

EPILOGUE

My aim in this book has not been to engage yet again in a reconstruction of the history of early Islam and the all too well known project of verifying the historicity of this or that episode. Rather, I set out to learn something new about early Islamic historiography. More concretely put, one major purpose in my reading the *History* has been to fathom the historicist assumptions guiding the many who took part in its production, as well as whatever undermines such assumptions. This seems to me no minor a challenge, given that, time and again, in fact, constantly, the reader of Ṭabarī's book is at the mercy, so to speak, of the "impeccable" sources and their access to historical knowledge. He/she must succumb to their posture—actually well known in all historical works since ancient times to our own days—that is meant to blur any distinction between the historical event and the text about it, and thus grant the latter the *status of reality* and its producer the position of a privileged "observer" of a reality that is no more.

All could be very simple were there not sufficient ground to see history in general, Ṭabarī's *History* included, as non-mimetic, not to say anti-mimetic, for which aspect, like art in general, it should be exposed.¹ This is what I have attempted to do in the first part of this book. Phrasing it differently, I have tried to make use of the recent theoretical shift in conceiving *mimesis*, which takes into account how the reproduction of the world *as language* "may expose and call into question precisely those conventions meant to systematize and objectify representation."² And so, in Part One I attempted to tackle the mimetic assumption that underlies the *History* head on and problematize it.

This leads me to another reflection that has more to do with the

¹ Murray Krieger, "The Semiotic Desire for the Natural Sign: Poetic Uses and Political Abuses," in David Carroll, ed., *States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse* (New York, 1990), 248.

² John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., "Introduction," in John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols Jr., eds., *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes* (Hanover, 1982), 3.

second part of my study. As I see it, Part Two not only suggests a different approach to reading historiography, having in mind aims other than “reconstruction,” but it also makes an additional contribution to our assessment of classical Arabic writing in general. For here I beg to differ from distinguished scholars, such as Paret and von Grunebaum who, speaking of classical Arabic literature, looked for the tragic mainly in poetry,³ or found it strange that despite its richness in anecdotal and unusual material, Arabic literature “never did seriously turn toward the large-scale narrative or the drama.”⁴ This assessment, I contend, is based on a rather narrow definition of literature. If one casts the net wider and also considers *ta’rīkh* for that matter, one finds in historiography perhaps the largest sample of dramatic literature produced in classical Islam. This should come as no surprise. As we all learn and experience, life is drama, the drama that is in historiography cannot be severed from the drama that exists in real life, and Islamic historiography as practiced in the *History* is no exception to that. The drama of the Amīn-Ma’mūn struggle, for example, or the tragedy of Ḥusayn’s murder, are relevant cases that I discuss in this study. In sum, drama is drama, whether in real life or fiction, and whether we find it in *belles-lettres* or in other genres of literary writing such as historiography, is a question of category, not of essence.

One further point that one should make at this stage is that Ṭabarī’s book is certainly a culmination of what could be largely viewed as sacred history (or classical history, or whatever epithet one chooses) that was produced in the formative age of Islam. Its poetics, as here analyzed, have, I think, much to tell about the poetics of this whole genre. But how should the *History* be considered in a wider context, that is, a context that includes not only Islamic historiography written before Ṭabarī’s age but generations later? The question is particularly pertinent, since in other respects, which have not been in the focus of my present study, Ṭabarī’s book has been seen as a watershed, in that the historiography of the following century, for example, had new things and different schemes to offer.

³ Rudi Paret, “Das ‘Tragische’ in der arabischen Literatur,” *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 6 (1928): 247–52; 7 (1929): 17–28, where the Karbalā’ affair is noted in passing.

⁴ Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago, 1953), 287.

Thus Khalidi, who links the *History* with the study of *ḥadīth*, pairs the history writing of a generation later, such as Masʿūdī's (d. 345/956), or of a century later, such as Miskawayh's (d. 420/1030), with a different sort of scholarship, referred to as *ḥikma*, literally "wisdom," and actually a secular "science" bearing affinity to classical philosophy and the so-called natural sciences. This new synthesis, carved out of different fields of scholarship should, at least is expected to, inform both the form and content of historiography.

Masʿūdī's historical writing, especially his *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, has drawn considerable attention and needs no elaborate discussion in this book.⁵ What I do find pertinent to note, however, is that from the perspective I have adopted in this study, the *Murūj* shows both difference and similarity when compared to the *History*. On the side of differences, one will easily note that Masʿūdī largely abandoned what Khalidi and others have seen as the methodology of *ḥadīth*, in that the identity of the sources is no longer part of the text. For all practical purposes, the well-known pattern of supplying *isnāds* disappears. It is also not especially difficult to appreciate Masʿūdī's brevity, his history being more a matter of facts, so to speak. To give a concrete example, while the *History*, as we have seen, devotes dozens of pages to the Karbalā' affair, in the *Murūj* the same event occupies less than a dozen.⁶

It is hard to tell with absolute certainty whether brevity in Masʿūdī's case is the crucial factor that influences the narrative. I suspect that, as Hayden White would have it, the form has indeed considerable bearing on the content. In any case, whatever the reasons, Masʿūdī's Karbalā' relegates Ḥusayn, otherwise the uncontested protagonist of the narrative, to utter marginality. Hence, there is not even the slightest doubt that a reading of Karbalā' as tragedy, for which Ṭabarī's text provides ample potential, is irrelevant in the case of the *Murūj*. Both in terms of space and ingredients, Masʿūdī's production of Ḥusayn's martyrdom story is a different matter and creates a considerably different effect.

⁵ Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: the Histories of al-Masʿūdī* (Albany, 1975); Ahmad M. H. Shboul, *Al-Masʿūdī and his World: a Muslim Humanist and his Interest in Non-Muslims* (London, 1979).

⁶ Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut, 1970), vol. III, 248–59.

This is not to say that, if we delve into the business of poetics, there are no elements that do persist in Mas'ūdī's work. Unsurprisingly, the mimetic claim is present—after all, how could it disappear from history writing? And thus, to linger on the Karbalā' affair, we get the details of Muslim b. 'Aqīl, Ḥusayn's envoy to Kūfa, when besieged by the Umayyad troops, roaming perplexed (this is repeated twice in a brief passage) in the alleys of the town until he finds shelter. Later, having been spotted and trying to clear his path by the sword, in the course of which he is wounded, the text mimetically depicts Muslim's attempt to drink, and the blood that is pouring from his mouth being mixed in the water. Also the use of verbatim citation of dialogues, eyewitness reports, the narrator's omniscience, and the insertion of poetry for general reflections, all—as in the *History*—feature in Mas'ūdī's Karbalā' account.

Moving forward, in Miskawayh, the state secretary, “a philosopher of very broad interests, an accomplished poet and *adīb*, as well as a universal historian,” one finds a model of scholarship that is markedly different from Ṭabarī, the jurist and exegete. This is manifested to some extent also in Miskawayh's historiography. And so he writes his *Tajārib al-umam* (“Experiences of the Nations”), which covers history from the Flood to the year 369/980, especially for the ruling elite (the 'Abbāsīd as well as the Buyīd), as “a long parable on the art of government,” and as offering an experience that can be put to useful application. In his contention, events like the ones he describes may recur. Miskawayh, then, is after the sort of observations and conclusions of general relevance that are not part of Ṭabarī's agenda. He finds interest in “the policies followed in bringing prosperity to countries, unity among subjects . . . [and] the reasons for which some men have advanced in status with kings while others declined.” At the same time, he excludes prophetic miracles, or the Prophet's expeditions (*maghāzī*), for example, as if, due to their indisputable uniqueness, they are utterly unprofitable for the readers. And while for Ṭabarī and his sources God is a prominent actor in history, in Miskawayh's scheme, what God himself takes a hand in is of no earthbound use.⁷ It is as if what is God's is to God, what is man's [sic] is to man, hence, in (*human*) history, never the twain shall meet.

⁷ Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 171–4. See also *E.I.*², s.v. “Miskawayh.”

When, for instance, Miskawayh tells that ‘Izz al-Dawla Bakhtiyār, the Buyīd prince, left Baghdad in ca. 350/960 to fight ‘Imrān b. Shāhīn, a local Iraqi bandit-lord,⁸ one observes that it is not the event per se that is the writer’s main interest, but the general conclusions, the praxis of the skill of *tadbīr* (proper management), which can be drawn on the basis of the particular event:

And kings do indeed act thus, but with it must go perseverance and the patience necessary to exhaust the enemy with ruses that resemble what Bakhtiyār began by doing, not that such a policy (*tadbīr*) would begin well . . . and proceed to jesting and frivolity, to the point where military power is neglected, the army is left unattended . . . and that this was why Bakhtiyār was forced to sue for peace.⁹

Thus, in the pen of an eleventh-century Muslim intellectual (is’nt it much like in the education of nineteenth-century British statesmen?) historiography becomes a guide to proper political conduct.

Here, as in Mas‘ūdī’s case, I should like to introduce some qualification, however. There are other aspects, more related to the concern of poetics, that render Miskawayh’s “Experiences of the Nations” not so dissimilar after all to Ṭabarī’s supposedly orthodox history. And although this is not the place to engage in even a superficial comparison between the historical products of these two scholars, I would suggest that, in terms of their poetics, the *History* and the “Experiences” are of a kind to a certain degree. Once again, the two share the mimetic assumption; what is more, they even share some of the mimetic tropes. Admittedly, there is in the *Tajārīb* less extensive “verbatim” chunks of historical monologues and dialogues, but this tendency has earlier been detected in Ṭabarī’s own contribution to the *History*, where he writes as an eyewitness. In fact, one could argue that, after Ṭabarī’s inexplicable shift, in the latter part of his book, to a genre of historiography that is characterized by “drying out” history and doing away with verbatim material altogether, Miskawayh (and Mas‘ūdī before him) finds it necessary to return to a sort of middle ground: including verbatim material, yet not excessively so. Still, Sinān b. Thābit, a court physician and one of Miskawayh’s sources, is believed to quote the exact words that

⁸ See on him *E.I.*², s.v. “‘Imrān b. Shāhīn.”

⁹ Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 175.

Bajkam, a Turkish officer, told him in 329/941, and in these words there is room for personal feelings, reflections, etc. Furthermore, there are in the monologue details that endow the historical description of the eyewitness with the aura of *mimesis*:

When I wished to make an expedition for the purpose of burying treasure, I used to have mules laden with empty chests brought to my palace. In some of the chests I would place the treasure, after which I would lock them. Into the rest I would introduce the men who were to accompany me, while they were on the mules' backs; I would then cover the chests, lock them and lead the mules, taking the rope which led the train, and sending away the attendants of the mules, which I would myself lead to the place which I wanted. When I was by myself in the middle of the country, I would let the men out of the chests, they having no idea where they were; I would then have the treasure taken out and buried in my presence, while I made some private marks. After this I would make the men get back into their chests, which I would then cover and lock . . .¹⁰

Miskawayh's predilection for eyewitness accounts appears no less than Ṭabarī's, and these accounts tend to provide the reader not only with the main contours of this or that episode, but the narrators' more private concerns and experience. And thus, Miskawayh's Abū Aḥmad al-Faḍl of Shirāz inserts into a description of a courtly audience in 329/941 information that one Qarārīti tells him privately ("If the matter [paying the troops] be put in my hands, I will manage it . . .")¹¹

Other tropes are used as well. For what is Miskawayh's point in telling the reader, for example, that Bajkam, in attacking some wealthy Kurds in 329/940, was clad in a *qabā'* without lining and without a *jubba*,¹² if not the urge to convey the "reality effect" that we have seen time and again featuring in the *History*? And is Miskawayh's omniscient posture—telling us that the 'Abbāsīd bureaucrats, when gathering in the same year to deliberate the appointment of a new caliph, had no doubt that the matter had already been decided, which is why they approved of Ibrāhīm, Muqtadir's son,¹³ or when

¹⁰ *The Experiences of the Nations by Miskawaihi*, Vol. II: *Reigns of Muttaqī, Mustakfī, Muṭṭi' and Ṭā'ir*, trans. D. S. Margoliouth (Oxford, 1921), 11–12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19. For "I said to myself" that is so similar to what is repeated in eyewitness accounts in the *History*, see e.g., 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10. See also e.g., p. 15 for Aḥmad b. Maimūn; p. 16 for the Barīdī.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

stating that the caliph summoned one Yakaq only when he felt sure of Bajkam's death¹⁴—any different from the omniscience displayed by Ṭabarī and his sources? One could go as far as to argue that, with Miskawayh being no part of the “old-fashioned” (or is it, actually, à la Lyotard, an antiquated precursor of the postmodernist?) school of history, which allows versions to exist side by side, and thus, in a sense, relativizing (our knowledge of) reality, there is in the history that the “Experiences of the Nations” provides an attempt to maximize *mimesis*, so to speak: a single version is better than many versions when the “telling” of reality is at stake.

All these are general suggestions and afterthoughts that should open new doors, not close old ones. The poetics of Islamic history writing remains a resourceful avenue to explore.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.