The modernity of Jahiz and his *Kitab al-Hayawan*

Valentina Colombi
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"A book is a vase full of knowledge, a container overflowing with refinement, a cup of seriousness and fun" — Jahiz

Abu ’Uthman ‘Amr ibn Bahr al-Kinani al-Fugaymi al-Basri (born in Basra, c. 781 – died December 868 or January 869) is one of the most important intellectuals in Arab literature and culture. He holds a special place in my life since I owe to him, together with Naguib Mahfuz, my deep love for Arabic literature and culture.

Belonging to the mu’tazila school of thought, that is the first school of Islamic free thinkers, he wrote about a wide range of topics as can easily be seen from the titles of his main works: the *Book of Misers* (*Kitab al-Balhali*), which I translated into Italian in 1997; the *Book of Eloquence and Demonstration* (*Kitab al-bayan wa-al-tabyin*), the *Book of Round and Square* (*Kitab al-tari*’ *wa-al-tadur*), the *Epistle of Concubines and Ephebes*, the *Epistle of Singing Girls*, the *Answer to Christians*, the *Epistle of Teachers* and many other essays. Many manuscripts of his works are held in the most important Oriental libraries, such as the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Ambrosiana Library in Milan, the Topkapi Library — where you can find one of the most beautiful copies of the *Kitab al-Hayawan*, and the National Library in Cairo.

In all his work — the French orientalist Charles Pellat in his *Essai d’histoire de l’oeuvre jahizienne* has counted 231 works — Jahiz showed a deep and peerless knowledge of human mind and human beings, of literature and history, of politics and theology, of sociology and psychology. I am firmly convinced that his masterpiece ever was the *Kitab al-Hayawan*, title usually translated into English as the *Book of Animals*.

The title

In my opinion a better translation, which is no doubt closer to its content, would be the *Book of Human Beings*. Even though in Arabic literature titles are usually very general and often have nothing to do with their contents, in this case the title is accurate, but requires a deeper analysis.

The term hayawan occurs in the Qur’anic text only once in sura XXIX, 64 with the meaning of “true life”: “It is the life to come that is the true life if they but knew it.”

In Edward William Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon *hayawan* is defined as a singular noun meaning “Any thing, or things, possessing animal life, whether rational or irrational”.

Jahiz himself confirmed our translation “Book of human beings” when he classifies them in animals and vegetals: and further divides them in three categories; 1. Animals, walking, that is men (nas); not carnivorous quadrupeds (bahá’il); carnivorous quadrupeds; 2. Birds that are carnivorous birds; not carnivorous birds, winged insects; 3. Not winged insects.

Another important distinction he made in *Kitab al-Hayawan* among human beings, which will be very important for our discussion, is the one based on language. He made a distinction between beings with articulated and intelligible language (tash), that is human beings, and beings with unarticulated and unintelligible language (a’jam), that is any being making obscure sounds, which are meaningless except for beings of the same kind (jinns). While drawing this distinction he underscored the superiority of Arab language and eloquence:

“A man is a being speaking a articulated, clear, intelligible language, no matter if he speaks Persian, Hindi or Greek. An Arab cannot understand the mutterings of a Byzantine just like a Byzantine cannot understand the eloquence of [Arabic] (I, 31-33]).”

Arabic language

In what may be described as one of the earliest comparative linguistic attempts, Jahiz wrote that whereas languages and ideas of non-Arabs had followed a process of immense meditation and long exercise of the mind, and rested heavily on studying books, Arabic language and thought, he said were uniquely spontaneous and were almost inspired. Words were at the Arab disposal once they wanted them, and were uttered in abundance without exercising any extraordinary effort. Arabs did not need to memorize the knowledge of others deliberately, nor had they to artificially model their speech in the form of those who preceded them. They transmitted what they naturally found palatable and close to their hearts and minds.

The Arabic expression, "al-bayan al-arabi", Jahiz added, "has no equal, and Arabic language has no parallel in its richness and wealth." This richness is attributed to Jahiz to an incomparable synonymy and derivative nature of Arabic. Jahiz wrote:

“The Arabs have been ‘more’ eloquent in their expression and they enjoyed a language which was ‘richer’ in vocabulary, ‘tenser’ and (uniquely) precise in word, the composition of its speech was ‘more varied’ and the application of proverbs which were in use therein were outstanding and more current”.

Another interesting point is Jahiz’s view of the relationship between Arabic and the Qur’an. Not only the Qur’an was divinely revealed, Arabic itself was also inspired. Adam is said to have been the first speaker of Arabic, this language that was exclusively endowed with a unique capacity to grow and increase in perfection and was enriched with unique incomparable features in order to allow it to demonstrate the miraculous difference between human and divine eloquences.

According to a Hashemite report, Jahiz said that outstanding Arabic was later initiated in the person of Isma’il who is said to have become an outstanding speaker of Arabic, not after proper instruction but because of a divine miracle that shifted his tongue and character to Arabic. That shift was a proof of the truth of his prophethood. So Isma’il stood in relation to his people in the same way Muhammad was to stand before Quraysh. In both instances the miracle was in
the sudden way both surpassed the native speakers of Arabic before them.

What happened between Isma'il's time and the pre-Qur'anic stage of Arabic maturity? Jahiz's answer is interesting, as it reflects a developmental outlook within the overall inspirational outlook to Arabic. In other words, Jahiz gives room for a human role in the journey undertaken by Arabic. According to Jahiz, Arabic was a bounty lent by God to the Arabs. It was God who provided the Arabs with the chance of exercising and experimenting with that bounty before the time came to reveal the difference between the human and Divine eloquencies of Arabic.

Until Arabic reached its pre-Qur'anic stage, Jahiz's account of the journey made by Arabic may hypothetically be sketched as follows:

1- Adam: first Divine inspiration of Arabic with potential for excellence which was not given to other languages known to Adam.

2- The Arabs: offered God's bounty to experiment and enrich it in Arabia.

3- Isma'il's outstanding Arabic in relation to the Arabic of the people around him.

4- Pre-Islamic Arabs: exercising with God's lent bounty until they produced an unprecedented literary output. Jahiz's rough estimation of the oldest poetry before Islam does not precede it by more than two hundred years. It is implied in Jahiz's attitude that Arabic had been undergoing a growing line of excellence which was proportional to its proximity to Islam.

This observation applied to all Arabs, initially the Northerners then followed by the Southerners who could not avoid joining the circle of Arabic due to the common geographic setting, and frequent inter marriages with the Northerners. As a matter of fact in Nabatean inscriptions such as En Avdat [one of two Arabic inscriptions written in the Nabatean alphabet, dating from the first century CE; the Narrana inscription, written 200 years later, is the other] and Narrana (4th century CE) we find, in the former, inscriptions of Arabic poetic verses in Nabatean characters [For (Ooboda) works without reward or favour; and he, when death tried to claim us, did not let it claim us, for when a wound (of course) fastened, he did not let us perish.]; in the latter the whole inscription in Arabic [This is the funerary monument of Imru'l-Qays, son of 'Amr, king of the Arabs; and [?] his title of honor was Master of Asad and Madhij]. And he subdued the Asad's, and they were overwhelmed together with their kings, and he put to flight Madhij thereafter, and came Driving them into the gates of Najran, the city of Shamar, and he subdued Ma'ad, and he dealt gently with the nobles Of the tribes, and appointed them viziers, and they became phyarchs for the Romans. And no king has equalled his achievements. Thereafter he died in the year 223 on the 7th day of Kusal. Oh the good fortune of those who were his friends.]. This meant that the language was shifting from Aramaic to Arabic, just like the writing was shifting towards Arabic. Even this time Jahiz was right!

5- Muhammad's outstanding Arabic in relation to the Arabic of his people; Muhammad's sudden excellence in Arabic, ranks after the Qur'an in the hierarchy of excellence.

6- Qur'an: The unsurpassable Qur'anic Arabic.

7- Post Islamic Arabic.

So what Jahiz believed to have occurred to Arabic in the meantime, is eventually evident in the superior literary status of its most notable clan, Quraysh. Jahiz's own description of the literary status of Quraysh and the Pre-Islamic Arabs sums up his view of Arabic mentioned above, that is of an inspired supervised Arabic.

Jahiz substantiates his original thesis of the divine origin of Arabic by making another comparative study among the Arabian tribes themselves. He wrote in Kitab al-Haya'ar:

"While some Arabian tribes had shared the same fertile geographical setting, they however exhibited different poetical output. Thus, there was no relation between the geographical setting and poetical output. Poety and power of expression, are due to "izma"

According to Jahiz the invisible caring hand of God was not confined to the Arabs alone, but was also responsible for the virtues of all other nations.
Owing to the superior feature of Arabic, the Arabs were elevated to a distinguished literary and socio-moral status among nations:

"Because of the eloquence of Arabic and the beauty of its expression, God sent His best Prophet amongst the Arabs, made his language Arabic and even revealed to him an Arabic Qur'an."

What is significant in Jahiz's view of Arabic is not just the linguistic aspects of Arabic but also the inseparable socio-moral dimensions. If the Arabs were to rise above the nations of the world, Arabic has been the mark and the cause of their excellence.

As the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, the Arabs were raised to be God's direct addressees, thanks to the (socio-)literary excellences He has provided. The Arabic language is superior to the languages of the world in the same way that the Qur'an is superior to the language of the Arabs.

Jahiz found the Qur'an to be magnificent in its amazing literary configuration, he said:

"The Qur'an differs from all the known rhymes of poetry and prose. It is a prose whose rhythm is not modelled on that of poetry or rhymed prose (sa'i) and whose configuration stands as a magnificent evidence and as a great Divine proof."

The underlying secret of the Qur'an, says Jahiz, lies in the very special and unprecedented composition of the very Arabic letters and words used by the Arabs. As in any masterpiece of art, the attention follows the way it is composed and assembled from the same raw material known to all. In spite of Jahiz's mu'azzilite position regarding man's great capacity of free will, it is only in this place that we find his view of human ability in relation to literary output and the inability to surpass the Qur'an.

Could he not have served the notion of jaz better without resorting to sa'fe, that is while still recognizing man's ability as continuously perfect and not turned away? The point was that while some maintained the notion of jaz, in their full recognition of man's undisputed free will in parallel with his inability to surpass the Qur'an, intellectuals like Jahiz thought it would show more respect for man's free will by assuming his established weakness vis-à-vis the Qur'an was not a malfunction of our perfect faculties but the result of a superior will that stopped them from so doing.

If Jahiz' resort to sa'fe appears to be an early compromise between reason and revelation, it was in fact a diplomatic call. He could continuously marvel that man's 'agl could have produced something like the Qur'an, had he been able to do so. Jahiz's view of sa'fe is therefore twofolded in its implication. It is first implying a sa'fe of capacity (divine intervention, man's ability being divinely incapacitated), hence leading to sa'fe of attention, will and desire.

In this respect he was following the position of his teacher, Ibrahim al-Nazzam.

But did Jahiz see the Qur'an as an obstacle to the future post-Qur'anic literary capacities of the Arabs? The answer is no. If Arabic was destined to grow before the Qur'an, its post-Qur'anic development cannot be denied. Arabic was not meant to be frozen in the literary forms of pre-Islamic Arabs. Post Qur'anic eloquence of Arabic was still possible, and Jahiz himself noted that some Arabic tribes reacted differently to the coming of Islam: a tribe like Banu Badi remained poetless while Banu al-Harith b. Ka'b produced famous Islamic poets, when they were not famous poetically before the advent of Islam.

Jahiz's views on Arabic should be fitted into their historical context as they initially reflect an intellectually curious search for the wisdom underlying the conditions that brought about the Qur'an in an Arabic dress. Hence, Jahiz may be credited for initiating such an analytical search into the distinctive features of pre-Islamic Arabic language and culture, and how they stand in comparison to the Qur'an and to all other languages and cultures, in the belief that there was no conflict between the "universality" of the Qur'an and its "particular" Arabic setting.

In his rational attempt to understand the harmonious relationship that existed between the Qur'an and the pre-Islamic language and culture, Jahiz at one point did say that Arabic enjoys a higher literary status than that of the other languages, simply because of the undeniable charismatic fact that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic. This position needs not necessarily implying a national prejudice by Jahiz towards the Arabs.

In my opinion, the notion of the superiority of Arabic to the other languages, outlined above, does not reflect the real and complete picture, because before Arabic happened to enjoy that status, it had to demonstrate its inferiority to the Qur'an. Similarly, had the Qur'an been revealed in Latin, all non-Latin languages would have been inferior to it, as Latin would be less superior to the revealed Latin. So before raising Arabic to an internationally comparative linguistic analysis, we have to remember the historical failure of the most eloquent Arabs to imitate the Qur'an stresses the permanent difference between human and Divine eloquences, between pre-Islamic Arabic and Qur'anic Arabic, which was left as a sign to attract the world via the Arabs to its content. As far as Jahiz's inspirational attitude to the origin of languages is concerned, one may raise the objection that if the Adam was equally the first speaker of languages, what was the special thing about Arabic? Because Arabic had been special since its inception in Adam, then this raises its status vis-à-vis other languages since its initiation. We may infer that out of all languages that had been revealed to Adam, Arabic was only language exclusively chosen by God to enjoy those innately incomparable superior features in order to fulfill its destined Qur'anic role i.e., in order to demonstrate miraculously the obvious difference between human and Divine eloquences.

Of course, languages other than Arabic were used by God and His prophets before Muhammad, but by assigning thecharismatically inspired features of...
Arabic to Adam’s time, we may also say that not even one of the languages revealed to those Prophets was intended to demonstrate the dimension Arabic had to convey. Previous prophetic messages were instead concerned with the content that could have been expressed in any language. The content of previous languages of revelation was stressed by external miracles which were outside the realm of human speech, but the content of the final revealed message was mainly stressed by its Divine and inimitable expression.

In short, Arabic had a special start in preparation for a special future function. That is why we have seen Jahiz’s explanation of the literary excellence of Arabs as being “almost inspirational”, i.e., drawing from the Divine pool, implying that it could not have been learnt or acquired. Similarly was the case with Adam, Isma’il and Muhammad, because perfection in Arabic eloquence can only be sought from the reservoirs of God whereby no one can rival Him in this respect. This outlook reflects another Mu’tazili way of expressing their concern for monotheism or Theology (Tasawwuf), uniqueness of power of speech of God (Rahmah), and in all aspects; a concern that sometimes grew out of its (Mu’tazili) proportions, and unintentionally bridged the gap with the Hanbalite’s or “Jabriite’s” concept of God, especially when one prominent member like al-Jahiz held that although it appears that man had had a share in the linguistic development undertaken by Arabic, it was in fact, Jahiz says, God who was the hidden and real architect of events, sole supervisor and unique perfector of Arabic.

Theory of translation

This is the same reason why Jahiz stressed the impossibility of translating Arabic poetry into another language. To use a modern expression he denies the possibility of a interlingual translation or translation proper (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other language). He also analyzed, in a very modern manner, the theory of translation. In Kitab al-Hayawan Jahiz wrote:

“The qualities of the eloquence (bayan) of the interpreter-translator have necessarily to be found in the translation itself, his knowledge has to correspond with a high skill in his translation. The translator has to know at the highest levels both the language of departure (luga hispanika) and the language of arrival (manqula, layhaha), his command of both languages must be perfect. Besides this, when the interpreter is bilingual (akallama bi-l-hisam) one of the two languages hurts the other; one attracts the other, it removes the other’s strength, it becomes an obstacle. […] the human being is naturally bestowed of a unique energy (quwwa), when he speaks more than one language, he discharges this energy in two directions. When he speaks more than two languages it is even worse”.

If in Jahiz’ opinion a good translation is almost impossible, when it comes to Arab poetry it is impossible at all.

“Some Indian works have been translated, some Greek aphorisms as well, some books about ethics and some Persian literature. Some have been improved by translation, some have remained the same. On the contrary if some wisdom (nilma) of Arabs were to be translated, that wonderful element that is rhythm (wazn) would disappear”.

Jahiz, one of the first Arab prose writers, pointed out that “poetry is young. The first ones to face it were Iru, al-Qayy, son of al-Huj and Muhyil, son of Rabi’a. […] Poetry is reserved only to Arabs and to the ones who speak Arabic language. It cannot be translated; it cannot be moved into another language. In another language, its order is lost, its rhythm is broken, its beauty disappears and aesthetic emotion dissolves” (Hayawan, I, 74).

Jahiz’ idea, even though it is strictly linked to the uniqueness of the Arabic language, is comparable to the modern theory of translation by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson. Because complete equivalence (in the sense of synonym or sameness) cannot take place in any of his categories, Jakobson declares that all poetic art is therefore technically untranslatable.

“Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting.”

What Jakobson is saying here is taken up again by Moulin, the French theorist, who perceives translation as a series of operations of which the starting point and the end product are significations and function within a given culture. So, for example, the English word pastru, if translated into Italian without regard for its significance, will not be able to perform its function of meaning within a sentence, even though there may be a dictionary ‘equivalent’, for pasta has a completely different associative field. In this case the translator has to resort to a combination of units in order to find an approximate equivalent. Jakobson gives the example of the Russian word yr (a food made of fermented pressed curds) which translates roughly into English as cottage cheese. In this case, Jakobson claims, the translation is only an inadequate interpretation of an alien code unit and equivalence is impossible.

Conclusions

In the 11th century, al-Khaz ib al-Baghdadi accused al-Jahiz of having plagiarised parts of his work from the Kitab al-Hayawan of Aristotle, but modern scholars have noted that there was only a limited Aristotelian influence in al-Jahiz’s work, and that al-Baghdadi may have been unacquainted with Aristotle’s work on the subject. In particular, there is no Aristotelian precedent for al-Jahiz’s ideas on topics such as natural selection, environmental determinism and food chains. Besides this we should never forget the importance and the uniqueness of Kitab al-Hayawan’s introduction.

ODE TO THE BOOK (Hayawan, I 38-42)

You blame the book itself But what a wonderful treasure it is! What independence leaves you! What a friend! How many muntions it gives you! How much information and what a marvelous view! What a leisure and what a joy! What a sweet and gentle festival when you are lonely! What a friend when you are in exile! It is near but at the same time something else, minister and guest at the same time! A book is a vase full of knowledge, a container overflowing with refinement, a cup of seriousness and fun. […] If you want to, you laugh at its jokes, at its anecdotes, at its original proposals otherwise you can be astonished at its curiosities, and odd and strange facts it tells. If you like it, its good words will take your mind off the problems otherwise you will be moved by its exhortations and preaches. No preacher could be more amusing than the book, no lecturer more passionate than the book, no ariosc more daring than the book, no dumber more “telling” […]

Nothing like the book can be at the same time doctor and nomad, Byzantine and Hindu, Persian and Greek, eternal and engendered, mortal and immortal? What else could be, like the book, the alpha and omega, too much and not enough, the hidden and the visible, the witness and the absent, the eminent and the humble, the consistent and the inconsistent, the form and its contrary, the gender and its opposite?

But let us go further, have you ever seen a garden which can be transported in a sleeve, an orchard on a stone-tablet, a being speaking on behalf of dead people and is an interpreter of living people, a member of your family who does not leave you fall asleep before you have fallen asleep, a being speaking only following your desires, who is silent as a tomb and keeps your secrets better than any unassuming secretary, who looks after your deposits better than anyone who says it is his job, who has a better memory than the most true Arabs […]?"
About the journal

Hadeeth al-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Ativar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Ativar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadeeth al-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Ativar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 16 got underway in October 2010 and, as with previous years, is presenting scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

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Dish carved from nephrite jade
(light greenish green with white blotches)
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