
Gert Borg and Ed de Moor, both from the University of Nijmegen, have done a good job of arranging and publishing this issue of Orientations, a multidisciplinary annual of the Dutch Association for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. The matter published actually consists of the presentations made at the Colloquium on the “Divine in Arabic Poetry” on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Institute of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Catholic University in Nijmegen. The colloquium was organised by Ed de Moor who, as Gert Borg states with remorse, “was not able to see the printing of this volume” (p. 5), which is dedicated to his memory.

It seems appropriate to quote, at the very outset, the following excerpt from the Introduction, which, as it crisply delineates the scope and perspective of the collection, has been highlighted on the back of the cover:

In Islam the fascination for “the word” is as vigorous as in Judaism and in Christianity, but an extra dimension is, that the revealed text, the Koran, is considered to be verbatim the word of the Almighty Himself, thereby providing the Arabic Language with just an extra quality. No wonder that throughout Islamic history the study of the word, the Koran, the Prophet’s utterances and the interpretation of both, has become the main axis of knowledge and education. As a consequence the intellectuals — and also the poets in Islamic culture — were thoroughly familiar with religious terms and the phraseology of a language which was highly estimated because of the divine origin with which it was associated. No wonder therefore, that allusions to religious texts can be found throughout Arabic literature, both classical and modern.

The subject of this volume is the representation of the divine in Arabic poetry, be it the experience of the divine as expressed by poets or the use of imagery coined by religion (pp. 1–2). (Also reproduced on the back of the cover).

The first paper by Gert Borg, the surviving editor himself, deals with the poetry of the Arab bard Umayyah b. Abī ‘l-Ṣalt who is famous for his religious tone during the period just preceding the advent of Islam. While cautioning on the knotty problem of determining the authenticity of Umayyah’s verse, Borg comments on Seidensticker’s view that wherever Umayyah’s alleged poetry appears to be consistent with later Islamic tafsīr, its authenticity becomes questionable. Borg contends that the possibility of
similar ideas being “circulated in the area before Koranic revelation” cannot be ruled out (p. 10).

A keen study of whatever is available in Umayyah’s name has been made, dividing it into four kinds on the whole and two categories thematically. Pointing out that choosing poetic expression for dwelling on religious topics in those times seems to be quite unusual, Borg analyses a few of Umayyah’s poems in detail making several important observations. For example, while analysing Poem 21, he remarks, with reference to Umayyah’s Heaven, that “What strikes us first of all is that Umayya never mentions any room for the souls of the righteous in this perfectly organised fortress” (p. 14), that “humans are hardly mentioned in this part of the poem” (p. 15) and that “in this text God is never mentioned as being rahim, an epithet Umayyah uses frequently in other poems” (p. 15), etc. Such observations bear testimony to the meticulous study and enormous labour that has been undertaken. It is benefiting to find the Arabic text of the poems, here, as well as in several subsequent presentations, provided in roman transliteration.

In “Salvation at Sea? Seafaring in Early Arabic Poetry”, J.E. Montgomery also, discusses a passage from Umayyah b. Abi ’l-Ṣalt regarding the Ark and the Flood. As put by the author himself, “This paper reviews, in the context of pre-Islamic poetry and the Koran, the quest for that ancient, Near Eastern and Semitic religious symbol, the ship of the souls” (p. 25).

G.J. Van Gelder has made a deep study of the 50 stanzas of the love poem on a Christian boy by the lesser known poet Mudrik al-Shayb ṣāḥib, “a poem in which the sacred and the profane, the human and the divine, are closely intermingled” (p. 50) and which has remained a source of inspiration for several later poets. Questioning the disparaging remarks of Manfred Ullmann, Gelder urges that the poem deserves to be re-evaluated in the light of its contemporary historio-literary perspective.

Peter Bachman examines the manifestations of the Divine in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s poems concentrating on a traditional qaṣīdah and a muwashshahā by him, while Guiseppe Scattolin, “on the basis of new manuscript evidence”, to quote the editor, “offers a fascinating interpretation of a huge poem by the other great mystic of Islam, the 13th century Egyptian poet ’Umar ibn al-Fārīd” (p. 3).

Arie Schippers studies the case of Ibn Ṣahl of Spain as what he calls a “humorous approach of the Divine” (p. 119) and with these six presentations ends part I of the volume, pertaining to the classical poetry while part II contains six more relating to modern poetry. Without going into further details let us have a look at the contents of the volume, referring the reader, of
course, to the “Introduction” wherein all the papers have been very briefly but quite aptly summarized.

Introduction
By Gert Borg

**Part I: Classical Poetry**

The Divine in the works of Umayya b. Abî al-Šâlt
*by Gert Borg*

Salvation at Sea? Seafaring in Early Arabic Poetry
*by James E. Montgomery*

Mudrik al-Shaybâni’s Poem on a Christian Boy:
Bad Taste or Harmless Wit?
*by Geert Jan van Gelder*

Manifestations of the Divine as Represented in Poems
by Ibn al-‘Arabî
*by Peter Bachmann*

The Experience of the Divine in the Poetry of the Egyptian Sufi Poet ‘Umar Ibn al-Fâriqî
*by Joseph Scattolin*

Humorous approach of the Divine in the Poetry of al-Andalus
The Case of Ibn Sahl
*by Arie Schippers*

**Part II: Modern Poetry**

The Koran as Subtext in Modern Arabic Poetry
*by Stefan Wild*

Religious Motifs and Themes in North American *Mahjar* Poetry
*by Cornelis Nijland*

Between Heaven and Hell: Sin and Sexuality in the Poetry of Ilyâs Abú Shabaka
*by Robin Ostle*

The Humanized God in the Poetry of a Tammuzian:
Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb
*by Ed de Moor*
The Divinity of the Profane, Representations of the Divine
In the Poetry of Adûnîs
by Stefan Weidner

The Christ Figure in Şiâyîh’s Poetry
by Roger Allen

The volume appears in attractive but sober paperback, printed in the Netherlands on paper which meets, as certified, the requirements of “ISO 9706: 1994, Information and documentation — paper for documents — Requirements for permanence, and published from Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam — Atlanta GA 2001, while some of the financial means to assist in editing and printing were provided by the Institute of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies, mentioned above.

The book as a whole, makes a pleasurable reading that affords a peep into the area under study from a rather unfamiliar angle. The matter which might have hitherto passed unnoticed has been arranged and brought under focus here in such a manner as may prove quite revealing for those interested in the classical and modern Arabic poetry or inclined to study the variety of expressions of the mystic or divine experiences of the human soul.

Khurshid Rizvi


Edward Conze is one of those rare individuals who spend their whole lifetime mastering some very remote and difficult field of knowledge. He is the author of six books on Buddhism, including (with I.B. Horner and D. Snelgrove) the classic *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (1954). In this brief introduction he attempts to cover the progress of the Buddhist religion in the last 2,500 years or so. As this religion is spread out so widely in the world — India, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand and other parts of East Asia — it is far from easy even to give the briefest outline of it, but this, indeed, is what the author has achieved in less than 150 pages.