Introduction

At the end of the first part of al-Maʿarrī's *Epistle of Forgiveness* the author says that he has been "long-winded in this part. Now we shall turn to reply to the letter." In other words, Part One is merely the introduction to the proper answer to Ibn al-Qāriḥ's letter. This introduction is in fact what made the *Epistle* famous, the part that has received the lion's share and more of the attention of critics and translators. One is reminded of the even lengthier introduction that Ibn Khaldūn wrote several centuries later to his *History*: this *Muqaddimah* or *Introduction* has become a seminal text, one of the great achievements in the intellectual history of the world.

Part One of the *Epistle of Forgiveness* is a text about the idea of forgiveness, cast in the shape of an imaginary narrative in which the protagonist is, unusually, neither a fictional persona nor a thinly disguised version of the author, but the addressee and recipient of the *Epistle*, Ibn al-Qāriḥ, "the Sheikh." In Part Two[1] al-Maʿarrī turns directly to Ibn al-Qāriḥ's somewhat rambling letter, commenting on it point by point, topic by topic, in the order in which they appear in the letter. As a result, Part Two is equally rambling, jumping from item to item, without the overarching narrative and the more or less unified theme (in spite of all its digressions) of Part One.

One of al-Maʿarrī's prominent methods in responding to Ibn al-Qāriḥ's letter is to treat the points made by Ibn al-Qāriḥ with profound and pervading irony, for it is rather obvious that, just as in Part One, the writer is mocking his correspondent. This begins right at the start: when al-Maʿarrī declares the Sheikh to be free of hypocrisy we can be certain that he means exactly the opposite of what he is saying. Much of the rest of the point-by-point reply should be read in the same light. When he objects to the Sheikh's praise by playing down his own learning, one suspects that he was not unaware of his superior erudition. The clearest instance of mockery is the passage in which he ponders the Sheikh's potential prowess on the marriage market, if he were to seek a mature spouse in the prime of life. It is impossible to decide to what extent, if at all, the lengthy section on heresy and heretics is to be read as irony. Abū l-ʿAlāʾ is a master of dissembling.

Another conspicuous method of al-Maʿarrī in commenting is to take up a theme or even a word and toy with it, in a manner that evokes the well-known description of the sermons of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626); a "Scotish Lord," asked by King James I how he liked them, replied that[2]

> he was learned, but he played with his Text, as a Jack-an-apes does, who takes
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> up a thing and tosses and playes with it, and then he takes up another, and
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> playes a little with it. Here's a pretty thing, and there's a pretty thing!

A good example, albeit a rather extreme one, is Ibn al-Qāriḥ's little story about the eighty-three dinars that were stolen from him by his niece.[3] Abū l-ʿAlāʾ begins with congratulating the Sheikh on retrieving his money; then he embarks on a mock eulogy on these dinars in prose, quoting many verses and some anecdotes about dinars, and mentioning a few people called Dīnār, comparing the Sheikh's dinars favorably with all of these. Next he takes up their number, quoting verses and stories involving the number eighty, followed by general thoughts on gold, and finally about sisters, women, and kinship. Thus an incident that in Ibn al-Qāriḥ's Arabic is told in some forty words is blown up by our author to a passage of approximately 2,200 words. In all this he displays his usual stupendous erudition. No doubt the author's ostensible purpose is to honor the Sheikh, but the reader cannot escape the feeling that the real point is to flaunt his vast knowledge and often rather ponderous wit. Moreover, the hyperbolic descriptions and comparisons involving the Sheikh's coins can be read as a form of ironic mockery of the triviality of the incident. Another example of his playing with words is the passage in which he takes up the titles of the heretic Ibn al-Rāwandī's books. His *al-Dāmigh* (*The Brain-Basher*) will only bash the brains of its author, his *al-Tāj* (*The Crown*) is not even fit to be a sandal, and so on.

Potentially the most interesting part of al-Maʿarrī's reply is his reaction to the lengthy passage in Ibn al-Qāriḥ's letter about heretics in Islam, particularly in the light of the many accusations leveled at al-Maʿarrī himself on account of his numerous aberrant or even heretical statements. Alas, he does not discuss theology or doctrine. One could hardly expect him to defend any of the alleged heretics listed by Ibn al-Qāriḥ, but he does not even discuss or attack their views apart from condemning them in general and strong terms. The long section on heretics contains much that is interesting, but one searches in vain for the author's ideas that could be connected with the often startling utterances that can be found the poems of his *Luzūmiyyāt* collection. Most of his "refutation" of Ibn al-Rāwandī consists of a long and somewhat excruciating series of puns on the titles of Ibn al-Rāwandī's books, as mentioned above, in a passage full of prose

rhyme, without any comments on what these books actually contain.[4] It seems that Ibn al-Qāriḥ, with his insistence on the subject of heresy, wanted to provoke al-Maʿarrī. But the latter does not take the bait and carefully makes it clear from which heretical views he distances himself and presents himself as "orthodox."

We know nothing about Ibn al-Qāriḥ's reaction upon receiving the reply to his letter, so one can only speculate on the mixed feelings he may have had. No doubt he was honored by the extraordinary length of the epistle and the effort al-Maʿarrī bestowed on its composition. But unless he was wholly obtuse he cannot have been blind to the irony that pervades it.

In Part One we have attempted to render the author's prose rhyme in the English translation, wherever it occurred. In Part Two there is much more of it in the Arabic and we decided that it was impossible to imitate it, except sporadically. Al-Maʿarrī consistently employs "rich rhyme," involving two consonants rather than the usual one, which enables him to display his vast knowledge of obscure words. Translating such words and expressions is difficult enough; providing rhymes in addition is beyond the realm of the humanly possible without unacceptable sacrifices of the meaning. Led by his rhyming skill and obsession the author often makes strange connections, leaping from one concept to another, very remote idea. Readers of the English, not alerted by rhyme, will have to take this into account whenever the text looks somewhat strange. On some occasions a note explains that the rhyme lies behind the odd juxtaposition of ideas, for instance when al-Maʿarrī comes up with a "mewing cat" (*māghin*, §31.2.1) because, unsurprisingly, it is the only word he can think of that rhymes with "brain" (*dimāgh*).

Just as in Part One a lot of poetry is quoted, sometimes with brief comments on technical matters. However, lengthy passages on grammar or lexicography such as are found in Part One, the direct result of imagined discussions with poets and grammarians, are lacking in Part Two. An alphabetical index of the Arabic poetry contained in both volumes, with opening rhyme word, meter, number of lines, and poet for each verse quotation (all in Arabic), is provided at the end of this volume.

The text is often difficult and in need of much annotation to make it understandable to the reader. On several occasions we have acknowledged our ignorance. Extreme care should be taken in using Monteil's French translation, which seems to read well, being based on frequent guesswork, some of it inspired but very often wide of the mark. It is riddled with astonishing howlers.