Poetry and the Sacred

A Reading in Interrelations

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to explore the relationship between the poetic and religious discourses. It attempts to read this give-and-take relationship, characterized by a great deal of caution and dread. The researcher tries to support his argument by examples of poets who encroached upon the domain of religion, and how religion used the poetic appeal to catch the attention of the reader, and possess his awareness.

الملخص:

يسعى البحث إلى إعادة استكشاف العلاقة بين الخطاب الشعري والخطاب الديني؛ فالعلاقة بين الخطابين تستحق عناء البحث من قبل دارسي الأدب؛ ففهم العلاقة بين الخطابين يلقي بالضوء على مساحات في هذين الخطابين لم يتم فهمها. يسعى هذا البحث إلى قراءة هذه العلاقة المتبادلة التي تتميز بالجلال والحذر. وسوف يحاول الباحث تعزيز حجاجه ببعض الأمثلة من الشعراء الذين استفادوا من تمثلهم للخطاب الديني، سعيًا إلى إسباغ الجلال على نصوصهم الشعرية، وبالمثل تسعى النصوص الدينية إلى الاستفادة من تجليات الشعر وأدواته للولوج مباشرة إلى قلب القارئ. وهنا تصبح دراسة العلاقة بين النص المقدس والنص العادي ضرورية لفهم الكثير من قضايانا المعاصرة.

Religion and poetry are two nearest and dearest fields of linguistic discourse. The relationship between poetry and religion is as ancient as man's existence itself. Both fields stem

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from "mysterious forces"[1] as Chekhov admits; inspiration is the source of both poetry and religion, the muses and the revelation are two sides of the same coin. Poetry is dictated by the muses; that is why the writers of great epics used to "sing the praise of the muses" before they go on to describe the events of their epics, and sacred books usually start with praising "God" as He is the source of inspiration of all prophets. The language prophets used was poetic, "The prophets used metaphor, similes, acrostics, meter, internal rhyme, parallelism, stanzas. The psalms are so carefully structured, manifesting advanced technical poetic skills, that many … of the divinely inspired prophets were very likely professional poets". [2] Santayana puts it clearer:

> Thus the religion of the Greeks was, we might say, nothing but poetry: nothing but what imagination added to the rudiments of science, to the first impressions of a mind that pored upon natural phenomena and responded to them with a quick sense of kinship and comprehension. The religion of the Hebrews might be called poetry with as good reason.[3]

Poetry and religion interrelate in more than one domain, language, figuration, symbolism, narrative and many others. This interrelation is genuine as both come from the same source: human beings' struggle to find the truth of life and afterlife, and their struggle to conquer fear, achieve satisfaction and contentment, or to achieve understanding as Margaret Alexander writes:

> Like Religion, the poetry of the people, their art, songs and literature, come from the deep recesses of the unconscious, the irrational, and the collective body of our ancestral memories. They are indeed the truth of our living, the meaning and the beauty of our lives, and the knowledge of this heritage is not only fundamental to complete understanding of us as a people, it is a fundamental ingredient in the development of our world consciousness.(4)

This paper attempts to investigate the relationship between poetic and religious discourses, and how transactional utility are accomplished when the poet seeks to benefit from the grandeur of the divine, and the divine to use the rhetoric of the poet. Although the religious and the poetic have been a subject of several studies,(5) the degree of the celestial and the secular in both discourses is rarely discussed especially that students of religious, and literary texts rarely deal with the interrelation of these two discourses. Sometimes poets seek to imitate the divine language in order to gain grandeur and splendor. This reminds us of the poet's assumption of prophetic capabilities. To ascertain these aptitudes he imitates the divine language of the holy texts.

On the other hand, religion also uses the same linguistic tools poets use (allegory, symbolism, metaphor, simile, synecdoche, and rhetorical questions), and in doing so, it gives right to poetry to trespass upon the property of religion. The translations of the Bible into vernacular German (Martin Luther), English (John Wycliffe), and others, was a turning point in the history of

these target languages. The Qur'an, for example, used Arabic rhythm and became the main source and reason of its continuity and permanence. John Sawyer also writes:

> It is believed that the Arabic dialects in which the scriptures is couched was akin to that of the dominant tribe in Mecca at the time of Muhammad, the Quraysh, and also has considerable affinities with that of pre-Islamic poetry, a notable corpus of which still survives. The language of pre-Islamic poetry indeed, could be used to clarify the language of the Qur'an. In a strange but very real way, the Language of the pre-Islamic bards prefigured the superior language of the Qur'an: a human linguistic prototype, as it was, of the divine articulation. Thus, when the great Egyptian scholar, *Taha Hussayn*, (1889-1973) alleged that most of the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry was in fact of later provenance, he was anathematized by orthodox theologians as if he had attacked the language of the Qur'an itself.(6)

The language of the Holy Qur'an perplexed the Arabs during the first years of Islam's appearance; they accused the prophet of being a poet, and the Qur'an being poetry. However, some Arab highbrows felt the differences between the language of poetry and the language of the Qur'an. One of those Arabs (Al-Walid Ibn el-Mughira) on hearing the Qur'an for the first time said: "Inna lahu lahalawa, wa inna alihi la talawa, wa inna a'lahu

lamothmir, wa inna adnahu lamoghdiq, wa innahu ya'lu wa la ya'lu alihi, wa ma howa biqaol basher, which translates: "It has limitless sweetness, charm, fruitfulness, generosity, second to none, not the words of human beings." This meant that the language of the Qur'an sounded different from the language of poetry, the Diwan of the Arabs as Ibn Abbas described it. It sounded heavenly and divine, and this is what towed the Arabs towards the belief in the prophet's message. The nature of language changes when it deals with the unknown, when it leaves the perceptible to deal with the imperceptible. The holy language is usually measured by its degree of deviation from the earthly language, from the human way of expression, to be identified with the sublime, the grand and the stately. Harold Bloom in his book entitled "The Western Canon" notices this thin strain, which relates the language of poetry with the language of the sacred:

> Ambivalence between the divine and the human is one of J's grand inventions, another mark of an originality so perpetual that we can scarcely recognize it, because the stories Bathsheba told have absorbed us.(7)

According to Bloom, Bathsheba's great literary success is recognized in her adoption of a near-sacred language, a language that transfers a feeling of a mixture of awe, fear, dread, admiration and ambiguity to the receiver who believes in the language itself more than the content. This belief in the language itself is the main product of this long wrangle between poetry and

religion. Religious language, though poetic in its essence, should be different from the language poets use; it is a celestial, heavenly, and extraterrestrial language. The Holy Qur'an itself defends the prophet against those who accused him to be a poet so as not to mix the word of God with that of Men. "And it is not the word of a poet; little do you believe!

وَمَا هُوَ بِقَوْلِ شَاعِرٍ قَلِيلًا مَّا تُؤْمِنُونَ"

(7)(41) and in that verse in which God tells us that the Prophet Mohammad had not learnt poetry: "And We did not give Prophet Muhammad, knowledge of poetry, nor is it befitting for him. It is not but a message and a clear Qur'an

"وما علمناه الشعر وما ينبغي لـه، إن هو إلا ذكر وقرآن مبين" (٦٩) .

We are told that the attempts to imitate the language of the Qur'an went ineffective. Those who tried to mimic its style have returned hopeless. Musailama the Liar's attempt was ridiculous. Even in the west, some prominent critics saw that the Qur'anic style is peculiar, "Thomas Carlyle, who presented in his Heroes, and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History a remarkably positive portrait of Muhammad, sensed the interrelation of the language of the Qur'an with the poetic."(8) On the other hand, in 1807 and 1809 the Austrian orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, published his Samples of a Metrical and Rhymed translation of the Koran in Christopher Martin Wieland's Der neue Teutsche Merkur. With the assumption that: "a faithful version of the Koran must convey its Geist as well as its Form."(9) Many Arab literary critics tried their best to prove the inimitability

of the Holy Qur'an (i'j¯az al-Qur"¯an) by comparing it with the best poetry the Arabs produced. The prominent critic Kamal Abu Deeb reminds us that Arab critics demonstrate the Qur'an's I'jaz against the poetry they produced. He writes:

> In his determination to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Qur'an, al Baqillani makes one or two points of real interest. One of his major principles is that the construction of the Qur'an differs from the genres, or types of discourse, known to the Arabs: poetry (metrical, rhymed discourse), various types of saj' (balanced and rhymed discourse without strict meter), balanced prose which does not rhyme, and other kinds of uncontrolled or free discourse. Yet he, like others before him, recognizes that the Qur'an has rhyming verses and verses which can be analyzed prosodic-ally and seem to fit into Arabic meters. Faced with this fact, he searches for definitions of poetry which will make it possible to reconcile its being metrical with the dogma of the seemingly metrical parts of the Qur'an not being poetry. He finds this possible by negating an established view which defined poetry in terms of metre; he argues that being metrical is not sufficient to make a piece of discourse poetry, and that two other conditions must be satisfied-intention of metrically and length of composition. The Qur'anic text lacks both conditions and is therefore not poetry.(10)

The assumption of the Qur'an

not being poetry is the basis of its inimitability, as some prominent Arab critics think and argue, although the Qur'an possesses other aspects of inimitability greater than its transcendence when compared with the best poetry the Arabs have composed. The over-valuing of pre-Islamic poetry was the early Muslims' strategy to establish a rationale towards "the claim that, although the ancient Arabs were unsurpassed masters of every kind of poetical and rhetorical art, not one of them could produce a work comparable in beauty to the Koran." However, most prominent scholars have participated in this battle of comparison. One of them is El-Tabari, a renowned critic and Muhaddith (narrator of Hadith) and an interpreter of the Qur'an, he writes:

> Since things are as we have described them, it is obvious that there is no clear discourse more eloquent, no wisdom more profound, no speech more sublime, no forms of expression more noble, than (this) clear discourse and speech with which a single man challenged a people at a time when they were acknowledged masters of the art of oratory and rhetoric, poetry and prose, rhymed prose and soothsaying […] Then he [i.e. the Messenger] told them all that they were incapable of bringing anything comparable to even a part of [what he had brought], and that they lacked the power to do this. They all confessed their inability, voluntarily acknowledging the truth of what he had brought, and bore witness of

their own insufficiency. (11)

Post – Islamic poetry has been greatly influenced by the language of the Qura'n and the prophet's tradition. "The Arabs ... took the highest pleasure in rhymed poetry, and therefore competed constantly to imitate the Karan."(12) The purpose of that imitation was to move the hearers as the Qur'an did. This competition to influence the hearer as the Qur'an did has flourished during the early Islamic period up to the whole first Abbasid age. That was the period when Islamic Sufism swept a considerable proportion of Arabic poetry and even prose. It was the period when great religious poets as Ibn al-Farid, el-Hallaj and others wrote their poetry.

Although the Bible includes large segments of poetry, Christian theology usually shrinks from being familiar with the poetic reality of the Holy Book. This does not mean that the poetical aspect of the Bible has not been abundantly discussed since the renaissance; it has been abundantly discussed, though within the conception that it is a holy book but without revelation. Holy books possess the two aspects: the poetic and the prosaic; the Bible includes large segments of poetry. There are recent studies dealing with Biblical poetry concentrating on its poetic features.

It is not a debate between philosophy and poetry more than a debate between poetry and religion, between the sacred and the secular. Plato expelled poets from his republic. The poet, according to Plato, as Daiches writes, "was a possessed creature, not using language in the way that normal human beings do, but

speaking in a divinely inspired frenzy. Such a view removed the poet from ordinary canons of judgment and made him something between a prophet and a madman-sometimes one, sometimes the other, and sometimes both." David Daiches goes on to explain that:

> The poet is presented as the inspired rhapsodist through whom God speaks, a man lacking art and volition of his own, a passive vehicle merely. In this dialogue, Socrates is speaking to Ion: "the gift which you possess … is not an art, but, as I was just saying, an inspiration; there is a divinity moving you."(13)

It is this debate between the divine and the sacred that this article tries to deal with. "There is a divinity moving the poet", but is there a poet moving the divine? In his "*Defence of Poetry*" (1821) Shelly's opinion deserves to be recited in full:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the center and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren worlds the nourishment and succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things; it is as the odor and the color of the rose of the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and

splendor of the unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption. What were virture, love, patriotism, friendship – what were the scenery of this beautiful universe which we inhabit; what were our consolations on the side of the grave – and what were our aspirations beyond it, if poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar? Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like a color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach of its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already in the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet.(14)

Remembering Aristotle's defense of poetry and poets against Plato's charges, one thinks that the religious struggled to get its language away from the poetic; to get rid of the accusation of being imaginative. Nothing more destructive of religion than being accused of being imaginative. On the other hand, poets are

sometimes haunted by the desire to secularize religious language; namely to transfer the language of religion to their area, the language of poetry. Western and Arabic poetry is rich with examples of those poets who tried to secularize religious language, and others who tried to imitate the sacred language of religion. The reason is simple: poets also worship and pray to the worshipped, the woman they love. *S. T. Coleridge*, *John Donne*, *John Milton* and *Walt Whitman* are four prominent examples of the poets who could secularize the sacred language of the Bible in western literature; *Al-Hallaj*, *Ibn Arabi*, *Ibn el-Faridh* and the other mystics are examples in Arabic poetry. Those poets used liturgical language in their poetry, to change their erotic love into sacred and spiritual instead of earthly and secular. There are writers who find that poetry's adoption of the divine discourse is a sign of a deep desire in the poet's conscience to talk to the extra-terrestrial. Robert Altar writes:

> Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty, and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications, it makes sense that divine speech should be represented as poetry. Such speech is directed to the concrete situation of a historical audience, but the form of the speech exhibits the historical indeterminacy of the language of poetry, which helps explain why these discourses have touched the lives of millions of readers far removed in

> time, space, and political predicament from the small groups of ancient Hebrews against whom Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and their confreres originally inveighed. (15)

It is important – for the sake of the development of this argument – to give examples of the poets who conferred sacredness on their poetry versus those holy texts, which tried to make use of the poetic language to reach to the hearts of their adherents. Both poetic and religious discourses "claim to be inexhaustible in reference to the world from which the significance of words, propositions and discourses is woven." (14) This is where poets like John Milton starts off to write their epics. In his *Paradise Lost*, while he is narrating the story of creation and the struggle that ensued, Milton tries his best to look divine. Examples from *Paradise Lost* as evidences of Milton's deliberate attempt to instill holiness in the language of his poetry, and to have his lines loaded with theological meanings. No stronger evidence of the deep longing of the poet to build on religious matters than the opening of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an example from Book I satisfies our request:

> OF Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
> Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought **Death into the World, and all our woe,**
> With loss of Eden, till **one greater Man**
> Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
> Sing Heav'nly **Muse**, that on the secret top

Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the **chosen Seed**,
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose **out of** Chaos: Or if Sion Hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's Brook that flow'd
Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my **adventrous Song,**
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian **Mount**, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet **in Prose or** Rhime.
And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst **brooding** on the vast Abyss
And mad'st it **pregnant**: What in me is dark
Illumin, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great Argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justifie the wayes of God to men.

In this inaugurating passage of *Paradise Lost,* the narrator's purpose from the start is to relate his story with the divine. He asks the "Heavenly Muse" to sing, a reference to the fact that his poetry is not his own. The heavenly muse who is going to speak for

him possesses the narrator. Again, the narrator is asking this muse to help him: "I thence invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song." He is asking the muse: "Instruct me, for Thou know'st; thou from the first Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread". This repetition of the assumption of his poetry being not his own, but comes from the highest place in heaven, is a pronouncement of his divine source. From the start, Milton is seeking difference; he establishes the holiness of his lines by accepting the difference between the literary and the divine. It seems that Milton is convinced that there is a difference between the religious and the literary.

By accepting this point of departure, Milton accepts Plato's idea that the poet, as Daiches writes, is "a possessed creature, not using language in the way that normal human beings do, but speaking in a divinely inspired frenzy." The reader is prepared to blame himself if he does not understand the language of Milton's poetry since looks like a divine and holy language. Unintelligibility in Milton's poetry means holy ambiguity, divine hiddenness. In addition, Milton wants to establish the idea that his poetry, being divine, possesses limitless meanings, and opened to inexhaustible explanations. In fact, Milton tries to solve the dilemma of portraying a clear picture of "God", while the nature of "God" should be ambiguous and hidden. "This intimacy between hiddenness and revelation is the essence of religious language. Religious language reveals the Holy as ever beyond us, whilst at the same time revealing its nearness. It is

precisely in language itself that the revelation of God as Other occurs."[16] The following passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost* book III, is an attempt to concentrate on the language as being the protagonist:

Hail, holy Light, offspring of Heaven firstborn,

Or of the Eternal coeternal beam

May I express thee unblamed? since God is light,

And never but in unapproached light

Dwelt from eternity, dwelt then in thee

Bright effluence of bright essence increate.

Or hear'st thou rather pure ethereal stream,

Whose fountain who shall tell? before the sun,

Before the Heavens thou wert, and at the voice

Of God, as with a mantle, didst invest

The rising world of waters dark and deep,

Won from the void and formless infinite.

Thee I re-visit now with bolder wing,

Escaped the Stygian pool, though long detained

In that obscure sojourn, while in my flight

Through utter and through middle darkness borne,

With other notes than to the Orphean lyre

I sung of Chaos and eternal Night;

Taught by the heavenly Muse
to venture down.

The narrator here attempts to show the object of his narrative as different from the objects of normal human beings. It is a "holy light", "offspring of heaven", "eternal beam", "coeternal beam", "bright essence increate", and "eternal night". Religion and poetry interact in this passage in the sense that the object of description is unidentifiable. Milton sacrifices the language of poetry for the sake of religious connotations. It is his task to bring the reader into the vague area between light and darkness as religious discourse sometimes does. The passage, as many passages in *Paradise Lost* do, takes the reader to nowhere in place, and defines no object. Milton's strategy is to give place for the reader to interpret, decipher and explain.

George Herbert is another example of the poets who consider themselves holy and "distinct from the secular love poet."(17) It is difficult to detach the sacred from the secular in the poems of George Herbert and the other metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. We may remember that poets' desire to be prophets or semi-prophets is a certain desire, which we can deduce from their sayings. Alexander Pope in a letter to Edward Blount, 3 October 1721 writes: "I really wish myself something more, that is, a prophet."(18)

One of George Herbert's poems entitled "Thanksgiving" reflects the ambivalence of the lover who suffers from being forsaken by the beloved, a psychological state we perceive in

most of the Arab Sufi poetry of the middle ages. In this poem Herbert, like Al-Hallaj, is forsaken by the beloved (God), and seeks to reunion. He writes:

Oh King of grief! (a title strange, yet true,
To thee of all kings only due)
Oh King of wounds! how shall I grieve for thee,
Who in all grief preventest me?
Shall I weep blood? why thou has wept such store
That all thy body was one door.
Shall I be scourged, flouted, boxed, sold?

'Tis but to tell the tale is told.
'My God, my God, why dost thou part from me?'
Was such a grief as cannot be.
Shall I then sing, skipping, thy doleful story,
And side with thy triumphant glory?
Shall thy strokes be my stroking? thorns, my flower?
Thy rod, my posy? cross, my bower?
But how then shall I imitate thee, and
Copy thy fair, though bloody hand?
Surely I will revenge me on thy love,
And try who shall victorious prove.
If thou dost give me wealth, I will restore
All back unto thee by the poor.
If thou dost give me honour, men shall see,
The honour doth belong to thee.

The poem is a series of prayers, not very much different from the supplications to the muse in the epics, or the holy light in Paradise

Lost. George Herbert was fond of concrete poetry. Sharon Achinstein writes: "These poems called attention to themselves as made objects, becoming the things they themselves were to represent, and they were emblems in a volume whose aesthetic work was to model its format after the physical structure of a church."(19)

Looking at the shape of the poem on the printed page, the reader views a colossal reptile moving submissively towards a holy entity. Herbert also wants to concentrate on the visual dimension of art rather than its linguistic shape. "The reader of the poems of The Temple became a viewer of the beauty of holiness."(20) The text is also loaded with unanswered questions, which inevitably take the reader to meditations without waiting answers. Answers to these questions will spoil them, or take them to the area of the known. The speaker willingly tries to attract the reader to the vague space of indeterminacy, and leave him no more learned than him. The key line in the poem is line 9: "My God, my God, why dost thou part from me?", which refers to a union between God and Man, and between the speaker and the holy spirit, a union that is based on grief; since grief is the common denominator in both selves, each is part of the other. This strong unity between the speaker and the divine is existent in most religious poetry in all cultures. The sudden absence of the beloved breaks this unity, and sends the lover to disintegration. In this respect, Herbert is

The Moslem Sufi poets also practiced this ambiguation of the object. The figure of Mansur Al-

Hallaj is prominent among the numerous examples of Moslem Sufis. In his poetry, Al-Hallaj attempts a complete identification between him and his object:

O Secret of my secret, so subtle, Thou art veiled

From all imaginations of all beings that have life,

Yet outwardly, inwardly, Thou manifest

Thyself in every thin to everything.

Ignorance it were that I should proffer Thee my pleas,

Enormity of doubt, excess of impotence!

Sum of Totality, other than me Thou art not:

How then shall I plead for myself unto myself?(21)

The relationship between the poet and the saint is evident in these lines; the ultimate purpose of the saint is to identify himself with God. To achieve this identification the poet struggles to define the undefinable, the lines are composed of words that turn on themselves, appear and disappear, come and go. The speaker, as a lover of a different kind, finds himself unable to express, this inability to express is, in itself, the core of poetry, the essence of poetic experience. Here the language of the poem comes closer to the language of religion, Anna Strhan writes, "Language itself may reveal that experience of otherness found in religion and bring to presence as concealed and unconcealed, present and absent. As Heidegger paradoxically challenges our understanding"(22)

Al – Hallaj's poetry is all

spiritual experience; he willingly took it up to the end, the event of his crucifixion crowned that experience of his journey to define the essence of love of God. Poetry according to Al – Hallaj is a sacred text produced after a spiritual as well as bodily experience similar to that of the prophets. The images, rhythms and movements of the poems are not detached from the speaker's experience. In addition, Al-Hallaj, like other Sufis, is fond of moving right and left, a movement that ascertains his value in front of a great Creator. Being a mystic, Al-Hallaj could break the taboo of identifying himself with the Deity, and to cross the borders between man and the Metaphysical. He is known for his doctrine of the union with God. In one of his poems, Al-Hallaj expresses his ability to see God with the eyes of his heart:

I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart.

I said: "Who art thou?" He answered "thou."

Thus where no where hath, as from Thee,

Nor is there, as to Thee, a where.

Thou givst imagining no image

For it to imagine where Thou art.

He art Thou who hath filled all where –

Beyond where too. Where art Thou then?(23)

Thes lines are instructive about the language that celebrates itself while celebrating the relationship between man and God. The poem runs in the same stream of the

previous poem, which embodies the perplexed self of the speaker. The speaker struggles to locate the Deity in space; while the attempt meets failure, the speaker turns around to create something different. He creates a dialogic encounter in a language that turns the attention to itself. The writer's interest in poetry is more obvious than his interest in the theme. The poem is left free to speak to the reader regardless of its theme; the "powerful inward cause"[24] suggested by M. Lings, is not the protagonist of the poem; the protagonist of the poem is the language. The language struggles to let the unseen appear, however the reader celebrates the language rather than this "inward cause". The poem, as most of Al-Hallaj's poetry, is a hermit's dance, a possessed man's ecstasy that turns the eyes to its shape on the printed page, an attempt to reach to the positive ambiguity of the language of the Holy Qur'an as Milton did when he imitates the biblical language. The poem is a direct imitation of the self-reflexive Qur'anic language in more than one example. The same is evident in the following poem:

Is it I or Thou? These twain! Two gods!

Far be it, far be it from me to affirm two!

Selfhood is Thine in my nothingness forever:

Mine all, over all, casts illusion twofold:

For whereis Thine Essence, where from me, for me to see,

When mine hath no where, as already is plain?

And Thy Countenance, where with my two sights may I

seek it,

In the seeing of my heart, or the seeing of mine eye?

Take, by Thine own "I am, mine from between us."[25]

This is a highly exquisite poetry of union, the rhythm of which mimics the Holy Qur'an especially in the last twenty short Suras. If Rhythm is the dominant figure of speech, the theme is the heart's suffering, struggling to find the speaker's identity, which lost in marveling at the Divine. It is Al-Hallaj's dire attempt to reach to the level of religious language, the habit of holy poets along history.

Another poet whose poetic language is direct in expressing man's confusion in front of the unknown, and goes far away at the same time from the holy language of the Qur'an, is Ibn al-Farid who "is thought by some to be the greatest of all Arab poets. Nicholson, in his Literary History of the Arabs, speaks of the "fervid rapture and almost ethereal exaltation" which has won for his poetry "a unique place in Arabic Literature".[26] In the following poem Ibn al-Farid writes:

Give me excess of love and so increase me

In marveling at Thee; and mercy have

Upon a heart for Thee by passion seared.

And when I ask of Thee that I may see Thee

Even as Thou art, in Thy reality,

Say not: Thou shalt not see, but let me see.

Heart, thou didst promise patience in love of them,

Take heed, and be not troubled, be not anguished.

Verily love is life, so die in

love,

And claim thy right to die, all sins forgiven.

Tell those before me and those after me,

And whoso witness of my sorrow was:

Learn from me, my example take, and hear me,

And tell mankind the story of my love.

Alone with the beloved I have been:

A secret subtler than wind's lightest breath,

When on the night it steals, between us passed;

He granted to my gaze a longed for sight,

Whence I, till then unknown, illustrious am.

Between His Beauty and His Majesty

I marveled, and my state of marveling

Was like an eloquent tongue that spake of me.

Turn then thy looks unto His Countenance,

To find the whole of beauty lineate there.

All beauty, if it gathered were and made

One perfect form, beholding Him, would say;

There is no god but God; God is most great. (27)

The lines are characterized by ambiguity while trying to resist ambiguity; the style interacts with that of the Holy Qur'an, with esoteric figures of speech, sudden stylistic changes, lofty rhythm, and powerful verdicts by the end of the

poem. The first two lines: "Give me excess of love and so increase me / In marveling at Thee; and mercy have / Upon a heart for Thee by passion seared" refer to the status of the Qur'an itself, as the texts which perplexed the Arabs by its inimitable language, and marvelous style. While Ibn al-Farid tries to imitate the Qur'anic style, he expresses his bewilderment on his inability to reach the true grandeur of the Qur'anic style. It is the poet's inability to understand the multilayered meanings of the divine style, which increases his marveling at its creator. He, therefore, tries to identify with a linguistic style that substitutes this grand being. The poet's confusion is evident in the middle of the poem:

Between His Beauty and His Majesty
I marveled, and my state of marveling
Was like an eloquent tongue that spake of me.
Turn then thy looks unto His Countenance,
To find the whole of beauty lineate there. (28)

The obscurity and imperviousness of the language of these lines take the object of the description to the level of the unknown. At the same time, the language created here suggests the presence of riddles that need to be resolved, in an attempt to link the reader with the language of the Divine. The lines remind the reader of the Qur'anic language itself; they remind us of Surat An-Nas: Say, "I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, the Sovereign of mankind, the God of Mankind, from the evil of the retreating whisperer, who whispers (evil)

into the breasts of mankind-from among the jinn and mankind.

Another poet whose subjects interact with the Scriptures is John Donne. Donne was a pioneer in changing the poetics of the Elizabethans. His language is challenging, his discourse is more daring, and his treatment of subjects is adventurous. In his Holy Sonnet XI he identifies himself with Jesus Himself:

SPIT in my face you Jewes, and pierce my side,

Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee,

For I have sinn'd, and sinn'd, and onely hee,

Who could do no iniquitie, hath dyed:

But by my death can not be satisfied

My sinnes, which passe the Jewes impiety:

They kill'd once an inglorious man, but I

Crucifie him daily, being now glorified.

Oh let mee then, his strange love still admire:

Kings pardon, but be bore our punishment.

And **Jacob** came cloth'd in vile harsh attire

But to supplant, and with gainfull intent:

God cloth'd himselfe in vile mans flesh, that so

Hee might be weake enough to suffer woe.

The poem is an attempt to get the language of the divine closer to the ordinary, and the ordinary closer to the Holy. Anna Strhan writes:

To speak of God in this way

> is to pass this gift of revelation on to others. Speaking and thinking about God not only draws us closer to the Holy, but might also renew the bonds of community and show the presence of the transcendent as immanent within every address of I to another. In the task of speaking about and thus revealing God, the possibility is always present of building a space for us to dwell poetically and thereby a place for a community to gather and flourish. (29)

Donne's poetry, like the poetry of the others (George Herbert, Al-Hallaj and Ibn el-Farid), comes closer to the religious. He is comparable to them when he expresses the predicament in our relationship with God. Like Al-Hallaj, Donne is interested in the union with the divine. The language of the poems of John Donne, especially in his "Divine Meditations", alludes to the language of the scriptures. Like Al – Hallaj, Donne's attempt to bring the Deity into the vernacular has come closer to accomplishment.

Another pleasure the poets derive from their attempt to fuse the natural with the mystical, comes from their longing for grandeur and magnificence in their lines and rhythms. This grandeur derives from the coming closer to the sacred, getting familiar with divinity, attaching divine significance to the subject of description. We see that the poetry celebrates all creatures; mystical intuition is a characteristic of all things. Their sympathy with life in general is the essence of their grandeur, their closeness to the Deity. Their will is set free from the shackles of the

terrestrial life; freedom of the soul is achieved by getting rid of the bonds of the earthly life.

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Conclusion

This paper deals with the interrelations between poetry and the sacred texts. Poets usually assume otherworldly sources for their poetry. In this respect, they are comparable with saints and prophets. Poetic and religious discourses usually interchange. The paper attempts to show this transaction, and highlight their mutual influence. The writer concentrates on certain poets whose poetry comes nearer to the religious text. Milton, John Donne, George Herbert are examples in English literature, *Ibn al-Farid and Al-Hallaj* are examples in Arabic literature. The paper concludes that poets interrelate with the sacred text in order to possess its grandeur. On the other hand, the sacred text uses the tools of poetry in order to influence its readers, and spell its hearers. The two discourses touch on man's inability to understand the very details of this universe.

The paper also draws the attention to the old relationship between the language of the holy and the language of the worldly. Poets benefited from the holy text and its spiritual style. Holy texts distinguish by their grandeur, and splendor. Students of literature and researchers do not frequently discuss this controversial relationship.

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Notes

1- H.V. Routh, "God, Man, & Epic Poetry: A Study in Comparative Literature", v. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 5.

2- Kilian McDonnell, "A Poet in the Monastery: I Don't Tell Lies", ABR (American Benedictine Review 59: 3 – SEPT. 2008), p. 240.

3- George Santayana, *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion* (Harper and Harper, New York: 1911), pp: 25 – 26.

4- Margaret Walker Alexander, "Religion, Poetry, and History: Foundations for a New Educational System" delivered at the National Urban League Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 29, 1968, Vital Speeches, *EBSCO* Publishing, 2003), p. 762.

5- There have been studies of the relationship between language and religion by linguists like Ramsey (Religious Language, 1957), and anthropologists like Rodney Needham (Belief, Language and Experience 1972). Special cases have been analyzed in words like S. D. Gill, Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer (1981), Julius Lipner, The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja (1986) and James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language (1961). See: John F. A. Sawyer etal. (ed.), Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion (New York, Elsevier, 2001), 1.

6- Ibid, p. 131.

7- Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: Books and School of the Ages* (New York, Riverhead Books, 1994).

8- Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (London, 1872, p: 59, see: Jan Loop, "Divine Poetry? Early Modern European Orientalists on the Beauty of the Qur'an CHRC 894.4 (2009), pp. 455 – 488.

9- Ibid., 456.

10- Kamal Abu Deep, "Literary Criticism", Julian Ashtiany et.al (ed.) in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Abbasid Belles – Letters* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 356.

11- Abu-Jarir Muhammad P. Jarir a t-abari, The Commentary on the Qur'an, an abridged translation of Jam'al-bayan and ta'wililayed-Qur'an, ed W.F. Madelung and A. Jones, Trans. J. Cooper (Oxford, 1987, p: 21. Quoted in 460 in CHRC 894 (2009) pp. 455 – 488.

12- Jan Loop, "Divine Poetry? Op.cit.

13- David Daiches, *Critical Approaches to Literature* (London: Longman, 1956), pp. 6-7.

14- Ibid. pp. 125 – 126.

15- Robert Altar, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Basic Books: New York, 1985), p. 141.

16- Anna Strhan, *Religious Language as Poetry*, Heidegger's Challenge (The Heythrop Journal, LII, 2011, pp: 926 – 938), p. 932.

17- Jermie S. Begbie, *The Holy Spirit at Work in the Arts:*

Learning from George Herbert (Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology (66, 1, 2012, 41 – 54), p. 47.

18- Robert Griffin, "Pope, the Prophets, and the Dunciad" (SEL 23, 1983), p. 453.

19- Sharon Achinstein, *Reading George Herbert in Restoration* (English Literary Renaissance, 2006), p. 433.

20- Ibid., p. 437.

21- Julia Ashtiany, etal., *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Abbasid Belles-Letters* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 247.

22- Anna Strhan, op.cit., p. 937.

23- Ashtiany, op.cit., p. 246.

24- Ibid., p. 246.

25- Ibid., p. 248.

26- Ibid., p. 253.

27- Ibid., p. 253

28- Ibid.

29- Anna Strhan, op.cit., p. 937.

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