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## THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY ON ARAB POETS IN THE FIRST CENTURIES OF ISLAM: THE PROBLEM OF LIE

The present paper aims at studying factors which have formed the image of the poet in Arabia on the eve of the Islamic era and in its first centuries. It focuses on issues in which medieval Islamic scholarly views on poetic art have expressed themselves and investigates the influence exerted on poets by the norms of Islam (*dīn*) complementing the pre-Islamic values of manliness (*murūwah*) and kinship solidarity (*‘aṣabiyyah*). The author’s hypothesis is that certain tensions between Islamic ideology and the pre-Islamic poetic tradition were not caused by a clash between *murūwah* and *dīn*. Rather they have been an expression of incompatibility between traditional poetry as an instrument of social action designed for decentralized tribal society, and institutionalized, centralized early Muslim society into which this instrument was imported. The problem of lie is examined in this context as the most salient point of tension between the norms of traditional Arabic poetry and the norms of Islam.

*Keywords:* Arabic poetry, Islam, Jahiliyya.

Research for this article was supported by Minerva Fellowship of the Max Planck Society.

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. *The State of the Field: Compatibility of Murūwah and Dīn*

Ignaz Goldziher examined the influence of Islamic ideology on ancient Bedouin society using the terms *murūwah* and *dīn* [Goldziher 1966-I: 1–39]. The term *murūwah* refers to the virtues of a true man (courage, prudence, generosity, etc.) and, at the same time, to the complex of norms by which proper manly behaviour is defined. The term “*dīn*”, meaning literally “religion” (when Islam is implied), refers to the norms defining one’s behaviour as a Muslim. Both terms became useful tools for analysing tribal discourse in the Islamic world. With these terms ideological issues concerning ancient Bedouin society were described and explained [Bravmann 1972], as well as those related to modern tribal society where the norms of *murūwah* remain in force. In addition to these terms, another three are usually mentioned when the ideological norms of tribal Arab society are being discussed: *ḥamiyyah* (tribal pride), which is opposed to *taqwā* (piety) [Kurpershoek 1994: 21], and ‘*aṣabiyyah*’ (tribal solidarity manifested in readiness to defend the tribe’s honour and to afford help to its members) [Rodionov 2007: 159].

After the ideas of Islam were brought into the Arab society by Muḥammad, a complex system of values emerged combining the spirit of manliness (*murūwah*) and kinship solidarity (‘*aṣabiyyah*’) which reigned among the Arabs from times immemorial, with a new religious consciousness (*dīn*) which started to develop in their minds. Even though Goldziher established a contrast between *murūwah* and *dīn*, most scholars who have been examining the ethical system which appeared in the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia found that, generally, Islam did not oppose pre-Islamic moral values, but rather approved and even reinforced them. Pre-Islamic norms were not rejected, but were only expected to undergo a certain transformation under the influence of Islam.

<sup>1</sup> The term “‘*aṣabiyyah*” is used by Ibn Ḥaldūn in “The Muqaddimah”. The scholar describes ‘*aṣabiyyah*’ as a basis of the defense capability of the Bedouin [Ibn Ḥaldūn 2005-I: 216]. Apart from this Classical Arabic term derived from the word “‘*aṣab*” (“kin”), a synonymous term “*qabwalah*” (derived from “*qabīlah*” — “tribe”) has to be mentioned. While extensively used in Yemeni vernacular Arabic [Rodionov 2007: 159], it cannot be found in dictionaries of Classical Arabic like “Lisān al-‘Arab” or “Tāj al-‘Arūs”.

As Bishr Farès showed, such transformation occurred naturally, because prior to the advent of Islam, *jāhili* ethics was functioning as a religion in a social sense. Common for all Arab tribes, it was this ethics that was making them united in terms of basic concepts and collective behaviour. After the advent of Islam, the Qur'an and the Sunnah kept most ethical elements related to honour, turning them into precepts of the new religion. Old ethical elements were not integrated into the religious system of Islam in their pre-Islamic form, but were rather recognized as *makārim al-aḥlāq* (virtues) [Farès 1932: 190–193]. Walzer and Gibb also showed that the pre-Islamic moral values were not forgotten, but rather were included into Islamic ethics as one of its constituent elements [Walzer, Gibb 1959: 335–339].

Lecomte came to a conclusion that no sharp contrast between the ethical foundations of pre-Islamic Arab life and Islam existed, because *jāhili* virtues did not contradict to Islamic morality. In his opinion, the old virtues (such as aspiration to defend personal honour, courage, tribal solidarity, hospitality and generosity, self-restraint, and decisiveness) that were apparently replaced with the new ones (such as piety, kind-heartedness, mercy, and the brotherhood of believers) in fact only underwent transformation, and Islamic virtues were nothing but practical implementation of the pre-Islamic values [Lecomte 1965: 449–450].

Bravmann argued that the principle known as *murūwah* played an important part in Islamic days and in fact, it was one of the main ideas of Islamic religion: manly virtues and the virile ethics of the heathen period were appreciated in the Islamic period, only that in the course of time other qualities, of pure religious character, were added to them [Bravmann 1972: 2].

Rezvan found pre-Islamic *murūwah* to become one of the core elements of the Qur'anic ethics. In his opinion, the difference was between interpretations of the same virtues by Muḥammad and pre-Islamic poets. For example, pre-Islamic generosity, indeed, turned to be a religious precept, but unlike the *jāhili* virtue — thoughtless, immoderate generosity coming from the mere aspiration to the ultimate generosity, in the Islamic period, a prudent generosity was appreciated. In the same way, bravery encouraged by the Qur'an (one's valour in a battle in which the true faith is defended) is something different from the *jāhili* bravery manifesting itself mainly in raids and acts of revenge [Rezvan 1988: 38–41].

Studying traditional Arab society in the modern period, Mikhail Rodionov arrived to a conclusion that *murūwah*, *‘aṣabiyyah* and *dīn* were still supplementing each other, and it was impossible to predict which complex will play a greater role in determining individual behaviour in different situations [Rodionov 1988]. The process of assimilation between the virtues of the tribal world and Islam was bilateral. Not only that the religion had adopted the pre-Islamic virtues, but, in the course of time, piety became a supporting pillar of the tribal ideology. When characterizing Yemeni society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Steve Caton put piety in the first place among the other values of a tribesman: before honour, generosity, courage and self-possession [Caton 1990: 26–30].

Thus, there was no contradiction between the pre-Islamic and Islamic values, but a new system was formed as a result of their fusion. This paper aims at contributing to the study of *murūwah*, *‘aṣabiyyah* and *dīn* by placing the poet in this system. Arguing that a certain conflict between pre-Islamic morality and the norms of Islam was inevitable, I examine the problem of lie as one of the most salient points of tension between Arab poets and religious ethics in the first centuries of Islam.

The problem of lie in Arabic poetry was previously examined in the 70s by two German-writing researchers. Renate Jacobi [1972] studied the works of 9–11<sup>th</sup> century scholars trying to understand, to what extent the truthfulness of words served as a criterion for evaluating poetic production, and what was the aesthetic function of truth and lie in poetry as artistic means. Christoph Bürgel [1976] examined the problem of lie in Arabic and Persian poetry using two Islamic terms: *zāhir* (the external expression of faith) and *bāṭin* (the inner or spiritual dimension of faith). As a result, he has divided poets by their approach to the problem of lie into *zāhirī* and *bāṭinī* poets. The first ones saw truthfulness of poetry as an extent to which a poetic description conformed to the reality. The second ones (Persian poets like Nizāmī or Ḥāfiẓ) tried to reveal the concealed truth (symbolic side of the universe, divine wisdom and beauty). In the process of the discussion, I will refer to certain points in both works in the relevant parts of the discussion. The present paper aims at contributing to the study of the problem of lie in Arabic poetry by tracing its origins. This will help to understand not only why the problem was inevitable, but also why it remained practically unsolved and any changes in the first centuries of

Islam occurred mainly at the doctrinal level. Also it will lead to new insights into the social conditions of the state founded by Muḥammad.

### 1.2. General Assumptions, the Hypothesis and the Method

My general assumption is that a certain conflict between the norms of traditional Arabic poetry and the norms of Islam was inevitable because of the coincidence of the following factors:

1) After the advent of Islam, poets' behaviour was exposed to the criticism of a religious establishment who sought to maintain a certain social order protecting the young Ummah from moral degradation and inner instability. Accordingly, the ethics of a good poet was defined by his abidance by the norms of Islam in interacting with all the members of the Ummah.

2) The pre-Islamic ways of poetic expression were developed for ideological tribal wars in which any means were applied to make verses effective, and only a poet's commitment to his tribe was defining the ethics of his actions. The earliest Muslim poets and, first of all, the crony poets of Muḥammad, were initially trained as defenders and propagandists of their tribes. Almost all of them, after converting to Islam, have maintained their usual artistic means. Thus, it was impossible to ban the traditional ways of poetic expression like exaggeration.

3) Finally, shortly before the advent of Islam, composing panegyrics and satires became a well-paid profession outside the tribal world and many outstanding poets left their tribes in search of earning opportunities.

My hypothesis is that, after the advent of Islam, the pre-Islamic tradition continued to determine to a great extent the actions of Arab poets, both because of the stability of a poetic canon moulded by tribal pre-Islamic reality and because of the importance of the poets' craft as propagandists. Indeed, the pre-Islamic poetic canon was designed to instil into tribesmen the virtues of *murūwah* and *'aṣabiyyah* and to make poets act conveying these principles when representing their tribes and defending them. Considering this fact and the stability of the canon, *murūwah* and *'aṣabiyyah* continued to influence Arabic poetry after the advent of Islam and even outside tribal context. Nevertheless, certain tensions between Islamic ideology and pre-Islamic poetic tradition (in particular, the problem of lie) were not caused by a contrast between *murūwah* and *dīn* in themselves (such a contrast

did not exist). Rather they were an expression of incompatibility between traditional poetry as an instrument of social action designed for decentralized tribal society, and an institutionalized, centralized early Muslim society into which this instrument was imported.

To argue the hypothesis by the example of the problem of lie, the following questions have to be answered: what factors have formed the image of poets as liars so strikingly evident in the Islamic tradition? Did this image exist already in the pre-Islamic period and in the days of Muḥammad? What changes have occurred (or have not) in the poets' behaviour after *dīn* emerged by the side of *murūwah* and *ʿaṣabiyyah*? What can be learned from this?

To verify the assumptions and answer the questions formulated above, I place the discussion on ethics and religious ideology in early Arabic poetry into the ethical paradigm of *murūwah*, *ʿaṣabiyyah* and *dīn*. Basing on the Qur'an and Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith texts, literary and historical works of medieval scholars and, of course, *diwāns* of 7–8<sup>th</sup> century poets, I trace the preconditions for shaping the attitude towards poets as liars on the eve of the Islamic era and during the early days of Islam. Then, I define how the spirit of manliness and tribalism contributed to this attitude, what traditional features of pre-Islamic poetry were unacceptable in terms of *dīn*, and why the situation could change at the doctrinal level, but not on the ground.

## IMAGE-MAKING FACTORS

### 2.1. The ambiguity of the Term “*šā'ir*” and a Popular Belief in Demons

Over the centuries before the advent of Islam, the term “*šā'ir*” referred to a soothsayer or a magician, while by the word “*šir*”, not only metered, rhymed words but also words of witchcraft and sorcery were meant [Goldziher 1896: 17]. The mere fact that the word “*šā'ir*” can be interpreted as an active participle derived from the verb “*šā'ara*” (to feel; to know; to notice; to perceive; to sense) indicates that originally, it referred to a person distinguished for special capabilities. Apparently, *šā'ir* was necessary to his tribe due to his talent in witchcraft and soothsaying. Similar tribal profession was defined by the word “*kāhin*” (fortune-teller, foreteller). Both professionals used rhymed prose for their practices. To both of them, public beliefs attributed an ability to communicate with genies and demons as a source of secret knowledge [Fahd 1966: 73].

According to a widely accepted theory, first elegies (*riṭā'*) and satires (*hijā'*) in Arabic were composed in the framework of bewitching practices, and a magic effect was ascribed to the texts in these genres [Goldziher 1952: 6; Filshtinsky 1985: 175]. Thus, ancient *šā'irs*, if not poets in the modern sense of the term, at least were among the first masters of artistic word in the history of Arabic culture. Gradually, the term "*šā'ir*" was referred to any master of meter and rhyme regardless of his ability to practice witchcraft and soothsaying. As a result, the main meaning of the word "*šā'ir*" today is "a poet". Goldziher paid enough attention to this kind of duality. What draws our attention here is the ambiguity of the term "*šā'ir*" in its original meaning ("a soothsayer").

Certain verses of the Qur'an indicate that prior to the advent of Islam, the term "*šā'ir*" referred not only to professional tribal soothsayers / foretellers (respected tribesmen, specialists necessary for their talent), but rather to wandering lying prophets or blessed fools. Evidently, in the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Arabs were used to encounter prophesying roamers. These persons were also defined as "*šā'irs*", but unlike tribesmen-specialists, they were treated with ridicule, distrust, and neglect as liars or madmen. In the 6–7<sup>th</sup> centuries, absolute ambiguity of this kind characterized not only the term "*šā'ir*". Amazingly similar fate was shared by the term "*šulūk*", and the example is fine because it also belongs to the field of tribal poetry<sup>2</sup>.

A typical reaction of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabs to *šā'irs* of the despicable type is shown in the Qur'an. Faithless people are cited as reacting to Muḥammad's preaching as if he was a usual *šā'ir* (hereinafter the translation is mine):

<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, this term referred to brave heroes who led their fellow-tribesmen during raids. On the other hand, the same word defined roaming beggars. Even if this duality was not uncomfortable for ancient Arabs in general, it was bothering *šulūks* of the first kind who were proud to be defined with this term and were despising the wandering beggars. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, 'Urwah ibn al-Ward who, due to his poetry and bravery in raids, was awarded a degree of "the prince of *šulūks*", in one of his most famous *qaṣīdas* combined praise of *šulūks* of his own type with deriding *šulūks* of the despicable type ['Urwah 1998: 67]. The third type of *šulūks* was represented by "pirates of the desert" ostracized by their fellow-tribesmen who were reluctant to bear collective responsibility for their actions. Such situation is described by poets who were experiencing it themselves, for example, by Šanfarā al-Azdī in the 6<sup>th</sup> century [Šanfarā 1996: 56] and by Sa'd ibn Nāšib in the 7<sup>th</sup> century [Marzūqī 2003: 52]. On the meaning of the term *šulūk* see also the work by Ḥanafī [1987: 17].

*No, they told, [this] (i.e. the words of Muḥammad) [is] a mixture of false dreams! No, he has invented it! No, he is a šā'ir! Let him bring us signs [just as the messengers who were] sent first [before him (Moses or Jesus) did] [21: 5].*

*And were saying: "Are we to leave our gods for a mad šā'ir?" [37: 36].*

*Or they say: "He is a šā'ir. Let us wait until the fate will punish him as he deserves" [52: 30].*

In the same way, *šā'irs* of the despicable type are described by the Revelation itself. *Šā'irs* are shown as obsessed by demons. They are wandering and propagating nonsense:

*Should I tell you upon whom the demons descend? They descend upon every sinful liar. They (sinful liars) throw [into public] what they have heard [from demons], while most of them are liars. And deviators follow [these] šā'irs. Have not you seen them roaming in every valley, saying (arrogating to themselves) what they do not do? (26: 221–226).*

In all the four quotations the word "*šā'ir*" intentionally was not translated. It stands to reason that, first of all, prophesying roamers are implied in all of them (especially in the first three). It is hard to imagine that a specialist necessary to his fellow-tribesmen and respected accordingly, could touch off such a reaction of the public as described in the first three quotations. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabs reacting in such a way to the words of a master like Ašā or Nābiġah. On the eve of the Islamic era, poetic art in Arabia was flourishing, being at the peak of its development and at the summit of its popularity. Poetic canon which continues to influence traditional Arabic poetry even nowadays has already crystallized by then. Dozens of outstanding poets became famous due to the trade fair in 'Ukāz and due to the mere popularity of the poetic art. As an effective instrument of propaganda, poetry was necessary to any tribe, both in its interior and exterior<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Abū 'Amr ibn al-'Alā' (Basra philologist of the 8<sup>th</sup> century) described the situation in the following words: "In the Era of Ignorance, a poet was preferred over a preacher because of their (Arabs) great need in poetry, which stored for them their

Thus, it is unlikely that in the 6–7<sup>th</sup> centuries, Arabs perceived outstanding poets as soothsayers and future-tellers, the more so, the poets themselves did not pretend to be prophets or foretellers and openly declared that in their verses. Zuhayr explained in his *mu‘allaqa*-poem: “I know the present day, and what was yesterday, before it, // but regarding the awareness of tomorrow, I am blind”<sup>4</sup> [Zuhayr 1988: 110]. In a similar way, the author of another *mu‘allaqa*, ‘Amr ibn Kulṭūm, expressed himself when addressing his beloved: “Indeed, the present day and tomorrow depend, // [as] the day after tomorrow, on what you are not aware of”<sup>5</sup> [Ibn Kulṭūm 1991: 67]. The poet implies that nobody, including himself, knows the future, even the nearest one. If someone really tended to attribute to every significant poet a capability of future-telling, these words of two great masters would surprise him to no small degree.

Most likely that in the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Arabs distinguished well between masters of artistic words who produced perfect poetry, and soothsayers who used rhymed prose for bewitching and foretelling (even though both, the former and the latter, were defined as *šā‘irs*). It is also likely that a clear distinction existed between professional tribal soothsayers and prophesying roamers. Muḥammad could not accept any activity of false prophets in Arabia, and as a widespread phenomenon they vanished after the advent of Islam. When poets (in the modern sense of the word) remained the only type of what was meant by “*šā‘ir*”, everything told about *šā‘irs* in verses 221–226 of Surah 26 (first of all, accusation of lying) was referred to them with all gravity. In such a way, the ambiguity of the term “*šā‘ir*” influenced the problem of lie.

What probably added to this ambiguity and, accordingly, to the poets’ image as liars, was a popular notion of their ability to communicate with demons. This ability was attributed to poets<sup>6</sup> not less than to sooth-

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heroic deeds, glorified their virtues, and scarified their enemies and those who arranged raids; it inspired fear for their horsemen and aroused horror because of their number” [Jāḥiẓ 1998–I: 241].

<sup>4</sup> وَأَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْيَوْمِ وَالْأَمْسِ قَبْلَهُ \\\ وَلَكِنِّي عَنْ عِلْمٍ مَا فِي غَدٍ عَمٍ

<sup>5</sup> وَإِنَّ غَدًا وَإِنَّ الْيَوْمَ رَهْنٌ \\\ وَبَعْدَ غَدٍ بِمَا لَا تَعْلَمِينَا

<sup>6</sup> Both in the pre-Islamic period and after the rise of Islam, there was a popular belief in Arabia that every outstanding poet (*fahl*) must have a demon responsible for his inspiration. In Yemen the belief in demons of inspiration survived until nowadays. In different examples of tribal poetry collected at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

sayers (hence the common term meaning literally “the one who feels”). Not without reason, Ibn Taymiyyah (13<sup>th</sup> c., Damascus, Ḥanbali school), commenting on verses 221–226 of Surah 26, has stressed that they refer to soothsayers, poets, and false prophets at the same time. In his opinion, the Qur’an implies that demons help men to lie and sin, but they only descend upon those who match them as potential liars [Ibn Taymiyya 2011–V: 61]. It follows from this that if demons have chosen someone, it is a sign that he had a natural propensity for lying. As for poets, not only the popular notion ascribed to them an ability to communicate with demons, but many of them, before and after the advent of Islam, claimed for such a talent themselves. Poets even new personal names of their demons and addressed them in their poems.<sup>7</sup> Thus, owing to the idea of the poets’ ability to communicate with demons (a source of lies), the stigma of “liars” gained additional argumentation.

Even though verse 227 of Surah 26 explains that everything stated about *šā’irs* as sinful liars does not refer to those “who believe and do righteous deeds and mention Allah a lot” (protection is guaranteed to such poets and punishment is promised to those who hurt them), the charge of lying was not dismissed even after most poets converted to Islam. The reason for that brings us to the second factor which contributed to the image of poets as liars at the beginning of the Islamic era.

## 2.2. *The Struggle for the Supremacy of the Qur’an*

Behind the Qur’anic emphasis on the poets’ propensity for lying, Renate Jacobi has found three objectives: 1) Muḥammad saw poetry as the most influential expression of pagan views which he had

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poets address a demon named Hājīs [Caton 1990: 319; Souvorov 2000: 59; Rodionov 2007: 188–189].

<sup>7</sup> It is known, for instance, that the demon of Farazdaq (7–8<sup>th</sup> cent.) was addressed as ‘Amr [Jāhīz 1967–VI: 226]. A‘šā was assisted by a demon called Miṣḥal. In one of his satire poems he invited him to help in disdainning a person named Jahannām: “I invited my friend Miṣḥal, and for him was invited // Jahannām, may Allah cut him something, to this despicable bastard” [A‘šā 1968: 125]. Islamic tradition keeps reports on encounters with genies of poetry, for example, on a man who stayed as a guest in a tribe that turned out to be a tribe of genies, and among its members he met a genie responsible for the inspiration of Ḥuṭay’a [Iṣfahānī 2008–II: 115]. Another narrator claimed to discover that a strange old man he met was a personal genie of Imru’u l-Qays [Quraṣī 1981: 51].

to overcome; 2) In the course of his conflict with those who did not recognize him as the Messenger of Allah, he was exposed to attacks with satire poems; 3) Stressing the lying character of poetry was intended to emphasize, by contrast, the truthfulness of the Qur'an, as it was stated that Muḥammad was not a poet [Jacobi 1972: 86]. In discussing these objectives, I shall argue that the first two points are relevant for the short-term outlook only. It turned out very early that there was no danger in the spirit of *murūwah* and *'aṣabiyyah* concentrated in poetry, and except for verses in which paganism was evident, Muḥammad did not prohibit to the Ummah enjoying pre-Islamic poetry [Hayṭamī 2001–VIII: 157]. As for the second point, indeed, in the beginning of his way as a prophet, Muḥammad was subjected to attacks with satire poems composed by his opponents, but very early the Prophet himself started to recruit masters of satire who became his guards [Ibn Rašīq 1963–I: 31; Ibn al-'Arabī 2003–III: 462]. It is with this fact that Christoph Bürgel explained Muhammad's double attitude towards poets and apparent contradictions is his statements on poetry [Bürgel 1976: 27].

The third point raised by Jacobi reflects an ideological struggle for the supremacy of the Qur'an over poetry. It has to be developed here independently as a factor that seriously strengthened scholarly and exegetical discourse on poets as liars. In the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, poetry was the most developed, rooted, and popular oral tradition. Muḥammad has brought a new tradition, initially oral, which used a special form, which was very different from poetry and, what was more important, was declared the supreme and inimitable one. Under these conditions, even if it was possible to avoid a conflict between *murūwah* and *dīn*, a conflict between two traditions and two different forms of speech was inevitable, because only one oral tradition and only one form of speech could remain supreme in Arabia in the era of monotheism based on words uttered in Arabic.

As the most popular pre-Islamic oral tradition and form of speech, poetry was doomed to give place to the Qur'an. Poets and their public had to keep in mind that poetry, even though not prohibited, should not derive attention from the Qur'an and prayer and nobody should dare to compete with the Qur'an in eloquence. To make the Qur'an prevail over any kinds of artistic speech and, above all, poetry, Islamic ideology made a good use of the poets' image as "liars obsessed by demons".

While verses 221–222 of the Sura of the Poets stress the existence of a connection between demons as a source of inspiration and the falsity of words inspired by them (*Should I tell you upon whom the demons descend? They descend upon every sinful liar*), verses 192–193 of the same chapter emphasise, that the source of the Qur'an is totally different from the one of poetry: "It is a revelation from the Lord which was brought down by the trustworthy spirit (*Jibrīl*)". Keeping the image of poets as liars helped both, to stress that the words of the Revelation were noteworthy much more than poetry, and that poetry, unlike the Qur'an, had a demonic source.

The doctrine of inimitability and divine nature of the Qur'an was seriously developed for proving the truthfulness of the book, and for that purpose, scholars widely used the contrast between the Qur'an and poetry. Bāqillānī (10<sup>th</sup> cent., Basra, Māliki school) and Ibn Rašīq (11<sup>th</sup> cent., Maghreb, Māliki school) noticed that those who were keen in poetry, could not imitate the style of the Qur'an, and it was the poets' inability to compose anything similar to the Qur'an, that Ibn Rašīq regarded as the strongest argument for the truthfulness of the book [Bāqillānī 1963: 53; Ibn Rašīq 1963–I: 21]. Later, Ibn al-'Arabī (12<sup>th</sup> cent., Spain, Māliki school) stressed that the clarity of the Qur'anic language (as opposed to the obscurity of poetry) was made a proof of its miraculous nature and an indication of its truthfulness [Ibn al-'Arabī 2003–IV: 21].

The discourse on lying poets and the truthfulness of the Qur'an was important not only for stressing the contrast between the natures of the book and poetry, but also for emphasizing the eloquence of the Qur'an, to which the eloquence of poetry would be incomparable. It was argued that poetry was beautiful only due to the lie it contains. Explaining how the supremacy of the Qur'an over poetry manifests itself, Rāzī (12<sup>th</sup> cent., Shāfi'i school) noticed that the Holy Book was the most eloquent text while there was only truth inside, whereas poetry, if to leave inside only the truth, would not be as beautiful as it was when containing all its lies [Rāzī 1982–II: 126].

Finally, the discourse on lying poets was necessary to explain why Muḥammad could not utter anything in a regular poetic meter<sup>8</sup>. This

<sup>8</sup> As told in the Qur'an about Muḥammad: "And We have not taught him poetry, nor is it befitting for him. It (this Book) is only a reminder and a clear Qur'an" [36: 69]. According to the commentaries of Ṭabrisī (11<sup>th</sup> cent., Shia Islam) and Rāzī

point was intended to stress that, due to the nature of things, the Qur'an could not appear in a poetic form. As Ibn Fāris (11<sup>th</sup> cent., Persia, Shāfi'i and Māliki schools) explained, Allah has cleared his Book and his Prophet from poetry, because "poetry, if it is poor of sense, is funny, and if serious, is lying" (*in hazala adḥaka wa-in ḡadda kaḏaba*) [Ibn Fāris 1997: 212].

Thus, the necessity to decrease the status of poetry in presence of a new tradition contributed a lot to maintaining the stigma about lying poets. Nevertheless, initially and to a great extent, driven by aspiration to values of *murūwah* and 'aṣabiyyah, poets earned their image themselves.

### 2.3. A Deserved Image

Abū Dāwud (9<sup>th</sup> cent., Basra, Ḥanbali school), explaining that poetic form by itself does not convert an utterance into an unacceptable one, emphasized that, "from the legal point of view, poetry is considered indecent, because of the fact that most of it contains praises for people who do not deserve them and other things of this kind" [Abū Dāwud 2009–VII: 358]. In the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn al-'Arabī referred verse 226 of Surah 26 ("And that they say what they do not do") exactly to poets (not soothsayers or prophesying roamers). In his opinion, these words imply "what they (poets) mention in their poems when lying in panegyrics, self-praise, amatory, and heroic verses" [Ibn al-'Arabī 2003–III: 463]. Ibn Fāris, commenting on the same verse, was even more radical than Ibn al-'Arabī and, without setting apart any certain genres, has stated that everything told in poetic meter is mostly worthless because poets use to invent and exaggerate<sup>9</sup> [Ibn Fāris 1997:

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(12<sup>th</sup> cent., Shāfi'i school), when the Prophet tried to utter a verse, he unintentionally disrupted its meter [Tabrisī 1995–VIII: 287; Rāzī 1982–XXVI: 104]. According to Qurṭubī (13<sup>th</sup> cent., Māliki school) and Ibn Kaṭīr (14<sup>th</sup> cent., Shāfi'i school), Muḥammad broke poetic meter intentionally [Qurṭubī 1975–XV: 51; Ibn Kaṭīr 1999–VI: 588].

<sup>9</sup> In the following way, the scholar described those who were considered poets in the Arab society before him and in his days: "Poetry was not befitting for the Prophet as the strongest in his faith among the believers and the most pious in his charitable deeds among the righteous, because poetry has conditions, and the one who does not meet them will be never defined as "poet". It is absolutely impossible that [the one who is considered a poet] will utter words in a regular meter abiding by the truth without exaggerating (*min ḡayri an yufriḡa*), crossing the line (*yata'addā*), lying

211–212]. Thus, as follows from the discourse led in urban context already in the Abbasid period, poets deserved the image of liars because of arrogating to themselves and attributing to others, usually, in an exaggerated manner, of positive features. Such attitude towards a well-developed artistic tradition shows that it developed in conditions different from those of the environment in which it was harshly criticized for centuries as something blameworthy. Let us trace its origins.

Exaggerations, first of all, in arrogating of appreciated qualities in their extreme degree, were typical for Arabic poetry from the very beginning. Relying on one of the earliest Arab philologists, Abū ‘Ubayda (8<sup>th</sup> century), the poet Muhalhil (6<sup>th</sup> century) was recognized not only as the first one whose personal poems were sung by the Bedouin, not only as the inventor of the *qaṣīda* form, and the first one who composed amatory verses, but also “the first one who told lies in his poetry” (*wa huwa awwalu man kaḍaba fī šī’rihi*) [Iṣfahānī 2008–V: 37]. Later philologists, Ibn Qutayba (9<sup>th</sup> century), al-Qālī and Iṣfahānī (10<sup>th</sup> century) accused Muhalhil of lying because of the following verse: “And if not for the wind, I would make those in *Hujr* // hear the clunking of white [helmets] torn by [our] swords”<sup>10</sup> [Muhalhil 1993: 41].

The scholars refused to accept these words as a figurative expression recognizing them as one of the most egregious examples of exaggeration (*min aysari l-mubālaḡāt*) in Arabic poetry [Iṣfahānī 2008–V: 37]. Most likely that Muhalhil gained a reputation of the first lying poet not only due to this very verse and his mastery in exaggerating. A 9<sup>th</sup> century philologist Ibn Sallām characterized him as a poet who invented a lot: “Arabs used to believe that he (Muhalhil) was telling about himself too much, claiming for much more than he actually did” (*yadda‘ī fī qawlihi bi-akṭara min fi‘lihi*) [Suyūṭī 1985–II: 476]. In the meantime, the noteworthy fact is that Muslim philologists took a very uncompromising stand towards figurative speech in Arabic poetry from the very beginning of Islamic literary criticism.

It is most probable that excessive boasting or exaggerated praise, defined as lie by medieval scholars in the cities, was not perceived as

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(*yamīna*) or inventing in it things which could never happen (*ya’tī bihi bi-aṣyā’in lā yumkinu kawnuhā battatan*). Hence, when people call somebody “a poet”, his words are likely to be worthless and inferior” [Ibn Fāris 1997: 211–212].

<sup>10</sup> فَأَوْلَا الرِّيحُ أُسْمِعُ مَنْ بِحُجْرٍ \ \ صَلِيلَ الْبَيْضِ تُقْرَعُ بِالذُّكُورِ

such in ancient tribal culture. Exaggeration was acceptable as a legal means of struggle in the constant tribal wars and as such, became a part of the canon. When boasting of their deeds or describing the might of their tribes, heroes did not exercise self-restraint. *Murūwah* and *‘aṣabiyyah* were driving them to be as effective as possible expressing devotion and commitment to their relatives.

The example of Ḥassān ibn Tābit proves it well. Once, still in the pre-Islamic period when he was a poet of the Ḥazraj tribe, Ḥassān took part in a competition of poets in ‘Ukāz. Nābiġa al-Ḍubyānī served as an orbiter, and the participants were coming into his tent one by one to recite. After Ašā, Ḥansā’ presented her verses, and Nābiġa highly appreciated them by saying: “If not for Abū Baṣīr (Ašā) who recited me before you, I would say that as a poet you are the best among both, genies and humans” [Ibn Qutayba 1982: 344; Iṣfahānī 2008–XI: 7]. After Ḥansā’, Ḥassān recited his verses including the following line:

“[In order to receive guests], *we have got beautiful plates shining in the morning, // and the blood [of our enemies] is dropping from the blades of our swords*”<sup>11</sup> [Ḥassān ibn Tābit 1994: 219].

“*You would be a poet, if you were not diminishing the honour of those you are praising*”, was Nābiġa’s verdict. “*You used the form “ġafanāt”, and that means you have less plates for receiving guests than one would think if you were using the form “ġifān”. You told that your plates are shining in the morning (yalma ‘na biḍ-ḍuḥā), but you would better say they were flashing in the darkness of night (yabruqna bi-d-ḍuġā), because guests usually come by night. Your words about blood dropping from your swords prove that you are not killing enough enemies. Instead of “yaqṭurna” (is dropping) you would better say “yaġrīna” (is flowing), and that would tell about a real bloodshed*”, — explained the orbiter [Iṣfahānī 2008–IX: 252]. Nābiġa does not seem preoccupied with the real state of things in the Ḥazraj tribe. In his opinion, Ḥassān’s problem was that he was not exaggerating well enough and thus, was not enough effective.

Thus, if someone was not enough effective, his poetry was not considered good enough. On the other hand, when a Bedouin poet was sending a message, he expected it to be perceived as trustworthy.

11 لنا الجففات العُرُّ يَلْمَعْنَ بالضحى \\ وأسيافنا يقطرْنَ مِنْ جَدَّةٍ دَمَا

There was a practice of stressing the truthfulness of words in special transitional formulas which marked the beginning of the main message inside a poem. For instance, in a short poem in which he informed his enemies about the renewal of war, Ḥassān ibn Ṭābit<sup>12</sup>, after a short prelude describing his tears, addressed the messenger of his poem with the following words: “*Oh you, the rider who starts his journey in the morning, // bring with you this threat with no lie in it*”<sup>13</sup> [Ḥassān ibn Ṭābit 1994: 38]. *In a very similar manner, Farazdaq emphasized in one of his panegyrics the verity of words he was going to say (the poem was composed outside tribal context, when Farazdaq was already a court poet, but obviously, being a Bedouin by origin, the poet used to abide by the canons of Bedouin poetry):*

*Oh you, the rider who is spurring up his mount, // rushing to  
[a place where there is] everything camel riders need,*

*By your arrival to the leader of the believers, tell [him] // frankly  
and with knowledge the [following] words with no lie in it*<sup>14</sup>

[Farazdaq 1987: 25].

Another argument for the assumption that in ancient Bedouin culture, excessive boasting of manly qualities was not perceived as lying could be found in the fact that, traditionally, lying was considered incompatible with manly spirit. As an ancient Arabic proverb has it, “a liar has no *murūwah*” (*laysa li-kāḍibin murūwah*) [Nuwayrī 2004–III: 330]. Al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays from the Tamīm tribe (after converting to Islam in the days of Muḥammad, he became famous as a commander) told: “Two things which cannot meet each other [inside one man] are lie and *murūwah*” (*itnānī lā yaḡtamī‘ānī: al-kiḍb wal-murūwah*) [Ibn Qutayba 1996–II: 26]. An unknown pre-Islamic poet told: “A [true]

<sup>12</sup> Régis Blachère noticed that it would be impossible to distinguish the production of the pre-Islamic nomadic poets from the poetry of their colleagues from sedentary tribes. Judging by its characteristics, the poetry of Ḥassān ibn Ṭābit is Bedouin poetry even though the poet’s tribe, Ḥazraj, was a sedentary one [Blachère 1966: 409].

<sup>13</sup> يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّكَّابُ الْغَادِي لِطَيْبِيهِ \\ أُنْبِغْ لَدَيْكَ وَعَيْدًا لَيْسَ بِالْكَذِبِ

<sup>14</sup> يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّكَّابُ الْمُرْجِي مَطِيئَتَهُ \\ يُرِيدُ تَجَمُّعَ حَاجَاتِ الْأَرَكَابِ  
إِذَا أَتَيْتَ أَمِيرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فَعُلِّمْ \\ بِالتَّصْحِاحِ وَالْعِلْمِ قَوْلًا غَيْرَ مَكْذُوبِ

man is not lying if not for his meanness // or bad habit or lack of education”<sup>15</sup> [Wašā’ 1953: 41].

At the same time, it can be admitted that in urban culture, poets gained the image of liars already in the pre-Islamic period, and it existed in the days of Muḥammad. One indirect proof is the Qur’anic thesis about demons as a source of inspiration which causes šā’irs to lie. Whatever is meant by “šā’irs”, outstanding 7<sup>th</sup> century poets like Ašā, even though not aspiring to prophecy, claimed to be in touch with demons of inspiration. Even if in some cases demons with personal names were ascribed to poets by later tradition, it is impossible to deny that this belief existed already in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, because some poets addressed their personal demons in their verses.

The second indirect proof is that, basing on earlier reports, some exegetes proceeded from an assumption that the notion of lying poets existed already in the days of Muḥammad. ‘Asqalānī (14–15 cent., Egypt, Shafi’i school) wrote on the image of poets in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia:

*Among the pagans were those who told about the Prophet, may Allah honour him and grant him peace, that he was a poet. It is noticed [by some scholars that he was perceived as such] because of metered and rhymed Qur’anic verses. [On the other hand], it is told that [by defining him as “a poet”] they implied that he was a liar, because poetic words were mostly lying, and, as a result of it, one used to define lying words as “poetry”* [‘Asqalānī 2001–X: 554].

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Turkish imam Ismā’īl Ḥaqqī, reflecting on the Qur’anic verse 21:5 which quotes unbelievers saying about Muḥammad “He is a šā’ir!”, assumed that in this way, they accused him of being a liar, because in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the word “poet” was synonymous to the word “liar”. The scholar supports his assumption with regular Arabic expressions:

Indeed, they accused him of lying, and indeed, by the word “šī’r” they usually meant lie, and by the word “šā’ir” they meant a liar. [For instance, they used to say] “false, poetry-like statement” and “poetry is a concentration of every lie”. And one used to say:

15 لا يكذب المرء إلا من مهائته \\ أو عادة السوء أو من قلة الأدب

“The best poetry is the most lying one”. And one scholar noticed that a true-speaking, pious poet would be never considered an outstanding one

[Ḥaqqī 1913–V: 454].

Of course, it is hard to rely on Arabic scholars of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods who explained how poets were perceived in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia. Their vision, even if reflects a true historical situation, could actually describe the situation of the later centuries, when the scholarly discourse on lying poets emerged. Nevertheless, the slogan “The best poetry is the most lying one” (*a‘dabu l-šī‘ri akḍabuhu*) could reflect the popular notion which existed already in the days of Muḥammad, because the Prophet himself and his companions were struggling against this very thesis. Ḥassān ibn Tābit even tried to reformulate it in his verses:

*Indeed, poetry is an indicator of the intellect of a man presenting it // to the society, whether he is a wise man or a fool,*

*But the best verse you utter // is the verse on which it is told after you recite it: it is truth!*<sup>16</sup>

[Ḥassān ibn Tābit 1994: 174].

### 3. DĪN VS KIDB

#### 3.1. The Change at the Doctrinal Level

While on the eve of the Islamic era one could easily put the sign of equality between the words “poetry” and “lie”, the new official motto was formulated as “The best poetic verse is the most truthful one” (*aš‘aru baytin ašḍaquhu*). The sign of equality between “*aš‘aru*” (the best in terms of poetic art) and “*ašḍaqu*” (the most truthful) can be found also among the sayings of Muḥammad if to correlate two versions of a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet utters his opinion on the words of Labīd: “Isn’t everything empty of Allah’s presence a vain thing?” (*a-lā*

<sup>16</sup> وَإِنَّمَا الشَّعْرُ لُبُّ الْمَرْءِ يَعْرِضُهُ \\ عَلَى الْمَجَالِسِ إِنْ كَيْسًا وَإِنْ مُهْمًا  
وَإِنَّ أَسْعَرَ بَيْتٍ أَنْتَ قَائِلُهُ \\ بَيِّتٌ يُقَالُ إِذَا أَنْشَدْتَهُ صَدَقَا

*kullu šay'in mā ḥala llāha bāṭilun*)<sup>17</sup>. According to one of them, Muḥammad characterised these words as “the best words ever told by Arabs in poetry” (*aš'aru kalimatīn takallamat bi-hā l-'arabu*). According to another one, the Prophet told “most trustworthy words a poet ever uttered” (*ašdaqū kalimatīn qālahā šā'irun*) [Muslim 1930–XV: 12–13; Labīd 1962: 256]. There is no point to guess, which version is closer to the original, the more so, one cannot reject that both of them were uttered on different occasions, but the mere existence of the two shows the ideological vector.

Without objecting *murūwah* and *'ašabiyyah* as a set of values and virtues, *dīn* has come strongly against the expression these values found in poetry. Three factors made the principle “The best poetry is the most lying one” unacceptable:

1) Lying in poetry was unacceptable as any lying. Liars are condemned in the Qur'an [2: 10; 16: 105], and painful torments are promised to them by the book. Not once lying was condemned by Muḥammad in his personal sayings: “Lying leads to profligacy. Profligacy leads to Hell”; “Lying is not permitted, not seriously, not as a joke”; “A believer should not be a liar” [Nuwayrī 2004–III: 330].

2) Even if we admit that in the 7<sup>th</sup> century the audience in Arabia could easily distinguished between lie and truth in poetry without taking poetic words too seriously, “artistic” exaggerations were dangerous as they accustomed the public to “beautiful and nice” lies. Elegant lie was not only widely acceptable by poets and their audience, but was even encouraged by the poetic form itself. As Ibn Rašīq complained, “even though people are agreed in opinion that lying is disgusting, it looks fine in poetry as if poetry was decorating lies, and [as a result] one is used to forgive the disgusting it contains”<sup>18</sup> [Ibn Rašīq 1963–I: 22].

3) The truthfulness of the Qur'an was presented as a proof of its supremacy over poetry. If so, one had to admit that the more truthful are words, the more beautiful they are. Thus, as a result of the Qur'an's victory over poetry, truthfulness had to become a criterion of evaluation.

<sup>17</sup> These words are the opening part of verse 9 of one of Labīd's elegies [Labīd 1962: 256].

<sup>18</sup> الكذب الذي اجتمع الناس على قبجه حسن فيه (في الشعر)، وحسبك ما حسن الكذب، واعتذر له قبجُهُ

The attitude towards Ḥassān's verse about plates and swords, which was considered ineffective and unsuccessful before the raise of Islam, has changed in the first centuries of the Islamic era, reflecting the new vector. Already in the Umayyad period, after Ḥassān's death in 674, the verse was presented as one of the most successful in Arabic poetry. Abū 'Ubayda (8<sup>th</sup> century, Basra) mentions a man from *al-anṣār* who was disputing the quality of the poetry of Farazdaq. He found the poet in Medina in a mosque, recited him the mentioned verse and told: "You are claiming to be the best poet among the Arabs!? I give you one year for it: if you manage to compose anything like this, you are really the best" [Abū 'Ubayda 1998–II: 3].

In the Abbasid period (already in the 10<sup>th</sup> century) Qudāma ibn Ja'far was advocating the artistic value of this verse. First of all, he explained that acting as an arbiter, Nābiḡah "was not asking from Ḥassān anything but exaggeration so that he would turn everything from what it actually was into something which would be over it and above it"<sup>19</sup>. Reminding that exaggeration is only one possible way (the second one is to describe things as they are), which is not acceptable for everybody, the philologist defined the opinion of Nābiḡa as an "absolute fault" (*ḥaṭa' bayyin*) and refuted his arguments against Ḥassān one by one<sup>20</sup> [Qudāma 1983: 92–93].

### 3.2. Irresistible *Murūwah*, 'Aṣabiyyah, and Earning Opportunities

The described ideological change could not overcome exaggerations and artistic lie in traditional poetry based on the principles of *murūwah* and 'aṣabiyyah, and of course, not in the poetry of hirelings who were not ready to concede their earning opportunities.

Proceeding with the case study of Ḥassān ibn Tābit, one should notice that "the poet of the Prophet" was the first not to abide by the principle "The best poetic verse is the most truthful one" (that he himself

<sup>19</sup> لم يُردْ مِنْ حَسَّانَ إِلَّا الإفراطُ والغُلُوُّ بتصويره مكانَ كلِّ معنى وضَعَهُ ما هو فوقَه وزائِدٌ عليه

<sup>20</sup> The philologist noticed that it was much more reasonable to say about the plates "shining in the morning" ("*yalma'na bi-ḡ-ḡuḥā*", precisely as Ḥassān did), than "flashing in the darkness of night" ("*yabruqna bi-d-dujā*", as Nābiḡa recommended), because utensils can shine in the sun but not in the moonlight. As for the recommendation to replace the words "the blood [of our enemies] is dropping from the blades of our swords" with "is flowing from the blades of our swords", Qudāma explained that Ḥassān used a set expression "*sayfuhu yaqfuru daman*", while there was no set expression "*sayfuhu yajrī daman*" [Qudāma 1983: 93].

has formulated). Muḥammad was absolutely aware of it. As he did in the pre-Islamic period as a tribal poet, Ḥassān used to compose self-praises attributing to himself traditional heroic characters of which he could not boast in reality. In one of such poems he told about himself:

*I woke up before [all] the tribe, girding myself // with a sharp [sword] which resembles salt in its colour and hits a lot.*

*It pulls the strap of the sword [which is] long, // wide and resembles in its colour a stream in a valley<sup>21</sup>*

[Ḥassān ibn Tābit 1994: 156].

Hadīṭ tells that the Prophet laughed when listening to these verses from Ḥassān because the poet was widely reputed for his cowardice. According to different evidences, he avoided taking part in battles when he had a chance, so it was unbelievable that his sword really used to hit a lot [Iṣfahānī 2008–IV: 123–124]. It should be mentioned also that Ḥassān was a master of twisting facts for his own advantage<sup>22</sup>.

In the period of the Righteous Caliphs the rule “Best poetry is the most trustworthy one” was extremely strong, especially in the days of ‘Umar ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb who paid special attention to the purity of the verbal art. He was extremely conversant with the questions of versification. Jāḥiẓ even defines him as “the most expert among the humans in poetry” (*a‘lamu n-nāsi bi-š-šī‘ri*) [Jāḥiẓ 1998–I: 239]. As for the caliph’s general appreciation of poetry as art, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih wrote that ‘Umar defined poetry as “the trunk of the tree of Arabic poetry” (*aš-šī‘ru jidlu min kalāmi l-‘arab*) [Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih 1983–VI:

<sup>21</sup> كَلَّفْتُمُونَا حُدُودَ مَنْطِقِكُمْ \\ فِي الشَّعْرِ يُلْعَى عَنْ صِدْقِهِ كَذِبُهُ  
وَلَمْ يَكُنْ ذُو الْقُرُوحِ يُلْهَجُ بِال \\ مَنْطِقِي، مَا نَوْعُهُ، وَمَا سَبَبُهُ

<sup>22</sup> Ḥassān’s version of the story on the competition in ‘Ukāz was very different from the main one transmitted by a number of narrators and fixed by Ibn Qutayba. As we remember, according to the latter, after Ḥassān recited his verses, the orbiter addressed him with the words: “Indeed you were a poet if not...” (*innaka la-šā‘irun law lā*) and criticized him for ineffectiveness [Iṣfahānī 2008–IX: 252]. Telling his own version, Ḥassān did not mention A‘šā (actual winner of the competition) at all and diminished the success of Ḥansā’ whose verses were highly appreciated by Nābiġa. From the speech addressed to him by Nābiġa, Ḥassān omitted everything except for the words “*innaka la-šā‘irun*”. According to Ḥassān, Nābiġa told just: “Indeed you are poet, and the sister of Banū Sulaym (i.e. Ḥansā’) is a mourner” (*innaka la-šā‘irun wa inna uḥta banī sulaymin la-bukkā‘atun*) [Iṣfahānī 2008–IV: 124].

130]. In other words, the caliph considered poetry an especially important form of speech and appreciated it as a means of influence. It was ‘Umar who came out strongly against objectionable phenomena in poetry: lies, vagueness of words, slimy language and the use of poetry as an instrument of slander. The sources tell that once he was listening all night long to the poetry of Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā performed by Ibn ‘Abbās — the Prophet’s cousin [Ibn Qutayba 1982: 143]. Zuhayr was one of his favourite poets: unlike most 7<sup>th</sup> century artists who easily ascribed in their panegyrics any virtues to the persons they were praising, Zuhayr (as ‘Umar himself noticed) “did not praise a person for anything not usual for humans”<sup>23</sup> [Qudāma 1983: 95]. Also, as the caliph himself stressed, Zuhayr “did not become entangled between rhymes and did not use unclear words”<sup>24</sup> [Ibn Qutayba 1982: 143]. The best poet is the caliph’s opinion was Nābiġa [Ibid: 158–9]. According to the explanation of the philologist Abū ‘Ubayda, he was distinguished from all other poets, because “his language was the clearest, and he used foul language less than anybody”<sup>25</sup> [Ibid: 168].

‘Umar defined as lie any poetic exaggeration. For instance, he found as such the following verse of Nābiġa: “*When arriving to him, come up [to his campsite] in the evening, to the light of his fire // [and] you will find the best fire with the best one who lights it*”<sup>26</sup> [Nābiġa 1996: 160]. The caliph explained that these words are lie, because the best fire with the best one who lights it is, undoubtedly, the burning bush seen by the Prophet Mūsā (described in the Book of Exodus and mentioned in the Qur’an in verses 9–15 of Surah 20). It is interesting that, providing this report on ‘Umar, Iṣfahānī by mistake ascribed the verse to Ḥuṭay’a [Iṣfahānī 2008–II: 130], apparently, because the latter was the most criticized by the caliph. Due to Ḥuṭay’a, we have another example of what ‘Umar could consider lie in poetry. Once, still in the days of Muḥammad, when ‘Umar saw the Prophet’s admiration for a thoroughbred stallion<sup>27</sup>, he has determined as lie the following verse in which

<sup>23</sup> إنه لم يكن يمدح الرجل إلا بما يكون للرجل

<sup>24</sup> لم يعاظن بين القوافي ولم يتبع وحشي الكلام

<sup>25</sup> أوصحهم كلاماً وأقلهم سقطاً

<sup>26</sup> متى تأتبه تعشو إلى ضوء ناره \\ تجد خير نارٍ عندها خير موقد

<sup>27</sup> «And he bent his knee and said: “Indeed it is a *baḥr* (i.e. straddling horse)” (*fa-ġatā ‘alā rukbatayhi wa-qāla: “innahu la-baḥr”*) [Iṣfahānī 2008–II: 114].

Ḥuṭay'a described his own dismal mood: “*Best stallions do not attract us, // as well as those covering their wrists with garments (i.e. women)*”<sup>28</sup> [Ḥuṭay'a 1958: 396]. In this case 'Umar considered the poet lying because, in his opinion, the situation in which a man could not be delighted with horses, was impossible and thus, Ḥuṭay'a was exaggerating [Iṣfahānī 2008–II: 114].

Despite such a hard line with respect to exaggerations, 'Umar is shown by the tradition as tolerant towards the phenomenon of hiring poets. Zibirqān ibn Badr who was extremely insulted by Ḥuṭay'a's lie, complained to 'Umar reciting him the verses by which he was attacked. The caliph considered that nobody has ever managed to compose a more injuring poem. He wanted to hear an expert's opinion and Ḥassān ibn Ṭābit was called for that purpose. After hearing the verses, “the poet of the Prophet” declared that Ḥuṭay'a “has not satirized [the victim], but has covered him with excrements” (*lam yahḡuhu wa-lākin salaḡa 'alayhi*). 'Umar ordered to throw the poet into prison and threatened him with exile from the lands of Muslims [Ibn Qutayba 1982: 328]. In the prison Ḥuṭay'a composed a touching poem asking the caliph to forgive him and explaining that he was forced to practice his craft in order to support his children (in the poem they are compared to young birds):

*What would you say to young birds in Dū Maraḡ // whose crops are red when they have no water and no tree [with food]?*

*You have imprisoned their supporter on the bottom of a pit. // Forgive me! May Allah grant you peace, oh 'Umar!*

[Ḥuṭay'a 1958: 208].

The poet was released, was not exiled, and continued to earn a living from his craft. Not only did not 'Umar give him his gruel, but even did not try to stop his poetry by force or threats. On the contrary, he paid him three thousand dinars for not composing satires (Iṣfahānī 2008–II: 123).

In the Umayyad period, dramatic changes occurred in the attitude of the establishment towards poets. On the one hand, when most Arab tribes converted to Islam, ancient Bedouin art was not criticized as

<sup>28</sup> وَإِنَّ جِيَادَ الْخَيْلِ لَا تَسْتَفْرَتُنَا \\ وَلَا جَاعِيَاتِ الرَّيْطِ فَوْقَ الْمَعَاصِمِ

pagan art any more. On the other hand, Umayyad caliphs were sympathizing with traditional Arabic poetry and actively used poets as propagandists in order to pursue a needed policy among the tribes. Apart from that, the empire was growing at the expense of non-Arabic population with developed cultures, and highly-developed poetic tradition of the Bedouin was the phenomenon which Arabs could offer to conquered populations as opposed to their cultures [Filshtinsky 2005: 194]. As a result of these factors, Arabic poetry kept its importance not only in tribal culture but also in the urban context, and the establishment became much more tolerant towards poets. Verses of the most outstanding Bedouin poets of the Umayyad period (Jarīr, Farazdaq and Aḥṭal) show that<sup>29</sup>. Once, in response to the caliph Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Malik’s (715 — 717) request to recite some of his most successful verses, Farazdaq told:

*Three and two, in all five [girls], // and one inclined to sip wine,  
And they have spent the night lying from my both sides, // and  
I have spent the night “breaking locked bolts”<sup>30</sup>.*

The caliph scolded the poet in joke: “I see that you yourself ask to be punished. You are arranging immorality here in front of me, while I am an imam and you do not want me to set a limit on you”. Then, the caliph reminded him the words of the Qur’an about the poets who say what they do not do”. Finally, he laughed and after saying “I have pushed aside the limit which was on you” (*dara’ tu ‘anka l-ḥadd*), has ordered to reward Farazdaq for his poetry [Iṣfahānī 2008–XXI: 262]. Sulaymān’s successor, ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (717–720), was the

<sup>29</sup> Umayyad caliphs enjoyed poems in which the poets of the triad were attacking each other, while it contained lies and slimy language. Attacking Farazdaq, Jarīr told that the poet converted to Christianity (*wa-qaḍ laḥīqa l-Farazdaq bi-n-naṣārā*) [Jarīr 1986: 182], or even that he is of Christian origin and because of that he brings into the mosque impurity when enters (*inna l-Farazdaq ḥīna yadhulu masjidan // rijsun*) [Ibid: 149]. Also he defined his opponent as “a monkey soliciting monkeys to libertinism” (*qirdun yaḥuṭṭu ‘alā z-zinā’i qurūdan*) [Ibid: 134]. Finally, he told that the mother of the poet, Fuqayra, has spewed him out instead of giving him birth in a natural way (*jarayta bi-‘irqin min Fuqayrata muqrifin*) [Ibid: 458].

<sup>30</sup> ثلاثٌ وأنتان فتلُكُ خمسٌ \\ وواحدة تميل إلى الشَّمام  
فيسُنُّ بجانيبي مُصَرَّعاتٍ \\ وبثُّ أفضُّ أغلاق الختام

Umayyad caliph who could be called “an exception that proves the rule”, as he was pious and did not tolerate poetry of his epoch<sup>31</sup>.

The Abbasid caliphs positioned themselves as much more pious and, as opposed to the Umayyads, much less tolerant towards poetic crimes, such as satires<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, as the Umayyads did, the Abbasids also enjoyed traditional panegyrics<sup>33</sup>. The words of Abū Dāwud, Ibn Fāris and Ibn al-‘Arabī cited above prove that the problem of lies in poetry remained topical also in 9–12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The image of poets as those who are ready to praise and to satirize for reward is expressed well in anecdotes of that time. A typical hero of *maqāmas* (urban rhymed prose with intervals of poetry) is a skilled improvisator. The hero of the third *maqāmah* in the collection of Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim al-Ḥarīrī is an old impudent beggar who has willingly praised for one dinar a coin shown to him and then, for another dinar, has satirized the same coin with no less mastery [Šarīšī 1992-I: 131–157].

Another fine example is an anecdote about Persian ruler Ḥālid Ḥumahrawayhi quoted by Jāḥiẓ in his “Book of Misers”. One may gain an impression that in urban culture of that time attitude towards lies in poetry (first of all, in panegyrics) was rational and ironic enough: poetic words were neither overestimated nor taken seriously. Reacting

<sup>31</sup> It is notable that ‘Umar II was the only Umayyad caliph whose tomb was not violated after the Abbasids came to power — apparently, as a sign of their respect to his piety which distinguished him from other caliphs of his dynasty [Filštinski 2005: 123]. Unlike other Umayyad caliphs, ‘Umar II has not taken any poet to his bosom (Jarīr was the only one who was granted an audience), and on the contrary, he ordered to send into exile to Dahlak Island the poet ‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘a (who was already an old man at that time) because the latter used to dedicate poems to women and in his poems used to lie [Ibn Qutayba 1982: 554].

<sup>32</sup> Abū al-‘Atāhiya was punished by one hundred whips in the days of the caliph al-Mahdī (775–785) [Ḥuṣrī 1965: 381] and by one hundred lashes in the days of Harūn al-Rašīd (786–809) [Iṣfahānī 2008-IV: 53]. Baššār ibn Burd for a satire poem insulting al-Mahdī was sentenced to 70 whips and died as a result of this punishment [Iṣfahānī 2008-III: 171], while according to other sources, the caliph has ordered to drown him to death [Ibn Qutayba 1982: 760].

<sup>33</sup> Unlike outstanding court poets of the Umayyad period, the best court poets of the Abbasid period (Abū Tammām, Buḥturī) were not Bedouins by their origin. Nevertheless, they used to stick to the Bedouin tradition in their poetry including panegyrics. Abū Tammām even used to put on traditional Bedouin dress before appearing in front of the caliph [Filštinsky 1985: 382].

to more and more pompous panegyrics, the ruler was ordering to bring more and more money encouraging the poet. Nevertheless, in the end he let his servant know that he was not going to give anything to the artist. His explanation is important for understanding the perception of panegyrics in the Abbasid period: “Did not we know he was lying? But when he was lying, he was causing joy to us. For that reason we should also cause him joy by means of words ordering to reward him. If it is nothing but lie, then let it be lie in return for lie” [Jāhiz 1990: 26–27].

Muslim scholarly criticism denied the motto “the best poetry is the most lying one”. As for literary criticism, in the Abbasid period there were those who were defending the poets’ right to use artistic means.

### 3.3. The Allowed Blameworthy

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Āmidī, comparing the poetry of Abū Tammām with that of Buḥturī, has written on especially pleasant verses of the latter: “Some poetry transmitters used to say: “The most praiseworthy poetry is the most lying one”. Definitely not! By Allah, if really the most praiseworthy, then only the most truthful one”<sup>34</sup> [Āmidī 1960–II: 58]. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn Rašiq has noticed on exaggerations in poetry: “There are those who find a poet’s knowledge in the ways of exaggeration and overstatement as a unique quality. I see this opinion just as an absurd one <...>. As experts have decreed, best words ever told [in poetry] are the words of truth, and if they are missing, then [at least] those which are related to them”<sup>35</sup> [Ibn Rašiq 1963–II: 60].

As opposed to this position, there were poets and philologists who explained that artists of words are not obliged to be truthful in their verses. Buḥturī, one of the most outstanding Arab poets of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, rejected the truthfulness as a criterion by which verses should be judged. In one of his poems, he attacked the principles of Greek logic, learned by Arab scholars from “The Poetics” of Aristo:

*You have imposed on us the boundaries of your logic, // [while] in poetry lies are more important than truth.*

34 وقد كان قوم من الرواة يقولون: أجود الشعر أكذبه. ولا والله، ما أجوده إلا أصلقه

35 ومن الناس من يرى أن فضيلة الشاعر إنما هي في معرفته بوجوه الإغراق والعُلُوّ، ولا أرى ذلك إلا مُحالاً [...] قد قال الخنّاق: خير الكلام الحقائق، وإن لم يكن فما قاربها وناسبها.

*The One with Ulcers (Imru'ū l-Qays) was no devotee of // logic, [and did not know], what are categories and what are its methods*<sup>36</sup>  
[Buḥturī 1963: 209].

Jāḥiẓ, the famous contemporary of Buḥturī, referred to exaggerations in panegyrics and satire poems explaining that poets had no intention to lie, but in order to achieve a required effect, used oversaturated descriptions: “When composing panegyrics or satire, poets use to oversaturate descriptions, but nevertheless, they admit that what they say is truth”<sup>37</sup> [Jāḥiẓ 1967–VI: 138].

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Qudāma ibn Ja‘far explained that “the quality of a poet is defined by whether his poetry is considered excellent, and not by what he is really thinking, because poetry is [not more than] words”. “If he uttered excellent words, one should not demand from him that it would be what he was actually thinking”, — concluded the philologist<sup>38</sup> [Qudāma 1983: 138]. At the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, ‘Askarī has stated the same idea in a more delicate form: “It was told to one philosopher that one [poet] was lying in his poetry, and he (the philosopher) answered: one expects from a poet that he will say words of beauty, and as for words of truth, they are expected from prophets”<sup>39</sup> [‘Askarī 1952: 137].

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there were still those who condemned any use of figurative language perceiving it as lies. Ibn Ḥamdūn (Baghdad) criticized the poet Abū Maṣṣūr ibn al-Aṣṣbāḡī for the verse in which the latter compared himself, when visiting his beloved only in the night time, with a *ṭayf* — a spirit which can get into one’s sole only when one is asleep. The verse is: “*Like a ṭayf which is not able to get [into one’s sole] through the opened eyelids // and does not get in, except when they*

36 كَلَّفْتُمُونَا حُدُودَ مَنْطِقِكُمْ \\ فِي الشَّعْرِ يُلَعَى عَنْ صِدْقِهِ كَذِبُهُ  
وَلَمْ يَكُنْ ذُو الْقُرُوحِ يُلْهَجُ بِالْ \\ حَنْطِيقِ، مَا نَوْعُهُ، وَمَا سَبَبُهُ

37 لَأَنَّ الشَّاعِرَ يُشْبِعُ الصَّفَةَ إِذَا مَدَحَ أَوْ هَمَّجَا، وَقَدْ يَجُوزُ أَنْ يَكُونَ مَا قَالَ حَقًّا

38 ووصف الشاعر لذلك هو الذي يُستجاد، لا اعتقاده، إذ كان شعرٌ إنما هو قولٌ، فإذا أجاد فيه  
القاتل لم يُطالَبْ بالاعتقاد

39 فقيل لبعض الفلاسفة: فلان يكذب في شعره. فقال: يُرادُ من الشاعر حُسْنُ الكلام، والصدقُ  
يُرادُ مِنَ الأنبياء

are closed”.<sup>40</sup> According to the philologist, ibn al-Aṣḃāgī, “as typical for poets, went to extremes of figurativeness, because a *ṭayf* does not get into [one’s soul] through the eyelids, but appears by itself in the soul as the dreams do”<sup>41</sup> [Ibn Ḥamdūn 1996–VIII: 205]. Later in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn al-Aṭīr (Mosul) laughed at Ibn Ḥamdūn as an example of total misunderstanding of artistic means: “These are words of someone who did not taste fruits of the tree of eloquence and rhetoric like nobody else except for one Byzantine ruler. It is reported that after hearing the verse of al-Mutanabbi” “[I felt] *as if thoroughbred camels [stayed] on my eyelids // for their nightly rest, and [only] after they were arisen, [the tears] flowed*”<sup>42</sup>, the ruler asked for its meaning, and when it was explained to him, told that he never heard anybody more lying than this poet” [Ibn al-Aṭīr 1959–II: 30–31].

In the Islamic law the status of poetry was complicated. Islamic jurisprudence attributes human actions to five categories: 1) Duty (*fard*), like the duty to pray five times a day; 2) Recommended behaviour (*mandūb*), for instance, additional prayers and fasts, hospitality, copying the Qur’an; 3) Allowed behaviour (*jā’iz / mubāḥ*) — not encouraged and not condemned (to marry, to go on business trips); 4) Blameworthy behaviour (*makrūh*) which does not cause punishment (carelessness when keeping religious commandments, stinginess, rudeness); 5) Prohibited behaviour (*maḥẓūr*) — acts which cause punishment in this life and after death (drinking alcohol, giving loan at bearing interest) [Rodionov 2003: 105].

Composing poems refers to “allowed behaviour”, the more so that traditional poetry brings one to respect traditional virtues (like hospitality and courage) that refer to recommended behaviour. On the other hand, lying refers to blameworthy behaviour, and as there was quite a lot of lies in poetry (especially in panegyrics and elegies), composing poems could be referred at the same time to blameworthy actions. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn Ḥazm (Spanish Muslim scholar who belonged in different periods to Māliki and Shāfi’i schools), described the situation in the following words:

40 كَالطَّيْفِ بَأَيِّ دُخُولِ الْجَفْنِ مُنْفِيحًا \\ فَلَيْسَ يَسْلُكُهُ إِلَّا إِذَا أُنْطَبِقَا

41 وجرى على عادة الشعراء في التجوُّز لأنَّ الطيفَ لا يدخل الجفن، إنما يتخيَّل إلى النفس كغيره من خواطر الأحلام

42 كَأَنَّ الْعَيْسَ كَانَتْ فَوْقَ جَفْنِي \\ مُنَاخَاتٍ فَلَمَّا تُرِّنُ سَالَا

*Also there are two genres of poetry which are not prohibited with a full prohibition, but are not encouraged as well, so they remain as something “allowed but blameworthy”. These are elegies and panegyrics. As for being allowed, it is because they mention virtues of a dead or praised person, and that is encouraging an aspiration for such qualities in the reciter of these poems. As for being blameworthy, it is because most of the poems of this kind are lying, and there is nothing good in lies<sup>43</sup>*

[Ibn Ḥazm 1987–IV: 68].

The problem of lie in poetry was not solved in the first centuries of Islam remaining actual until nowadays. Shaikh ‘Āḥid al-Qarnī, popular in Saudi Arabia in the beginning of the current century, referred to the issue in a series of lectures “Qaṣīdas which killed their authors” (*Qaṣā’id Qatalat Aṣḥābahā*) based on a book with the same name [Qarnī 2005]. Under the heading “Best poetry is the most lying one” the sheikh referred to the question of acceptability of this statement. In his opinion, it is acceptable only as a figurative one. He stressed that even though most Muslim scholars share the opinion that the words “the most lying one” do not mean that a poet exaggerating in his verses has an intention to lie, nevertheless, one should shun any lies and to ask Allah for refuge against it<sup>44</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

The image of poets as liars developed as a result of several factors. Initially, the principles of personal manly pride and commitment to the tribe were driving poets to exaggerate when picturing their virtues and describing the deeds of valour attributed to their tribes. Effectiveness was the main criterion of evaluation, and exaggerations were a valid means in a constant competition between tribal poets. After the phenomenon of hired poets developed, exaggerations and inventions

<sup>43</sup> ثم صنفان من الشعر لا ينهى عنهما نهيًا تامًا ولا يحض عليهما. بل هما عندنا من المباح المكره، وهما: المدح والثناء: فأما إباحتهما فلأن فيهما ذكر فضائل الموت والممدوح، وهذا يقتضي للراوي ذلك الشعر الرغبة في مثل ذلك الحال، وأما كراهتنا لهما فإن أكثر ما في هذين النوعين الكذب، ولا خير في الكذب.

<sup>44</sup> <http://audio.islamweb.net/audio/index.php?page=FullContent&audioid=19676>.

in panegyrics and satire poems increased and “lying poetry” became a part of urban culture, where it attracted special attention of establishment and Islamic scholarly criticism. The ambiguity of the term “*šā‘ir*”, the fact that one of the main roots of poetic art was in the craft of soothsayers, and the popular notion of poets as those who communicate with demons, contributed to the poets’ image as liars. Everything told in the Qur’an about *šā‘irs* (including soothsayers and prophesying roamers) as liars, was referred to poets only. The stigma about lying poets was used against poets in the beginning of the Islamic era in order to stress the prevalence of the Qur’an over poetry.

After *dīn* has emerged by the side of *murūwah* and ‘*aṣabiyyah*, poetic exaggerations were exposed to institutionalized, religious criticism, but changes occurred mainly at the doctrinal level. In spite of the fact that any poetic lie was condemned, and the truthfulness was declared the main criterion of evaluation, the traditional poetic canon moulded in the pre-Islamic tribal culture showed itself as very stable. Due to the fact that the values of *murūwah* and ‘*aṣabiyyah* were recognized by Islam as virtues, tribal Arabic poetry, after it was cleaned from paganism, has maintained its traditional ways of expression attached to the preserved traditional values. It was still necessary to make verses effective and thus, exaggerations remained in the poets’ arsenal of artistic means. When the art of panegyrics and satires turned to be a well-paid profession, traditional ways of expression became especially demanded. At the same time, in the beginning of the Islamic era, poets proved themselves as effective propagandists who could serve the establishment and thus, the latter had to tolerate traditional ways of expression.

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