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The Alhambra has been described as a “stone book,” “an especially sumptuous book,” even an “inhabitable book.”<sup>1</sup> If so, it is a book with most of its pages missing, and those that remain rebound in an order that reroutes the reader, just as the Patronato de la Alhambra sends modern-day tourists through the site by way of a path that is not only confounding but was impossible before the twentieth century. It is a book without a table of contents or any other prefatory or explicatory material to help us understand how it should be read. It is a book from a library long ago lost, for the buildings standing today are only a fraction of the enormous complex that once covered the site. It is a book written over so many times that it has become another book, for the original buildings were so fragile and so improbable in their conservation that virtually everything a visitor sees today is a modern reconstruction. It is a book with few readers, for even those visitors trained to read literary Arabic may feel shouted at by the endless repetition of slogans on its walls rather than invited to interpret the lines of poetry inscribed in plaster (figure 16.1).

The Alhambra is not a book. The metaphor is useful to understanding—reading—the Alhambra only if we reject it as misleading and use it instead to reorient ourselves. Thinking of the Alhambra as a book requires us to imagine standing arm in arm with Ferdinand and Isabella, whom history would come to know as *los reyes católicos* (the catholic monarchs) on January 2, 1492, looking north from the gates of the Alcazaba (from *al-qasbah*, or “walled fortress”) toward the rest of Spain and Europe and therefore toward the future of the printed book, which had been known in Spain for less than a generation. Despite their later reputation as champions of the faith in both the Old World and the New, Ferdinand and Isabella showed up to occupy the Alhambra wearing Moorish garb.<sup>2</sup> They did not stand at the gates of the Alcazaba to look out at the world but passed through them to occupy a fortress and palace already long familiar since the architecture of their Spain had also been built by Muslims. Like the Alhambra itself, they looked not to the future but to the past and to the east. To understand the significance of this building and the meaning of the writing on its walls, we must do the same.



**16.1.**

The Mirador of Daraxa once encouraged the reader of the verse around its sill to gaze out over the lands ruled by the Nasrids, but today that view is blocked by a building constructed after the Christian conquest. Photograph by the author. Permission granted by Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife.

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When Ferdinand and Isabella took possession of the Alhambra, it had already long been an expression of nostalgia. Although the monarchs may have had little or no sense of their significance, the lines of poetry they saw on the walls after they took the keys from Muhammad XII (known to the Castilians as Boabdil or El Chico [the little one]), the last Nasrid ruler, had been there at least a century, composed by the minister-poets Ibn al-Jayyab (1274–1348), Ibn al-Khatib (1313–75), and Ibn Zamrak (1333–93).<sup>3</sup> Because we have no surviving historical documents in any language describing the Alhambra between Ibn al-Khatib's mid- to late fourteenth-century *Al-Ihatah fi akhbar Gharnatah* (often translated as *History of Granada* but more precisely as the *Comprehensive Annals of Granada*) and the triumphalist sixteenth-century Castilian chronicles, we can't know for sure if the poetry remained unchanged on the walls because no one wished to see it replaced, because the interminable political violence of the period precluded any thought of redecoration, because there had been a decline in the craft of the artisans who would have been responsi-

ble for inscribing new verse, because the final century of the Nasrids was without poetry (we know of almost no Andalusí poetry after Ibn Zamrak), or because the circumstances of the kingdom had become so straitened that even the relatively cheap decorative material plaster was no longer affordable. Even when Ibn Zamrak's verses were new, they must have already seemed old, for both his poetry and prose were "archaicizing, glosses on glosses, commentaries, erudition; reiteration . . . of topics and clichés that had come before."<sup>4</sup> Although we might not agree with García Gómez that Ibn Zamrak suffered from "professional cynicism," he does amply prove in his seminal study of the poet that his poetry becomes "a sort of intellectual algebra" that uses reductionist metaphor to both polish and impoverish the reality around it. (García Gómez's citation and translation of three different poems by Ibn Zamrak that compare three different things—a giraffe, a pile of dead game after a royal hunt, and racing horses—to jonquils blooming among anemones is a delicious example of critical derision.)<sup>5</sup> By the fourteenth century in Granada the life had already gone out of poetry; it might as well go up on the walls and lose itself among the geometric shapes of the ceramic tiles and textiles (a surprising number of which are extant although not in situ) and the stylized tendrils of the plasterwork entangled with the calligraphy.<sup>6</sup>

It is common in Alhambra studies to note that, although the building's stylistic peculiarities have, since the early nineteenth century, become architectural shorthand for the Arab world and Islamic culture, it is unique today and almost certainly was in the fifteenth century as well. As Oleg Grabar points out, "the use of poetical inscriptions on architecture is not unique to the Alhambra, but . . . is exceedingly rare before the fourteenth century and especially in the Mediterranean world. . . . Poetical motifs became fairly common on Iranian artifacts at about the same time; but other than the Alhambra no example of it is known in the Muslim world west of the Euphrates until quite late in pre-modern times."<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that the Alhambra appears on the stage of architectural history without precedent or analogy but that, like another enigmatic example of Arabic architecture, the late seventh-century Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, whose context has been lost and which appears to be *sui generis*, its meaning is always just beyond our grasp. The accident of the Alhambra's preservation has made it normative, when in fact its singularity may have contributed to its preservation.

Not, strictly speaking, a mosque but a shrine, the Dome of the Rock is notable for the lengthy inscriptions in mosaic that run above the arcades of the octagonal building. They appear to be verses from the Qur'an interspersed with pious declarations expressed in the same sort of language. There has been speculation

that the discrepancies between the text on the walls of the Dome of the Rock and the received text of the Qur'an that we have today indicate the existence of alternate versions of the Qur'an or that its text had not yet been fixed. Although this may be true, it is also possible that the inscriptions were not conceived as citations in the strict sense. They may have been "simply parallel statements of a religious nature that would have been part and parcel of a collective expression of beliefs without necessary tie to the Revelation itself."<sup>8</sup> In other words, just as it is misleading to think of the Alhambra as a book, it may be misleading to think of the inscriptions on the walls of the Dome of the Rock as intended to represent the Qur'an. Although we now have evidence (in the form of Yemeni parchment fragments) of Qur'an manuscripts from roughly the same period as the construction of the Dome of the Rock, that does not mean we should assume that the inscriptions were intended to represent them, for we cannot be sure how widespread was the manuscripts' dissemination or exactly what their function was meant to be in a society whose nearly every member was illiterate. Some of the discrepancies—such as "changes from the first to the third person in quoting divine pronouncements about Jesus"—may result from an understanding that a building's voice functions differently from a book's (or a recitation's, for the Qur'an would have been considered in its orally transmitted form as well).<sup>9</sup> We know this from studies of the Alhambra because some of its poetic inscriptions are routinely understood as speaking in the voice of the building itself. Perhaps the builders of the Dome of the Rock did not want to ascribe the words of God to a human structure.

The only other famous Arab building that comes to mind as a potential model for the Alhambra is even older than the Dome of the Rock and no longer extant (and perhaps was never extant). According to a persistent but certainly apocryphal tradition, before the sending down of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, every year the most powerful tribes of Arabia met for a series of poetry tournaments in or near Mecca. The best poems were then hung on the walls of the sanctuary of the Kaaba, the enormous black stone that even today is at the center of the most holy site of Islam. Although this tradition is still widely believed (and is taught to schoolchildren across the Arab world), most scholars believe that it is a relatively late invention. Our first textual evidence dates from the tenth century, in *Iqd al-Farid* (The Incomparable Necklace), an anthology of poems and belles-lettres collected by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih of Cordoba, the most powerful, important, and culturally productive city of al-Andalus throughout its nine centuries of existence. It may simply be a coincidence that the earliest mention of this tradition is found in an Andalusian manuscript, but it does at least suggest that the notion of

decorating a building with the greatest poems may have long been part of the Islamic cultural unconscious of Iberia in a way it may not have been elsewhere in the Arab world.

In both these examples, what is most striking is the uneasiness that accompanies visible language in sacred space. The citations from the Qur'an in the Dome of the Rock are not quite citations, are not quite in the same voice as the very similar verses of the holy book, while the holiest place of Islam is retroactively assigned the role of repository for the greatest verses of pre-Islamic poetry despite the Qur'an's repeated insistence that it is not poetry and Muhammad is not a poet.<sup>10</sup> There is a tangle of unresolved contradictions at the origins of both Islam and Arabic literature that remains just on the other side of retrievable historical knowledge. The Qur'an banishes poetry from the center of Arab culture and rejects it as the source of knowledge and meaning in the life of the Arab, yet by the tenth century in Cordoba this poetry had been resacralized by its return to the holiest place of Islam, even if that return is slightly off-centered by its projection to the final years just before the Qur'an's appearance. I suggest that the Alhambra is a physical manifestation of the tension between poetry and Qur'an and represents yet another attempt to resolve it as al-Andalus entered into its final and splendid decline. To fully understand this, we need to take a further step back into the history of Arabic literature and its relationship to the birth of Islam. We will then be able to read the Alhambra not as a book but as a literate Andalus Arab would have read it.

Pre-Islamic poetry was always written down and never written down. By this I mean that poetry composed before the sending down of the Qur'an was by definition composed, presented, and transmitted orally by poets and reciters who could not read or write. Since there are no unbroken lines of oral transmission from the sixth and seventh centuries to the present, however, all extant pre-Islamic poetry was written down, primarily, according to tradition, in the eighth and ninth centuries by scholars from Basra and Kufa who went out into the desert to listen to rhapsodes (*ruwat*) recite poems of earlier times. Some modern scholars, notoriously Taha Husayn in his 1925 book *Fi shi'r al-jahili* (On the Poetry of the Age of Ignorance), claim that pre-Islamic poetry was forged by these eighth- and ninth-century scholars and that either there was never any such thing as pre-Islamic poetry or that whatever poetry we now have was merely a tiny fraction of all the poetry composed in previous centuries and was probably greatly transformed before it was collected and transcribed. While I believe that Husayn's claims of forgery are extreme and unsubstantiated (it would have required a great deal of effort to perpetrate fraud on the Arab people without leaving any trace of the conspiracy), I am skeptical that

an entire tradition survived completely unchanged until it was rediscovered more than a century later. Whether pre-Islamic poetry as we know it today is a pristine survivor of a world that did not yet know Islam or is heavily marked by the concerns of those Muslim scholars who transcribed it, it is clear that accounts of early Islam as well as accounts of pre-Islamic poetry share an anxiety about (il)literacy and the written word and that this anxiety manifests itself centuries later in the Alhambra and even later in discussions of the Alhambra among scholars today.

Most Muslims today believe that Muhammad was illiterate, although it makes little sense that a seventh-century Meccan merchant would have been unable to read or write. Most unbelievers reading the Qur'an for the first time are surprised to discover how reticent the text is about Muhammad and his life; but the belief that he was illiterate is based solely on 7:157, which describes the prophet as *ummi*, a word whose meaning has been lost, although it is almost universally glossed in the great medieval commentaries as "illiterate." Richard Bell has convincingly demolished this interpretation by comparing this verse with other occurrences of the word in the Qur'an. He insists that *ummi* means non-Jewish or Gentile.<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested that Muhammad's putative illiteracy makes the composition and transmission of the Qur'an seem even more miraculous. More to the point for this essay, it also makes Muhammad more like a pre-Islamic poet and, not incidentally, more like the first king of the Nasrid line in Granada. According to Ibn al-Khatib, the founder of the Nasrid dynasty, Ibn Nasr was "an illiterate man who wore sandals and coarse cloth, and came from a long line of farmers based in the insignificant small town of Arjona in Jaén province."<sup>12</sup> It is astonishing that illiterate poets composed poems of great beauty and complexity that remain the standard for eloquence in Arabic literature today, just as it is astonishing (if one believes) that an illiterate man stands at the origin of a text-obsessed religion that today has more than 1 billion believers (most of whom cannot truly read the Qur'an, or at least cannot decipher its meaning by looking at the text, although a great many can read it aloud for the pleasure of its sounds alone), just as it is astonishing that an illiterate and insignificant man in 1238 (two years after the fall of Cordoba to the Christians) founded a dynasty that clung to a foothold on the Iberian Peninsula until the year that Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas. We might add to all this astonishment over illiteracy Robert Irwin's speculation that not only the architects but the artisans responsible for creating the calligraphy out of plaster were illiterate.<sup>13</sup> Not only the Qur'an but the survival of pre-Islamic poetry and the astonishing walls of words of the Alhambra now seem miraculous against the context of near-universal illiteracy.

The illiterate composer of the pre-Islamic *qasida*, the most im-

portant and prestigious genre of Arabic poetry until the twentieth century, always begins his poem with a *nasib*, an evocation of his attempt to rediscover the traces of the abandoned encampments of his lost beloved. The poet attempts to read in the world signs barely visible—long-ago desiccated dung of camels and flocks of sheep or ashes from campfires—that are difficult to distinguish from the usual markings of the natural world. When he comes across something he believes to have belonged to or to have been marked by the tribe of his beloved, a series of memories are unleashed and the poet is able to continue singing of his beloved's life as well as his own. One of the most famous of the *mu'allaqat* (qasidas supposedly hung around the Kaaba) is by Labid, an illiterate pre-Islamic poet who lived long enough to convert to Islam (but not, apparently, long enough to learn to read). It begins:

Effaced are the abodes, their positions, their sites  
at Mina, Ghawl and Rijam now deserted;  
And so are the torrent channels of Rayyan's traces laid bare,  
just as their stones entrust writings to a smooth surface.  
As for the black encampment, since the time of their people  
the annual pilgrimage cycles have been completed, sacred and  
profane months elapsed.  
They received the spring rain of the stars; thundershowers,  
their downpour and their drizzle, fell on them.  
From each cloud of night and morning incessant rain,  
from each evening cloud grumbling replies.  
Ayhuqan plants leafed and on two sides of the valley  
female gazelles and ostriches bore young.  
And the oryx cows, recently calved,  
stand over their young, assembled in the vast plain.  
The floods uncovered the ruins as if they were  
writings whose texts their pens renew;  
Or the repeating of the tattooer, her indigo  
sprinkled in circles above which the tattooing appears.  
I stopped, questioning them, but how do we question  
rocks deaf and dumb, forever in one place, their words indistinct? <sup>14</sup>

As Suzanne Stetkevych has pointed out, the poet tells us three times “that the passage of time and ravages of nature have only rendered the message all the more permanent.”<sup>15</sup> The passing of time makes the signs of the natural world ever more distinct. The dry beds of the Rayyan are like stones with writing on them. The floods uncover the ruins rather than sweep them away, as if they are writing over the same text to darken the markings. Or the floods are like a tattooer going over the tattoo again. To a literate culture like our own, this would seem to mean that nature is making its signs easier for us to



read, but for the illiterate poet attempting to read the natural world (or perhaps read himself and his beloved into it) the written word means just the opposite. The signs are ever clearer but remain just as hard to decipher, until out of sheer frustration the poet in search of the traces of the abandoned encampments that will unleash the erotic memories he needs to complete the composition of his poem questions the rocks. They are as unanswering—and, more fundamentally, unhearing—as the written word.

Part of the point of the opening of Labid's poem seems to be that making language visible, and then ever more distinct, does not necessarily make it comprehensible.<sup>16</sup> Stetkevych interprets the writing on the rocks as inscriptions of earlier and disappeared civilizations that "non-literate" Bedouins "so often encountered."<sup>17</sup> If she is right (and I have no reason to doubt her erudition), it makes for a deliciously irrelevant and anachronistic comparison with the hordes of tourists who today march through the Alhambra unable to read the calligraphy, but able to identify it thanks to the countless reapplications of plaster to restore its legibility. Just as Labid failed to read the writing on the rocks, the tourists fail to read the writing on the walls. It would have been odd indeed for these pre-Islamic verses to have been hung about the Kaaba as just so much frippery that would have said as little to the poet as the flood-scoured rocks he questioned in vain.

Unlike the stones of Labid's poem, the walls of the Alhambra speak in many voices—for those who are able to read the words aloud. The first word of the Qur'an sent down to Muhammad was "iqra!" which can mean either "Read!" or "Recite!"<sup>18</sup> Although Muhammad's putative illiteracy would, of course, lead us to believe that recitation rather than reading is intended, the Qur'an itself is somewhat more ambiguous about what form it takes. It sometimes alludes to itself as something to be said, ordering Muhammad, "Qul!" (Say!), while at other times it describes itself as a "kitab" (something written down). In Muslim practice, the Qur'an itself reattaches the spoken to the written because it exists equally in both forms, ending the unhappy disjunction between the written and spoken we find in Labid's poem. Because both the Qur'an and pre-Islamic poetry were written down primarily to be read aloud (or as an aid to recitation) rather than read silently, I wonder if the literate visitor to the Alhambra was not often moved to begin speaking what he read on the walls, as if written language itself were always imperative in Arab culture and also more profoundly attached to the spoken word than in twenty-first-century Europe and North America. It is difficult for me to imagine the Alhambra silent when the very walls seem to shout deafeningly. But what exactly would the literate visitor have chosen to read aloud?

Because "la ghalib ila allah" (there is no victor but God) is repeated over and over on the walls of virtually every room of the complex, its



**16.2.**

A line of poetry in plaster on the wall of the Patio of the Arrayanes is surrounded by stylized representations of vegetation and various iterations of the Nasrid slogan “There is no victor but God.” Photograph by the author. Permission granted by Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife.

sheer omnipresence causes it to disappear into the background (figure 16.2). So merely decorative did it become that, when the Christian monarchs of Castile decided to redecorate their own palace, the Alcazar of Seville, with an eye to the Alhambra, they, too, slapped the same plaster slogan on their walls.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to imagine that they intended to adopt the motto of their Nasrid enemies, although the victory that Muhammad I was celebrating (or, according to the story, was ascribing to God rather than to himself) was his participation in the 1248 Christian conquest of Muslim Seville, so there is plenty of irony or cynicism to go around. In any case, only a madman would have run around the palaces of the Alhambra parroting, “There is no victor but God, there is no victor but God.”

Far more interesting than the cynical ruler’s motto made decorative are the thirty-one poems on the walls, twenty-five of which “refer directly to the architecture on which they were written,” as D. Fairchild Ruggles has pointed out.<sup>20</sup> Eleven of these “employ the first-person voice in which the architecture seems spontaneously to

speak.” Individual architectural elements are given voice, saying things such as “I am the garden which beauty adorns” and “I am a mihrab.”<sup>21</sup> The literate visitor would have spoken the building’s own thoughts about itself aloud. In one of the loveliest examples, on either side of the window of the ornately decorated Mirador Daraxa, which used to look out over all Granada before a building was constructed in front of it, we read:

I’ve attained the utmost in charm and beauty  
so that the stars at the farthest horizon seek to borrow them.  
I of this garden am the delighted eye,  
the pupil of which is truly that of the lord. . . .  
Through me is manifest the entire capital of the realm,  
seen clearly from the caliphal throne.<sup>22</sup>

As we can see from the illustration (see again figure 16.1), even the most perspicacious of visitors would have had some difficulty in distinguishing the lines of poetry from the surrounding geometrical designs on the tiles and from the stylized representations of leaves and tendrils. At this moment, it seems to me, the reader-visitor is not unlike the pre-Islamic poet looking for traces of human activity among the all-too-similar signs of the natural world. Once the lines of poetry are distinguished from the background decoration, the poem can be read and the experience it promises lived. The literate visitor reads aloud and then not only takes on the voice of the building but is guided into assuming the position of the ruler of Granada himself. In the act of recitation, the visitor becomes the poet, the building and the king all at once, just as the pious Muslim reciting the Qur’an hears spoken through him the voice of countless other believers, the voice of the Prophet Muhammad, and even of God Himself. This is a far richer way of living the Alhambra than the metaphor of palace-as-book promised us.

## Notes

1. Robert Irwin, *The Alhambra* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 88, 119; Michael Jacobs, *Alhambra* (London: Lincoln, 2000), 77. Place names and other terms have been transliterated into Arabic when necessary using a simplified system without the usual bars and dots to indicate either long vowels or consonant sounds that do not exist in English. Citations from the Qur’an are from *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. Arthur John Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All other translations from Arabic are my own.

2. María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (New York: Little, Brown, 2002), 245.

3. D. Fairchild Ruggles, “The Eye of Sovereignty: Poetry and Vision in the Alhambra’s Lindaraja Mirador,” *Gesta* 36, no. 2 (1997): 185.

4. Emilio García Gómez, *Ibn Zamrak. El poeta de la Alhambra* (Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra, 1975), 25.
5. *Ibid.*, 88–89.
6. Irwin, *The Alhambra*, 33. *Editors' note*: Compare the effects of this entanglement with Cynthia Hahn's analysis of the difficulties of reading represented by the entwining of figures in foliage in the Book of Kells.
7. Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 101.
8. Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 63.
9. *Ibid.*, 63.
10. The Qur'an distinguishes itself from poetry in a variety of ways. Sometimes it insists on its clarity while denying that it is poetry: "We have not taught him poetry; it is not seemly for him. It is only a Remembrance and a Clear Koran" (36:69). "And the poets," the Qur'an tells us in a *surah* (chapter) titled, appropriately enough, "The Poets," "the perverse follow them; hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley and how they say that which they do not?" (26:224–25). The Qur'an is "the speech of a noble Messenger" and "not the speech of a poet" (59:40–41). There are many reasons that the Qur'an does not want to be considered poetry and does not want Muhammad to be considered a poet, although the constellation of words related to *poem* in Arabic reveal the oddity of the Qur'an's denigration of poetry in an Arabic cultural context. The poem (*shi'r*) is composed by a poet (*sha'ir*) who is aware and knowing (*yash'uru*). While poetry and poets earn six references in the Qur'an, the related verb for awareness and knowing merits twenty-five but always in the negative. In the Qur'an poetry and the awareness/knowingness from which poetry arises in the pre-Islamic Arab context are always about *unawareness*.
11. Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Koran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 34.
12. Jacobs, *Alhambra*, 25.
13. Irwin, *The Alhambra*, 100.
14. Richard Serrano, *Neither a Borrower: Forging Traditions in French, Chinese, and Arabic Poetry* (Oxford: Legenda, 2002), 29.
15. Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 20.
16. *Editors' note*: See the very different post-Enlightenment perspective on visibility and comprehension presented in the essay by Lorraine Piroux.
17. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 22.
18. The *surahs* of the Qur'an are not organized chronologically but roughly from the longest to the shortest. According to tradition, the earlier *surahs* tended to be shorter, so they ended up at the back of the book.
19. Irwin, *The Alhambra*, 77.
20. Ruggles, "The Eye of Sovereignty," 187.
21. *Ibid.*
22. These are lines 1, 2, and 6 of a twelve-line poem. I have used the recension of Gabriel García Gómez in his *Poemas árabes en los muros y fuentes de la Alhambra* (Madrid: Instituto Egipcio de Estudios Islámicos, 1985), 124–28.

