Francesco Gabrieli

CASUAL REMARKS OF AN ARABIST

The Arabic language has a term, "*musta'rib*" with a long and varied history. In the genealogical schemes of pre-Islamic antiquity, it indicated those tribes in the Peninsula (the northerners, according to the most wide-spread opinion; but there were those who instead, turning the relationship upside-down, designated southerners in this way), who, as opposed to the pure autocthomic Arabs (al-'Arab al-'âriba) were "assimilated" or "assimilating" to the Arabs, in other words "secondary Arabs" or "Arabized." Then, in Moslem Spain, as is known, the term served to designate that part of the Iberian population which remained Christian in religion, but culturally was Arabic, that is "Mozarab." And in modern linguistic usage, *musta'rib* along with *mustashriq* indicate the Orientalist, and more precisely, the Western Arabist: he who takes as object of his studies the Arabs, and in some way tries to become closer and even assimilated to them (according to the prevailing semantic value of the prefix of the tenth verbal form *ista-*, to which in fact the original Arabic participle refers). Common to all the evolution of the term then is the meaning of one who is not really and originally an Arab, but who wants to become one and be considered one, whether by pretending Arab blood or by assimilating Arab culture.

The author of this article is a *musta'rib* in the latter and more modern sense, as are many of his brothers in Europe and America

Translated by Susan Scott Cesaritti.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as well as in the non-Arabic East. Initiated when a child, almost as a game, to Arabic writing and language, he has made of that civilization the principal interest and study of his life, his professional occupation for now almost half a century. Many books and writings given him by Arabic friends carry in the dedication the hyperbolic qualification of *al-mustashriq* (or *al-musta'rib*) *al-kabîr*, for which one could feel flattered if he didn't know well that it is only a fixed formula of Oriental courtesy and emphasis. The bare truth is exactly the opposite of that title of greatness: the "great Arabist," reaching now almost the end of his career, feels in reality very small. This is not at all the traditional declaration of modesty of an *astaghfiru llâh* quite as formal as the hyperbolic praise rejected. It is rather the precise consciousness of the enormous obstacles, along with the individual limits, which block the path of one who, even with the work of a lifetine, wishes to master a language and a culture so distant from our own, both in space and in spirit, as the Arabic, and with an evolution so peculiar and problematic. A really great Arabist from my same country, Carlo Alfonso Nallino, formulated once the Faustian proposition to want to "know all" about the Arabs. Naturally not even he arrived at that point, even though he knew as much as very few do in the West or even in the East. But even one without such an all-eclipsing ambition, who renounces right at the outset to become an expert on the contribution of the Arabs in fields to him foreign and incongenial (law for instance, and the sciences, in which on the other hand Nallino excelled)—even one who restricted his ambition for sure knowledge to more limited even if still vast dominions: the *adab* and the philology, the poetry and the history of the Arabs, even he must conclude, on the threshhold of old age, with the sigh of Faust "die Kunst ist lang, und kurz ist unser Leben"; the eternal sigh of man, I repeat, but which the *musta'rib* (or at least this *musta'rib*) sees justified by particular, specific motives.

The first problem and the first stumbling-block is immediately that of the language. Not in the sense that *elementary* Arabic presents greater difficulties than so many other exotic languages, but for two other and different characteristics: on the one hand, the enormous range of the *'arabiyya* (above all, its oceanic lexicon), in the span that goes from pagan poetry to the con-

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

temporary literary language, passing through the entire millennium of medieval Arabic civilization, in its varieties of poetic, historical, religious, juridic, and scientific language, to the various levels of the *Hochsprache* and of *Mittelarabisch*, and the relative technical vocabularies. Every Arabist understands easily that to which I allude. But the other and even more perplexing problem that an Arabist finds before him, especially in the modern age, is the scission of diglossy, the double register of the written and the spoken language, or rather languages or dialects, even if a certain spoken *koinè* can be found today at the center of the Arabophone area, with sufficient attenuation or at least reciprocal intelligibility of the various dialect characteristics. Beyond this central area, colloquial Arabic, *non intellegitur* even by Arabs of other, distant origin. Recently I happened indeed to hear, with a certain malignant satisfaction, a distinguished Moroccan intellectual, M. Lahbabi, lament his having been present at the projection of a film in Egyptian, in Cairo, without having understood much at all. Without ever having been able to obtain a sure comprehension and use of any dialect (for the reason of never having lived for any length of time in the Orient), I have always felt that I have chosen the best part in devoting myself to the enthusiastic study of the *fasîha*, the literary language of poetry, of religion, of every superior spiritual life of Arabism. But this lacuna in the alive oral communication with Arab speaking people (who are in their turn unable, except for rare exceptions, to use correctly in a direct conversation the literary language, even though perhaps able to write it to perfection) has been and is for me the thorn in the side of all my long intellectual relationship with Arabism.

* * *

Another problem which the Arabist finds himself facing (that is, whoever nears the Arabic world with an interest prevalently linguistic-historical-literary, as well as historical-religious) is that of the inescapable relationship between Arabism and Islam. The pagan prelude of the *Giâhiliyya*, however romantic a fascination it holds for us with its heroic and untamed world, induces us often to ask what could ever have been the role of the Arabs in the history of civilization without Mohammed and Islam.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The manifestations that are left to us of the non-Moslem Arab world, that is, almost exclusively Christian (the Copts of Egypt, the Maronites in Lebanon and other minor Arab-Christian communities in Syria and Mesopotamia) are not such as to give us a high idea of the religious and cultural possibilities of that people, without that great new fact that pushed it suddenly from a wretched life of raids and sterile civil wars to the front row of the stage of history, with a new original physiognomy. The Arabs were, according to a celebrated definition of the Caliph Omar, the raw material (*mâdda*) of the new faith, and in an earlier time its exclusive followers and propagators. Nor is it by chance that just that period of the origins of Islam, when its area of diffusion and that of wholesale Arabism coincided, was the moment of the major political power of the Arabs as such, of the "Arabische Reich" so ably reconstructed by Wellhausen. After the century of the Omayyads, the fate of Arabism and of Islam notoriously parted company, and the Arabs were no longer the hegemonous people in the Islam empire, nor the only carriers and diffusers of the Moslem faith. Its long march in Asia was carried on with other races, with other languages and cultures, even if all marked, through the Sacred Book and the correlative religious-juridical structure, by the Arab language and spirit of early Islam. But the consciousness of a political-social decadence of Arabism is already alive in the centuries of the greatest flowering of Moslem civilization, and it manifests itself in the East in the verses of Mutanabbi (10th century) as well as in the extreme West in Andalusian Arabism, sustained against the Reconquest but at the same time mortified and overwhelmed politically by the crude Berber strength. The surmounting of the Islamized Turks, which constituted the true bulwark of Islam in the resistance to the Crusades, gave the *coup de grâce* to the dying political fortunes of Arabism, and inaugurated that Turkocracy, in the Mediterranean and in Asia Minor, which lasted to the dawn of our century. With the *Nahda* or Arab Renaissance between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the twentieth begins a new story, of an Arabism religiously unchained, or at least less tightly linked to Islam, which moves imperceptibly from the plane of religious values to that of national and racial myths: it is the era of nationalism, the Arabic *qawmiyya* of today, to which we will return later.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Now in this centuries-old union of a people, provided with its own ethnical, linguistic and cultural characteristic, with a great universalistic faith—born in its midst but which soon enough transcended it to an international role—arise a tension and an exchange between giving and taking, from which neither the scholar of Arabism nor that of Islam can subtract himself. If the *Giâhiliyya*, the age of the pagan Arabs, mirrors in the most evident way its innate virtues and defects, its capacities and its limits, Islam cannot but appear to us as an overturning of those values, one which we cannot be surprised if the Arab people at the beginning harshly repudiated.

The contrast of the pagan *virtus* (Arab *muruwwa*) to the *dîn* of Mohammed, analyzed in a celebrated study by Goldziher, is a given fact that can be tempered and shaded further, but not destroyed; to the point that another great historian of the Arabs and of early Islam, Leone Caetani, could sustain that the word of Mohammed was diametrically opposed to all the ideals and values of his own people, and that only with other peoples did it find a congenial field for its reception and development. An extreme and unacceptable formulation this last, for whoever recalls how we have just now remembered that it was from this same moving force of Islam that the Arabs were conducted to their brief supremacy in world history. It is necessary then to admit that the *metànoia* instilled by the Prophet touched or stirred up fundamental chords, dormant until then in the depths of the Arab psyche, atrophied by the superficial and materialistic pagan vision of life, and then made to vibrate by the serious, profound, demonic personality of Mohammed, who revealed to his same people sensibilities and possibilities latent within him, impetuously unfolded in the new spiritual climate which he inaugurated. In the last analysis, early Islam seems to us profoundly Arab, and M. Guidi insisted rightly on the thesis that represents it as an Arab adaptation of monotheism, realized by the compromising genius of Mohammed. But with this recognized, it would be well to add that something of the more authentic Arab genius always escaped the totalitarian grasp of Islam: the *fakhr*, the lofty spirit of individual and tribal affirmation (which in the condemnation of Mohammed became "the pride"—*nakhwa*—of Giâhiliyya) was never completely suffocated by Moslem piety, and flickered even in the saddest

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conditions of decadence and humiliation of the Arab people, feeding the poetry, and by it in turn nourished. The table of ethical values or Arabism (*makârim al-akhlâq*), in this and other points, is not transfused completely in the Moslem ethic, but transcends and escapes it, in a vein that we cannot but call humanistic. The modern uprising, then, of the national sentiment even in its excesses, if on the one hand undoubtedly showing the effects of ideologies and influences from the West, on the other hand continues in our opinion something deeply rooted in the Arab national character, which has coexisted for more than 1,000 years with a different conception of the world and of man (Islam) but not entirely transmuted in it, and has exploded again in our times with uncheckable vigor.

* * *

We have thus arrived at the tangled problems of the present day, the most difficult to come to terms with for whoever makes of his relationship with the object of his study, in our case Arabs and Islam, not a detached experimental observation, but a living commitment. If to judge the Arab past one needs an adequate philological preparation, and a correlative historical orientation, treating the present is a proceeding *per ignes*, and philology and historical vision become entangled in politics and fierce passions. Our own fierce passions, let it be understood, if politics is "present history," as well as the fierce passions of the Arab world, which after the independence attained has not been introduced to a period of prosperous liberty, but rather to a new road of illusions and delusions, of tears and blood. This is the first, fundamental given fact of which one must be convinced in order to understand (and also forgive) many things at times difficult to understand. And above everything else, for a Western *musta'rib* or *mustashriq*, there is the stubborn complex of diffidence and contempt that despite every cordiality of personal relationships the Arab intelligentsia today nourishes precisely for the *istishrâq* or Western Orientalism, to which it arrives in extreme cases at denying from the outset every right and capacity to judge Arabism and Islam, present and past. Without dwelling on other precedents of this kind, it is enough to mention a study in this same journal, by Abdallah Laroui ("Towards a Methodology of Islamic Studies: Islam as Reflected

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by G. von Grunebaum,") where the author of *Idéologie arabe contemporaine*, with impeccable formal courtesy but with a net refusal of method and results, places on trial again the entire work of that late scholar, who was at any rate undoubtedly one of the most refined yet impassioned researchers into classical and modern Islam, and into this latter's efforts toward a "cultural identity." Having made in an earlier time in these pages an apology for Orientalism,[1] we will not stop here to do another for just one representative of it, however eminent and to us personally dear. We will rather limit ourselves to pointing out to Laroui that his most lively ingeniousness is permeated throughout by that European culture regarded by others with so much suspicion and scorn, and that his same damnation of culturalism as an inadequate base and method for an evaluation of Islam, resolves itself, if we have understood rightly, in the necessity for a more rigorous historicism, which is certainly not a revelation or conquest on the part of Arab-Islamic tradition, but is born from the depths of European thought. Anyhow, with Laroui and Anwar Abdel-Malek we are reaching the highest level of the Arab-Islamic polemic against Western Islamistic. With others rather less gifted, the discussion would be on a quite lower level. We do not intend here to descend nor to ascend, but rather to observe and, as we have said earlier, understand, possibly better than we ourselves have been understood.

Let us then ask that our professional *isti'râb* be forgiven or forgotten for a moment, and turn to the Arab world of today with the unbiased eye of an observer aware of the problems that assail East and West alike, that is all of humanity. There is no doubt that the quest for freedom from want and a solution to the social problem are at the bottom of the illness, and even the convulsed unrest that torment modern Arabism. In attempting to solve this problem, no Arab country has been able or willing to enter completely the ideological road of the Soviet Union and its more direct European and Asiatic applications; but whatever the various degrees of approach to that problematic model, all or almost all the various Arab states have lined up in the substantial refusal of the ideals of liberty and democracy (even continuing

[1] See my article, "An Apology for Orientalism," in *Diogenes* No. 50, (Spring 1965), in answer to that of Anwar Abdel-Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis," *Diogenes* No. 44 (Fall 1963).

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to use and abuse the latter term), sacrificing them to other myths and ends: social justice, Arab unity, defense from neocolonialism, an unshakeable common front in the fight against Israel. Everyone is free to evaluate for himself the measure in which these ends have been reached or can be reached in the near future, but it will be fair at least to remember the price paid for that, namely the abandon of that *hurriyya* which is not only freedom from foreign domination or arrogance, but freedom from any tyranny, whether it speaks a foreign or our own native language. It was the privilege and pride of the Italian Risorgimento to have conducted together the fight for the unity, independence and civil liberty of our country, and when the first two were won, never to have forgotten, except in the twenty years of Fascist dictatorship, the supreme value of that third ideal of liberty. The Arab Risorgimento as well, in its 19th century roots, united those three ideals, but in its tormented 20th century realization it has substantially let fall that one which to a modern conscience is perhaps the most precious. Here we know very well the ironies, from both Eastern and Western sources, on the inadaptability to certain economic and social conditions of the parliamentary institutions and of "English-style" liberalism. But whatever are the undeniable inconveniences and difficulties in practical application of these institutions (Cavour used to say that he preferred the worst of Chambers to the best of antechambers: of absolute monarchs, we mean, or sultans or *za'îms* or whatever they may be...), one thing is sure and should be repeated here: in all the modern world, there is no one example of the preservation of a people's civil liberties except in a multi-party, representative system: intending here for "liberty" not that of dying of hunger, but liberty from the nightmare of fear, from the totalitarian grasp of the police state, with its jails, tortures and gallows. A liberty, it is true, of which few Arabs today, to judge from outward appearances, seem to feel the need, but the desire and regret for which, we believe, are still alive in the hearts of the best, although almost suffocated by that same fear. Having thus repeated frankly our *delenda Carthago*,[2] not said certainly to

[2] I have already developed these ideas in my book *Il Risorgimento arabo*, Torino, 1958, and in the booklet *Unità e divisione nel mondo arabo*, Roma, 1968. These writings were, just for those motives, ill received in certain Arab circles and by their totalitarian patrons on the level of international politics.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reconciliate the sympathies of official Arabism, we shall pass immediately on to other problems of the contemporary Arab world, less burning but not less urgent, and in some manner related to the one just discussed.

We do not believe that the pan-Arab ideal, which as a friend of the Arabs and a modest Arabist we view certainly with sympathetic eyes, has made or is about to make great progress in the political sphere since the end of the second world war when, with the foundation of the Arab League, it seemed to enter into a phase of near-realization. Notwithstanding this high ideal, sectorial differences have cut too deeply into the complex of the Arab nation to be easily surmounted; and the groupings and unions continually proposed and attempted have not resisted up to now either the egoism of the men and groups at the top, or the objective needs of the individual states. A charismatic leader, who for a moment seemed able to draw after him his own and neighboring peoples on the road to unity, has gone without leaving behind him any follower of equal prestige capable of succeeding his figure or his myth. The surest steps to inter-Arab unity, or at least to close collaboration, we believe, are yet realizable on the ground of culture, in the struggle for linguistic Arabization (*ta'rîb*) in the diffusion of education and knowledge, which goes hand in hand with the recovery of the longed-for *'arabiyya*, and the shortening of the distances between it and the various dialects. The day should come when a Moroccan intellectual would not feel ill at ease watching a movie in Cairo, nor his sovereign forced to speak French or English with an eastern Arab princess. Arab cultural unity, as opposed to political, seems a reachable goal, at least by approximation, in the course of a couple of generations.

Another potent element of unity, it is almost superfluous to mention, is religion, however much the universalism of medieval Islam has yielded its place to a sense of nationality in the self-awareness of modern Arabism. But even admitting this displacement, let us not underestimate at all the surviving cohesive of the faith which the Arabs have given to so much of the world, and which numerically at least is in continuous increase and expansion. The Islam of Abu Dharr al-Ghifâri seemed to anticipate modern socialism, that of Khâlid ibn al-Walîd and of 'Oqba ibn Nâfi' the Arab nationalism of today. The aversion

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the atheist, capitalist, neo-colonial West seems able to reconcile the old religious principle to the new racist and nationalist one. Even where Islam does not cut more deeply into individual consciences, it is justly felt as a substantial part of the fatherland tradition, the word of life spouted and diffused among the Arabs even before being proclaimed to and imposed on the world. Only the crudeness of an old-fashioned anti-religious propaganda can yet illude itself that it can place the "obscurantist religion" of the Prophet (like that of Jesus Christ) against the lights of rationalism and Marxism; and however poorly the trinominal Nationalism-Islam-Socialism can resist a more profound critical analysis, it still keeps its hold on the thought and action of the ruling classes of the contemporary Arab world.

* * *

What is, what can be the function of the intellectual in such a world? We have read the article by J. P. Charnay, "The Arab Intellectual between Power and Culture," full of acute observations, even if a bit cryptic to one not initiated into the language of contemporary sociology. In the terms of a non-initiate, we would like to take up again some points of that discussion, calling forth recent and not-so-recent experiences. Up to the 1950's, that is more or less up to the end of the second world war and the almost total independence of Arabism, the problem of the Arab intellectual, in policy united to all his fellow countrymen in auguring and hurrying that redemption, was to reconcile the affection for the fatherland cultural tradition with a reception of European culture and civilization: that Europe which, like Peleus' lance, healed the wounds it itself inflicted, lifting those same peoples it had plundered and colonized to wider spiritual horizons, and primarily to a more conscious and irresistible need for freedom. In this position of refusal of a colonialist engulfment and yet of appreciation and assimilation of the intellectual goods which contact with the West brought, were, one could say, all the leaders of the Arab intelligentsia of the first half of this century, from Taha Husein to 'Aqqâd, from Salâma Musa to Kurd Ali, to Shekîb Arslân and other representatives of contemporary *Nahda*. Only in the last decades has this position of full intellectual opening toward the West at the

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press

same time that its political domination was refused been modified, placing in question at times the validity of Western culture itself; and some positions advanced by the "Occidentalists" just mentioned have appeared, perhaps even to their own champions, needy of revision. The Arab *nouvelle vague*, of which a Laroui, a Lahbabi, an Anwar Abdel-Malek can seem to be representatives, continues, yes, still to feed on European thought, but no longer seems to accept the net dichotomy between it and Oriental tradition that the older generation took for granted: and a Westerner could even rejoice at this, seeing that with this Arab élite the principle that "there is no East or West" has reached maturity. By now there is one culture, one intellectual and moral effort for facing the common, grave problem weighing down. Other attitudes of this same intelligentsia however leave one perplexed, when it seems to deny to the West (on a much vaster scale than to suspect Orientalists alone!) the capacity to furnish directive criteria of historical interpretation to Eastern civilizations and their crises of today. In our humble opinion, neither an Ibn al-Muqaffa' nor an al-Fârâbî nor even Ibn Khaldûn himself can serve today as guiding stars for the difficult orientation of modern Arab society, even though remaining for it dear and precious values, milestones on its long, painful and at times glorious march. But the necessity of an *Auseinandersetzung* with idealism, Marxism, existentialism, in short of all the most vital currents of modern spirituality, that like it or not have had their sources and roots in the West, requires from an Arab intellectual a frank acknowledgement. To remain Arabs to the marrow, but to rise together by a spiritual openness to being citizens of the world, would be our deepest ambition, if we were in the shoes of a modern Arab intellectual. From a poor *musta'rib* one can ask no more, and it is already recklessness to have advanced that simple and arduous proposition. May this be at least a witness of affection and goodwill toward a people to whose study we have dedicated a lifetime: *wa li-kulli mri'in mâ nawâ.*

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108301 Published online by Cambridge University Press