

II. G. E. VON GRUNEBaum: TOWARD RELATING ISLAMIC STUDIES TO UNIVERSAL CULTURAL HISTORY

It is too soon to measure the influence of G. E. von Grunebaum on developing trends in Islamic scholarship. But it is not too soon to assess the legacy of his writings. The assessment is bound to suffer from subjectivity and perhaps even border on the presumptuous. And I must confess at the outset that in this paper I have not ruled out a degree of inferential and impressionistic judgment, which in the end may only reflect my own limited vantage.

It is to offset this subjectivity that I choose to begin my review of the nature and scope of von Grunebaum's contributions to the study of Islamic civilization with a lucid and self-revealing quotation from his essay called 'Islamic Studies and Cultural Research' written in 1952:

It has been demonstrated often and by many writers how the scrutiny of the scholar will expand the available contexts; new visions and directions open up new aspects of the known; new tendencies in interpretation make possible the delineations of facts hitherto ungrasped or unsuspected. From the logical point of view each fact, to be made completely meaningful, ought ultimately to be assigned its position within universal and even cosmic history; the tact of the scholar, guided by the dominant interests of his time, will restrict the study, in deference to heuristic and pragmatic considerations, to directly observable relations. As a limit of his work he may accept, for instance, the confines of the culture within which a phenomenon was observed, a self-restriction for whose artificiality he may fruitfully compensate by integrating his observations into the supplementary cross-sectionings of comparative sociology or comparative religion.

In a necessary reversal of his method, the scholar must attempt to extract from the individual facts every indication that will permit him to define the nature of the contexts determining them.

It is possible to view the life work of von Grunebaum in the light of that statement and to see a coherent and purposeful pattern of self-fulfillment.

The scholarly traditions, the intellectual ambience, and the temperamental make up that combined to motivate the creative career of G. E. von Grunebaum should be touched upon before reviewing his accomplishments. It has become fashionable in recent times to cast aspersions on Orientalism as a discipline. Much of the criticism, particularly that aimed at the ulterior motives, preconceived biases, narrow visions, and isolation from other branches of learning, is well taken; but it tends to obscure the distinctive flavors of the various schools of Orientalism. It is probably fair to say that even before the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire the Vienna School of Orientalism was already more removed from Biblical parameters and drawing closer to humanistic classics. What political impetus existed down to World War I was no longer relevant in postwar Vienna. What remained, however, was the intellectual insularity of Orientalists. This insularity was particularly pronounced in a city that was

almost bursting with creative energy. A listing of intellectuals and artists who were active in Vienna in the first third of this century reads like an honor roll of modern sensibility: Mach, Boltzmann, Schlick, Wittgenstein, Neurath, Buber, and Popper in philosophy; Mahler, Wolf, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern in music; Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka in painting; Sitte, Wagner, Loos in architecture; Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Werfel, Broch, Musil, Zweig in literature; Freud, Adler, Rank in psychology; Menger, Hayek, Schumpeter in economics. Whatever it was that led to this late flowering of the imagination must have had a profound effect on the intellectual shaping of the young von Grunebaum. Exposed on the eastern periphery of Western Europe, at the crossroads of multiple cultural influences, this truncated head of the former Empire, with its intellectual life tolerated on the margins of respectable society, formed in the intimacy of numerous private 'circles', without the help of rich foundations or the government, provided just the right milieu for a bold attempt to bring the cerebrations and insights of the twentieth century into the discipline of Orientalism.

Von Grunebaum possessed the boldness. He undertook to address himself at the same time to Orientalists and psychologists and cultural anthropologists by treating the material of the first with the methods and approach of the others. He succeeded in a fruitful grafting of Orientalism to classics, history, cultural anthropology, and modern psychology to produce cultural history par excellence.

The works of G. E. von Grunebaum may be divided into three broad categories: literary criticism, cultural history, and reflections on 'modern Islam'. The prolific publications that span the years 1936-1972 may also be divided chronologically, and they would roughly reflect the same order of themes. But the divisions do not represent abrupt changes of interest. Rather, one can detect a natural and organic manner in which he moved from subject to subject. The literary critical concerns that dominated the early phase of his creativity were increasingly occupying him at the unexpected end of his life. Moreover, it can be said that from the start even his minute studies of fragments of Arabic poetry were leading up to his brilliant and profound analysis of Islamic culture and civilization. So can it be said that his later study of 'modern Islam' in search of itself had arisen from an awareness of a classical identity formulated in the earlier cultural historical essays. In this sense the remarkable decade from 1945 to 1955 which witnessed von Grunebaum's major works and collaborative efforts on Muslim civilization may be seen as the central arch and the most enduring part in the architecture of his creative scholarship.

It is not my intention to present a comprehensive review of the prodigious bibliography of G. E. von Grunebaum in this forum. I shall merely touch upon those highlights which I believe to be his most distinctive contributions to our understanding of Islam.

Among the monuments of Orientalism in the *Annals* of the Vienna Academy are the labors of Nöldeke on pre-Islamic Arabian poetry. His research, as well

as that of other Orientalists who dealt with this body of poetry, treats the subject as historical, philological, and perhaps ethnological documents. In fact, Nöldeke mused whether the aesthetic pleasure one hoped to derive from this poetry was worth the long and tortuous effort it required.

Von Grunebaum's first major publication, which appeared in Vienna in 1937, represents a bold response to the challenge of Nöldeke. Better yet, it is an audacious challenge to the insularity of Orientalism. *The Artistic World of Early Arabic Poetry: A Literary Inquiry* is the first approach to this poetry as art. It applies the criteria of literary criticism, heavily endowed with insights and methods of modern psychology, to the *Mu'allaqât*. Orientalists objected to the application of refined and cerebral sensibilities to the works of primitive and elemental men. Modern practitioners of aesthetic anthropology or anthropology of aesthetics would judge otherwise.

Von Grunebaum's subsequent studies in literary criticism and Arabic literary theory are perhaps more traditional in methodology (in the best, most exact, Vienna-school sense of the word). They deal with classical formulations of theories of the 'miraculous inimitability' of the Qur'ân, and their implications for canons of Arabic rhetoric and literature; with the definitions and functions of imagination and beauty in Arabic literature; and with the education of the scribe in Islamic culture. They demonstrate the remarkable breadth of the author as he frequently fortifies his arguments with comparative references and quotations from Greek, Latin, and Byzantine authors. This display of erudition, however, is not for its own sake. It is the early sign of the groundwork for the central conviction upon which his later analysis of Islamic civilization is based, namely the commonality of the cultural roots, intellectual concerns, and spiritual outlook of medieval Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Western Christianity.

If the judgment of the Orientalists and the dictum of the classical Islamic literary theorists (in conformity with Aristotelian categories) relegated the use of imagination to a low order of mental activity, the methodological retreat from the *Artistic World of Early Arabic Poetry* was only tactical and temporary. For in his latest essays on literary analysis and criticism von Grunebaum was to return to the theme of imagination as the paramount psychological process in artistic creativity.

Just as the intellectual climate of pre-Anschluss Vienna had emboldened the young von Grunebaum to let the winds of new ideas blow through the confines of Orientalism, the move to the University of Chicago in the early forties must have provided him with a most congenial atmosphere where he could communicate his expanding and original views on Islamic civilization to a remarkable and receptive group of anthropologists, historians, and other scholars in humanities and social sciences. There he began to synthesize his careful and paradigmatic monographic studies into a systematic and profound analysis of the cultural history of classical Islam. The principal concepts developed in these studies, and shaping

their form, are: (1) the fundamental intellectual, cultural, and spiritual homogeneity of the medieval world of Jews, Christians, and Muslims; (2) the development of an expanding cultural consciousness among Muslims leading to a model of classical Islam; (3) the overwhelming unity of Islamic civilization as it is reflected in every aspect of Muslim culture such as piety, law, political thought, literature, science, and urban structure; (4) Islam's interactions with other civilizations.

The method chosen for these cultural analyses can best be described in his own words:

The achievement of various cultures with regard to the satisfaction of the psychological needs of their bearers may be directly or indirectly deduced from their self-descriptive utterances... The comparison of self-testimony from representatives of different cultures often allows definite judgment on the varying degrees of existential satisfaction available to the individual and the community as a result of the character of the primary cultural decisions. Is it not evident that every period, every culture, favors certain psychological types and condemns others to self-distortion or outright failure: What possibilities has the ecstatic in our culture? What scope the scholastic systematizer among the Bedouins? ['Islamic Studies and Cultural Research.']

(I remember the look of painful exasperation on his face one summer day in 1969 when a session of a scholarly conference he had sponsored at UCLA was being liberated by some latter-day ecstasies.)

In 1946 von Grunebaum published *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation*, a collection of the expanded and annotated texts of a series of lectures he had delivered at the University of Chicago the preceding year. In originality of concept, profundity of analysis, sensitivity for the subject, proportion of form, and felicity of language, this book is generally admired as the best fruit of his labors. I once conveyed to him my admiration for this mature masterpiece fashioned before he was forty, saying that I would be happy to rest at eighty with a work half as good. He responded by admonishing me for my lack of ambition – but I don't think he doubted the truth of my statement.

In this volume von Grunebaum gives us first a view of Islam, the religion/state, which rapidly spreads and establishes itself over the domains of the Sasanian and Byzantine empires. Then by a method of depth-probes from multiple, selected angles he proceeds to create for the reader what he calls the 'temper and flavor' of Muslim Middle Ages. He examines medieval Islam's idea of itself; its conception of the universe surrounding it; its borrowed and original elements; its effective and characteristic intellectual attitudes and enthusiasms; the manner of its communication and confrontation with its contiguous worlds; and, most important of all, its motivating values. Political history is touched upon only when it is relevant to the context of cultural phenomena. Economics is left out although considerable attention is given to social structure. To some, this is the major flaw of the book. Tendentious and ideologically rigid carping aside, one may say that the result is something between intellectual and cultural

history as historians generally recognize these genres. What von Grunebaum has done is a selective omission and not necessarily a distortion of the role of economics in the social infrastructure of classical Islamic culture. It is not like the romantic fuzziness of nineteenth-century classicists who gave us the idealized picture of Greek democracy by overlooking its economic base. By the same token, their depiction of the dominant cultural and intellectual temper of classical antiquity is no less valid by its omission of economics. When von Grunebaum speaks of 'self-descriptive utterances', he is fully aware that most of it comes from the culture-bearing, culture-forming élite of the society.

What at first glance may seem even more glaring an omission in a book on cultural orientation is a treatment of the fine arts, which von Grunebaum declares outside his ken. But in view of the avowed primacy of literature and recognition of poetry as the master art of Islamic civilization – and the focal attention it receives from him – this omission is not serious after all.

What the students of Islam gain from *Medieval Islam* is a synthesis of the essential traits of Islamic civilization examined by von Grunebaum. These traits he identifies as: (1) Islam's power of adaptation; despite an overriding sense of spiritual unity, Muslims preserved and integrated an enormous diversity of national and regional elements; (2) although at first glance it appears omnivorous, Muslim civilization is very selective; it recognizes and adopts that which supports its basic religious verities and rejects what is counter to its identity; (3) this universal receptivity and dynamic creativity was arrested in the ninth century, leaving the development of Islam 'an unfulfilled promise'.

He enumerates the sources of external influences on Islamic civilization and suggests the degrees of effectiveness of these influences and their successful assimilation as determined by the Muslims. He also examines the reverse process of Muslim influences on development of Western Europe. In this analysis von Grunebaum seems to be telling us that the difference between Islam and the West is in the different uses to which they both put the legacy of classical antiquity. The contrast is between the ninth century in the Muslim East and the Renaissance in Europe; between reason as the handmaiden of faith and as the weapon of a self-confident man in his quest for mastery of nature. The touchstone of a 'developing' civilization to von Grunebaum is the regenerative use of rational knowledge. This is one way of saying that he views Islam, and the world, with the sensibilities of a Western humanist. We owe, of course, much of the critical canons of modern scholarship to humanistic thought: the principles of scientific method, of objective inquiry, of fair judgment and the critical spirit. Certainly our historical writing is much influenced and improved by these criteria. And certainly von Grunebaum is a model humanist scholar who combines his intellectual rigor, methodological precision, and judicious originality with a feeling of empathy and enthusiasm for his subject. But it should be pointed out that analysis of a universal religious system from a Western humanistic view is *by definition* passing judgment on one normative system by the canons

of another normative system, with all the advantages and pitfalls that such judgments entail.

Following *Medieval Islam*, von Grunebaum continued to expand our knowledge of Islamic culture by studies in such divergent fields as the structure of Muslim cities, Muhammadan festivals, Arabic aesthetics, Islamic views of parapsychology, the Muslim concept of history, and comparative Byzantine and Islamic institutions, to name only a few. They are all distinguished by the author's masterly confidence, uncommon erudition, and incisive judgment.

In *Islam: Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition*, which appeared in 1955, von Grunebaum carried on his technique of monographic essays in elaboration of representative ingredients of classical Islam, while in the same volume he examined the attempts of contemporary Muslims at self-interpretation and coping with acculturation. In this volume, as well as in a 1957 essay on 'The Concept of Cultural Classicism', and finally and more extensively in *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity* (published in 1962), we find von Grunebaum concerned not only with depicting a classical era but also with classicism as a decisive conceptual construct for study of societies and their cultures. At the risk of my oversimplification, he finds the concept useful – indeed essential – in writing of cultural history from the humanistic point of view; but at once supportive and paralyzing for the lagging but restive heirs of a classical legacy. His rational outlook, his temperamental love of order and sanity, his innate sense of style and good manners, his distaste for strife and chaos in everything and everyone, and his impatience with mediocrity predisposed him to focus upon the classical zenith of Islamic culture. At that 'moment' classicism is more than a historical abstraction for him. Its palpable 'flavor and temper' are communicated with zest and brio. He succeeds in portraying for us 'a picture of the model past, an image, as it were, frozen in a mirror, arrested in a gesture of commanding grandeur'. I must confess immediately to playing a cad. For these are von Grunebaum's own words chiding the modern Muslim's static view of his own classical past. It would be a gross injustice to accuse von Grunebaum of insensitivity to the ebb and flow of time, to flux and tension in society; but his relentless focus upon what he correctly identifies as the *primary cultural decisions* in Islam relegates much that is vital in existential and universal Islam to peripheral attention. One might ask, for example, what if, undaunted by the classical Arab literary critics and theorists who value formal virtuosity above imagination, von Grunebaum had chosen to work on Rumi instead of the likes of Muṭī ibn Iyās?

Current fashion in writing of history is to amplify the tempo – and particularly the acceleration of tempo – of change. This runs counter to the depiction of a classical 'moment'. More seriously, it points to the dilemma of historians in writing, say, economic history and intellectual history on mutually compatible conceptual grounds but without the constraints of a common, rigid, and *a priori* ideological framework. How to relate some of the basic motives of social

behavior to a society's dominant cultural values without losing sight of the vital and constantly shifting resonance between the two levels – one level operating in a milieu of tension, the other tending to crystallize and conserve? And ultimately, there is the question not just of the intellectual and ideological tendencies of the historian but of his temperamental proclivities as well and of the reciprocal influences that operate between the historian and his chosen field.

These generalities notwithstanding, it remains true that the corpus of von Grunebaum's writings on culture and civilization of classical Islam have opened profound and novel vistas for students of Islam. What is equally true, and perhaps ultimately even more significant, is that he was the first and so far the only Islamist who was able to communicate and relate his discipline to the widest range of scholars in the social sciences and humanities.

As I have noted above, von Grunebaum's reflections on modern Islam are strongly imbued with and conditioned by his intimate and dynamic knowledge of classical Islam. Questions of self-image and identity, nationalism, Westernization, unity, political modernization are viewed in his writings in the context of classical traditions. He analyzed the writings of significant modernists and reformers. Recognizing their inherent apologetic and self-conscious limitations, von Grunebaum reached for the truer image in contemporary *belles lettres*. With curiosity he gathered the evidence of novels from North Africa, Egypt, Sudan and the rest of the Arab Middle East. To all this prodigious reading he added frequent travels to the Muslim world, cultivated fruitful contacts with many leaders of thought, and formed close friendships with some.

The difficulty that I have with von Grunebaum's reflections on modern Islam is that he deals with it as a universal category that is still alive or is at least capable of resuscitation. In these writings his humanist aspirations and his genuine humanity predominate. His critical faculties are at their sharpest, and there is some acerbic dismissal of a few patently foolish voices. But essentially his is a sympathetic voice of reason, noting the gropings of modern Muslims in their effort to rejoin the caravan of civilization, warning of the pitfalls in their way, and hoping to help guide their way by the true light of their own classical heritage. But all the same, one cannot help the impression that he would feel more at home and more confident that his counsel would be heard in Ma'mún's Bait al-Ḥikma. The times are rough on reason.

True classical form does not approve of ending on a rueful note. So if I may be permitted, I wish to end with a few personal observations that relate the man to his work. It was an eighteenth-century Frenchman who remarked: 'Style is the man himself'. Von Grunebaum was and remains the true embodiment of that, paradigm. I have already made reference to his personal sense of style. That should be elaborated to include a regard for his own as well as his fellow's dignity; a certain respect for the individual's aura; a magisterial presence that could be used to keep mediocrities at arm's length, but which was replaced by the most generous, but private, compassion for those who sought his help;

a courtliness of manner; a lively wit and abundant joy of life; and yet, withal, an innate shyness and a suppressed aesthetic emotionalism.

Buffon's statement, however, refers specifically to literary style, and it is that style of von Grunebaum's that endures with all his identity and individuality. I am only speaking of his English style, as I am not competent to speak of his German, French, and Italian. It is perhaps fair to say that by and large Anglo-Saxons did not like it. He was often accused of teutonic turgidity. I disagree heartily. All his professional work was concerned with a language and rhetorical tradition that exalts form above content, yet in his writings it is always the idea that dictates the syntax. A complex nuanced thought process dictates long, compound, attention-compelling sentences. The beauty is in the architectural form of the thought. It is – true to the man himself – a cerebral beauty.

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