

THE LUMINOUS SHADOW OF SHEZAD DAWOOD

“He who taught the use of the pen, taught man that which he did not know” (*al-Qur’an*, 96: 4-5).

These are among the very first lines of the Qur’an, the Holy Book of the Muslims, revealed in oral form to the Prophet Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel. They make evident, from the start, the existence of two signs (and traditions) in the Islamic faith: orality, the word, recitation, but also the pen (for mystics, an Angel), the alphabet and writing as an inescapable teaching of God to humankind. A duality that must in no way be confused with ambiguity. Given these premises it is no surprise that calligraphy and writing have assumed a central (pre-eminent) role as means of expression in Islamic culture and art. Indeed I would say, and I am not the first to do so, that the supreme iconography of this civilization is its script, of ancient and noble Semitic origins. The whole of the art is made up of graphic elements that can be related to the lunar cycle of time represented by the twenty-eight letters of the alphabet and their correspondence with the stations of the moon. What is more: while we say alphabet (the first two letters of the Greek one) and Pinocchio had the abecedarium, what counts in Arabic is the *abjad* and the theory of numerology, which has quite a bit in common with the Kabala! Time that turns into writing. Through rules, which now have the weight of history behind them, laid down by the enlightened work of the great vizier Ibn Muqlah: in Baghdad, towards the end of the first millennium, he invented (in the classical etymological sense of the term) the geometric and mathematical rules and proportions that make the Arabic script – any script used to write Arabic or derived from it – particularly harmonious and balanced, even when some characters, like those of the Kufic style, appear fairly angular to us. Elevating the rule and yet breaking the symmetry: this has been the classic means of Islamic artistic expression in the various styles and periods of epigraphy.

Everything that has been said up to now can be considered almost obvious in relation to historical Islam. But we come now to the present and a phase in which the historic sensibilities related to the perception of the other, and of the self as well, are being put under enormous strain by a general irritation, often more of a feeling than a reality (and this has always been so, even if it was given a different name), but which through distorted perception becomes real and threatening. That is to say: we continue to theorize about clashes of civilizations and as a consequence some will be convinced that there are irreconcilable differences and that conflict is inevitable and, in the view of a few, desirable so long as we are stronger over here... In other words, *jinn* attack the organism when it is weak, tired and distracted; they are viruses – even mental viruses – and antibodies for them, if you like, exist. But we should not underestimate the ability of the *jinn* (which, in other contexts, we might call *devil*, *div*, glossing over – for heaven’s sake! – the common etymological root with the Sanskrit word *daeva*, *deity*) to focus his efforts on the organism that is most exposed and in the most critical state. Even if, leaving metaphor aside, in our state of bewildered astonishment we are unable to say, today, whether it is more a prerogative of the West or the East, although the Solomon who is dear to all the monotheistic religions would probably tell us that in reality the thing concerns everyone, and then, straining a little the words of E. Said, East and West do not even exist! The point, however, is the sensitive one, notwithstanding what the author believes, of the use of the Islamic faith in art. It should also be pointed out that in all this there has always been an unequivocal and, in my view, infallible compass: that of *respect*. Respect stems from the knowledge and the awareness that diversity does not permit and does not tolerate (zero tolerance!) any shortcut and any value judgement. No mechanism of faith is better than any other: anyone who approaches Islam honestly and sincerely, in this case with full respect, certainly cannot cause outrage (“oppression is worse than murder”), but is justified by the Word of God (and by more than a thousand years of tradition) in expressing himself. Namely: Shezad Dawood, a Pakistani (but also Indian and – why not? – European) who speaks and acts as an artist. Being or not being Muslim in this context is of little account, except to refine his sensibility as a man, not as a practitioner of art. For some time now (2008), there has been no such thing as contemporary Islamic art (one birth does not suffice to consider it such; to take an example, there may be some who argue that Andy Warhol can be categorized as a “Christian artist”, but even if this were so, would anyone be interested?). And so let’s clear the field of a label that in reality is highly reminiscent of a sort of ghetto and an induced marginality. For this work Shezad Dawood uses the repetition, three times, of a formula fundamental in Islamic culture, and not just its graphic art, the *shahada* (profession of faith), which declares: “there is no God but God” (*la illaha ila’llah*), omitting the part that refers to the Prophet. Curiously, but the historian’s trade relies on these tricks, as soon as I saw the work I was reminded of a great artist of the past (Gentile da Fabriano) who used those very Arabic words in the halo of the Virgin (clearly legible in one case, and with great verisimilitude in eight more!) to lend a touch of the exotic to his own profound conviction, or as

a now somewhat cryptic allusion. Here, obviously, the intention is quite different. What interests the artist is what is considered (G. Vercellin, *Istituzioni del mondo musulmano*, Turin, Einaudi 1996, p. 12) “the only true dogma of Islam”, and which begins, as it were, with a negation rather than an affirmation. The whole thing repeated three times: I do not know whether Dawood has read anything by Henry Corbin (such as *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press 1969), and through the historian/philosopher authors like Ibn al-‘Arabi himself or al-Ghazali, but it seems to me that he too is more a translator and interpreter at a very high level than a beneficiary of that penetrating Sufi analysis. The symbology of three (not in the sense of the Christian Trinity), but as mechanism of Creation, rather than of Hegelian banality. And light. “The light is impregnated with a shadow which is the glass itself. And the twofold implication of the divine Names must also be taken into account” (Corbin, cit. p. 192). Light as in one of the most famous and often quoted verses in the whole Qur’an (24: 35), which has admitted of some beautiful interpretations.

And so, again and to conclude, I don’t know whether our artist is conscious of all this; I do know, however, that what he has expressed is clear, is luminous, is universal. Said in all sincerity: if this brings down on us the *takfir* (anathema), it is because it is not possible to deny the wonder.

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