

NATURAL QUALIFICATIONS OF A MEDIEVAL POET ACCORDING TO MOSHE IBN EZRA

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The book *Kitāb al-Muḥāḍarah wa-al-Mudhākarah*¹ by Moshe Ibn Ezra is the only treatise on the poetics of medieval Hebrew literature written in the Middle Ages.² The book deals with Hebrew poetry³ up to the time of Moshe Ibn Ezra (1055/1060–1135/1138). It is the most basic and comprehensive book on the subject and it is on that book that this article is based.⁴ In considering a poet's qualifications, Ibn Ezra attaches particular importance to his natural gifts, his ethnic and geographical origin, and his creative talent.

Natural Talent

Moshe Ibn Ezra states that one cannot be a poet unless one has, from birth, a natural talent that predisposes one to this art: 'You should know also, that the poem will not fill the eyes and ears and will not satisfy the heart and mind unless it flows naturally from its creator and from the innate ability of its maker' (*Kitāb*, 73). This categorical statement denies the possibility of acquiring the art of poetry; one must be born with a natural flair for it. A person who is not a born poet may try to acquire the art and technique of poetry, but 'imitation is not nature; what seems blue is not blue. It is also said: The difference

¹ See *Kitāb al-Muḥāḍarah wa-al-Mudhākarah* (henceforth, *Kitāb*) by Moshe Ibn Ezra: A. Neubauer, *Catalogue of the Hebrew MSS in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford 1886–1906), VI, 688; 1974. The Arabic text has been published with a Hebrew translation by A.S. Halkin (Jerusalem 1975); and with a Spanish translation by Montserrat Abulmalhan Mas (Madrid 1986).

² Ibn Ezra himself wrote another work on poetics: MSS 412 *מקאלה אלהדריקה פי מעני אלמנאו ואלחקיקה*. See D.S. Sassoon, *Ohel David: Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the Sassoon Library* (London 1932), 410.

³ See *דנה, הפואטיקה של השירה העברית בימי הביניים ומקורותיה עפ"י ר' משה אבן עזרא (ירושלים – תל אביב 1982)*.

⁴ There is another treatise (it would seem) by Elazar B. Jacob, still in manuscript form, which has been expounded by Abramson in *פרקים* 1 (1967–8), 9–28: 'ספר השיר לר' אלעזר ב"ר יעקב הבבלי'.

between the natural and the affected or assumed is as that between the true and the false. Nature is truth and imitation is a distortion' (*Kitāb*, 73). Thus the natural faculty for poetic creation is compared with truth, and the artificially acquired faculty is compared with falsehood. A natural gift, if indeed such a thing exists, reveals itself, according to Ibn Ezra, in the poet's first efforts. 'Everyone's fate is fixed in his first attempts and his first poems' (*Kitāb*, 48). And thus, 'If he finds that he is not naturally creative, he should refrain from it' (*Kitāb*, 74b).

Ethnic and Geographical Origin

The most important attainment of the Arabs, in Ibn Ezra's opinion, is the distinction they achieved in the field of rhetoric. This gave them an advantage over other peoples, and not just in a particular period or in a single generation. They achieved this even before becoming a people, that is, while still ignorant and unenlightened,⁵ before the rise of Islam: 'This is their special quality, which they possessed in the days of their ignorance as well as in the period of Islam; they could be both expansive and succinct. The gift of speech came naturally to them — to their men and their women, to the sick, to the children, to the corrupt and the degenerate, to the blacks, to the ignorant nomads and the meanest of their peasants' (*Kitāb*, 16a).⁶

According to Ibn Ezra, it is not by chance that the Arabs, as a people, excelled in poetic language and were, in this respect, superior to other people. Following this general opinion he gives a geographical-physical and geographical-cultural reason for this. He holds that there is a close connection between, on the one hand, a person's birthplace, his star, the climate and air of his country, his diet and his temperament, on the other hand, the talents that form and develop within him: 'This is the favour that was bestowed on them by their star, their climate and the air of their land, with its running waters that kept their tongue moderately moist' (*Kitāb*, 16ab). He finds support for this theory in the essay 'Introduction to Astrology', of the Ikhwān

⁵ The Jāhiliyyah period which preceded that of Islam.

⁶ Compare 'Alī ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Jurjānī, *al-Wasāṭah bayna al-Mutanabbī wa-Khuṣūmi-h* (Cairo 1961), 10: 'Poetry is one of the Arabic sciences'; see also Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *Kitāb al-'Umdah* (Beirut 1972), 16: 'I found that poetry is the Arabs' greatest wisdom'; see also *ibid*, 43, where poetry is termed 'the commerce of the Arabs'.

al-Ṣafā' (*Kitāb*, 16b–17a):⁸ 'If several births occur in different countries simultaneously, all under the sign which indicates that they should become poets or preachers, but one is born in an Arab land, another in the land of the Copts, and the other in Armenia, the impressions they absorb will be different, for the Arabs are quick to assimilate the genius of their land, which makes them articulate and eloquent.' Thus, if at the same time one person is born in Arabia and another is born outside, the one born in Arabia will excel simply because he was born there.⁹ Similarly, Jews born in Arabia will also speak eloquently, under the influence of the dry air of Arabia as against the damp air of Israel:¹⁰ 'All who return from our diaspora to their own land, that is to Arab land, and multiply there, their speech is lively, their diction

⁷ The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', a group founded in the tenth century, delivered opinions on the natural sciences, on ethics and in particular on religion. Its members wrote, jointly and anonymously, fifty letters entitled *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* [= letters of the Brothers of Faith]. The group had a neoplatonic worldview. See also N. Aloni: 'תשובת ר' משה אבן עזרא ל"ערביה" בספר הדיונים והשיחות (שירת ישראל) תרביץ' 6 (תשל"ג), עמ' 99 הע' 6. Aloni refers to the Arabic source, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il* (Beirut 1957), I, 149.

⁸ The corresponding passage in the letters of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' is: 'If a number of children are born under the same sign in different countries, and the disposition of the heavenly spheres indicates that they will be preachers, but one was born in an Arab country and one among the Nabatians and one in Armenia, their receptiveness will vary, since the Arab is more receptive, due to the uniqueness of his country.'

⁹ See also *Kitāb*, 15: '... this Ishmaelite group, known as "those who sit in the courts" because they dwell in the fertile, cultivated area of the Hejaz and its wadis, that is, in the Arab peninsula, which is their portion in the world ... God did not endow them with wisdom but with expressiveness, nor did he shape their nature for anything other than refined speech; and they are superior to other peoples and tribes only in the precision of their language and in the composition of rhymed verse and impassioned songs, and their other songs in the watery places and the wastelands and songs of war and peace.' This astonishing phenomenon, the distinction of Arab tribes in the fields of rhetoric and poetry, is, in my opinion, an indisputable fact that can be explained by their confined way of life in the deserts of Arabia. Their imagination was unable to go beyond poetry, to story and myth for instance. Their confinement in the desert also prevented them from dealing in their poetry with religious, national and social topics. These were of no interest to them. Their senses were sharpened by the desert landscape and they focused in their poems on descriptions of the desert and the rhythm of life there. And because they were pre-occupied solely with the desert and desert life, they did not write contemplative, philosophical poems, for their lives were nomadic, a continuous chain of wanderings in the desert. On the other hand, love, self-glorification, shame, lamentation, war songs, wine, praise and complaint — topics that did not require deep and sustained thought — were prominent in their poetry.

¹⁰ 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah min Kitāb al-'Ibar* (Cairo 1956), 64.

pleasant and their poetry refined, because they have left the damp air of Syria and have come back to the dry air of the Hejaz. So they burst into song, and poetry flows readily from their lips' (*Kitāb* 17a). Ibn Ezra relies here on Galen, who writes: 'If you check, you will find that most peoples' appearance, characteristics and habits derive from their country of origin' (*Kitāb*, 16b).

Ibn Khaldūn, an Arab philosopher and historian who lived in Tunis in the fourteenth century, similarly supports the claim that there is a connection between the ability of a poet and his ethnic and geographical origin. He sees a link between the air of a country and the characteristic features of the individual: 'Whoever studies this phenomenon in various climates and lands, will find that the quality of the air has an influence on the character.' Ibn Ezra refers also to Mas'ūdī,¹¹ in support of his belief that the geographical-physical location of a person decisively influences his intellect and its development: 'Mas'ūdī writes that in the Indian Ocean near Yemen there is an island, known as the Island of the Intellect, whose waters are called the Waters of the Intellect. Seafarers come for its water, which improves their mental faculties' (*Kitāb*, 17a).¹² Ibn Ezra asserts that there is a similar place in Israel: 'The city of Tiberias, although Syrian, is blessed with air and water that improves the speech and clarity of expression of those who drink it' (*Kitāb*, 17a). Even the disposition of animals changes when they are moved from place to place. Plants that bloom in one area wither when transferred to another. All the more so are human beings influenced by these external factors, and the nature and quality of their creative work differs from place to place (*Kitāb*, 17b-18a).

Ibn Ezra sees a further reason for the Arabs' excellence in poetic language: their geographical proximity to the courts of the Persians, Babylonians and Syrians, who possessed a refined culture: 'And since these Ishmaelites¹³ settled in the island I have designated and were close to the settlements of Persia, Iraq and Syria, their speech became

¹¹ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas'ūdī was born in Baghdad, and died in 956. He was an Arab historian with a universal approach. In his well-known book *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawāhir* he chronicles the history of the world and that of Islam.

¹² In Mas'ūdī's words 'And there are islands between these two coasts, one of which is called the "Island of the Intellect", where there is water known as "Waters of the Intellect", from which sailors drink, and which have a favourable influence on their talents and intellect.' See also Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawāhir* II (Cairo 1964), 19.

¹³ The reference is to Arabs descended from Adwān, who dwelt near the cities of Persia, Iraq and Syria, and whose poetry and speech were consequently refined.

refined, their poetry more elegant and their homilies gentler than those of the pure Arabs, Qaḥṭān,¹⁴ who live in tents in the desert' (*Kitāb*, 19a). If, as Ibn Ezra claims, the Arabs are naturally eloquent, their geographical proximity to cultured lands helped to develop their natural talent.¹⁵ Ibn Ezra also asserts that the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, who dwelt in Jerusalem, excelled intellectually and their intellectual superiority manifested itself in their descendants, the Jews of Spain, who in the composition of Hebrew poetry surpassed Jews of other origins. Ibn Ezra (*Kitāb*, 28b-29a) argues that the place mentioned in the Bible to which the inhabitants of Jerusalem were exiled, is Spain (= Sepharad) and bases himself on the biblical verse: 'And the captivity of Jerusalem that is in Sepharad' (Obad. 1:20).¹⁶

Family pedigree plays a part too in the formation of the poet's nature. Ibn Ezra never fails to mention the pedigree of a poet who comes from a noble or saintly family, because this is part of his make-up as a poet. For example, he says of Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Batāt: 'from distinguished families and saintly forebears' (*Kitāb*, 42b). Of Abū Ibrāhīm ibn Bārūn he says 'from an eminent family and the son of saintly parents' (*Kitāb*, 42b-43a). A poet with saintly parents will, most likely, possess noble qualities.

¹⁴ Ishmaelites of the southern branch. They were considered pure-blooded Arabs, who had preserved their racial purity owing to their isolation in the desert.

¹⁵ Compare ethnic and geographical claims in Judaism. According to Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra in his commentary on Deut. 4:19: 'it is well known that every people has its own star and zodiacal sign, and so it is with each city, but not so with the Jews: the Lord gave Israel this great privilege that He should be their adviser, and not a star; for Israel is the Lord's inheritance.'

¹⁶ Whether or not we ourselves accept these assumptions, Moshe Ibn Ezra did so, primarily from a desire to provide a parallel to the argument advanced by the Arabs. The parallel here is clear: just as the intellectual poetic attainments of the Arabs were a factor of their geographical-climatic conditions, so too with the Jews in Spain. It seemed reasonable to assume that the Spanish Jews excelled wherever they dwelt, but since such a claim would have raised the status of Spain despite its being a foreign land, Ibn Ezra was forced to relate their poetic talents to Israel — and, more particularly, to Jerusalem, the place from which the Jews of Spain had been exiled. He ascribed a higher status to Jerusalem and to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, who were exiled from it, than to Spain, which was in the Diaspora. Fundamentally, there is no qualitative difference here between his claim and that of the Arabs, who ascribed their excellence in poetic diction to their ethnic-geographical origin. On the other hand it is surprising that Ibn Ezra does not ascribe sanctity to the whole Land of Israel and declare it as the source of the wisdom of the Jew who lives there — as claimed by the Talmudic sages (in B. Batra, 158b): 'The air of the Land of Israel makes one wise', a claim that parallels the uniqueness the Arabs ascribed to the Arab peninsula.

The poet's pride in his tribal lineage is a common thing among the Arab poets. 'Antarah,¹⁷ for example, says of himself in his poem:¹⁸ 'On one side nobly born and of the best / Of 'Abs am I; my sword makes good the rest!' (*Kitāb*, 16b-17a). Jarīr¹⁹ says in his derisive poem:²⁰ 'Cast down thine eyes for shame! For thou art of Numayr — no peer of Ka'b nor yet of Kulayb.' In order to preserve their tribal and Arab 'pedigree' the Arabs were careful to marry their daughters only to someone of the same pedigree. They looked down on those of foreign descent or of mixed marriages. Al-Samaw'al²¹ takes pride in his noble origins: *ṣafawna fa-lam nakdar wa-akhlaṣa sirra-nā / ināthun atābat ḥamla-nā wa-fuḥūlu* [= 'our lineage is pure, and without blemish; for our women refined it very highly, and bore us leaders of the people']. It is not surprising, therefore, that descent from noble ancestors was, in the eyes of Ibn Ezra, who followed Arab poets, a basis for the moulding of a poet.²²

In his book, Ibn Ezra explains why the Jews of Spain surpassed other Jews in composing Hebrew poems, polished essays and letters: 'There is no doubt that the people of Jerusalem, from whom we are descended, were better versed in the art of speech and in the study of the Torah than people of other cities and towns' (*Kitāb*, 29a). Accordingly, any man born in the Arabian peninsula, or descended from a Jerusalemite, already has the makings of a poet. Y. Levin points out the importance attached to the poet's origin, and the status he enjoyed as a consequence of it. For an example of this from the Jewish world he cites Ibn Gabirol, who said of the Nagid: *גבה ברוש תדהר בבית יצהר* ('a cypress has leapt up in a saintly home = he leapt up like a cypress in a saintly home') employing 'an image of the tall, erect tree rising out of the olive grove — to refer to the

¹⁷ A folk hero from the pagan period, a poet, the son of a servant, he was granted the status of a freeman for saving the tribe from danger.

¹⁸ See R.A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge 1930), 115. 'Antarah says this in order to express his contempt for slaves (though he himself was a slave who was set free as a reward for a courageous deed in the cause of the tribe of his adoptive father, the tribe of 'Abs).'

¹⁹ Died around 728. Master of satirical poetry.

²⁰ Nicholson (n. 18, p. 246). Jarīr said this about the poet Rā'i al-Ibl, who supported the dispute of al-Farazdaq.

²¹ Al-Samaw'al ibn 'Ādaya, a well-known Jewish poet from the period of Jāhi-lyyah; lived about the middle of the sixth century. He was best known among the Arabs for his loyalty. See also H.Z. Hirschberg, *Israel in Arabia* (Jerusalem 1946), pp. 130, 243-50.

²² See also the article of Aloni (p. 97) which stresses the high status that Arabs, and the tribe of Quraysh in particular, occupy in the 'Arabiyyah.

Nagid's descent from Yitzhar ben Kehat ben Levi'.²³ The Arab poet and critic, Ibn Qutaybah, argued against this conservative approach which held that the poet's talent derived from his origins. He claimed that a poet may be born of any nation, or in any generation.²⁴ Moshe Ibn Ezra knew Ibn Qutaybah and his book well. Nevertheless, as we see, he drew upon conservative sources that attributed prime importance to ethnic and geographical origin in the fashioning of a poet.

The Creative Imagination and Conditions Favourable to It

The poet has an imagination that enables him to experience visions, which an ordinary mortal cannot. Ibn Ezra cites al-Fārābī:²⁵ 'What happens to the poet, in the act of creation, is that his imagination conjures up in his soul something that relates to him and, at the same time, repels him and causes him to withdraw from it, though he knows for a certainty that it has no existence in reality' (*Kitāb*, 63b). The poet is able to soar on the wings of his imagination and to have visions, while those not poets are only able to see what their eyes reveal to them. This imagination bursts forth from the poet's inner springs, and without it study of the art is of no avail. In this matter Ibn Ezra hardly differs from modern critics.

The Arabs believed in a higher being, or 'genie',²⁶ which appears to the poet and fertilizes his imagination.²⁷ Ibn Ezra states that it is

²³ Y. Levin, 'The Song of Apology in Secular Hebrew Spanish Poetry', *ha-Sifrut* 2 (1973), 185.

²⁴ Abu Muḥammad 'Abdallāh Ibn Qutaybah, *Kitāb al-Shi'r wa-al-shu'arā'* (Leiden 1902), 15.

²⁵ I have translated this quotation according to my own understanding, but its import is not clear to me. I therefore give below the original Arabic version:

פיערץ להם ענד קולהא מן אלחכיל אלדי יקע ענהא פי אנפסהם שבה מא יערץ לנא ענד נטרנא אלי אלשי אלדי ישבה מה נעאף מנה, פיפרק נפוסנא פנענובה, ואן תחקקנא אן לים הו פי אלחקיקה. כדלך יערצנא פי אלאקאריל אלשעריה, ואן כאן עלמנא אן אלאמר לים כדלך.

²⁶ See, for instance, Gibb-Landau, *Arabic Literature* (Oxford 1963), 19, 35; see also B. Klar, *Poetry and Life: The Place of Poetry in the Cultural Life of the Jews of Spain*, (Tel Aviv 1954), 87-8.

²⁷ See the introduction to Ibn Shuyad's *Risālat al-Tawābi' wa-al-zawābi'* (Berkeley 1971). I found, in an Egyptian manuscript, interesting details on the 'genie' in a special appendix on genies and demons in Arabic literature, Sayyid Muḥammad 'Alī Nawfal, 'al-Jinn wa-al-Shayaṭīn fī al-adab al-'arabī al-qadīm', *Majallat al-Hilāl* (Cairo, May 1974). The genie resided both among human beings and with the angels. The Arabs believed that the genie rewarded good with good and evil with evil. So says al-Jāhīz who kept company with genies and described them. Regarding the nature of the poet, every poet had his special private genie: 'It was said that 'Imru' al-Qays' demon was Lāfīz b. Hāfīz, and 'Ubayd Allāh b. al-'Abraṣ' and Bashīr b. Hāzīm's demon was Hubayd; Ziyād al-Dhubaynī's demon is Hāzīr b. Māhīr' (ibid.).

not sufficient for one who wants to be a poet to be learned if he is not blessed with imagination, for there have been great scholars among the Arabs who never composed a single verse, simply because they were not gifted with poetic imagination. He cites as examples (*Kitāb*, 74b), the 'sages of Islam, such as Ibn al-Muqaffa' the preacher and 'Abd al-Ḥamīd the writer and al-Aṣma'ī and al-Jāḥiẓ and others, pillars of eloquence and princes among the preachers, none of whom composed even a single rhyme.' Of Ibn al-Muqaffa' in particular he relates, (*Kitāb*, 74b) that when asked why he did not write poetry, he replied, 'What I desire to do I cannot do, and what I can do is not what I want to do.'

The expert and the educated who are not blessed with the gift of imagination are compared to a grinding machine. They may be critics but not poets: 'One of the critics was asked about this, and replied, "I am a grinding machine, I sharpen and I do not cut"' (*Kitāb*, 74a). A poet with imagination cuts. If he is a critic only, he merely grinds but does not cut. He can express his opinion on the creative power of another but he himself is unable to create.

It would seem that the poet is able to create conditions that stimulate the operation of the imagination mainly by removing worry from his heart: 'When one's heart is full of care, one is unable to create poetry; and a certain poet has said: when one is sad, there is no song in the heart' (*Kitāb*, 83a). Drinking wine is one way of stimulating the imagination. It operates by removing worry: 'He recommends "wine" because of its absorption into the body and its immediate influence on the cares that trouble the heart' (*Kitāb*, 152a-b). By drinking wine, the poet isolates himself from his surroundings. The manuscript of the *Kitāb* has little to say on this subject but one can fill in the picture from what has been said by Arab prosodists (*Kitāb*, 151-2a).

Ibn Rashīq²⁸ advises isolating oneself from one's fellows in order to attain the same result as that produced by drinking wine ('*Umdah*, 207): 'When Jarīr wanted to compose a truly great poem, he would do so at night. He lit his oil lamp and cut himself off from the rest of the world. Or else he would go up to the roof alone, lie down and cover his head in order to be alone with himself.' Al-Farazdaq evoked the poetic mood in the following manner: 'It is related that when the poetic mood would not come to al-Farazdaq he would ride his camel, travelling alone in the mountain passes, in the deep valleys,

²⁸ Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan b. Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *Kitāb al-'Umdah* (Beirut 1972) (henceforth, '*Umdah*).

and in barren desolate places, and the words come to him' (*'Umdah* 207).

Abū Nuwās,²⁹ as quoted by Ibn Rashīq, states that he drank wine to stimulate the imagination: 'When Abū Nuwās was asked: "What do you do when you want to write a poem?" he said: "I drink until I am in an elated spiritual state, not quite sober and yet not drunk; then I create, when the energy has entered me and awakened my spirit"' (*'Umdah*, 207). It is said that when the people of the tribe of Quraysh, which is the tribe of Muḥammad, (*'Umdah*, 211) wanted to imitate the elevated language of the Qur'ān, they would drink wine and eat mutton in an isolated place in order to attain a style similar to that of the Qur'ān.³⁰ The famous poet al-Jāḥiẓ was unwilling to write even a single verse without drinking wine, claiming that wine made the heart merry and stimulated him to compose a poem.³¹ Drinking wine, however, created a problem for the religious Muslim poet,³² but the Hebrew poet was spared this dilemma.

It is not enough for the poet to have poetic talent; there remains the labour and skill involved in the execution of the art, which is a further difficulty. The laborious aspect has been likened to the extraction of a tooth, or something even more painful. So says al-Farazdaq as quoted by Ibn Qutaybah: 'Al-Farazdaq used to say: "I am the greatest poet in the tribe of the pure one, yet at times the extraction of a molar tooth would be easier for me than to write a single verse"' (*Shi'r*, 19).³³ Ibn Ezra attributes this remark to 'one of their distinguished men', without mentioning al-Farazdaq by name (*Kitāb*, 83a).

²⁹ Died in 811, wrote satirical poetry and poems about wine. A rebellious poet. He ranks among the 'modern' poets who ignored the ancient rules of the *qaṣīdah*.

³⁰ See also *ibid.*, 208–12, and II, 114–15; and Abū Muḥammad 'Abdallāh Ibn Qutaybah, *Kitāb al-Shi'r wa-al-shu'arā'* (Leiden 1902) (henceforth *Shi'r*), 17. Other things that stimulate the imagination are: dawn, night, lilies, bathing, pleasant food, drink, listening to songs, lovemaking, avoiding worry, and isolating oneself in lonely places.

³¹ Buṭrus al-Bustānī, *Uḍabā' al-'Arab fī al-Jāhiliyyah wa-ṣaḍr al-Islām* (Beirut 1962), 320.

³² See Ibn Qutaybah, *Kitāb al-Shi'r wa-al-shu'arā'* (Cairo 1966), ii, 690: 'This as-Sarādiq was addicted to drink. When his daughter reproached him for drinking wine, he said to her "My daughter, I am unable to give it up, for it has become my nourishment." So she said to him, "You can drink date wine instead." He commanded her to make him date wine. He drank this for several days, but could not take it, and he returned to wine.'

³³ This remark is also quoted by Ibn Rashīq (*'Umdah*, 204): 'Al-Farazdaq, the greatest poet of Muḍar, in his age, used to say: "I sometimes feel that the extraction of a molar tooth would be easier for me than to write a verse."' For another similar statement, see pp. 219–20.

Creative talent is a precondition for writing poetry. If one is blessed with this talent, the gates of poesy are open: 'When your heart is happy, my friend, you will certainly not lack for words' (*Kitāb*, 83a-b). He who is gifted with imagination will find the words to express what he has conceived. The imagination is not a guest that may be summoned at any time. If the poet does not regularly practise his art, it may wither and waste away. Ibn Rashīq quotes (*'Umdah*, 205) the words of Bakr al-Ḥanafī: 'A poem is like a spring: if you abandon it, it remains buried; if you draw from it, its water will continue to flow.'

The Dynamic Force of Inspiration

The poet's creative faculty should not be wavering and sluggish. Inspiration should burst forth forcefully. Temperate wavering inspiration is the worst. Inspiration, like a current of water, may be very cold or very hot, but not lukewarm (*Kitāb*, 44b). 'It is said: the worst thing a poem can be is to be middling. A poem may be compared to water (*Kitāb*, 84a), if very hot it quickens; and if very cold, it stimulates, but if neither hot nor cold it is of no value.'

The creative faculty may be latent within people without their being aware of it. It is hidden away, as if behind a screen. But that creative talent will at the right time burst forth and what was concealed will become visible to the eye:³⁴ 'It is said: a person stands behind a screen, until he writes a poem or an essay, for then he reveals the secret of his talent to all.' Although this was said in passing and in a context not directly related to poetics, it nevertheless concerns 'poetry and composition', and may justly be quoted as such.

Some modern critics state that the creative imagination is activated by an event that stimulates the artist by bringing him into contact with irrational worlds and thus arousing his poetic consciousness. In consequence of the experiences aroused in him by the stimulus he stands stunned in the face of a great marvel beyond all logic; this is what Ibn Ezra describes as 'the lifting of the screen', as a result of which the poet's innermost essence is revealed to all. Natural talent, which is a product of the 'creative imagination', was known to Ibn Ezra, who expressly acknowledged its existence and the need for it. This 'creative imagination' was regulated, ordered and balanced by the poet and subjected to rational analysis. We may therefore say that

³⁴ This refers to a prophet who has no imaginative power. The voice of the Lord heard through the poet's mouth is a transmission and is not an act of creation. Therefore the status of such a prophet is lower than that of a sage or a poet.

Ibn Ezra, while recognizing the existence of the creative imagination, considered that it must function in a disciplined manner in accordance with the poet's nature.

The Joy of Creation

Moshe Ibn Ezra extols the gift of creativity; it stands very high in his estimation. In discussing whether the sage or the prophet is more worthy, he comes to the conclusion that the former is, for 'the prophet fulfils the mission laid upon him, or pronounces the prophecy that he is commanded to declare; while the sage interpretes the words of the prophet and enlarges upon it within the bounds prescribed by the Torah. He uses his judgement and draws conclusions from logical premises. He has, therefore, the primacy of the innovator' (*Kitāb*, 20a). We may therefore assume that the art of poetry, which was undoubtedly the most creative art, represented for Moshe Ibn Ezra man's supreme intellectual achievement.³⁵

³⁵ See also Ross Brann, 'The Regenerate Poet: Moses Ibn Ezra', in *The Compunctious Poet* (Baltimore 1991), pp. 9–22, 59–83.

