

REVELATION AS A LINGUISTIC CONCEPT IN ISLAM

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This is the draft of one of the series of lectures I gave at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, in the spring semester of 1962, under the title of 'Islamic Culture from the Linguistic Point of View'. I have decided to have it published in this form, for the problems treated make this part of my talk — though originally a section of a larger subject — something detachable from the whole as an independent unit. I take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to the Director of the Institute, Dr. Wilfred Cantwell Smith for his constant help and encouragement. I am also grateful to all those, both Muslims and Christians, who attended my class and discussed with me the problems raised. Here I publish my draft, not exactly as I read it at the Institute, but with considerable modifications and additions. But the argument itself remains substantially the same.

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There would be no denying that in religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam the problem of Revelation occupies the central position. These three great religions, whatever their differences in other respects, are one in admitting that the very historical source of their religion and the ultimate guarantee of their religious experience is the initial fact of God's having revealed Himself to human beings. In all of them, everything begins from the fact that God spoke, and revealed Himself. This *is* the initial act ; without this initial act on the part of God nothing would have occurred, and naturally there would have been no Judaism, no Christianity, no Islam.

But, although these three religions are unanimous on this point, they differ widely in the way in which they conceive of this initial divine act. With each of them, revelation, which is in this case fundamentally of the same nature and which would seem to go back to an identical source, took, historically, different forms, and each of them, accordingly, formed for itself a peculiar understanding of Revelation ;

said : "They — i. e. the Jews — (always)hear the speech of God"

The very possibility of paraphrasing "Revelation" into a more analytic form of "God's speech" shows most clearly that this phenomenon of revelation has semantically two different points of emphasis : (1) God and (2) speech, or that this concept has two bases on which it stands.

With particular emphasis on the first constituent, that is, God, the concept of revelation is expressed by a certain class of words that cannot properly be applied to ordinary human speech behavior, like *tanzil* "sending down", *wahy*, etc.

Tanzil can never be used in reference to the occurrence of speech-act between man and man ; the etymological meaning of the root itself shows better than anything else that it is a very particular kind of supernatural communication, as we shall see later in detail, while the second of them *wahy* may sometimes be applied to human communication, or indeed, for that matter, even to animal communication as it often happens in pre-Islamic Arabian poetry, but even then the word is used only when the communication in question, whether human or animal, occurs in an extraordinary situation, and it has always the connotation of secrecy and mysteriousness. This also we shall see later, and there is no need now to go into further details.

It suffices to see now that seen from this side, revelation is not a speech-act in the natural and ordinary sense of the word. And if we go a step further and place an absolute emphasis on this first pole, the phenomenon of revelation becomes a theological mystery, incapable of being grasped by human analytic thought. Revelation, in this aspect, is something essentially mysterious, that does not allow of analysis ; it is something only to be believed in.

And yet, we must remember, there is another equally important aspect in this phenomenon, which makes it something capable of analysis.

As I have suggested above, Revelation is semantically equal to God's speech. If, instead of putting an exclusive emphasis on the first element, we look at the matter from the point of view of this second element, we see at once that it is after all a kind of speech. Otherwise, the

Koran would not have used the word *kalâm* (speech) in reference to it.

So, although, in so far as it is *God's* speech, it is something mysterious and has nothing in common with the ordinary human linguistic behavior, in so far as it is *speech*, it must have all the essential attributes of human speech. In fact, the Koran uses also other words in reference to Revelation, that are most commonly applied to ordinary, common-place products of speech, *kalimah* (word) for example.

So in (XLII, 23/24) "God will wipe out the falsehood and establish the Truth as Truth with his words (*bi-kalimâti-hi*)".

This sentence, as it stands, would even suggest that there is no essential difference between human speech and divine act of speaking. At least, so far as the apparent formal meaning of the sentence is concerned, God would seem to be using words just as the great pre-Islamic poet Labîd used his words at the court of Hîrah to refute, in a hot debate with foreign speakers, the falsehood and uphold the truth, as recorded in one of his famous Odes (*Mu'allaqah*, 70-72, Zauzanî recension). He says :

"Very often in a place filled with strangers unknown to each other, all strong-necked men, threatening each other with furious hatred as if they were devils of Badî (a famous wadi in the property of the tribe of Banû 'Âmir, where devils were believed to assemble for discussion), with their feet firmly planted, I rejected their falsehood and supported what was true in my view, and even the noblest of them could not surpass me in glory and pride."

Qaul is another word of this kind ; it is evidently of the commonest of all terms relating to the human speech behavior. *Qâla*. i. e. someone *said* something, is one of the words that are most frequently used in Arabic from the earliest time of its history until to-day. The word *Qâla* is so commonplace that it needs almost no explanation. The word is there ; and everybody understands its meaning. Now in connection with what we have been discussing, it is important to note that in the Koran God Himself often uses this word in reference to the content of His own revelation.

Thus, in LXXIII, 5, addressing Muhammad God says "We are going to cast upon you a weighty speech (*qaulan thaqilan*)" What does this adjective *thaqil* (heavy or weighty) mean? It will be explained later when we shall take up the problem of the forms of revelation as recorded in the Hadiths. It suffices here to note that God refers to his own revelation by means of a word which is the commonest of all words to denote human speech.

The conclusion to be drawn from this brief consideration is that, although revelation in itself is something that goes beyond all comparison and defies all analysis, yet there is a certain respect in which we may approach it from the side of human speech and try to discover the basic structure of its concept by regarding it as an extreme, or rather, exceptional case of the general linguistic behavior.

What makes revelation such a particular non-natural kind of linguistic behavior is that here the speaker is God and the hearer is a man, that is to say, the phenomenon of speech occurs here between the supernatural order of being and the natural order of being, so that there is in fact no ontological balance or equilibrium of rank and level between speaker and hearer. In the normal give and take of words, both the speaker and hearer always stand on the same level of being. A human being speaks only to another human being; there can be no linguistic communication between a man and, say, a horse, except as a metaphor. This holds true even when there is such an intimate — almost personal, we might say — relation between the two as in the case of 'Antarah and his horse'. Because, between a human being and an animal, however intelligent the latter may be, there is no equality in regard to the level of being. The utmost that the two partners can have in such a case is the occurrence of non-verbal or extra-linguistic communication. The well-known verses of the pre-Islamic warrior-poet 'Antarah (*Mw'allaqah* 68-69) describe this experience in a most touching and pathetic way.

Here the poet describes the death of his beloved horse on the battle-field. Already the horse is mantled in blood; with several spears stuck in his breast, he flinches and turns aside, being no longer able to

In analyzing word meanings in general, it proves often very important that we should begin by paying attention to the number of persons involved. The word 'person' in this context must be taken in the sense of *dramatis personae*. In other words, it is often useful to know as a first step in semantic analysis how many persons or actors should be there on the stage, in order that the phenomenon in question might actually occur. This is of course restricted only to those cases where the idea of person is essentially involved in the basic structure of the meaning itself. A table is there, for example, for people to sit at, and books are there for people to read, and yet the meaning structure of the table or book does not contain 'person' as one of its essential constituents.

Now if one compares the two expressions (1) 'I eat' and (2) 'I blame' one would notice immediately the kind of semantic distinction of which I am talking now. I intentionally choose the verbs 'eat' and 'blame', both of which are so-called transitive verbs, to show that what I have in mind is something essentially different in nature from what is ordinarily known as the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs.

Both 'eat' and 'blame' are transitive verbs, and yet the first is a one-person word, while the second is a two-person word. In the case of 'eating', only one person is required to be on the stage. Of course there may be more than one person, but that is something quite accidental and secondary as far as the meaning structure of 'eating' is concerned. There is one actor on the stage, and he eats ; that is all. This kind of words we may call one-person-relation words.

In the case of 'blame', on the contrary, there must be essentially two persons on the stage : someone blames somebody else. The act called 'blaming' cannot in the nature of the case be enacted if there are not at least two persons. If there is no one else, the actor blames himself, if he blames at all. And that is also, structurally, a two-person-relation.

Coming back to the word in question *wahy*, we observe, in the light of this explanation, that it is a two-person-relation term. There must

be, in other words, two persons on the stage in order that something called *wahy* be actually enacted. Let us call them *A* and *B*. In this process *A* acts actively and *B* passively ($A \rightarrow B$), and the act itself is the transmission of *A*'s will and thought by means of signs and symbols. And there can be here no reciprocity, that is to say, the relation, once established, cannot absolutely be reversed. It is a strictly unilateral communication.

(2) It is not necessarily verbal. That is to say, the signs used for the purpose of communication are not always linguistic, though words may also be used.

(3) There is always a sense of mysteriousness, secrecy, and privacy. In other words, the communication is esoteric, so to speak. The communication is strictly a private matter between *A* and *B*. *A* makes himself perfectly understood to *B*; there is a perfect communication between them. But it is made in such a way that the context of communication is difficult to understand for the outsiders.

With these three essential conditions in mind I will, out of a number of examples, give only one from the pre-Islamic poetry as an illustration. The famous poet 'Alqamah al-Faḥl says in one of his odes,

*Yûli ilai-hâ bi-inqâḍin wa-naqnaqatin * kamâ tarâṭamu, fi afdâni-hâ, al-rûmû.*

The poet here is describing the conduct of a male ostrich. This male ostrich has gone far away from his home in search of food. Suddenly, on a rainy and windy day, he remembers his wife and children — i. e. the female ostrich and the eggs — that he has left at home. The rain somehow makes him feel anxious about them, and he begins to run as fast as he can toward his home. He comes back : and there he finds his family safe and in peace. Relieved of his anxiety he begins to talk to his wife delightfully. He is saying something to her. What is he saying? No one knows besides themselves : it is a secret between the two. This is the situation which the poet is trying to convey. He says :

"The male ostrich is talking to her (*yûli*, a verbal form corresponding to our *wahy*) with cracking sounds (*inqâḍ*, which is the ostrich's

language) and with *naqnaqah* (which is an onomatopoeia or sound imitation of the ostrich's voice) just like the Greeks talk with each other in an incomprehensible language in their castles."

The word *tarâṭanu* (for *tatarâṭanu*) is interesting for our purpose. The verb *raṭana*, of which *tatarâṭanu* is a derivative form, contains semantically two fundamental elements: one is the idea of the speaker's being a foreigner, i. e. a non-Arab, speaking some non-Arabic language, the second is that it is completely incomprehensible from an Arab's point of view. *Tarâṭana* thus means foreigners talking with each other in some unknown language. And in most cases this was enough to cause suspicion in the minds of the Arabs, whenever such a thing happened among them.

The word occurs in the authentic Hadîth. In the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal (No. 416) for example, a young Greek is seen talking to a Greek woman married to an Arab, in their own language (*râṭana-hâ bilisâni-hi*). And this was taken as an evidence that they were having illicit intercourse with each other.

In the light of this information, the second half of this verse would seem to give an important clue as to how we should understand the key-word in the first half (*yâḥî*) and, consequently, the *waḥîy*. It is as though you were looking at two persons talking with each other with apparent intimacy in a foreign tongue which you do not understand. You know that between the two persons there is a perfect communication of ideas and sentiments, but you cannot penetrate into the content itself of that communication, because you are but an outsider: you are completely shut out from their intimacy. This naturally raises the sense of mysteriousness.

That the connotation of *waḥîy* contains an important element of mysteriousness coming from incomprehensibility may be shown by another fact. In pre-Islamic poetry the word *waḥîy* is very often used in the sense of writing, letters or characters. Thus Labîd (*Mu'allaqah* v. 2), speaking of the remains of an abode of his beloved, long deserted by the inhabitants, says that its trace is not yet completely erased; it still remains there like characters (*waḥîyy* pl. of *waḥîy*)

engraved on the rocks." *kamâ ḍamina al-wuḥiyya silâmu-hâ* — more literally : "as if their rocks contained characters."

Likewise al-Marrâr b. Munqidh, a poet of the first century of Islam (Mufaḍḍaliyyât XVI, v. 51) : "You can just see the faint traces of the old abode, like the latter L in the writing of books (*mithla khatti al-lâmi fi waḥyi al-zubur*).

The Arabic lexicons usually give two different meanings to this word *waḥy* : (1) revelation and (2) letters, as if there were no connection at all between the two. This view overlooks the very important fact that for the pre-Islamic Arabs, who were mostly completely illiterate, letters were something very mysterious. We know how the strange South Arabian characters engraved on the rocks struck them with astonishment. Consequently the word *qalam* 'pen' carried in those days an unusually grave tone, as we can see from the Koran itself (LXVIII *Sûrah al-Qalam*, Chapter of Pen).

The written letters were signs of something, the Arabs knew it very well. The written letters were there to convey something, but the Arabs did not know what they conveyed. They were something mysterious. Communication coupled with the sense of mysteriousness — this was the connotation of writing at that time. Thus understood, the two allegedly different meanings of the word *waḥy* are, far from being different from each other, just one and the same thing.

In regard to this idea of mysterious way of communication conveyed by the word *waḥy*, attention may be drawn to the existence of a very interesting example in the Koran. To be more strict, it is not so much a mysterious way as an unusual non-natural way of communication. But still the basic idea is the same.

In XIX, 12/11 Zakariyyâ is made dumb and speechless for three days as a sign (*âyah*) of God's special favor. There we read :

"Then he came out unto his people from the sanctuary and signified (*awḥî*, the same word as *yûḥî* — *waḥy*) to them : Glorify (your Lord) morning and evening'.

Under ordinary, natural conditions the Koran might have used the word *qâla* "he said" or *amara* "he ordered". But Zakariyyâ is tem-

porarily dumb ; he cannot say anything ; so he gives signal to them not by words but by gesture. The purpose of communicating ideas is achieved here admirably well, and yet it is done in an unusual way. This is the meaning of *wahy* here. The example is interesting because it is an extremely rare case in which both *A* and *B* who are involved in the two-person-relation of *wahy* are human beings. Usually in the Koran, only one of the two persons, i. e. *B*, he who receives the communication, is a human being, and *A* is almost always God Himself.

"And We signified (*awḥaynâ*) to Moses : Throw down your stick!" (VII, 114/117)

There are many examples of this use of *wahy* in the Koran, but it is not necessary to adduce them, for all of them are of the same type. We must remark that at this stage *wahy* is not yet Revelation in the proper, technical sense of the word. At this stage *wahy* is a synonym of *ilhâm*, a kind of non-verbal inspiration: that is to say, God communicates His Will to a human being directly, without any intermediary between them (*A*→*B*). God works upon the human mind in some mysterious way, and this makes the man understand the Divine Will immediately. The Revelation in the proper, technical sense, is, besides being a verbal process, not a two-person-relation, but a three-person-relation or even a four-person-relation as we shall see presently.

In connection with this problem of direct two-person communication between God and man, we must remark that in the Koran Moses occupies a special position. It would seem that Moses was allowed to enjoy a special privilege in this respect, from among all the Prophets recognized as such in the Koran. Quite exceptionally God even speaks to Moses directly — the word used being *kallama*. This last word is a transitive verbal form of *kalâm* "speech" which we have seen above, and means to "address oneself to" "to speak to" in the sense of "*parole*".

For instance in VII, 139/143, Moses goes up alone to the Mount Sinai to meet God, which is also one of the most famous Biblical scenes. There God speaks to Moses intimately (*kallama-hu*) in complete seclusion from all others. In IV, 162/165 we have: "God spoke (*kallama*) unto Moses directly (*taklîmâ*)".

In another passage (XIX, 52/53), the same situation is described in a somewhat different way: "We (the speaker is God Himself) addressed — *nâdainâ* — him (i.e. Moses) from the right side (slope) of the Mount Sinai, and let him approach Me as a confidant."

In this verse we have two interesting linguistic concepts: the verb *nâdâ* and the noun *najîyy*. *Nâdâ* is roughly the same as *kallama* in meaning, the only essential difference being that the former is specially conditioned in terms of space relation between *A* and *B*: it means, *A* speaks to *B*, *A* being in a far-off place. It means "to talk to somebody from afar;" there is always the element of long distance between *A* and *B* in this concept. The second concept *najîyy* refers to the particular status of *B* in the *A*→*B* relation of linguistic communication. It means *B* as a person standing in a particularly intimate personal relation to the speaker *A*. It is the confidant, the bosom friend of *A*, to whom *A* can safely confide all his secrets, to whom *A* can completely unbosom himself and speak his mind. This kind of confidential talk is called in Arabic *munâjât*, which is derived from the same root as *najîyy*. This is also specially conditioned in terms of the space between *A* and *B*; it suggests short distance between them, an extreme nearness of *A* to *B* — hence *qarrabnâ* ("We let him approach me") in the Koranic text just quoted.

All this would seem to suggest that Moses in this respect was given a very special divine favor. The Koran itself is very much conscious of this fact, as is evident from II, 254/255, where we read:

"Those Apostles, some of them We caused to excel others. Among them there is one to whom God Himself spoke (*man kallama Allâhu*)."

It is in this sense that the later theologians called Moses *kalim Allâh*, meaning thereby one upon whom God bestowed a special favor by speaking to him directly.

It will be worth remarking further that in this two-person (*A*→*B*) relation if *A* happens to be not God but *Shaiṭân* (Satan or Demon), then the communication is not usually called *waḥy*, but *waswasah* (Koran VII, 19/20, CXIV, 5—6). But structurally these two are not entirely different things. As we can see easily, the only main difference between

them lies in the source of the communication : in one case *A* is God, while in the other it is *Shaiṭān*. To be more correct we should say that *waswasah* is a small class within the larger class of *wahy*. That this is also the view the Koran itself takes is evident from VI, 112/113, where the verb *awḥā* is used exactly in the sense of *waswasa*.

"In the same way We have appointed to each one of the Prophets an enemy — Demons, whether of humankind or Jinn, who communicate secretly (*yūḥī*) to one another some speech adorned with false embellishments".

Also VI, 121 where we read : "The Demons inspire (*yūḥūna*) their companions (i.e. the unbelievers) to dispute with you (Muslims)"

Sometimes the human soul itself plays the role of *Shaiṭān*, as we see from L, 15—16, where we read : "We created man, and We know what his soul tends to suggest (*turwaswisu* — again *waswasa*) to him".

The word connotes something said in a low, whispering tone, which derange and agitate the mind and leads it into temptation.

The pre-Islamic poet A'shā al-Kabîr (Diw. Cairo ed. IV,4) uses the word in describing the clattering sound of the bracelets and ankle-rings as the beautiful girl Hurairah walks away gracefully, which allures him, entices him, and stirs up his passion.

"You hear a tempting sound (*waswâsan*) from her ornaments as she walks away, which sounds just like a rustling '*ishriq* tree when the wind blows through it (lit., when it seeks help from a wind)".

Interestingly enough this verse of the great poet seems to respond to a Koranic verse (XXIV, 31), where the pious women are admonished not to do anything which is likely to provoke men's lust.

"Let them not stamp their feet so as to be known, i. e., so as to reveal the ornaments (i.e. the ankle-rings) which they hide".

This is a very well-known verse and is often quoted in Islam as a ground for prohibiting dancing. And the commentator al-Baidâwî says that the clattering (*taqa'qu'*) of ankle-rings is likely to excite lust in men.

on the same level of being, that they should belong to the same category of being. In the case of Revelation — — and here begins the real characteristic of the concept of Revelation — — this basic rule is violated. For here *A* and *B*, i. e., God and man, belong to entirely and essentially different categories of being.

I should like to make this point the second essential condition of the Koranic concept of Revelation. Here most evidently *A* and *B* do not stand horizontally on the same level of being. The relation is vertical; *A* belongs to a superior level of being, and *B* to an inferior.

Normally, in such a case, there can be, as I have said above, no linguistic communication between *A* and *B*. In order that real linguistic communication might occur in spite of this basic rule of language, something extraordinary must happen to either *A* or *B*. This point has been clearly grasped by some Muslim thinkers. Al Kirmânî (*Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Yûsuf b. 'Ali*, ob. 786 A. H.), for instance, in his famous commentary on al-Bukhârî's Hadîth-book says (I, p. 28) : Revelation consists in verbal communication between God and man. But theoretically no exchange of words (*al-taḥârvur*), nor teaching (*ta'lim*), nor learning (*ta'allum*) is possible unless there is realized between the two parties a certain kind of equality, i. e., the relation (*munâsabah*) of the speaker (*al-qâ'il*) and the hearer (*al-sâmi'*).

How, then, is such relation realized between God and man? There are, al-Kirmânî replies, two possible ways : either the hearer (*B*) should undergo a deep personal transformation under the overwhelming influence of the spiritual force of the speaker (*A*), or the speaker should come down and assume somehow the attribute of the hearer.

And he adds that both cases actually occurred with Muhammad. The auditory type of Revelation in which, as we see in the Hadîth, Muhammad heard some strange noise like the ringing of a bell or the humming of bees, belongs to the first category. While the visionary type of Revelation, equally attested by the Hadîth and the Koran, in which he saw the heavenly messenger or Angel, belongs to the second category.

However we judge this last point, we must acknowledge that al-Kirmânî saw quite rightly the fundamental nature of speech, and that

also he tried to interpret the fact of Revelation in terms of this basic principle.

At any rate it is certain that the particular kind of *munâsabah* "relation" of which al-Kirmânî speaks can be established between a supernatural being and a man only by a drastic transformation, a denaturalization, we might say, of the personality of the man. Here something above his power, something against nature comes to pass forcibly in himself. This causes him most naturally the keenest pain and torture, not only mental but also even physical. This happened to Muhammad in various forms. Hadiths tell us of his intense sufferings, physical pains, the feeling of being choked at those moments. 'Â'ishah relates — and this is one of the most famous authentic Hadîths about Revelation — "I saw him as Revelation came down upon him on an extremely cold day. His forehead was running with beads of perspiration". Other Hadiths report that when the Revelation came, his face darkened ; sometimes he fell to the ground as if intoxicated or swooning ; sometimes he groaned like a camel's colt, etc.

Ibn Khaldûn in his *Muqaddimah* (Wâfî's edition, vol. 1, 346-347, 360) explains this phenomenon in this way. This physical pain, he says, is due to the fact that in this supernatural experience, the human soul which is not by nature prepared to such a thing, is forced to leave momentarily its humanity (*al-bashariyyah* human-ness) and exchanges it for angelicity (*al-malakiyyah* angel-ness), and becomes actually for the time being part of the angelic world until it resumes its human-ness.

But this is of course a later theoretic or philosophical explanation of the phenomenon. This was not certainly the way the Arabs in Muhammad's time looked upon it. Indeed the pagan Arabs had ready at hand a very convincing ----- of course to their minds - way of interpreting this kind of phenomena.

We must keep in mind in this connection that we are as yet only at the second stage of our analysis. All we have established is that we have here a case of verbal communication coming from a supernatural being to a human being. Properly speaking the problem of who or what this supernatural being is not yet decided.

Now, if we stop at this stage - - - and the pagan Arabs did stop at the stage and refuse to go any further—— if we stop at this stage and look at the matter from the pre-Islamic point of view, then the whole thing is just the very familiar phenomenon of possession (*tajnin*), which is, in no way peculiar to the Arabs or the Semites, but something of the widest occurrence throughout the world and generally known in modern times under the name of shamanism. Some invisible supernatural being, whether a spirit or divinity, suddenly possesses an ecstatic person momentarily, and utters impassioned words through him, which the latter could never compose by himself in ordinary calmer moments.

This phenomenon was extremely familiar to the pre-Islamic Arabs. For the *kâhin* (soothsayer) and the *shâ'ir* (poet) were exactly this type of man who was liable to be possessed at any moment by a supernatural force. And this was the sole type of inspiration known to the pagan Arabs.

Let us first examine the concept of 'poet' in ancient Arabia as an 'inspired' man. In doing this we must bear in mind the very important fact that the pre-Islamic poetry which has been preserved and handed down to us is mostly the product of the late Jahili period, when the Arabic poetry had already passed long ago the cruder stage of primitive shamanism. By the time Islam appeared the poetry had already been elaborated and refined to a very great extent into an art, almost in the sense in which we usually understand it. The famous pre-Islamic poets, like Imr' al-Qais, Ṭarafah and others were no longer shamans in the original sense of the word ; they were rather real artists.

And yet even in their work there are sporadic remains of the ideas belonging to the older stage, and particularly there is a branch of poetry called *al-hijâ'* --- satirical poetry.

This hijâ'-poetry, as was shown admirably well by Goldziher's now classical work on this branch of Arabian poetry (*Abhandlungen zur arabischen Philologie, Erster T.*), preserved even right into the Ummayyad period the pre-historic shamanistic conception of poetry. Besides, we have also a huge amount of old oral traditions preserved in various books, which provide us with valuable material for studying the Arab concep-

tion of the poet and poetry in the earliest, unrecorded times.

Now what was poetry and what kind of man was a poet in the original form? To make a very long story short, the poet, as his very name *shâ'ir* ——— it is a derivation from the verb *sha'ara*, or *sha'ura* meaning "to have cognizance of", i. e., in this case, of something to which ordinary people have no access ——— implies, was a person who had the first-hand knowledge of the unseen world. And this knowledge of the unseen world he was supposed to derive, not from his own personal observation, but from constant intimate commerce with some supernatural beings, called *Jinn*. Thus poetry at this stage was not so much art as supernatural knowledge derived from direct communication with the unseen spirits who were hovering around in the air.

The *Jinn* did not communicate with everybody. They had a special choice. when a *Jinn* found a man of his or her liking, he or she pounced upon him, threw him down to the ground, kneeled upon his chest, and forced him to become his mouthpiece in this world.

This was the initiation ceremony of poetry. The man was henceforward known as a poet. And henceforward there was established between the poet and the *Jinn* a particular kind of extremely intimate personal relationship. Each individual poet used to have his own *Jinn* who came down upon him from time to time to give him inspiration. The poet usually called his *Jinn* his 'familiar friend' *khalil*. Not only that ; the *Jinn* who came into this intimate relationship with a particular poet was even known by a proper name somewhat like John or Mary. For instance the *Jinn* of one of the greatest pre-Islamic poets al-A'shâ al-Kabîr had the personal name *Mishal*, the original meaning of which is 'carving knife' ——— a name symbolic of his glib, eloquent tongue. This *Jinn* *Mishal* appears often in his poetry.

Here I will give only one example, which is particularly significant in connection with our present topic.

Wa-mâ kuntu shâhirdan wa-lâkin hasibtu-ni
Idhâ Mishalun saddâ liya al-qaula antiqû
Sharikâni fimâ baina-nâ min harwâdatin
Şafyyâni jinniyyun wa-insun murwaffaqu

Yaqûlu fa-lâ a'yà li-shai'in aqûlu-hu

Kafû-niya lâ 'ayyun wa-lâ huwa akhraqu (Diwân, XXXIII, 32-34)

The situation is somewhat like this. The poet is being attacked by an enemy poet. He must make a counterattack : otherwise he would not only lose his face personally, but he would let his whole tribe suffer a defeat according to the basic belief of the age. He feels irritated, impatient and uneasy, and yet somehow he cannot utter a word. As an excuse he describes his strange relationship with his *Jinn*, and says that he remains dumb and speechless in the face of his enemy, not because he is incompetent or ignorant, but simply and solely because his *Jinn* does not yet give him words.

He says : "I am not an inexperienced debutant in the art of poetry (*shahird* 'apprentice' — Pahlv. *ashâgard*, Modern Persian *shâgird*), but my situation is like this: whenever Mishal bestows upon me the word I begin to be able to speak. Between us we are two intimate sincere friends ; a *Jinn* and a human being who is naturally fit to him. If he only speaks (i. e. if he inspires me), then I will no longer be incapable of anything I would say. He suffices me so long as he is neither a tongue-tied one nor an awkward stupid fellow".

It is important to note in this connection that this kind of demonic inspiration was always felt by the poet to be something coming down from above, i.e., from the air. And for this aspect of poetic inspiration, the

A (<i>Jinn</i>)	word <i>nuzûl</i> (verb <i>nazala</i> "to come down") was most
↓	
B (<i>shâ'ir</i>)	generally used. Thus, for example, Ḥassân Ibn Thâbit
	(Diw. 79, last verse) describes his own poetic experience

in this way :

Wa-qâfiyatin 'ajjat bi-lailin razinatin

talaqqaitu min jawwi al-samâ'i muzûla-hâ

"Oft did a grave and heavy verse (the word *qâfiyah* does not mean, in a context like this, simply 'rhyme' or 'rhyme word' as it does in later Arabic, but it rather means words endued with a magical power by their being uttered in a poetic form — a sort of incantation, like the word *carmen* in old Latin) resound at night; oft did I receive

it coming down (lit.: its coming down *nuzûl*) from mid-air."

To this we must add another important fact that in the most ancient times of Arab heathenism known to us the position of the poet in the society was extremely high. A real poet was an inestimable tribal asset in both time of peace and war. In time of peace he was the leader of the nomad tribe, because of the supernatural knowledge he got from his *Jinn*. The wanderings of the tribe in the desert were regulated by instructions given by the chief shaman-poet of the tribe. In this sense, in the majority of cases *shâ'ir* was almost synonymous with *qâ'id* a "tribal leader." In war time he was even more powerful than a warrior because he had the supernatural power of disarming the enemy, even before the actual battle began, by curses and spells which he launched against them in verse-form, and which were believed to have far more terrible effects in bringing destruction and shame upon them than arrows and spears. Such was the pre-Islamic conception of the poet although in the late Jahili period just preceding the rise of Islam, the social position of the poet was no longer so high.

Now we see why the Prophet Muhammad was so often regarded by his contemporaries as a poet inspired by a jinni (*shâ'ir majnûn*, Koran XXVII, 36). The pagan Arabs stubbornly refused to see anything in the prophet Muhammad, which would distinguish him from a person possessed and inspired by *Jinn*. In their eyes, here was a man who claimed a knowledge of the unseen (*al-ghaib*), which was brought to him by a supernatural being coming down from heaven (*nuzûl*). Whether that supernatural being be God, angel or *Shaitân*, there was no essential distinction at all in their conception; all were *Jinn*.

The Koran itself tells us that the pagan Arabs could hardly differentiate Allah from the Jinn. For instance, in XXXVII, 158 we read ; "They establish between Allah and the Jinn a kinship." In other words, in their conception both belong to one and the same family.

Moreover, this man, Muhammad, showed at those moments of prophetic inspiration evident signs of intense physical pain and mental sufferings. So here was, they thought, another *shâ'ir* — a man possessed by a jinni (XXIII,24) ; this was their very simple immediate

conclusion.

That such was the most prevalent and most widespread view among the pagan Arabs, particularly in Mekka, the Koran itself gives us ample evidence. The very fact that the Koran stresses constantly that Muhammad has nothing to do with demonic possession, that he is not a man "possessed by a jinni" (*majnûn* — the word means "possessed" and "mad") is the evidence that this was the actual situation.

Even in Islam the existence itself of a class of supernatural beings called *Jinn* was never doubted. This was a belief common to Arab heathenism and Islam, and it constituted an important element of the world-view of Orthodox Islam. Even the rationalistic Mu'tazilah school did not doubt the existence of *Jinn*. It would be interesting to observe in this connection what the famous theologian Ibn Taimiyyah remarks on this problem. As usual he is quite categorical in his assertion and he speaks in a very harsh tone, particularly against the philosophers: "There is not a single person among the Muslims, of whatever sect or school he may be, who has denied the existence of *Jinn*. The same is true with the pagan Arabs. Because the existence of *Jinn* has been handed down from the most ancient times by a long line of successive traditions of the prophets in a way that leaves no place for doubt. The only people who deny the existence of *Jinn* are a small, insignificant group of the stupid, ignorant philosophers."

By 'ignorant philosophers' (*juhhâl al-falâsifah*) he of course refers to Ibn Sînâ (Avicenna) and his followers who assert that the word *Jinn* belongs to that category of words that have meaning (*ma'nâ*) but do not correspond to any outside reality (*haqîqah khârijiyyah*), that is to say, to use modern terminology, words that do have connotation, but do not have corresponding denotation. In this conception, *Jinn* are just imaginary beings who live and exist only in human imagination, but have no basis in reality, while for the Orthodox Islam, the word *Jinn* does have denotation as well as connotation.

However this may be, from the Koranic point of view, those pagan Arabs who took Muhammad for a "poet" committed a double mistake: first, by confusing the Almighty God with a jinni, and secondly

by confusing a prophet with a poet possessed by a jinni.

According to the Koranic view, the real source of prophetic inspiration (*A*) is not *Jinn* but Allah. And there is between these two an essential absolute difference, for Allah is the Creator of the whole world, while *Jinn* are merely created beings ; they are part of the creature (Koran VI, 100) ; and they, just like ordinary human beings, will be brought forth before God on the day of judgement to be judged (XXXVII, 158), and the Hell will be filled both with men and *Jinn*.

In the second place, there is also an essential and absolute difference between a prophet and a poet. A poet is essentially *affâk* (XXVI, 222) : and what he says is sheer *ifk*, which is not necessarily a 'lie' as some translate it, but something which has no basis of *ḥaqq* "reality" or "truth," something that is not based on *ḥaqq*. *Affâk* is a man who utters quite irresponsibly whatever he likes to say without stopping a moment to think whether his own words have some real basis or not, while what a prophet says is Truth, absolute *ḥaqq* and nothing else (XV, 6). So that the $A \rightarrow B$ relation of prophetism, although it bears an outward and formal resemblance to $A \rightarrow B$ relation of shamanism, has an essentially different inner structure from the latter.

But this is not yet the whole of the story, for the word *majnûn* "possessed" among the Arabs of that age was applied to still another type of man : *kâhin* to which reference was made earlier. We must now turn to this second concept.

Kâhin 'soothsayer' was also a man possessed by *Jinn*, who uttered non-natural words under the demonic inspiration. *Kâhin* had much in common with *shâ'ir*. Indeed, the more we go back to the ancient times the more difficult does it become to distinguish one from the other. After all, both were manifestations of shamanism, and in origin they must have been one and the same thing both in their nature and in their social function. And yet historically, there seems to have been some important points of difference.

Kâhin, in the Jahiliyyah, was a man with occult powers who exercised those powers as a profession, and received freely honorarium or fee for his services, called *ḥulwîn*. At least in the late Jahili age as

we know it from the old traditions, it was almost a social institution. He was interrogated on all important tribal and inter-tribal problems. He acted as an interpreter of dreams, he was asked to find lost camels; he served the tribesmen not only as a medical doctor but also as a detective in matters concerning crimes committed in society.

But the most important social function which he exercised was *ḥukum* "judging". He was the judge whose sentence was authoritative because he was believed to give his judgement according to the instructions given him by supernatural forces. So it was a primitive kind of divine judgment, and his sentence was usually regarded as something final against which there was no appeal.

However, far more important, from a linguist's point of view, was a stylistic feature which distinguished a *kāhin* from a *shū'ir*. The *Kāhin* always gave his utterances in particular rhythmic form known as *saj'*. Opinion is divided as to whether this was the earliest form of poetry among the Arabs. Most probably it represents the pre-poetic form of expression : it is a form of expression which lies between regular poetry and real prose of ordinary daily conversation. Real Arabic poetry begins with *rajaz*, and *saj'* is a stage just preceding it.

Saj' consists in a sequence of short pregnant sentences, usually with a single rhyme. And this was the most typical style of inspiration and revelation in ancient Arabia. All speech act that had their origin in the unseen powers, all speech-act that was not a daily mandane use of words, but had something to do with the unseen powers, such as cursing, blessing, divination, incantation, inspiration, and revelation had to be couched in this form.

The word itself *saj'* (corresponding to Hebrew *shag'*) etymologically and originally meant the cooing of pigeons and doves. And it was associated with the purring sound of *jinn's* voice. The prophet Muhammad himself, in an authentic hadith going back to 'A'isha, describes the *kāhin's* utterance as clucking of a hen : "He (the *jinnī*) clucks (*yuqarqiru*) into the ear of his companion like the clucking (*qarqarh*) of a hen."(Bukhârî, *Bâb al-Tauhîd*)

As an example of this style, I will give here the very well-known

prophecy uttered by a famous *kâhin* Satîh, of whom it is said that in moments of demonic seizure he folded himself up, like a garment so that his whole body appeared to be boneless except his skull.

<i>Ra'aita ḥumamah</i>	You saw a black charcoal
<i>Kharajat min zulumah</i>	Comming forth from the darkness of night
<i>Fa-waqa'at bi-arḍi tuhamah</i>	And it alighted on the lowland
<i>Fa-akalat min-hâ kulla dhâti jumjumah</i>	And devoured all that has a skull

This piece of *saj'* is said to have meant the invasion and conquest of Yemen by the Ethiopians. When pressed by the king of Yemen as to whether this prophecy was true, the same soothsayer uttered the following words, also in *saj'* form.

<i>Wa-l-shafaq</i>	by the evening twilight
<i>Wa-l'asaq</i>	By the darkness
<i>Wa-l-falaq</i>	By the dawn
<i>Idhâ' ttasaj</i>	When the matter is well arranged
<i>Inna mâ anba'tu-ka bi-hi la-ḥaqq</i>	Verily what I have told you is truth (Ibn Isḥaq- Ibn Hishâm. I)

This one example will make it sufficiently clear that the *saj'*, as regards its form, was a kind of rhymed prose, very close to real poetry by the repetition of rhyme, but different from poetry in not having meter in the sense of measured syllables. We may notice also that the *saj'* style of the *kâhin* was characteristically marked by strange oath-formulas, conjurations of nature, of which the second piece gives us same examples.

Both of these features, i.e., the repetition of rhyme which gives often the sense of haunting beauty, and the conjurations of nature are characteristic of the early Suras of the Koran. Is, then the Koranic style fundamentally *saj'*? The answer is: largely yes, but partially no. For in some passages the Koranic style satisfies in every respect the basic formal norms of *saj'*, while in others particularly in the later Suras the use of rhyme words deviates so far from the standard norm of *saj'* that we can hardly recognize there the ordinary *saj'*-form. In Orthodox

Islam, many outstanding scholars have tried hard to demonstrate that the Koranic style has nothing to do with *saj'*. But no one has succeeded perfectly in doing this. The real motive which drove them in this direction would seem to have been the desire to show that a real prophet was not a *kâhin* as the pagan Arabs claimed him to be. But if such was their motive, then they should not have approached this problem solely from the stylistic point of view, for properly speaking, the form of expression, whether it is poetry, *saj'* or prose, has nothing to do with the content of the message conveyed. I will come back to this topic later.

However this may be, many of the pagan Arabs of Muhammad's age also made this confusion and took Muhammad for a *kâhin* simply because of this formal, stylistic characteristic. And the Koran itself denies emphatically the Prophet's being a *kâhin* :

"By the grace of your lord you (Muhammad) are neither a soothsayer nor a man possessed by a *Jinn*!" (LII, 29, also LXIX, 42)

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Now we are in a position to examine from our particular point of view the third — and the most important — feature which characterizes the structure of the Koranic concept of Revelation. In the Koran, Revelation as a supernatural linguistic act is a three-person-relation concept, which makes it structurally something entirely different, not only from ordinary human speech, but also from all other types of verbal inspiration having *Jinn* as its source. We must begin by calling to mind that both in the case of *shâ'ir* and that of *kâhin*, $A \rightarrow B$ relation is strictly and essentially two-person-relation.

A, i.e., a *Jinn* gets into an extremely close personal relation with *B*, i.e., a human being : so close is this connection that always here the *Jinn* is the 'I' and the *shâ'ir* or *kâhin* is 'Thou'. And the *Jinn* possesses the man from time to time, incites him forcibly to utterance ; or rather it is the *Jinn* himself who speaks through the man. There is no inter-

mediary between them. We might even say that in the moments of demonic seizure, the *Jinn* and the man are completely united into one person. And this is the phenomenon which we generally know under the name of shamanism.

This does not apply to the Koranic conception of Revelation which is, as I have just said, three-person-relation. There was, in other words, in Muhammad's prophetic consciousness always somebody, some mysterious being between God and himself, who brought down Divine words to his heart. So that the basic structure of Revelation in the sense in which the Koran understands it, is like this: $A \rightarrow M \rightarrow B$. Let us examine this in some detail.

According to the Koran itself, there are only three possible types of verbal communication from God to man. The three types are clearly stated and distinguished in (XLII 50-51/51) where we read:

"It is not for any man that God should speak to him except by *waḥy*, or from behind a veil (*min warā'i ḥijābin*) or by god's sending a messenger (*rasūlan*) to communicate (*vūḥiya*) by His leave what He will".

So the three different manners of Revelation are: (1) mysterious communication, (2) speaking from behind the veil, and (3) by means of a messenger.

The first type is not elucidated in this passage, and, strictly speaking, we are left in the dark as to what is meant in concrete terms. But the word *waḥy* would seem to suggest that the reference is to that sort of direct communication which I explained a few paragraphs back; that is, *waḥy* in the sense of *ilhām*, non-verbal kind of inspiration, which is, as we saw, the special divine favor bestowed upon Moses to the exclusion of all other prophets.

As to the second type, the expression used — "from behind the veil" — suggests that there does occur a verbal communication (not a simple *ilhām*); only the hearer in this case does not have any vision of the speaker himself. But, although nothing is visible to his eyes, the prophet has the clearest consciousness of there being somewhere around him a mysterious being who speaks to him in an extremely

strange way. And I think we can supplement our knowledge about this by some important information derived from the Hadîth.

In a very famous tradition going back to 'Â'ishah, it is related that al-Ĥârith b. Hishâm having once asked the prophet saying, "O Apostle of God, how does the revelation come to you?", the latter replied, "Sometimes it comes to me like the ringing of a bell. (*mithla şalşalati al-jarasi*) And this is the most painful manner of revelation to me; then it leaves me and I have understood (*wa'aitu*) from that noise what He (God) meant to say."

Note the use of the perfective aspect (*wa'aitu* "I have understood"), which is quite significant in this context as Ibn Khaldûn pointed out long ago. What Muhammad is trying to convey thereby seems to be that during the very time of his receiving the revelation he does not have the consciousness of hearing any intelligible words spoken; all that he hears is something like a mysterious, indistinct noise (*dawwiyy*), but the moment it ceases and he himself returns to the level of normal human consciousness he realizes that the noise has transformed itself into distinct meaningful words.

The reading "like the ringing of a bell" (*mithla şalşalati al-jarasi*) is not so certain as it is usually assumed. The last word *al-jarasi* ("the bell") may very well be read also: *al-jarsi*; then the phrase would mean "like some low and indistinct sound." Besides, there are several variants: "like the noise of the beating of some metal," "like the flapping of the wings of a bird" etc. Still, it is always some mysterious, indefinable sound that is meant.

Then comes the third type, that of verbal communication by means of a special messenger; here Muhammad not only hears the words spoken, but actually sees the speaker. And it is to this third type that the remaining half of this Hadîth refers. There we read: "and sometimes — the prophet goes on saying — the angel appears to me in the form of a man and speaks to me, and in this case I understand (*a'i*) immediately what he says". We must notice that here the important verb (*wa'a*), which appeared in the perfective aspect (*wa'aitu*) in the first half of the passage, now appears in the imperfective aspect (*a'i*). This suggests clearly that in this case, and in this case only,

Muhammad hears real words spoken.

Apparently Muhammad was not only an auditory type of prophet; he was also a visual type. He had many visions at critical points of his prophetic career. And in the Koran itself, in two different places reference is made to the appearance of the Mighty Being who transmitted to him Divine words. One is LIII, 1—18, the other is LXXXI, 15—25.

In the former the Divine messenger is described as *shadid al-quwà* "One terrible in power" i.e., a being glorious and majestic, who stood straight in the highest part of the horizon, then drew near and approached till he was at the distance of two bows or nearer, and transmitted the divine message. The second passage also gives a substantially same picture.

This majestic and mysterious being who made himself visible to Muhammad and transmitted to him the divine words was at first, i.e., in the Meccan period, simply called by the symbolic name of *rûh al-quds* ("Holy Spirit", corresponding to the Christian *Spiritus Sanctus*).

"Say: the Holy Spirit has brought it down with truth from your Lord" (XVI, 104/102). It is also called *al-rûh al-amin* (the "Trustworthy Spirit" — "trustworthy" from the standpoint of one who trusts him): for example:

"And verily this is a revelation (*tansil* lit. "sending down") of the Lord of the Universe, which the Trustworthy Spirit has brought down upon your mind so that you (Muhammad) might be one of the warners" (XXVI, 192—194)

At the same time it is strongly emphasized that it is not an inspiration coming from the *Jinn* (XXVI, 210—211 — the word *al-shayâtin* "Satan's" being synonymous in this kind of context with *Jinn*.)

Later, in Medina, this "Holy Spirit" reveals himself to be the Angel Gabriel (*Jibril* or *Jabril* — cf. for example, II, 91/97). And in many of the authentic Hadiths, the Divine Messenger who brought down revelation to Muhammad is said to have been from the very first *Jibril*.

So if we stop at this stage of analysis, we should say that the revelation is three-person verbal relation $A \rightarrow M \rightarrow B$, in which the

a messenger (*rasûlun*) sent by the Lord of the Universe. I convey (*uballighu*) to you the messages of my Lord". (VII,59/61 — 60/62)

And in V, 93/94, "The sole duty of Our messenger is to convey (*al-balâgh*) clearly the divine words". Many other examples can be given, but the idea is so clear that it is not necessary to do so.

Linguistically this brings up a very interesting and important problem. Since *B* is the transmitter of what *A* has said, *B* must memorize and transmit *A*'s speech word by word i. e., it must be conveyed to *C* directly and exactly in the words and phrases in which it has been given. Not even the slightest change or omission is permissible. In other words, the divine words, when they reach and are received by *B*, must form an objective entity, an objective linguistic work — a *Sprachwerk*, as the Germans would say. The divine words as an objective Sprachwerk in this sense are called *qur'ân*. The word *qur'dn*, whatever its etymological meaning may be, means in this context a piece of Divine Revelation as an objective entity. Of course the whole body of the individual *qur'âns* may also be designated by the same word, and this is evidently the most usual sense in which the word *Qur'ân* (or more popularly: Koran) is understood now. However, this was not its original meaning. Besides, the collection of all the revealed words in the form of a book which is now called the *Qur'ân* came later.

And it is the most important duty or function of a *nabiy* to keep in memory the revealed text literally and directly so that he may convey it to his people without any modification at all. If such modification occurs, then the prophet may be accused of having committed the grave sin of *tahrîf* which means "turning round" "twisting" "falsification" (the verb being *harrafa*), although it is particularly the case when the modification has been done intentionally. In the Koran we see the Jews constantly accused of having "intentionally twisted" the revealed words. (see for example III48/46).

The Revelation in the technical sense of the word which I have just described differs essentially in this respect from the non-technical, or pre-technical concept of *wahy* which I explained at the beginning. There,

revelation - - - if we can use this term legitimately here — is a kind of prompting to action. It may not be verbal : the man who receives inspiration in this sense may not have a clear consciousness of the exact words and phrases that have been spoken to him. The main point is that he should understand the idea itself and act in accordance with it.

Take for example VII, 114/117 : "We gave *wahy* (*awhainû*) to Moses : throw down your rod". And Moses did throw down his rod accordingly. The sole purpose of *wahy* here is to prompt Moses to a certain action ; it is a kind of imperative. The words themselves do not count. The purpose of *wahy* once achieved, it is no longer necessary for the words to remain permanently, as a Sprachwerk.

While in the case of the Revelation in the proper, technical sense, every word and every phrase should remain permanently as an objective Sprachwerk. Muhammad himself was keenly conscious of the extreme importance of keeping in memory, while he was receiving revelation, the exact words and phrases as they were being given. This is clearly reflected in the Koran. In LXXV, 16/19, we see Muhammad admonished not to move his tongue in haste to follow the revealed sequence of words : "Do not move your tongue in haste in following the revelation". For there is danger, in doing this, of Muhammad's forming unintentionally in advance the words that are about to come, instead of waiting calmly and quietly until the revelation comes to an end. (Also in XX, 113/114, we see the same admonition). But this haste or impatience on Muhammad's part was due to his prophetic consciousness that he should not forget even a single word. God Himself assures Muhammad in the same passage that He would take care of everything, so that all Muhammad has to do is wait until the revelation assumes a definite verbal form, and follow its wording passively.

And this is one of the reasons why from the point of view of Islam the Koran is inimitable (*mu'jiz*). And this is the famous problem of the "inimitability of the Koran" (*i'jâz al-Qur'ân*). Ibn Khaldûn explains the point in this way. The Koran occupies a unique position and stands alone among all the divine books, because here we have the text of revelation in its original form while in the case of the Torah and

the Gospel, he says, the prophets received the revelation only in the form of ideas, which they, after they returned to the normal state, formulated and expressed in their own words. — We must observe in parentheses that this is not wholly true, because in the O. T. prophetic books there are preserved some revelations in verse-form in their original wording, as they were given to the prophets. But as a whole this *is* true, because the bulk of the Old Testament text is the work of professional writers. — Hence all the heavenly books, Ibn Khaldûn concludes, with the sole exception of the Koran, do not have “inimitability”.

The word *nabiy*, as I have said, means, with regard to that particular aspect which is directly related to the concept of revelation, the man specially chosen by God Himself to receive the revelation to the exclusion of all others, and make a Sprachwerk out of it by memorizing the original wording of the revelation to the minutest detail, and then to transmit it to his community.

As to the origin of this Arabic word itself, the Western scholars unanimously maintain that it is a borrowing from the Hebrew *nâbhi'*. Here we seem to detect a confusion of “word” with “concept”. It is true that the particular connotation of the transmitter of Divine Revelation was something completely foreign to the mind of the Beduin Arabs, who had no idea at all of what Revelation was. And in this sense the concept certainly belonged to the circle of the monotheistic ideas, that was historically bound up with a long Biblical tradition ; and so it is but natural that the word *nabiy* does not appear in the pre-Islamic poetry of the Beduins. But this should not be taken to mean that the word itself is a direct borrowing from Hebrew. The word *nabiy*, in both its formation and its root meaning, belongs to the genuine Arabic stock. The root *NB'* goes beyond Arabic far back into the Semitic antiquity with the meaning of “anouncing” and “proclaiming”. However this may be, the etymological question is of a secondary importance for our purpose. What is much more important from our standpoint is to know whether the Koranic concept of *nabiy* coincides completely with the Biblical concept of *nâbhi'*. And for this purpose we must push our analysis a step further.

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When we try to isolate the characteristic features of this Koranic concept, two points seem to stand out as deserving special attention — two points that are both of a negative nature.

One of them is that the Arabic *nabiy* has essentially nothing to do with prophecy or prophesying in the original Greek sense of *prophesy*, "telling-beforehand", i. e., future-telling. The etymological root from which the word *nabiy* is derived, *NB'*, has, as we have just said, certainly the meaning of "announcing" "giving news of something" and yet it is not in the direction of the giving news of some future event, prediction, that the word points. In the Koran, the news of which it is question is always news of the *ghaib* (the unseen world of God). The announcement is always the announcement of the Divine will. Of course in a certain sense, the detailed description of the Hell and Paradise on the day of Judgment may be said to be a prediction of the future. But this is far different in nature from a description of some impending and imminent event which is about to happen to a definite person or some definite nation, as it often happens with the Hebrew prophets seeing beforehand what will come to pass in future ; this is not at all part of the function of the Arabian *nabiy*. But this was not so easily understood by Muhammad's contemporaries, as is evidenced by the very fact that he was on many occasions asked by various men to predict future events, great and small. In the minds of those people, the concept of *nabiy* was still vaguely associated, and confused even, with the old traditional concept of *kâhin*.

The second of the negative characteristics of the semantic structure of *nabiy* is that the words he speaks or conveys has essentially nothing to do with word-magic. This is an extremely important point, because it is perhaps from this angle that we can distinguish most effectively the Islamic concept of revelation from all manifestations of the Arabian shamanism, like poetry and *kâhin's* oracles. While if we approach the problem from the standpoint of the outer form of expression, we are almost sure to get into difficulty in characterizing the Koranic style.

I have already pointed out that it is sometimes impossible to distinguish the Koranic style, particularly that of the earliest Meccan Suras from the ordinary *saj'*-style. From purely theological and pious considerations, many of the outstanding Muslim scholars of the classical age tried to prove that the Koranic style was essentially different from *saj'*. But if we look at the matter objectively, we should admit that they hardly succeeded in doing this.

The fact of the matter is this. They thought : since the Koran states explicitly that this revelation is not the oracle of a *kâhin*, nor words of a *shâ'ir*, there should not be any stylistic affinity at all between the two. My personal opinion is that they sought the solution of this problem in a wrong direction. What really matters here is not the form of expression, the style, but the thought-content which is expressed through this conventional means of expression. Everybody who is at all familiar with both the Koran and the pre-Islamic shamanism knows how great and essential the difference is between them as regards the thought-content, the subject-matter, and the general spirit that animates one and the other.

There is, however, also a no less important point to make in this connection from the linguistic point of view. In the pre-Islamic age, both the *saj'* which was the style of all inspiration and the *rajaz* which was the first poetic form developed from the *saj'*, both of them were mainly used for purposes associated in some way or other with word-magic. In those ancient days, words uttered in measured lines and with recurring rhymes were believed to be endowed with strong magical powers. The prophet Muhammad himself recognized, according to many authentic Hadîths, the very real power the rhyme possessed. As a matter of fact Muhammad was greatly helped, in his campaign against the pagans, by his favorite poet Ḥassân ibn Thâbit who stood in high estimation among the Muslims precisely in this capacity, despite all that Koran says disparagingly about poets and their low moral standard. It is related that Muhammad once remarked to this, poet, "Your poetry is much more dangerous to our enemy than arrows shot in the dark of night". (See for further information my earlier work *Language and Magic* 1956,

pp.130-131) Poets, in short, were venerated and dreaded in the pre-Islamic age chiefly, if not solely, because of the magical release of supernatural power he commanded against his enemy, whether personal or tribal.

There is a certain respect in which the poetic use of language presents a striking similarity, both in nature and structure, to the prophetic speech which I have described above, for in the case of a poet as in that of a prophet, the words uttered should form an objective entity — a *Sprachwerk*. The words he utters should be memorized exactly as they come out of his mouth and transmitted to others. Originating from a supernatural source, his words also should go beyond him ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$). But launched against C — the poet's enemy — his *Sprachwerk* is no longer a linguistic phenomenon in the proper sense of the word ; it is rather a magical phenomenon ; the poet's speech is here a magical force that works upon C , binds him up, and destructs him.

The same was true with the *saja'*-style of soothsayers. As true poets could handle *rajaaz* poetry in a destructive way, so real soothsayers were able to handle the *saj'* prose in such a way that they could mortally wound their enemy by the magical power of the rhyme. Their words are often compared in old Arabic literature to deadly arrows shot by night which fly unseen by their victims ; the verb most frequently used in such contexts is *ramà* which means "shooting". They are also compared to sharp, cutting spears that are poisonous, inflicting wounds from which the victims could scarcely hope to recover. What made these rhymed words most dangerous is that these curses and counter-curses, once released, had an uncontrollable activity of their own, and nobody, even the poet or the soothsayer himself who had released them could no longer restrain the malignant and destructive forces thus released. The *qarwâfi* once said had an imperishable and inevitable magical power.

Now it is evident that the Koranic revelation had nothing at all to do with this kind of release of magical power. *Saj'*, as we have seen, had two different aspects in the pre-Islamic age : it was, on the one hand, the language of inspiration : all supernatural inspiration, whatever its source, took linguistically this form. It was, on the other hand,

regard to the phenomenon of prophetic mission. Thus in XIV, 4 we read :

"We never send an Apostle except with the language (i. e. *langue*) of his people, so that he might make the message intelligible."

As the peoples of the world differ in color, so they differ in language (XXX,21/22). And no adequate understanding, i. e., communication, is possible where there is no common language (XVIII, 92/93).

And, we are told, this is why an Arabic speaking prophet is now sent to the Arabs with an Arabic revelation :

"We have sent this down as an Arabic Koran (*qur'ânan 'arabiyyan*)"(XII,2) "Verily this is the revelation (lit. sending down : *tanzil*) of the Lord of the worlds, which the Trustworthy Spirit (i. e. Gabriel) has brought down upon your heart, so that you might be a warner, in a plain Arabic language (*bi-lisânin 'arabiyyin nubinin*) (XXVI, 192-195)

Just as Moses was given a Book in his language, so now the Arabian prophet is given a book in the Arabic language (*lisânan 'arabiyyan*, XLVI, 11/12).

For if God made His revelation in some non-Arabic language, then the people would never believe, there being no understanding at all.

"If we had made it a Qur'ân in non-Arabic language (*a'jamiyyan*), they would say : Why are not its verses made intelligible. Is it non-Arabic (*a'jamiyyun*) and Arabic (*'arabiyyun*)? (i. e. a non-Arabic revelation given to an Arabian prophet?)" (XLI, 44)

Likewise if God had revealed this Arabic Koran to a non-Arab prophet and let him recite it in Arabic to his people, who are of course non-Arabs, they would never have believed in him.

"Had we sent this down upon some non-Arabian (prophet), and had he recited it to them (in Arabic), they would not have believed in it" (XXVI, 198-199)

All these verses are, as we see, based on the view that each community has its own language, and that there is an inseparable tie between a community and its language. And this is tantamount to saying that the Koran has the concept of *langue* in the modern technical sense of the word. This concept is in the Koran expressed by the word *lisân*

“tongue”.

There is in the Koran itself a clear indication that it was rumoured among the Arabs at that time that the Koran was not a divine revelation, that, in reality, there was a man behind Muhammad, a man versed in Jewish and Christian scriptures, who was teaching him what to say under the pretence of Revelation. Al-Ṭabarî gives several names of Christian slaves of foreign origin as those who were talked about by the pagan Arabs in this sense (XVI,105/103).

However — the Koran argues against this accusation — the native language (*lisân*) of the man to whom they attribute all this is non-Arabic (*a'jamiy*), while this is a plain Arabic language (*lisânun 'arabiyyun mubînun*), the implication being that anyone whose language is not Arabic would be absolutely incapable of teaching what to say in pure Arabic.

This and some of the Koranic verses which I have just quoted have brought to our attention a very important word *a'jamiy*. We may perhaps discuss this problem better in terms of the basic opposition between 'Arab and 'Ajam. In the eye of the ancient Arabs all the peoples of the known world were divided into two categories : Arabs and non-Arabs. In the latter category all the non-Arab peoples known to them were simply lumped together without any distinction. These two concepts were not exclusively linguistic, because blood, i. e., race also played an important role, particularly in the concept of 'Arab. But the most decisive factor was undoubtedly language. This is evidenced by the fact that even a man of pure Arab origin, if he was not able to speak Arabic properly, was very often called *a'jamiy*.

This, by the way, has led some of the authorities, like Abû Ishâq, to the view that there is a fine distinction between *a'jamiy* or *a'jam* on the one hand and *'ajamiy* on the other, the former meaning, on this view, one who is incapable of expressing himself correctly and clearly, even if he be a real Arab by descent, while the latter means one who racially belongs to a non-Arab people without any regard as to whether he speaks Arabic well or not. However not all lexicographers agree to this view.

However this may be, it is certain that in the pre-Islamic age the root 'JM had a very wide range of application. The basic meaning seems to have been the extreme obscurity of one's speech, whether it is just a temporary casual state or a permanent state due to one's being a foreigner. The following verse by al-Ḥuşāin b. al-Ḥumân is very interesting in this respect.

*Wa-qâlû tabayyan hal tarâ baina dârijin
wa-nahyi akuffin şârikhan ghaira a'jamâ*

"And they said : Observe well, can you see between Dârij and the rain-pit of Akuff anyone crying for help that is not voiceless (*a'jam*)?"

Here *a'jam* means one who has lost his voice by crying for help incessantly, but in vain. And of course this extreme obscurity of speech, when it goes to its utmost limit, coincides with perfect silence. And the verb *ista'jama* was used just for this meaning.

We have for example in the Hadîth : *Ista'jamat 'alai-hi qirâ'atu-hu*, which means literally "His reading or recitation (of the Holy Book) became silent against him" i. e. the man was overcome by drowsiness while he was reciting the Book and could not continue reading it. This use of the verb is also very old, and examples are found in pre-Islamic poetry.

Finally, the idea of linguistic obscurity may take another direction : animals, cattle and the brutes are called *a'jam*. I will give only one simple example from the Hadîth : *al-'ajmâ'u jurḥu-hâ jubârun*. Here *al-'ajmâ'* is the feminine form of *a'jam*, meaning *bahimah*, that is, "animal." The meaning of the Hadîth itself is : As to the brutes, injury (including death) caused by them is *jubâr*, i. e. bloodshed which is not liable to punishment : that is to say : no vengeance should be taken for any injury caused by the brutes.

These examples will be enough to show that anybody, or anything that is incapable of speaking in a proper human way is *a'jam*. This also shows at the same time that the term *a'jam* or *ajam*, when applied to non-Arabic speaking people, was originally a pejorative term : in other words it implied a disparaging and contemptuous attitude on the part of the Arabs towards those who could not speak Arabic, which was

Where does this fundamental attitude come from? In order to account for this seemingly strange fact it is of prime importance that we should keep in mind that the cultural situation in which the Arabs found themselves in that period was not so simple and homogeneous as one might suppose.

Arabia at that time was not a closed world ; on the contrary, it was an open world in lively contact with other peoples speaking different languages with widely different cultural traditions and forms.

Roughly speaking, the Arabs of that age may be divided into two different categories or types : the one is the pure, genuine Beduin type who lived in a closed society, conservative, traditionalist, reluctant to admit anything new into their mode of living and mode of thinking, and the other is a more enlightened sort, widely open to other forms of life and thought than their own, ready to accept or even ready to go out of their tribal society in search of new and higher cultural values.

The first type of Arabs were the real children of the desert, living strictly within the narrow limits of the tribal structure of society, living in the tribe, with the tribe, and for the tribe. The very basis of their sentiments, emotions and thoughts were essentially tribal. Of course even they had to come into close contact with foreigners if only for the reason that the wine-dealers were mostly Christians, Jews and Persians, and they were people who could not imagine life without wine-drinking, and we know from their poetry that they were familiar also with the devout and meditative life of the Syrian Christian monks who lived here and there in the midst of the desert and whose solitary lamps lit in the darkness served as guides to travellers by night. And yet on the whole the Beduins were far more concerned with themselves than with other nations. Their interest was almost exclusively centered on their tribal affairs and inter-tribal affairs.

Compared with this genuine Beduin type, the second type is a far more enlightened sort — the class of cosmopolitans of that age. And the Jahiliyyah produced a great number of them, among whom we find some of the greatest names in the history of Arabic literature like Labîd, al-A'shà, etc.

Of course, these were also, at bottom, tribal Beduins as regards

their mode of life, their mode of thinking, and mode of reaction in general. So it is but natural that we should see them share with the first type many, or even most, of the mental traits which may be considered typically Beduin. And it need cause no surprise if we find also many border-lines cases, or overlapping areas between the two classes. Thus, to take one telling example, the poet al-Nâbighah, who displayed a genuine Beduin-ness in his thinking and expression, was also an outstanding figure in this second class.

And yet, as a whole, there is one remarkable feature which draws a clear line of demarcation between the purely tribal, Beduin type and the cosmopolitan type. Those who fell under this second category lived on an open, international level : they had a mind open to all the foreign cultures and peoples that surrounded them, that had even infiltrated deep into the Arabian peninsula. These were the intellectuals of the age, who breathed an enlightened air, and whose intellectual horizon was not at all limited to the narrow confines of Arabia ; they left their souls free to be influenced and cultivated culturally by the surrounding peoples who stood at the higher stage of civilization. They had enough curiosity to venture into unknown worlds, learn new ideas, and assimilate them. Unlike the first type, their minds were not at all confined to the tribal matters.

We see a typical example of this category in the poet al-A'shà al-Kabîr, who travelled all through the peninsula from North to South, went over its border and visited Jerusalem and Homs, went to Iraq, and even crossed Iraq into the Sassanian Empire of Persia and brought back from there a number of Persian words and concepts, which he put into his poetry together with some Christian ideas which he learned from the people of the kingdom of Hîrah. He was so much interested in, and influenced by, the things he saw outside of Arabia that he almost became a Christian in his view of life and world outlook. He seems even to have travelled to Ethiopia in search of new ideas and unknown cultural values.

The state of affairs just described will make us understand why, contrary to our naive expectation, we do not find in the Koran a declaration of the natural superiority of the Arabic language. The prophet

Muhammad as a man belonged to this second type of Arabs, and the Koranic outlook over the surrounding world was also evidently of this second type, for it was based on the recognition of the existence of various nations and various communities on the earth, and it addressed itself to all peoples. The spirit of the Koran, in this respect, was a definite and daring break with the old tribal spirit so characteristic of the Beduin Arabs.

The world in which the Koran and Muhammad worked, the level of cultural consciousness at which they addressed the Arabs, was not that of the Beduins of the desert ; it was the open world of a lively cultural contact and cultural competition among a number of different nations.

We must remember in this connection that the Koran itself shows a deep distrust in the Beduin type of Arabs. It is even stated in one passage that the utmost an ordinary Beduin can attain in the matter of religion is *islām* in the literal sense of a formal "surrendering", and not *imān* "deep belief" : "The Beduin say, 'We believe (*āmānā*)' Tell them, 'You do not believe (in the true sense of the word). You should say rather, 'We have surrendered (*aslāmnā*), for the true belief has not permeated your hearts.' (XLIX, 14-15)".

In other passages we are told that the Beduins are the most difficult people to handle in the matter of religion and belief. They are stubborn, obstinate, haughty and arrogant ; and the vainglory prevents them from acquiring the virtue of humbleness or humble-mindedness, which, however, is the very gist of the religious mind as Islam understands it.

These passages show most clearly that the cultural and spiritual sphere in which the Arabian prophet lived and worked was essentially different from, and even diametrically opposed, in certain important respects, to the world in which the Beduins lived. The Beduins of the desert, in short, stood far below the level of cultural consciousness at which Islam addressed itself to the Arabic speaking people. And at this culturally open level of world conception, the Arabs were after all but one among many different peoples, and the Arabic language, too, was merely one among many different languages.

Thus we see why the Koran, in spite of its constant emphasis on its being in Arabic, is not meant to be a manifesto of the superiority of this language. Each community has its own language. So when God sent down His Revelation to the Israelites in the form of the Torah, He chose Hebrew as the vehicle of His message, because that was the language of that community. The same is true with other Revelations sent to other nations : each one of the People of Scripture had their own *kitâb* in the language of the community. Likewise, all Messengers who were raised before Muhammad addressed their people (*qaum*) in their particular language. So it is now with Muhammad. Since he is primarily an Arabian prophet and Arabian apostle he is sent with a *kitâb* in Arabic. Otherwise, there would be no reason why the Arabic language should be preferred to other languages.

This was quite of a piece with the broad world outlook which I have just described in some detail. However this was not the way in which the Arabs, or to be more correct the Arab Muslims, understood the whole matter. The evident fact that nowhere in the Koran was the superiority of Arabic stated was simply ignored by them, who had always been so proud of their Arab-ness and their Arabic language.

As is quite natural, the fact that the Koran was revealed in the Arabic language was for those Arabs ipso facto the strongest evidence that it was superior to all other languages. If Arabic was chosen by God Himself for the vehicle of Revelation, it was not for any pragmatic usefulness but rather for the intrinsic virtue of this language qua language. The enthusiasm that was deep-rooted in the minds of the Arabs for their language was, by the fact of the Koran being in Arabic, transformed and raised into the feeling of sanctity. Arabic was now the sacred language. And sooner or later the non-Arab Muslims also had to admit, because of their ardor and veneration for the Sacred Book, the natural superiority of this language. And thus the Arabic language qua language ended by assuming a high religious value. This process is admirably well depicted with all its theological implications by Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî in his "Great Commentary" *Mafâtih al-Ghaib*.

This natural tendency of the Arabs, continuing to be dominant all

through the Ummayyad period, was pushed to its extreme and took on even an emotive nationalistic aspect in the Abbasid period when the Arab 'Aṣabiyyah was faced with the Persian *Sh'ûbiyyah* which claimed the incomparable superiority of the Persian culture in Islam, including the Persian language, over things Arabian.

This movement which arose in the second and third century of Islamic history struck a fatal blow at the already declining Arab supremacy in Islam. The people who represented *Sh'ûbiyyah* not only declared openly that all Muslims are completely equal, irrespective of race, nationality and lineage — this much was in complete accordance with the Koranic teaching — but went further and said that the non-Arabs were far superior to the Arabs in every respect, who were nothing but poor babarians of the desert with no cultural background at all, and that all that was significant in Islamic culture went back to non-Arab sources. And this was in fact the main, dominant current of the time beginning with the tendency shown by most of the Caliphs themselves who were much more attracted by the glory of the Persian civilization and culture than by the rude arrogance of the Arabs. The good happy days of the Arabs were now over, and they were reduced to a very humiliating position in society.

The leaders of the *Shu'ûbiyyah* revolt against the Arabs were naturally mostly Persians, but since the reign of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil they were joined by the Turks too. Even the last stronghold of the Arabs, i. e., the Arabic language which, as I have repeatedly said, had been raised to sanctity, could not remain safe from the vehement attacks of the *Shu'ûbiyyah*.

A number of leading scholars made their utmost to bring down the Arabic language from its sacred throne and to show that non-Arabic languages like Greek, Persian and Indian were far more perfect than Arabic, both as a tool of logical thinking and as a means of expression for poetic sentiments and emotions.

This is indeed an extremely interesting and important phase of the history of Islamic culture. But to go into further details about this will take us too far beyond the scope of this paper.