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Abstract. The overt aim of this essay is to offer an interpretation of Muhammad ‘Awfi’s preface to his chronicle or biographical dictionary completed in 1221 C.E. of Persian language poets, the earliest instance of this genre of chronicle in Persian. This interpretation foregrounds the simultaneously archival and theoretical importance of this preface by arguing that it characterizes the lacks in any archive of historical documents as the effects of an epistemic finitude inscribed into the human condition rather than as accidental gaps that might ideally be filled. By such a characterization, ‘Awfi not only anticipates the epistemic modesty characteristic of Persian chronicles in this genre for nearly half a millennium following him; he also anticipates and problematizes an insight we today owe to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method,* namely that “temporal distance” from a text’s empirical origin can facilitate rather than impede its understanding.

Finitude and the Authorship of Fiction: Muhammad ‘Awfī’s Preface to his Chronicle, *Lubāb al-albāb* (*The Piths of Intellects*)[1]

(for Shamsur Rahman Faruqi)

In 1221 C.E Muhammad ‘Awfi, a Central Asian chronicler and poet in the court of the Ghurid vassal Sultan Nāsir al-din Qabāja in Occh, completed what he declared was the first biographical dictionary of Persian language poets, dedicating it to the sultan’s vizier ‘Ain ul-mulk malik ul-vuzarā. As this genre of chronicle had had a longer pre-history in Arabic where it was termed *tabaqāt,* ‘Awfi denominated his text a *tabaqāt* too although it would come, in later centuries, to be termed a *tazkirah* in Persian. To his composition he added an introduction followed by four chapters, respectively, on the excellence of poetry and its practice, the etymological origin of the word “poetry” (*shi’r*), the significance of who first spoke poetry in general, and who first spoke poetry in Persian. The following essay interprets these prefatory texts of the self-consciously earliest instance of what would come to be a major genre of Persian literary historical memory. The main contention in this essay will be that this group of prefatory texts serves to justify the lacks in any archive of historical documents, not by characterizing them as accidental gaps that

[1] Muhammad ‘Awfi, *Lubāb al-albāb*, ed. Said Nafisi (Tehran: Chap-i Ittihad, 1914). ‘Awfi’s text constitutes what is very likely the earliest *taẕkirah* or biographical dictionary of Persian poets. He composed it in 1221 C.E. in Ochh in the province of Sind (in present day Pakistan) in the court of Nāsir al-din Qabāja and dedicated it to his vizier, ‘Ain-ul mulk fakhr al-din al-husain bin sharaf ul-mulk rāzi al-din abi bakr-al ash’ari. I thank Sunil Sharma of Boston University for providing me with a copy of this text. All translations, unless otherwise specified, are mine.

might ideally be filled, but as effects of an epistemic finitude intrinsic to the human condition. As we hope to show, this account of the limits intrinsic to all human knowing forms a joint frame of reference for the recounted origins of poetry as well as of chronicle; for literary discourses as also discourses addressed to the past[2]. Thus any study of this frame of reference would necessarily constitute an account of the anthropology shared by historical and literary discourses in medieval Persian. If an elucidation of this anthropology is valuable to us today, it is because of the break methods of the humanities have been making with the positivism we inherit from nineteenth century Europe. Although such positivism was then devised for "the human sciences" on the model of those of the "natural sciences", it was rooted through its presupposed ideal of an exhaustive recovery of the documentary sources of the human past in the humanist voluntarism

[2] Although I use "chronicle" in Hayden White's sense, distinguishing it like him from "story", 'Awfi allows us to read his treatment of his "chronicle" as a synecdoche for all discourses addressed to the past. It should suffice for the purposes of this essay to observe that whereas a chronicle lists its events as a non-narrative series, a story narrativizes its events. "Historical *stories* trace the sequences of events that lead from inaugurations to (provisional) terminations of social and cultural processes in a way that *chronicles* are not required to do. Chronicles are, strictly speaking, open-ended. In principle, they have no *inaugurations*; they simply "begin" when the chronicler starts recording events". And "In a chronicle an event is simply 'there' as an element of the series; it does not 'function' as a story-element". Hayden White, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 6-7.

exalted by the Renaissance[3]. If humans were kept from a perfect mastery of their pasts, it was only because of the historical accidents affecting the documents mediating attainment to such mastery. Documentary lacks could ideally be supplied and the veil of linguistic ambiguities ideally be rent to reveal a truth independent of how it was formulated. Among the major intellectual challenges to such humanist positivism have been narratology and Nietzsche's genealogical method. Where narratology exposes the inseparability of a narration's truth from its linguistic formulation, Nietzschean genealogy alerts us to the exclusions through or costs at which truth-claims come to be dominant. Whereas the former seeks to expose the partial constitution of truth by its very telling, the latter aims to expose the interests motivating and belying the proclaimed neutrality of knowledge and the losses necessary for such knowledge to be regarded as normative. As attitudes aiming to expose the illocutionary aspects of locutionary language and of the inscriptions of value into ostensibly value-free knowledge, both developments have come to inform interpretative methods in the humanities as much as they

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[3] In this sense, the heroism of "the heroic age of the positivist philology" that, according to Sheldon Pollock, motivated Ulrich von Williamowitz-Mollendorf's scholarly or *Wissenschaft* based attack on Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and Nietzsche's own opposed concern with *Bildung* may be seen as different applications of a humanist faith in self-formation whose origins lay in the European Renaissance. 'Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World' in *Critical Inquiry, Summer 2009, Volume 35 Issue 4*. For an account of the emergence of this positivism in the contemporary humanities, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* translators Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2006), 1-37.

have themselves been objects of inquiry in these disciplines[4]. However, methodological appropriations of narratological or genealogical methods do not put into question these methods themselves or their particular pre-histories. And when these methods have come to be thematized as topics in themselves, their intellectual genealogies have mostly been revealed to lie within Europe[5]. Not that the European origins of most of our current methods in the humanities is inherently problematic, but that we rarely seek in non-European intellectual traditions alternative models of critique by which to put into question the methodological hegemony of European methods of inquiry in the humanities. By interpreting the anthropology implicit in Muhammad 'Awfi's preface to the earliest chronicle of Persian poets, this essay hopes to reveal in a text from

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[4] For a methodological use of narratology in history, see Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995). For a famous use of Nietzschean genealogy, see Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*: *Volume One: an Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1978).

[5] Among many important pre-histories of the methods used in the contemporary humanities that situate themselves exclusively within European textual traditions, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1994); and Jean Joseph-Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1990). The latter work confines itself to the relations between structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis. For a literary critical use of psychoanalysis that thematizes its origins in European Romanticism, see Kenneth Scott Calhoon, *Fatherland: Novalis, Freud and the Discipline of Romance*; Wayne State University Press 1992.

a medieval Muslim literary culture anticipations of the narratological and genealogical critiques of positivism. Without suggesting that ‘Awfi shared the idiom of modern narratology or our modern and specifically Nietzschean method, we will nonetheless reveal in his text and its implicit anthropology insights into how a story’s telling conditions the truth of what is told; and how it is only by deciding on how well kinds of knowledge serve particular human purposes that we can know the world at all. Without implying that ‘Awfi’s text was widely known and cited through subsequent centuries, this essay will also demonstrate in passing the persistence of its anthropological postulates for over half a millennium in the Persian literary worlds of Iran, Central Asia and India[6].

Performing poetry as a failed mimesis of nature

The opening passages of ‘Awfi’s preface, following his praise of the prophet Muhammad, present a scene that relates ‘Awfi’s authorship of the following biographical dictionary to the blossoming of spring flowers:

> The writer of these chapters and speaker of these texts, Muhammad Muhammad-i ‘Awfi, says that the display of these bridal virgins and the blooming of these lights of Venus in the meadow of the subtleties of poetry [*ash'ar̄*] occurred in the season of spring. The thought-painter [*naqsh-band-i fikrat*] displayed [*chehra migushad̄*]

[6] The manuscript deposits of ‘Awfi’s text suggest that until Sai’d Nafisi came to edit and publish it in 1914, it was mainly if not exclusively known in South Asia where it was originally composed. In his philological account of the Persian language, *Musmir*, the mid eighteenth century literary critic and lexicographer of Delhi, Siraj̄ al-din ‘Ali Khan̄-i Arzu briefly cites ‘Awfi’s account of the origin of the earliest poetry. Siraj̄ al-din ‘Ali Khan̄-i Arzu, *Musmir*, ed. Rehana Khatun (Karachi: The Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1991), 17-21.

> these subtle forms in the workshop of nature [*kārgāh-i tabi'at*] when the prince of travelers and the king of stars [i.e. the sun] had sprung into the litter of Aries and the eastern breeze [*sabā*], that deft painter, had fallen to work without the aid of a reed-pen and compasses and had expressed [*be izhār mirasānid*] rare figures [*nigār-hā-yi shagarf*] without the assistance of vermilion and verdigris [ink] (1).

'Awfi opens this passage by setting the coming into being, the "display" and "blooming" of the flower-like texts constituent of his chronicle, in spring. That the sun was in "the litter of Aries" and the eastern breeze was at work signify, by convention, the concomitant coming into being of real flowers, flowers independent of authorial consciousness. What relation does this vernal setting signal between the literary flowers of his text and their non-literary natural originals? We find indications of the nature of this relation in the description of the eastern breeze that, implicitly unlike his own writing, had "fallen to work *without the aid of a reed-pen and compasses* and had expressed rare figures *without the assistance of vermilion and verdigris* [ink]" (my italics). Whereas he creates the texts he is prefacing with writing technology, nature – or an element of its "workshop" – creates its own texts without such technology. 'Awfi thus inaugurates a lengthy asymmetry between two allegorically similar orders of creation, the human creation of characters whose mode of being is linguistic-poetic and the natural creation of actors who exist independently of human language. Specifically, these characters are the Rose and the Nightingale, two stock allegorical character-representatives for the beloved and the lover respectively from the diegetic world of the ghazal, a genre of Persian love lyric: "By spring-rain and the effects of the sun's power was brilliant red Rose set into in the earth's mine. Upon the lectern of the branches Nightingale the preacher cried out variously his praise of the Lord of the

Happy Conjunction and the command of the Sultan-like ‘Ain al-mulk malik al-vuzarā [that is, ‘Awfi’s vizier-patron]. Hearts leapt in joy and nightingales sang” (1). We speak of an asymmetry because the narrator perceives that Rose and Nightingale do not act in ways that conform to their stock roles in the ghazal. Appearing to infantilize himself by characterizing himself as a “language learner” [*zabandān*], ‘Awfi writes:

> The thought of the language learner, without verbal formulation, fell deeply into conversation with Rose and Nightingale, asking, ‘O Rose, from which palace-garden are you? And O Nightingale, what chanticleer are you? O Rose, if you are the beloved, then why does the Nightingale beseech and plead like faithless beloveds? And O Nightingale, if you are the lover, then why does Rose rend its skirts like forlorn lovers?

Rose and Nightingale confusingly seem to share traits when they should, according to the poetic conventions the narrator judges them by, be distinct and opposed. Furthermore, they seem to bear physical traits in excess of their conventional poetic roles, traits that he cannot read and categorize by convention. He thus urges them to (re)assume those roles:

> O Rose, what burden afflicts you that you have thus lit the world’s meadow and have rent your skirts like the dawn? Are you lamenting life’s brevity? Why do you bear so many flakes of gold in your heart? Are you complaining of your torn skirts? Why have you released so many sharp needles of thorn for nothing? This is the time for your honor [*vaqt-i ābru-yi to’st*]. See to it that Nightingale labors

> [*dar an̄ kush ke ab̄i bar ru-yi bulbul b az̄ ar̄i*]. This is the period of your beauty. Struggle, that you might spend this period living with him (2).

‘Awfi here cites in his prose what compendia of rhetorical tropes conventionally prescribed for poetry or verse – in the genre of the *qasida* or purposive panegyric in particular – as one of the items of *balag̅hat*, eloquent discourse or apposite literary speech – namely, the trope of “astonishment” (*ta’jjub*). This is how Muhammad ‘Umar Rāduyāni describes this trope in his *Tarjuman̄ al-balag̅ha* (*The Translator of Eloquence*, circa 1106 C.E), the earliest extant manual of such tropes in Persian: “Chapter on Astonishment [*Fasl fi al-ta’jjub*]: one of the items of apposite discourse [*balag̅hat*] is that wherein the poet estranges his speech from familiar usage and assigns a strange sense to it; or makes a thing rare where it is known to be familiar and present…or determines a thing without cause and so forth in an astonishing manner”[7]. This account presupposes an awareness of what it is conventional in order to estrange or transgress convention. ‘Awfi performs such an estrangement from convention in confounding the conventionally assumed traits of the Rose and the Nightingale and expressing astonishment at this. And if literature, as we will see, originates in an astonished retreat from nature it is a performed convention of astonishment. “Performativity”, then, is not the prerogative of a humanist voluntarism and sovereign will but a “citationality”, in Judith Butler’s corrective

[7] Muhammad ‘Umar al-Rāduyāni, *Tarjuman̄ al-balag̅ha* (Tehran: Chapkhana-yi Muhammad Ali Fardin, 1920), 59-60.

formulation[8]. The agency in 'Awfi's performative citation of a trope familiar enough for Rādūyānī to have included an account of it in his influential compendium of tropes lies in his citing for his distinct purpose – namely an account of the psychological origin of poetic fiction in astonishment – a trope that long preceded him. Underscoring our recognition that performativity here is citationality is that he deploys this conventionally poetic trope in his prose.

In keeping with this performance of the trope of astonishment, then, a burgeoning of empirical detail complicates the author's task of coordinating such detail with conventionally established meanings. Rose replies, "Pay no heed to my stolen laughter for I have much weeping ahead of me. I may have had my way in dishonoring fire [*āb-i ātash bebordam*] these few days in the meadow but finally in the vase's prison fire will dishonor me [*ātash ābam khwāhad bord*]". The tableau-like and temporally neutral scene of lover and beloved that constitutes the diegetic world of the ghazal now appears susceptible to a time of seasonal decay, its spring-time eroticism now yielding in the following passage to the wilting of autumn, a transformation conceived in terms of a humoral imbalance in this self-sufficient natural economy, an annual disease proper to its time:

> On its separation from the almond [tree's] beauty [a symbol for the almond-eyed beloved], the meadow's throat grows bitterer than the mouths of those afflicted with an excess of yellow bile. Parting from the violet, the garden's face grows darker than that of those with an excess of black bile. The dyers of the garden who always used azure and verdigris now lay out dying coals. The yellow-faced

[8] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge 1993), 95.

> ones of the garden, once ruddy from wine, fall victim to bilious jaundice. Nature's oculist, overturning the tulip's mortar, [*kuhal̄-i tabi'at hav̄in-i lal̄ih ra¯sar zir konad*] squanders on dust the kohl of light that it had made for the eye of the narcissus (3).

The author's attempt to co-ordinate natural signs with conventional meanings, an attempt that had assumed a temporally neutral sign-system, remains frustrated by this natural transformation that merely modifies a spring-time semiotic excess into an autumnal excess. He responds by affirming this frustrating transformation as a cosmologically proper one, offering a couplet to underscore this affirmation with rhetorical concision: "A couplet: This is spring's imprint [*naqsh*], it will not last long. / That is the lord's state, it will last forever". Suggesting that he has been staging his own frustration, this affirmation finds corroboration in the following naturalistic observation: "Pooled water, steeped in the color of fire from the sun's rays and melting under fire's heat, *has no origin*. Under the fire's mirror, the water of the flower's proper color…[missing text]" (my italics). This observation and the half available one following it affirm cosmic changes and retrospectively imply the propriety of the author's creaturely confusion at the semiotic excess of the created world; an excess that is now affirmed as properly incomprehensible in the totality of its cyclical ("has no origin") variations. Furthermore, this variation is itself a sign referred to the sign it opposes, namely the unvarying world of "the lord's state" that "will last forever".

If 'Awfi, as we said, was performing his own astonished humbling at nature by citing a prior or received trope of astonishment, he is no less derivative in his subsequent affirmation of authorial and human creaturehood. We might consider another iteration of this affirmation in passing: in

his prelude to his *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings, circa 1000 C.E) Ab'ul Qasim Firdusi begins by briefly characterizing god in familiar terms as the arch-creator of the cosmos and the being chiefly responsible for its planetary transformations ("The lord of Saturn and the turning sky \ Igniter of the moon, Venus and the sun") but then addresses the inaccessibility to human senses of such divinity – and thus its ineffability[9]. Firdusi:

> You will not see the creator with your eyes \ Do not strain them. \ Nor will thought reach him \ For he is beyond name and place…If wisdom [*khirad*] chooses literature [*sukhan*] perpetually \ It chooses only that which it sees perpetually. \ Nobody can praise him as he is. \ Prepare then to serve him…Confess his being then \ And be done with vain talk…Beyond this veil is no place for words [*sukhan*]. \ Thought [*andishah*] can address nothing but created being [*hasti*] (7).

To be, Firdusi seems to imply, is to be somewhere in time and space. And to address to any being a discourse adequate to it is to address what one "sees perpetually" because it is not "beyond name and place" like the divine creator. A discourse addressed to this creator must begin by declaring its intrinsic inadequacy to its object and content itself with the limited referential scope of language that can only address "created being". By this expansive gesture that takes in all human meaning-making, he subordinates human creativity – through the specific case of his own linguistic creativity – to divine, and authorizes his own poetic creativity by characterizing it as a discourse addressed to "created being" alone. For Firdusi's pithy treatment

[9] Abul Qasim Firdusi, *Shahnama-yi Firdusi* (Tehran: Talayah, 2005).

of the mystery of god's being, 'Awfi substitutes and stages the changes of the ambient and created world as divinely ordained if barely understood by humans. For the ineffability Firdusi submits the human senses to, 'Awfi substitutes a burgeoning polysemy that human senses cannot cope with. Both however share a de-limitation of literature's truth-claims to human sociality and especially to a particular and most elaborate formation of it, namely the political state. This affirmation, following upon creaturely frustration, inaugurates Firdusi's account of the succession of kings who are metonyms of the states of Greater Iran. And it is in this very domain of creaturehood, the systematicity of whose variations humans only partially comprehend, that 'Awfi then situates the Muslim sovereign, his vizier and their state by reference to which he authorizes his compilation of poems.

Underlying this asymmetry between nature's cyclical time of seasons and the fixed tableaux and ideal persistence of its imitation by humans in literature is a distinction between two kinds of immortality, a distinction that frames classical Persian literature and may be of Greek derivation[10]. Whereas individual animals, birds and plants were able to redeem their mortality by

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[10] If Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* offers, without intending to, a remarkably precise formulation of this medieval Persian distinction between two kinds of immortality, it is not so much because of a trans-cultural historical coincidence as because of the historically attested assimilation of Greek ideas into the Muslim world. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998), 18-19. The definitive treatment of this assimilation remains Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: the Greco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998).

their acts of procreation that ensured the immortality of the species, human individuals could not hope for such redemption, being unique. Incumbent on the human individual was redemption by a great deed. Such a deed assumed the notion of a public that, long after the individual's death, continued to share the ideal animating it, thus ensuring him immortality by collective remembrance. Among the ideals of deeds that animated the public was that of a deed of poetry. Thus does Firdusi declare in his *Shāhnāma*, implicitly contrasting the immortality of his verbal creation with its mortal and vegetal model: "Never hence will I die, for I am alive / Having sown the seeds of poetry [*sukhan*]". And thus, too, does Salmān-i Sāvuji (d. 1376) in his *masnavi* (a genre of narrative poetry in mono-rhyming couplets) *Firāqnāma* (Tale of Separation) urge his son to a great deed on his own model, contrasting spring's rebirth that follows upon autumn's dying with the finality of a human life: "Youth and old age are spring and autumn each / Not the autumn that has spring in its wake"[11]. But the text under consideration happens to be a genre of chronicle, a biographical dictionary of Persian poets rather than a work of poetry by 'Awfi himself. What then does 'Awfi accomplish by performing or citing the psychological origin of poetry in a failed poetic mimesis of nature's cycle of seasons?

The anthropological basis of a genealogy of poetry

Our contention is that this staging, taking the form as we saw of a deployment in prose of the poetic trope of astonishment and a retreat from nature's bewildering text, implicitly constitutes an assertion of the creaturely limits to human knowledge. And furthermore that such an assertion serves the purposes of an author explicitly conscious of being the earliest chronicler of Persian

[11] Salmān Sāvuji, *Kolliyāt-i Salmān-i Sāvuji* (Tehran: Kitab-forushi-yi zavvar, 1961), 469-97.

poets by inscribing into the human condition itself the origin of any lacks in his archive of documents. Today, we might speak of such a gesture as a "critique" in the Kantian sense of a delimitation of the claims of human reason. In 'Awfi's own literary culture this self-assertion of finitude as a condition for the authorship of fiction signals the membership of his text in the discourses and culture of *adab*. As it would exceed the aims of this essay to elucidate the many meanings of this ancient Perso-Arab term, we will content ourselves with this adumbration of its axial sense from Lālā Tek Chand Bahār's famous dictionary of Persian literary terms, *Bahār-i 'ajam* (*The Springtime of the Persian East*, 1739 C.E.): "*Adab*: to keep in view or bear in mind the limit of each thing. It is a metaphor that means 'a desirable method or mode' and is used to with the words 'to do' and 'to give' and 'to receive', the latter with the sense of 'to receive a reprimand'". And since this gloss presupposes an understanding of the word "limit" (*hadd*), here is Bahar's gloss on "limit": "direction and side...a kind of theological punishment [*siyāsat-i shar'i*] in which sense it is used with the words 'to strike' and 'to receive'; and with the word 'to acquire' was a metaphor for 'attaining perfection'"[12]. Reading these two mutually implicated glosses together, we might gloss *adab* as *a proceeding towards perfection with a continually corrected sense of limit, whether such correction was self-applied or received from another.*

Like his contemporary literary theorists and chroniclers, 'Awfi assumes a theocentric world in which only god was free of lack and limit. And of all of god's limited creatures only humans strove to perfect themselves, being distinguished by the capacity for speech that, in its ideal deployment, attested to the possession and dominance of reason or "the rational soul". The

[12] Lala Tek Chand Bahar, *Bahar-i 'ajam* (Delhi: Matba-i sirajī sa'dat'ali khan, 1916).

various demonstrations of human perfectibility by reasoned speech were always accompanied by equally various assertions of self-abasement in the face of god and the prophet Muhammad. ‘Awfi’s particular inflection of this familiar Aristotelian anthropology for the purposes of such self-abasement takes an ambivalent form. That is, his account, contained in a chapter entitled ‘On the etymological meaning of poetry [*shi’r*], seems to exalt poetry as the best of all canonical knowledges but does so only by basing such a judgment on a perspectivalism and private evaluation that tacitly admits the possibility of error. It is with reference to this chapter that we will justify our opening contention that ‘Awfi anticipates modern understandings of how private interests in public knowledges determine their normativity. But before we attend to his particular citation of the topos of poetic humility, let us briefly expose its resemblance to another version of it in the opening passages of Amir Khusrow of Delhi’s preface to his third collection of poems, *Divān-i ghurrat al-kamāl* (The Divān of the New Moon of Perfection, 1298 C.E.) In speaking of the superiority of human speech as an attribute distinguishing humans from animals – a ubiquitous premise and topos in classical Persian and pre-colonial Urdu literature – Khusrow says the “superiority of human speech derives from the page of the creator who illuminated the principle\ origin\ beginning [*mabda’*] of the book of humanity with *the comparison of the implication* [*tashbih-i kināya*] of ‘He created man after his own image’” (my italics)[13]. In

[13] Amir Khusrow-i Dehlavi, *Dibācha-yi divān-i ghurrat al-kamāl*, ed. Sayyid Vazir al-Hasan ‘Abidi (Lahore: Matba-i ‘aliya, 1975), 8. ‘He created man after His own image’ is a statement attributed to the prophet Muhammad and much cited by mystics and poets alike as a justification for attending to the human form and its parts. Such form – designated by the Perso-Arabic word

speaking to each other, humans felicitously confirm their inner possession of "the rational soul" (*nafs-i naṯiqa*), attesting by their controlled verbal articulation to the mastery of the rational soul over "the animal soul" (*nafs-i hayvāni*). But in doing so, they speak in the image of god who, as Khusrow quotes, "created man after his own image". But lest such speaking in the image of the divine be understood to close the distance between god and the human, Khusrow doubly distances this famous pronouncement attributed to the prophet Muhammad by calling it "the comparison of an implication". Like his contemporary Amir Khusrow, 'Awfi invokes a topos of humility to preserve the affirmed subordination of creatures to the creator, of man, the noblest of creatures, to god his creator, and to the prophet Muhammad, the best of men, as well as to his companions. This need stems from the procedure of argumentation both thinkers employ in analogizing human and divine creativity. Formalized, this procedure could be formulated thus: if a human author creates poetry as god creates the human world, then is human literary creativity of the same order of potency as divine? Does human poetic utterance belong to the same order of discourse as the prophet Muhammad's utterances? Rather than being a purely theological problem, this suggestion threatened the resource of normativity by which poets authorized their practice of poetry inasmuch as they bestowed normativity on poetry by insisting on its non-

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surat – referred both to the human body as well as to the bodies of linguistic signs generated by humans, both being understood as divinely encrypted with meaning. For a typical Sufi instance of such a justificatory use of this prophetic pronouncement, see Hamid Ibn Fazlullah Jamali (d. 1535/36), *Mirāt al-ma'ni=The Mirror of Meanings: a parallel English-Persian text*, trans. A.A. Seyed-Gohrab (California: Mazda Publishers, 2002), 36.

identity with divine creativity whose discursive form it nonetheless shared. ‘Awfi similarly strikes an attitude of creaturely humility at the beginning of his text by staging, as we saw, his own confusion at a natural and divinely ordained creative excess that overwhelmed and negatively defined his conception of the literary as a limited fiction of nature, as a kind of mimesis that operated by simplifying and configuring into unvarying tableaux isolated elements (Rose and Nightingale) of a more complex and varying cycle of transformations. Not that fiction was thereby false, but that its truth-claims applied only to the human world. Let us recall that this mimesis entailed assigning to signs (the flower and the nightingale) a determinacy and fixity they did not possess in the nature that contained their original referents. Such determination and fixing entailed a singling out of marks on beings that permitted them to be recognized and deployed as signs. It thus entailed by implication a disregard of proximate signs, a relegation of ambient signification to the status of a semiotically neutral margin that permitted the relevant mark to stand out and be read. Roses had to be read so as to yield the abstraction of the character Rose and nightingales the abstraction of the character Nightingale. But this operation was beholden to nature that could at any moment overwhelm it by varying its complex of signs. As indeed it does already at the opening of ‘Awfi’s text. He tells us that he composed his text in spring. He was fortunate to encounter nature’s originals for his allegorical characters in the season of spring when they still bore signs that he could recognize from formal literary conventions. But the vast seasonal variation into autumn that comes upon the scene only succeeds by degrees an already changing scene of springtime health and fertility, a variation that causes Rose and Nightingale to reveal signs on their thus far partly legible bodies that the author

cannot comprehend in their totality. If nature was a book like the one 'Awfi prefaces, it was unlike any book of human invention in that its human readers could not determine the semiotically neutral margins that supported and conferred legibility on its signs; could not determine such paratexts as 'Awfi himself is providing to orient the act of reading; and could not coordinate its temporality of seasons with that of literary conventions. Saturated with meaning, nature's polysemy could only evoke confusion and then humble wonder, furnishing infinite models for finite creaturely creativity.

In his chapter 'On the etymological meaning of poetry', then, 'Awfi argues that each genus of beings is named after the best species in it. The character of such a species as the "best" is determined by its value for humans. Thus, since jewels [*jowhar*] are the best of stones and minerals because the life of "the great and the noble" depends on them, so the essence of a thing is denominated its 'jewel' [*jowhar*]. Analogously, since poetry is the best of knowledges it is equated with all knowledge, and the poet is equated with scholars.

> It must be known that 'poetry' [*shi'r*] means knowledge [*'ilm*], that is, intelligence [*dānish*]. That is, intelligence by which the intelligent comprehend [*fahm*] a thing and by which the comprehension [*idrāk*] of this class [of intelligent persons] grows comprehensive. 'Poet' means he who knows [*'ālim*]; that is, an intelligent person [*dānā*] who comprehends a subtle meaning the thought of which shows subtle plays of ideas beneath the mind's curtain [*zir-i pardah-yi zamir khayāl-bāzi-hā-yi latif namāyad*]. Knowledge has a general meaning and poetry a specific one. For it is not possible to call every such person who comprehends a thing and understands a fine meaning a poet, and the application of such a word to him would be incorrect. Excepting when a thing is the best [*fāziltar*] of its species [*nou'*] and, distinguished by being highly valued [*ziyādat-i*

> *sharaf*] and the name of this species [*nou'*] is assigned to the genus [*jins*]…Thus, to poetry that is the most excellent of the species of knowledges [*shariftarin anwaʾ-i fazl*] and signifies the water of eternal life that, after the being's death, [*fawat̄-i zat̄*] is cause for the perpetuity of its name that is a simulation of mortal life, they attributed the generality of this noun [*mutlaq-i in ism badu dad̄and*] and considered it a preface to the glories of this species (16).

'Awfi assigns to the etymological derivation of poetry an axial meaning of comprehension. 'Awfi accounts for poetry as the effect of an ability to include difference within knowledge. Within the connotative range of 'Awfi's word for poetry – *shi'r* – is the word for discernment – *shu'ur* – that designates discernment or the human ability to make out difference. This ability results in the knowledge that is poetry, knowledge of differences, of rank. According to 'Awfi's exposition of genus, such poetic knowledge that is the best of knowledges and is thus a name for all knowledges or the genus of all knowledges, includes "subtle meanings" or differences within itself. The non-poetic differences made by discernment are secondary to the primary difference it makes out or discerns – poetry. Such non-poetic differences comprise relations internal to poetry. Poetry itself, the knowledge of all human knowledges, the best of them as well as inclusive of them all, relates externally to god's knowledge alone. In thus including all human knowledge within the knowledge that is poetry, 'Awfi makes on poetry's behalf an inclusionary gesture that he shares with Khusrow.

And yet, like Khusrow, he subordinates this master-knowledge to the inscrutable and greater knowledge that god alone possesses, a subordination already implicit because of his opening affirmation of his creaturely confusion in the face of the semiotic excess of god's nature. At this

stage of this text, ‘Awfi re-iterates that subordination by arguing that a human decision as to the value for itself of a species of beings determines that the name of that species be applied to the genus of all such species: “To poetry that is the most excellent of the species of knowledges …they attributed the generality of this noun”. Being valued as the best member of its species, the name of poetry also designates every other member of its species. Whereas an inferior member of the species of knowledges would refer to the species and to the genus of such species only conditionally, poetry refers to all such species and to the genus of such species unconditionally because it is the best of them. Its highest value derives, as ‘Awfi makes explicit, from the way in which it perpetuates a human name – to be understood here as a metonym for reputation – after the death of its mortal bearer. The superiority of poetry must here be understood as its superiority *for* humans and not without reference to them. *Humans cannot name and know anything without at the same time evaluating what they name and know.* And for ‘Awfi, the question of value must always be a question of: valuable *for* whom? Valuable from whose perspective? ‘Awfi’s discourse thus shares with Khusrow’s a vector that first determines an expansion of poetry’s categorical jurisdiction into the knowledge inclusive of all legitimate knowledges, and then determines the necessity for an apologetic that would nevertheless maintain the epistemic inferiority of poetry and poet to god. However, ‘Awfi’s apologetic takes a form distinct to that of Khusrow. It takes the form of a perspectivalism that obliges us to read

any further truth-claim he makes or attributes to others as qualified by its interested nature[14]. Here, as in the preceding and following chapters, ‘Awfi operates with a conception of origin as value rather than fact, a genealogical rather than empirical conception of origin. If humans cannot name and know without simultaneously evaluating what they name and know, whatever ‘Awfi names and claims to know must also be his own interested evaluation. It is in the context of such avowed perspectivalism that we must read the following historical account of the earliest author of the earliest poetry.

Having put on display (*ta’rruz*) conflicting perspectives on the functions or uses of poetry, ‘Awfi discusses a received historical account of the psychological, social and cosmological origin of poetry, of the totality of circumstances in which poetry first entered the world, as well as

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[14] Wael Hallaq’s contention that transmitters of *Hadith* (morally exemplary reports of statements or actions by the prophet Muhammad) themselves regarded the bulk of the corpus of Hadith to belong to the epistemic category of the “probable” rather than “the certain” allows us to suggest that ‘Awfi – who had trained as a Hadith transmitter – was applying to a corpus of secular texts techniques and criteria of textual verification that he would have applied to Hadith. The origin of the *tazkira* genre in Hadith textual practices has been well noted before. But such biographical information would serves us very little by way of explaining the methodological skepticism operative in ‘Awfi’s text as it is equally true of *tazkiras* of Persian and Urdu poets from subsequent centuries whose authors were seldom if ever Hadith transmitters. ‘The Authenticity of Prophetic Hadith: a Pseudo-Problem’ by Wael B. Hallaq in *Studia Islamica, No. 89 (1999)*, 75-90. And ‘The Tezkere Genre in Islam’ by J. Stewart Robinson in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies, Volume 23, No. 1 (Jan. 1964)*, 57-65.

contestations of this account. He entitles his chapter 'On the significance of who first *spoke* poetry' (my italic). That poetry was first of all "spoken" and only then, as this report shows, written maintains the semantic valence long attached to *sukhan* as referring at once to the activity of speech and to its character as a thing or verbal artifact that survived mortal speech as fame. He opens his presentation by declaring the topic to be a controversial one among "masters of the craft" of poetry. The immediately following account attributed to Maimun bin Mihrān and reiterated by contemporaneous literary theorists must then be read as personal decision 'Awfi takes to present an account of the first "versified speech" [*sukhan-i manzum*] despite such controversy, in the face of it:

> The first person to have threaded the pearls of speech [*sukhan*] in verse [*nazm*] was Adam, may God preserve him. The cause [*sabab*] was: Cain's rejection of the commands of God and his destruction of what Abel had founded, this being the first blood to have been spilt unjustly upon the earth. Adam was then in Mecca. The world's air was transformed, the clear waters of the age growing clouded, dust darkening the air's purity. Upon fruit bearing trees now appeared sharp thorns where before the rose had bloomed beauty-like without the thorn's enmity. A stink appeared in the waters and the wild animals of the desert that had been friendly with humans now fled from them. Adam, peace upon him, said: 'Has there occurred some untoward event that the world's affairs are thus transformed and that such ugly transformations should have come upon the world? That the radiant faced flower should have been submitted to the thorn's heedless guardianship and the clear waters of the melancholy ocean should have turned salty? From Mecca he came to India [*hindustan*] and, examining how things were, found his beloved son Abel killed. Fire broke into tongues in his heart and water flowed from his eyes. Lamenting this death, pearls of tears adorned his cheeks. In tones of lamentation, he wailed movingly. Dressing these couplets in verse, he

> mourned his son: Poetry [*shi'r*] [in Arabic]: Transformed are the lands and those upon them. \ Clouded is the earth's ugly face. \ Transformed are all colors, all tastes. \ Diminished is the cheer on the beautiful face (18).

However, scholars who argued that the prohibition against prophets' speaking poetry applied equally to all prophets, including Adam, rejected this account, as 'Awfi notes. Notwithstanding this, 'Awfi observes "some reports" have declared Adam to have indeed been the speaker of that poem [*an̄ shi'r*]. A report by Abu Mansur Mata̅ridi says that Adam instructed his son Seth to guard these words and instruct his progeny to guard them too so that "after me, your children and grandchildren may read this and lament the suffering of Abel" (19). Seth guarded these words until they passed on to Ya'qub bin Qahta̅n, "the father of Arabs and the moon of the sky of *adab*", who was "the first person to have written in the Arabic script". He was fully acquainted with Hebrew and Syriac and "translated into Arabic verse so that it might be easily remembered that testament that the first father of humanity had uttered in the Syriac language". 'Awfi adds with a qualifier "if these first words are confirmed [*sab̄it*], then it was the father of humanity who first laid the foundation of this knowledge ['*ilm*] and the basis of this practice. After him, his descendants drew blood from the veins of thought, bringing sweet words flowing like water from the mind's solitude into the field of a book [*bayaz̄*]".

The above account by 'Awfi extends to the origin of literature and literary authorship the genealogical method he had previously deployed in the etymological derivation of the noun poetry. Just as words inscribe human value judgments into themselves so does poetry, which is a particular kind of language use, originate as a value judgment on evil. Adam's value judgment

originates in his psychological suffering. This psychological origin is also social in that it refers to the murderous disagreement of brothers, to fratricide. Adam's lamentation of Abel's unjust murder constitutes the immediate psychological origin of poetry. Cain's envy, his experience of a lack of divine favor in comparison with his brother, also a psychological origin of poetry, gives rise to his evil that, causing terrible cosmological transformations, thence causes Adam the psychological pain that in turn causes poetry. Between these two terms of psychological suffering, Cain's and Adam's, these cosmological transformations entail a sudden emergence of disharmonious opposites, each pole the lack of its opposite: a clouding of the water's clarity, a darkening of the air's purity, a thorn on the rose's previously unimpeded self-presentation, the antipathy of animals towards humans where before there had been friendship. Inquiring into the origin of these lacks in his world, Adam experiences the lack that causes him to mourn in poetry. 'Awfi's account allows us to read the simultaneously psychological, social and cosmological origin of poetry and poet as a set of evil lacks or evil *as* lack. We must recall here that this is not the first account 'Awfi offers us of the origin of poetry. The opening passages of his text, a reading of which opened our discussion of *Lubab̄ al-albab̄*, also detailed a total situation in which poetry originated as the result of a submission by the poet to a lack in himself. This lack took the form of an inability in the poet to determine the edges of nature's burgeoning book, to delimit and read its profusion of signs. His final submission to his own lack entailed an affirmation not only of his own creaturely weakness but also of nature's polysemy as a desirable rather than undesirable event. Whereas the opening account of the origin of poetry thus assigns a positive valence to the affirmation by the poet-author of a creaturely lack in himself, this second

account in the third chapter of ‘Awfi’s preface characterizes as evil Cain’s rejection of a divinely ordained lack in him. Cain’s evil envy contrasts with ‘Awfi’s humility as two opposed attitudes to the creaturely experience of lack. ‘Awfi’s humility generated a fiction of nature’s text, as we had noted, that made its truth claims with reference to human sociality alone. Cain’s evil results in Adam’s poetry of mourning that seeks, by instituting a collective and transmitted memory of evil, to restore the world to just order: Adam’s descendants “strung the jewels of knowledge [*faza'il*] by the thread of verse so that the world acquired the excellence of order and the art of parity”.

‘Awfi’s historical report situates the origin of poetry in Adam’s mourning for a world order that was good, beautiful and true at once. Cain’s crime sundered the unity of the true, the good and the beautiful. Adam’s mourning that takes the form of a simulation in ordered speech (“the thread of verse”) of that lost order must be read as an iteration of an account of poetry, familiar to ‘Awfi’s readers, not just as secondary and thus epistemically inferior to god’s knowledge but also as superior to the nature created by god because of its greater permanence, its artificial or inorganic invulnerability to the “transformations” that affect this nature’s mortal organisms. Poetry is inferior to god’s knowledge of the world and its creatures because it originates in ignorance of the possibility of such creaturely hubris as we see in Cain. But because it represents that lost creaturely world in or as changeless artifice it is superior to that world. Poetry originates in a world whose unity of the true, the good and the beautiful has already been cleft by evil. It originates as a post-lapsarian and inorganic simulation in language of that lost organic unity. This is the genealogy of fiction, of the bejeweled and changeless perfections of its

decorations, of the deathless spring of the literary roses of Sheikh Sa'di's *Gulistān* (The Rose Garden, 1258 C.E.) and the ever-lasting mechanical marvels of Māh Rukh Pari's garden kingdom in Mir Hasan's famous Urdu masnavi *Sihr al-bayān* (*The Magic of Speech*, 1785 C.E).

However, this post-lapsarian genealogy of the form of poetic fiction must not be understood as being merely nostalgic. For, as 'Awfi affirms, by commemorating a world, poetry also makes a world. It makes a world in the sense of instituting the practice of poetry among Adam's descendants as a commitment to the institution and preservation of a just worldly order that approximates- and is more beautiful the better it approximates- an original order lost irretrievably through Cain's evil. Balancing this account's affirmation of error-ridden creaturely perspectivalism, this commitment takes the form of the act of composing poetry that 'Awfi like Khusrow characterizes by the familiar motif of a setting into order, a stringing of pearls. Such "measured speech" (*kalām-i mauzun*) is alternately a metonym of and model for political order ("so that the world acquired the excellence of order and the art of parity"). Hussain Muhammad Shah Shihāb Ansāri (d. 1316 C.E), a younger contemporary of Khusrow's from the Khalji court in Delhi, cites a statement attributed to the Prophet Muhammad to authorize the function of poetry as disciplining or systematizing change: "Poetry [*shi'r*] is the Divan of the Arabs, the translator of *adab* [*tarjumān al-adab*] and the rule of change [*zābita-yi taghyir*]" (3)[15].

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[15] Hussain Muhammad Shah Shihab Ansari, *Kanz al-fawā'id* (Treasury of Benefits), ed. Sayyid Yusha (Madras University: Islamic Series no: 18; 1956), 3.

In discussing the "hermeneutic significance of temporal distance" in his *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer says: "In fact the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us"[16]. But by what "custom and tradition" can ‘Awfi claim to have understood the earliest poetry when that poetry itself originated in a murderous and catastrophic disruption of the "continuity of custom and tradition"? We could answer that it was precisely the irruption of murderous evil into the world that *produced* the "continuity of custom and tradition", the time *before* the murder being, in some sense, pre-historical or irrelevant to human understanding; that, in other words, such continuity of custom and tradition lay in the verbal simulation and recollection of a lost world order. And that it is the custom of poetry that established itself *since* that originary disruption that allows ‘Awfi to understand the earliest poetry. However, while Adamic mourning may have come chronologically first, it cannot be logically prior in ‘Awfi's text because the legend of Adam's mourning could not even have been told – whether by ‘Awfi or others – were it not for their personal investments or interests in such telling; were it not for the perspectivalism we have remarked on. Logically prior to the narration of the legend of the earliest poetry uttered are the particular interests of its various narrators. Gadamer appears to take account of this when he adds: "It is true that what a thing has to say, its

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[16] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* translators Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2006), 297.

intrinsic content, first appears only after it is divorced from the fleeting circumstances that gave rise to it. The positive conditions of historical understanding include the relative closure of a historical event, which allows us to view it as a whole, and its distance from contemporary opinions concerning its import". But such "positive conditions of historical understanding", 'Awfi appears to signal, never quite arise in the case of the earliest poetry because the event of the first irruption of evil was only ever *memorialized* in poetry, not *closed* by it. Also, the very reports of the earliest poetry remain subject to the various interests of its reporters, to "contemporary opinions concerning its import". 'Awfi's account performs this perspectivalism by distinguishing between the earliest poetry and the earliest available poetry. He quotes the two couplets he attributes to Adam in Arabic and then says that these couplets were translated into Arabic by Ya'qub bin Qahtān from a Syriac original "so that it might be easily remembered". It was Ya'qub bin Qahtān's decision as to what was best for the Arabs that determined the subsequent availability of Adam's verse in Arabic translation. We must read the presumed unavailability of the Syriac original at more than one level as a coded affirmation by 'Awfi of his own creaturely fallibility as a compiler of a *tazkirah*. It is not only the psychological origin of poetry that inscribes human value judgments into it, but also its chronological origin that remains fraught by value: Ya'qub bin Qahtān translated Adam's words into Arabic "so that it might be easily remembered". 'Awfi's account of the origin of poetry must thus be understood as a self-consciously provisional account of the passage of poetry into a historical archive always-already steeped in value judgments and thus susceptible to lacks[17]. 'Awfi's account of the origin of

[17] 'Awfi, it must be noted, presents an iteration of what we take to be a proven historical report today that

poetry in general and Persian poetry in particular distinguishes itself from Khusrow's by the ways in which it situates such postulated beginnings of poetry - whether of poetry as such or of Arabic and then of Persian poetry - within a chain of fallible creaturely narrators. That 'Awfi's engagement with the historical life of poetry takes the form of an account of its transmission from lost origins may be the function of the fact that his text constitutes a preface to a chronicle or biographical dictionary rather than a collection of poems as in Khusrow's case. Whereas Khusrow assumes an ideal of poetry as undiminished (indeed in fact heightened in value) by the timelessness of its sociality, 'Awfi characterizes poetry as necessarily damaged by its passage through time. And if 'Awfi everywhere makes explicit the real lacks poetry inscribes into itself

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most translations of philosophical texts from the ancient Greek took place in the course of the fifth century C.E. first of all into Syriac under Syrian Christian translators and thence into Arabic in the Abbasid courts, thus mediating the Arabic reception of Greek knowledge by the doctrinal polemics that had split the Christian churches of Antioch and Alexandria at this time. However, this iteration encodes the value 'Awfi places on affirming the fallibility of historical transmissions and thus the ineluctable incompleteness of archives.

in its passage into Arabic from lost Syriac and into Persian from Arabic, it is because such an archival defectiveness is only an effect of a cognitive defectiveness in humans[18].

Conclusion

To take in at a glance how ‘Awfi’s anthropology anticipates our narratological and genealogical insights today, we will conclude with a summary of the negations through which ‘Awfi, like his contemporary litterateurs, institutes poetry and poetic authorship. We see ‘Awfi perform the human authorial origin of poetry in prose by negating its error-ridden mimesis in favor of divine authorship to which he begins by comparing it. And yet it becomes apparent that this abasement of poetry in prose was a performance or citation of a given linguistic convention and thus implicitly also in favor of poetry inasmuch as it bears such comparison. Poetry constitutes a failed representation of nature only by representing other and earlier poetry. *The anteriority of language as given custom allows linguistic intelligibility and innovation.* We then see ‘Awfi

[18] ‘Awfi’s account of the origin of poetry in general and Persian poetry in particular from chronologically prior but imperfectly preserved traditions may be read as a considerably refined corroboration of Ricardo Zipoli’s postulate: “We believe that the earliest poetry to have been composed in Italy and Iran can be considered a continuation and deepening of the literary values of their time and place. Such a birth brings to mind the manner of the goddess Minerva’s birth because, as we know, when this divine being was born of the great god Jupiter’s brain, she was not born naked but clothed and equipped with golden weapons”. Ricardo Zipoli, *Cherā sabk-i hindi dar dunyā-yi gharb sabk-i bāruk khwāndah mishavad?* [Why is the Indian Style read as the Baroque style in the West?], (Tehran: Daftar-ha-yi bastan-shenasi anjuman-i farhangi-i italiya, 1943), 32.

account for the origin of poetry again in a negation: he signals that the personal motivations, evaluations and concomitant omissions of transmitters cast doubt on the veracity of the public historical memory of Adamic mourning in verse. However, it is verse that laments, simulates and institutes in the "custom and tradition" of creating verbal order a cosmological order destroyed by Cain's rebellion against divine commandments. However philologically unverified this legendary text and however murderous the disruptive and alleged origin of its metrical and traditionally imitated order, it is only by the custom it reportedly instituted that it is legible to us today. *'Awfi thus foregrounds the exclusions by which the practice of poetry came to be customary.* Summarized thus, these negations reveal in our medieval Muslim text anticipations of our modern and otherwise Eurocentric awareness in the humanities of how language partially constitutes what it refers to; and how we could not even know the omissions that condition our knowing but for those omissions themselves.