`ba for pilgrims; [it contains] the tablets of the Bible, the pages of the Quran; it is the religion of Love that I believe in, wherever Love's caravan turns; for Love is my belief and my true faith." There is a high-level symbolism in Arab mystical poetry, from Ibn al-Farid, to Ibn `Arabi, to Suhrawardi (d. 1163) and others. But the paucity of our knowledge of world poetry bars us from finding as many comparisons as one feels must really exist. Geertz's "local" link cannot explain the whole picture of the artistic experience, dependent as it is on other, perennially universal factors. It is true that some earlier aspects of description in the old *qasida* were related to the social concept of pre-Islamic Arabs. The physical qualities of the beautiful woman, for example, are based on the concept of fecundity as a paramount quality, hence the praise of her well-built body, well-rounded thighs (recalling the sixteenth-century French poet, Ronsard: "... le parfait consiste en choses rondes"), luxuriant buttocks. (Woman's bosom, the ultimate sign of rotundity, fertility and voluptuousness, the part of woman that has always aroused the greatest desire

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<sup>6</sup> *Local Knowledge*, London: Fontana Press, 1993, p. 119.

and lust in men, does not figure in those early descriptions). However, in the history of art, this particular concept of womanhood, this interest of the early Arabs (later Arabs differ) in the opulent physique of woman, is not a unique instance. The exuberant, sensuous paintings of the seventeenth-century Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens reveal opulent and full-blooded women, emphasising, however, the bosom instead. Rubens' delineation of Hélène Fourment, his second wife, revealing, as in his painting *The Fur Coat*, naked, superabundant and boldly sensual breasts, an image adopted in other ancient cultures (Greek, Indian) as a symbol, perhaps, of abundance, nourishment and life, was not usually taken up by the early Arabs. This difference in cultural approach deserves a full study elsewhere, but it might indicate an early pre-Islamic Arab reticence in acknowledging the most voluptuous symbol of femininity, and so demonstrating, perhaps, the purely 'Arab' roots of some of the restrictive concepts regarding woman, now dominant in the Islamic world.

The description of the she-camel and the horse in early medieval Arabic poetry is culture-bound, in that these animals were central to the early medieval poet: they were crucial to the enforced mobility of nomadic life prevailing then, and in this sense they bespeak the particular culture that has valued their importance and acknowledged their centrality. Idealised far beyond reality, as described above, they in another sense reflect the Arab bent of mind towards idealism.<sup>7</sup> Yet the description itself is esthetically confined, devoid of the apprehension of actual experience, of emotion, of personal memory or the intrusion of the poet on the majesty of the self-sufficient tableau and its independence from direct human involvement, of its utter dehumanisation.

But the dehumanisation of art reaches its climax in the miniature poems, or painting in words discussed above. Written in the purely urban surroundings of the flourishing Islamic empire, they became immensely popular in al-Andalus or Muslim Spain. Witness, for example, this description of the walnut by an Andalusí poet:

Its covering is composed  
of two halves so joined  
it's a pleasure to see:  
like eyelids closed in sleep.

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<sup>7</sup> It is out of the scope of this essay to discuss the possible pagan religious connection of the animals described, such as the wild ox, for example, or the onyx.



Cleave it with a knife  
and you will say the convex side  
is an eye bulging out  
straining to see.

while the inside is an ear  
because of the convolutions  
and crevices.<sup>8</sup>

What is most important about these miniatures is their *acultural* quality whereby a complete "neutrality and calm" are exhibited, a robust "exercise of the imagination to focus on verbal refinements, to cull rare epithets and find ever new ways of describing the same thing: a rose, a narcissus, a violet, a bower, a garden, a stream",<sup>9</sup> a fruit or any suitable object. Called *nawriyyat* (flower poems), or *rawdiiyyat* (garden poems), these urban depictions of neutral objects could have been written in any fertile environment where flowers, plants and fruits abound. Like still life paintings, they are not native to any particular place or culture. Yeats was right when he said: "All art is a disengaging of a soul from place and history."

In these Arabic miniatures, the riches of the language used should not be taken to indicate any intrinsically "florid" quality in the language. The Arabic language is immensely rich in all kinds of vocabulary, capable of accommodating the florid and the practical, the connotative and the denotative in equal measure.

Here the Eastern Abbasid prince, Ibn al-Mu`tazz, the initiator of the genre of *nawriyyat*, describes the narcissus:

As if their pupils in their beauty  
were golden vessels in camphor leaves  
As if the dew on them were tears  
in the eyes of an abandoned lover.<sup>10</sup>

and this on gardens by the Eastern Syrian poet, al-Sunawbari:

<sup>8</sup> Poem by Abu Bakr Muhammad b. al-Qutiyya, eleventh century A.D., by kind permission of the translator, Cola Franzen, in: *Poems of Arab Andalusia*, San Francisco, 1989, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> The present writer in "Nature Poetry and the Rise of Ibn Khafaja", in: *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992, p. 374.

<sup>10</sup> *Diwan Ibn al-Mu`tazz*, ed. Michel Nu`man, Beirut, 1969, p. 224.

Garden flowers when they smile  
 they beckon ...  
 Still they speak though they are silent  
 The silence of gardens is speech."

The Spanish Arabist, Emilio Garcia Gomez, who, in the twenties, translated a good selection of these poems into Spanish and wrote on them, describes such poems as "dainty... weighted down with so many elegant embellishments... [but] devoid of any intellectual order, even of any human feeling in many cases." This divorce from experience, this dehumanisation is exactly what I am speaking about. The *acultural* status of these poems made their resurrection in modern times, in both Spanish and English, a renewed intercultural discovery of man's delightful capacity to apprehend the esthetic. Gomez's translations immediately drew the attention of the poets of the twenties in Spain, in particular Lorca, who wrote a whole collection of poems in their style which he published in a work of poetry called by the Arabic name *Diwan*, i.e., book of poems. In the late eighties and early nineties three collections of these same poems appeared, all in America, translated into fine English, and winning a genuine welcome from qualified readers.

This is not to suggest the pervasive presence of a wide gap between esthetics and life in Arabic poetry, or to claim that art should be divorced from experience. These examples, which are not the norm in any poetry, and certainly not in Arabic poetry (laden as it is with the complex history of sixteen centuries of life and adventure, triumphs and catastrophes), are given here to demonstrate the absolute possibility of an esthetic that is not culture-bound, that is completely free, autonomous and independent. Poetry's natural approach is through experience, and most poetry has some narrative to tell: some past history, some connection with the present or future. The law of narration is one of change. But these tableaux are a negation of narrative; they pitch themselves at a level of material existence where there is a wholesale eviction of the event, testifying to a sophistication beyond utility and outside the movement of events or the vicissitudes of history.

The important thing here is that these examples contradict Geertz's central emphasis on "local" knowledge in the interpretation of art. He bases his arguments on the study of oral verse in the Moroccan countryside. The popular poet in question, he says, does not "create his text out of sheer fancy, but builds it up, molecularly, a piece at a time, ... out of a

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<sup>11</sup> *Diwan al-Sunawbari*, ed. Ihsan `Abbas, Beirut, 1970, p. 430.

limited number of established formulae."<sup>12</sup> Some of the formulae he describes are thematic, some figurative and some are "formal — strict, mechanical schemes of rhyme, meter, line, and stanza. The singing, the tambourines, the dancing men, the genre demands, and the audience sending up you-yous of approval or whistles of censure ... make up an integral whole from which the poem can no more be abstracted."<sup>13</sup> The *total* adherence of the artist to "local" expectations, however, becomes the central factor only when creativity is stale and an art of "improvisation", totally dependent on repetition, has become the norm. In a fresh and robust approach to art, on the other hand, creativity must perforce be subject to acultural universals — the way art and experience merge, the similarities in the processes of creation itself, the absolute limitations of artistic modes and genres, and the interconnection between them: the relatedness and antagonisms of those that harmonise and give birth to each other, and those that oppose each other and are naturally at war.

The kind of poetry Geertz describes as existing in certain parts of Morocco is not the creative poetry famous as the Arabs' foremost art form, but an improvised kind of verse. It is very clear that Geertz has focused his research on a traditional local verse of great repetitiveness of theme, meaning, language and intention. His labeling it as representative of "Islamic" poetry is totally unacceptable. First, Arabic poetry (he does not differentiate much between "Arabic" and "Islamic") in its finest examples, those that have been preserved for posterity since the early seventh century when Islam began, does not boast a major poetry of a dominant "Islamic" theme and approach, with the exception of the great Islamic mystical experiment. Second, the word "Islamic" straddles many languages and cultures, and popular culture in the Moroccan countryside is but a miniscule part of a vast area of human creativity. This said, one concedes that the poetry he describes is closely linked to its "local", heavily Islamic culture; yet that has nothing authentically to do with general Islamic or with contemporary Arabic poetry. The same kind of improvised verse, moreover, exists in other parts of the Arab world, particularly in Lebanon, a delightful verse, often taking on a secular aspect, with Christian allusions sometimes too.

Geertz says: "A Muslim making verses faces a set of cultural realities as objective to his intentions as rocks or rainfall, no less substantial for

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<sup>12</sup> *Local Knowledge*, p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

being nonmaterial, and no less stubborn for being man-made."<sup>14</sup> It is appropriate to mention here that avant-garde twentieth-century Arabic poetry, vibrant, original, highly innovative, and written by both Muslim and Christian Arab poets, bears no relation to Geertz's descriptions of "Islamic" poetry. It has undergone, during this century, a great revolution in all the elements of the poem and strongly rejects any "set of cultural realities". In its best examples,<sup>15</sup> it bears full comparison with any poetry being written in the world today. On the other hand, the devotional Islamic poetry of the Pakistani poet, Muhammad Iqbal, with its lofty political and religious vision based on twentieth-century experience,<sup>16</sup> its great originality and innovative technique, poses an immediate challenge to Geertz's generalised description of formulaic and traditional poetic improvisations in the Moroccan countryside as being at all synonymous with well-known examples of "Islamic" poetry.<sup>17</sup> I recall here the words of Yeats who asked whether the whole of life was not simply the struggle of naked, unarmed, but immortal experience against generalised thought.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> See for example the present writer's book on the history of modern Arabic poetry, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 volumes, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977; and see her edited work, *Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry*, New York, 1987, which contains translations from ninety-three poets.

<sup>16</sup> Which, being contemporaneous with this century's temper, refutes Geertz's notion of a compulsive, repetitive "Islamic" poetry. As a single example, see Iqbal's famous poem, "The Mosque of Cordoba".

<sup>17</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to go into the many other mistakes Geertz makes in this essay. A single example will suffice to show how cultures can be taken for granted even by famous scholars. Writing on p. 112 about the Arabic language today, he describes the high level on which it is still used in for public speeches "cast in an Arabic so classicized that most who hear them but vaguely understand them". Then he continues, "Arabic newspapers, magazines, and books are written in a similar manner, with the result that the number of people who can read them is small." This is a highly unrealistic statement for at least two reasons. The first is that newspaper Arabic has become extremely simplified and modernised, and secondly, mass proliferation of audio-visual communication systems means that even illiterate people now understand the Arabic language used in news, religious and political oratory etc. As for literary productions, many of them are even rendered in the colloquial of the country, or in the colloquial Egyptian now understood everywhere.

## III

It is no longer easy to keep high and popular cultures separated. Mass media and the tabloid newspapers are bringing the two together, almost tragically. I am not trying to express an elitist spirit. Popular culture has its legitimacy. It is one of the simpler means of entering new spheres of modern experience and, through commercialised literature, popular song and music, sentimental and violent films, food culture, the world of fashion, and the sensational advertisements for consumer goods, joining parts of the world hitherto alienated from each other. Mass culture can bring greater homogeneity to the world, at the popular level. It is more easily assimilated and poured into the melting pot where it can arrive, however, at a fearful conformity. In popular culture, adoptions, appropriations and piracies change the other, deeply infiltrate taste and concepts, and, in a multi-cultural world, harmonise what have hitherto been naturally disparate affinities.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that adoptions and appropriations do not take place all the time within the aristocratic integrity of high culture, but these, sooner or later, tend to be recognisable, if only after centuries. Moreover, they do not transform the appropriator as low culture does. This is where identification can exist at its best. Not an identification of similarity, but one of mutual enjoyment and acknowledgement, of mutual deference.

But modern pressures, economic, political, functional, even in a non-cultural sphere, can impose the kind of overpowering homogeneity that makes local cultures belonging to smaller nations dwindle. Every year several minor languages disappear. To take a single example, the Livonian language in the Baltics is now, I am told, only spoken by a handful of people, and is presumably on its way to extinction. As a language disappears, it drags with it all the literature and the poetry of a people, their repertoire of wisdom, and the annals of their past. No matter how small or uninfluential they have been, their past is an integral part of "human" history; their loss is a disturbance in the continuity of this history, and a denial of its diversity, of the totality of its existence.

"There has been a plethora of strategic moves", says Andreas Huysen, "tending to stabilize the high/low opposition from within" with one

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18 Not all parts of society will participate in this spontaneous interculturalism. In

Arab society, for example, conservative members are only too conscious of "foreign" elements that do not conform with their "ethical" or "moral" "standards", and will be too reticent to participate fully. However, some elements of the new global lifestyle will certainly be embraced.

trying "to appropriate elements of the other" and to bridge the gap. But this is not what I mean when I speak of interculturalism. The attempt at commercialising creative works so they may reach the greater public is an abortive attempt at interculturalism. However, "this opposition — usually described in terms of modernism vs. mass culture or avantgarde vs. culture industry — has proven to be amazingly resilient,"<sup>19</sup> says Huysman. Fine arts must certainly preserve their dignity, unruffled by media mania. It is necessary for the future of civilisation that interculturalism, at the fine arts level, and in the sphere of ideas, philosophy and high cultural disciplines, should keep its integrity, preserve its specific characteristics, and survive the impetus towards a colourless homogeneity. For a single example, the arabesque and the complex, artistically entangled Arabic calligraphy now featured in many beautiful works of art by Arab painters from Iraq to Morocco, are a specificity that distinguishes a culture and that deserve to be enjoyed on a wide scale. What we seek here is that fine art everywhere should take its rightful place in the art gallery of the world and be looked at for its esthetic worth, no more, no less.

However, the urge to cater to the majority will continue. One sees it happening everywhere today, in all cultures. I see it happening in mine. But, as I said at the start, the activity of bringing together the finer achievements of man continues briskly.

This is the vision behind the work we have been doing in America since the early eighties. With the collaboration of several distinguished colleagues, I began a project aiming at the dissemination of the best in Arabic culture and literature.<sup>20</sup> With our ears tuned to the accelerating rhythm of cultural exchange going on around us, and working with well-known poets and writers of the English language and a number of able bilingual translators, we went on a vertiginous journey of exploration and offerings, carrying a basketful of poems, stories, plays and novels that reflected the riches and originality of an Arabic culture deeply rooted in history. It was time, we felt, that Arabic culture, one of the richest in the world, should be offered on a larger scale to others. Arabic culture is neither hermetic nor isolationist, but is rather a humane and open culture based on human necessity and human exploration of life. This kind of offering to the world was, above all, an acknowledgment of this world's cultural unity, of its capacity to overcome its own in-built

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<sup>19</sup> *After the Great Divide*, London: Macmillan, 1988, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Project of Translation from Arabic, PROTA*, based in Boston and London.

prejudices, stereotyped illusions and myths. And this is the kind of work, I believe, that can preserve the integrity of the world and save it from an ever-increasing chaos.

However, I instinctively avoided becoming directly involved with the three major themes that have been most popular in Western studies of the Middle East: politics, religion and the status of women. It was the humanness of literature and the general civilisational issues that arise inevitably from the massive cultural encounters of our day that attracted my zeal, not the satisfaction of state politics. The proliferation of "cold facts" for the benefit of would-be experts or scientists who study the other as one studies a patient laid out on the operation table is not my responsibility. Mine is to talk to those who search for the sources of human genius and creativity, those others who can respond with warm and open hearts to the humanising message imbued in all good literature. It is primarily through literature of merit that existential problems beleaguering individual and nation, the predicaments blocking their growth, the joys that enhance it, their quest for progress, freedom, identity, or for self-realisation, can be felt by others. Such literary exchange is fostered through the translation and publication of good literary material. It is a bridge of sympathy that will erase prejudice and throw man's essential struggle to control his own destiny into relief. It is the most secure bulwark against war and hatred.

I dream of a world that recognises great art everywhere and adopts it, without ethno-labelling it, without searching for the racial and cultural barriers that prevent the eye from seeing and the ear from hearing. I have never felt the remoteness of other worlds, never sensed their complete 'otherness'. One goes straight to the humanity of the other, to the originality and genius of men and women everywhere. And one always attempts, to borrow a phrase I read once, to be the "proowler on the frontiers".