

Unwinding the Threads of Western Discourse(s) about Islam and the Orient: an investigation of Washington Irving's "*Life of Mahomet*"

GUENDOUZI Amar
(University of Tizi-ouzou)

This paper is a tentative interdisciplinary assessment of one of the early American biographies of the Prophet Mohammed, namely Washington Irving's *Life of Mahomet* (1949)²⁷. Notwithstanding the broad scope and interest of Interdisciplinarity and its suitability (desirability?) to the investigation of any academic subject, the choice of this approach as an analytical paradigm may also be vindicated on at least three other grounds: the author, the work and its critical reception.

To begin with the first of the three, Irving is the early product of the American Literary Renaissance, well known for his versatile approach to writing, in which the humorous was often blended with the serious and scholarly, the hagiographical with the historical and biographical, the American with the Continental (mainly English) and Oriental, the sympathetic with the polemical. Unwinding the different threads of his discourse is therefore a difficult task, which cannot accommodate traditional historicist and/or literary approaches, which are too focused to offer any holistic view of the subject under study. *Life of Mahomet*²⁸ reflects the versatile and cosmopolitan spirit of its

²⁷ Irving, Washington. *Life of Mohammed*. Ed. Charles Getchell. Ipswich: The Ipswich Press, 1989. Subsequent references to this work will be indicated between brackets within the body of the text.

²⁸ The writing of *Life of Mahomet* spanned almost three decades, long enough for Irving to collect and assimilate enough documents available on the life of the Prophet in the European languages he mastered. The manuscript was ready for publication after Irving's first sojourn in Spain in 1829, but was not sent for print. Irving revised it and submitted it again to his publisher in 1832 under the title "The Legendary Life of Mahomet", but when they failed to reach an agreement over its publication, he withdrew it to remain unpublished for almost two decades. Meanwhile, Irving served a second time in Spain, this time as a U. S. minister, from

author as well as his writing ambitions. In addition to being a piece of historical writing rooted in the genre of biography, it is also an intellectual endeavour which borrows from different traditions of thought and sensibilities, such as the discourse of Orientalism, Christian anti-Islamic polemic, Romantic aesthetics, and Enlightenment scepticism. The fact that Irving's work is traversed and permeated by all these stream of thoughts led to its controversial reception by critics. Indeed, even if *Life of Mahomet* was still reprinted today to offer English-speaking audiences insights into the life of the Arabian prophet and excursions into ancient Arabia, its assessment would still be mixed: while some critics would praise it as a lively portrayal of the character and deeds of the Prophet, others would criticise its "levity" towards its subject and its prejudiced point of view.

In the Preface, Irving describes his recreation of the Arabian Prophet's life in the following words: "It [*Life of Mahomet*] bears the type of a work intended for a Family Library, [... whose aim is] to digest into an easy, perspicuous and flowing narrative the admitted facts concerning Mahomet, together with such legends and traditions as have been wrought into the whole system of oriental literature." This statement may point to a certain lack of ambition on the part of the author/biographer. However, this limitation has not prevented some (Western) critics to extol Irving's narrative and to laud its merit. For example, Raphael Patai, an American orientalist, author of the notoriously controversial *The Arab Mind*, finds that, in his book, "Irving painted a most prepossessing picture of Mohammed –a picture that even today, a century and a half later, we can still find attractive, instructive and appealing." ("Introduction"). After Patai, Timothy Marr, who has carried out an in-depth analysis of Islamic Orientalism in American literature of the mid-nineteenth century, affirms that "Irving transcended the image of Islam as antichristian despotism in his works and celebrated instead [...] the prophet Mohammed (and what he called in his revisionist biography *Mahomet and his Successors* "the enigmatical career of this extraordinary man")." (2006: 222). Patai and Marr are two distinguished examples of sympathetic reception to Irving's representation of the prophet of

1842 to 1846, and after his return to America he published *Life of Mahomet* in a two-volume work entitled *Mahomet and His Successors*, in 1849.

Islam in the West. Nonetheless, *Life of Mahomet* remains deeply controversial among critics, since there are also numerous scholars who voiced their disappointment at some of the book's theses and statements. Farida Hellal, an Algerian academic, in her paper "Imaginary Flights, Contextual Determinisms in American Romanticism: Washington Irving in New Historicist Perspective," is a case in point.

Hellal has illustrated some major "flaws" and "discrepancies" at the heart of Irving's discourse on the Islamic culture and religion; flaws and discrepancies that were the products of the interaction of his text with his context and that have often been "glossed over" or simply "rationalized" in the course of American intellectual history. "Irving," the Algerian academic contends, "often associates accounts of Moslem struggle with evocations of fanaticism and fatalism, as if *Mahomet and His Successors* was not a historical enterprise but a "sociological" endeavour aimed at imposing a theory about Islamic history and culture" (58-9). The endeavour to impose a theory about the history and culture of Islam is an Orientalist turn of mind that betrays the racial bias of Irving's work and its cultural hegemonic pretensions. This bias fuels the controversy over the merit of *Life of Mahomet*, and prompts an interdisciplinary assessment that is more likely to assess fairly the overall achievement of Irving's work and to free it from the critical binary paradigm within which it is confined.

To this end, this paper will explore and assess four aspects of *Life of Mahomet*: one, its belonging to the generic territory of biographies; two, its connections with the age-old Christian anti-Islamic polemic; three, the influence of the Orientalist ethos and writing praxis on its narrative discourse; four, its indebtedness to the Romantic aesthetics of his age. The conclusion will attempt a synthesis of the findings reached after every discussion and will stress the merit that can be gained after reading this biography.

I- *Life of Mahomet* and the Practice of Biography

The purpose of this section is not to investigate the extent to which *Life of Mahomet* complies with the genre of biography as it developed during Irving's lifetime. This task will require a paper of its own. My purpose is rather much limited. It consists of classifying this book in accordance with James L. Clifford's taxonomy, having as a

criteria Irving's own point of view regarding the practice of biography, the proportions in the narrative of both objectivity and subjectivity, on the one hand, and fiction and facts, on the other, and, finally, the kinds of knowledge involved in his narrative. These criteria enabled Clifford to distinguish between five kinds of biography, which are listed and explained by Catherine N. Parke:

- 1- the "objective" biography which, though it cannot entirely omit subjective choices [...] attempts to keep them to a minimum;
- 2- the "scholarly-historical" biography, characterized by the "careful use of selected facts, strung together in chronological order, with some historical background;
- 3- the "artistic-scholarly" biography, for which the author does all the homework required for scholarly-historical biography but presents these materials "in the liveliest and most interesting manner possible" while not altering or adding to the facts;
- 4- the "narrative" biography, for which the author collects all the evidence and "turns it into a running narrative, almost fictional in form", though still not adding materials;
- 5- "fictional" biography, for which the author relies on secondary sources and treats the life of the historical subject as a novelist would treat a character, adding and inventing as the author sees fit for the effects she [sic] is trying to create. (quoted in Parke C: 2002: 29-30)

Life of Mahomet falls in the fourth kind, the narrative biography, which abides by the authenticity of its data and reads like a work of fiction. However, assessed through the norm of authenticity, it proves terribly deficient. Keeping in mind Irving's statement concerning his intentions in writing the life history of the Prophet, where he declares that his objective was "to digest into an easy, perspicuous and flowing narrative the **admitted facts concerning Mahomet**", (my emphasis), one wonders the extent to which he remained faithful to the purpose that he set himself to. In fact, many chapters, events and assertions in his book seem at odds with the historicity of Mohammed's life. Let me mention some examples:

- a- His first Chapter "Arabia and the Arabs" is more historiography than fact. His main sources in the composition of this chapter remain the Bible and Christian historiography.
- b- The historicity of many events mentioned in his book is doubtful. For example, speaking of the marriage of Abdallah, the Prophet's father,

he writes: “on the night of his marriage with Amina, two hundred virgins of the tribe of Koreish died of broken hearts”. I doubt that any traditional Moslem scholar ever reported such an event.

c- More serious, pernicious I dare say, is his account of the Prophet’s marriage with Zeineb. Irving strips it out of the historical and social context in which both the Koran and Moslem traditional accounts locate it and presents it in the form of a wild passion overtaking the Prophet who, thus led by uncontrollable love, sacrifices his son-in-law to marry his wife.

All these examples testify to Irving’s breaking away from the requirements of narrative biography, a genre that never compromises the accuracy and veracity of its original material. It is true that Irving also stated that he also consciously incorporated in his work “such legends and traditions as have been wrought into the whole system of oriental literature”. But then how did he manage to reconcile facts and legends without breaching the very standards of the genre in which he was operating? Actually, his breaking away from both the historicity of the Prophet’s life story and the scholarly demands imposed by the type of narrative biography is aggravated by two other facts in Irving’s intellectual career and achievements. First, Irving was an active reader of history books (such as Lord Gibbons’ *The History of the Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire*), which means that he could have cared for the historicity of his narrative. Second, he was a producer of historical biographies, such as *Life of Washington* (1859), in which history acquires all its meaning, and is never sacrificed at the altar of story-telling. Why then did he leisurely fuse fact and fiction, history and imagination in *Life of Mahomet*? And why didn’t he write the biography of the Prophet of Islam in the same vein as that of the first American President?

II- *Life of Mahomet* as a Christian Pamphlet

The pamphlet is the form that took most writings about the Prophet Mohammed since the Crusades, because this genre enabled Latin Christian writers to freely air their polemic about Islam, its holy book, and its prophet. After the Renaissance, the same genre continued to be used to speak about the same subject. However, thanks to the revolution of ideas that took place during the Enlightenment period, some writers started to slightly modify their points of view by questioning the assumptions held by the early Latin polemicists,

assumptions which were mostly “misapprehension and misrepresentation” (Daniel 12). This is why, depending on their attitude towards the Prophet, two kinds of pamphlets developed during the Enlightenment: the intolerant and the sympathetic. The former attacked the Prophet and considered him a pseudo-prophet, an impostor, whereas the latter vindicated his religion and showed consideration towards his mission²⁹. *Life of Mahomet* is often classified in the second category. In my view, this classification should be assessed.

Even though written in a narrative form that arranges the events of the Prophet’s life as they happened from his birth till his death, *Life of Mahomet* does not disregard the tradition of the pamphlet, since its last chapter “Person and Character of Mohammed and Speculations on his Prophetic Career” borrows the licence of this genre’s mode of writing. In this chapter, Irving feels compelled to raise the issue of Mohammad’s prophetic mission and asks: “the question now occurs, was he [the Prophet] the unprincipled impostor that has been represented? Were all his visions and revelations deliberate falsehoods, and was his whole system a tissue of deceit?” (p. 199). These two questions are simply cryptic and enigmatical! For how could an author who claims to record the acknowledged facts of a person’s biography engage in such a polemical subject, as if the few pages of the chapter suffice to answer his problem? Besides, Irving’s answers to the issue of the Prophet’s mission achieve so little originality that he can hardly be said to have deviated from the Christian anti-Islamic tradition that fuelled the Western polemical rhetoric since around the twelfth century.

Let us examine some of his answers to this issue.

Irving does not wait until his last chapter to air his pro-Christian bias, since right from the beginning of his narrative he affirms that “the system laid down in the Koran, however, was essentially founded on Christian doctrines inculcated in the New Testament” (p.36), as if his whole endeavour will culminate in the demonstration of this statement. In the last chapter, at the risk of contradicting himself, he distinguishes “two grand divisions” (p. 201)

²⁹ Examples of the first type include Humphrey Prideaux and the author of the *Bibliothèque Oriental*, Barthélemy d’Herbelot. The second type includes, among others, Dr Henry Stubbe and Comte Henri de Boulainvillier.

in the Prophet's career: the pre-Hegira period (characterised by long suffering, abnegation and forbearance), and the post-Hegira period (characterised, in his view, by "worldly passions" and military conquests). It goes without saying that it is the first period which wins the favours of Irving. However, to his mind, both periods are blemished by the nature of Mohammed's revelation, since, Irving contends, the state of mind of the Prophet was that of "an enthusiast acting under a species of mental delusion"³⁰ (p. 202).

Irving's assault on the nature and authenticity of Mohammed's teaching is worsened by other "hackneyed theses" (Hellal) belonging to traditional intolerant pamphlets. For example, echoing traditional anti-Islamic polemicists, Irving alleges that the Prophet inspired his followers with a "fanatic zeal" and "proclaimed the religion of the sword" (p. 204). Such statements had had long life in the works of Latin polemicists³¹, where they are employed to discredit the Prophet and his mission. In the words of Norman Daniel, "if [the Prophet can] be shown no prophet, the whole Islamic fabric [will fail]." (88) The intersection between Irving's narrative and the discourse of Christian intolerant pamphlets casts a shadow on his endeavour and reminds us that, in spite of his proclaimed good will, he could not escape the weight of a long tradition of intolerant representation of Islam and its prophet in the West.

III- *Life of Mahomet* and Orientalist Discourse

In the introduction to this paper, I have quoted Timothy Marr who affirms that Irving did not yield in his biography to the brand of

³⁰ In 1846, *The North American Review* published an article entitled "Was Mohammed an Impostor of an Enthusiast?". Rev. Chauncey Burr responded to this article by writing: "They tell me that this man is an impostor. It may be so: but then his imposture (if you commit so great a wrong upon an honest fanatic) has done more for a greater number of the human race than the truth of any other man born within these twelve centuries. His awful 'No by alla' has shook a thousand idols into dust. His holy 'ALLA ACBAR! ALLA ACBAR!' has built, in the wild waste of Arab hearts, a shrine where God is worshiped". (Quoted in Marr T, 2006: 227, n23).

³¹ Unfortunately, this thesis is still circulated in our post 9/11/2001 world, and demonstrates what Norman Daniel wrote in 1960 when he asserted right at the outset of his study of the representation of Islam in the West: "the earliest Christian reactions to Islam were much the same as they have been until quite recently" (2009: 11).

Islamic Orientalism of his American contemporaries. This point of view is contradicted by Farida Hellal's article in which she demonstrates that Irving's work, as any work of fiction and/or history, could not escape the contingencies of its time and space. In my view, if Marr turns a blind eye on Irving's practice of orientalist discourse, it is because his images of Arabs and Muslims serve purposes different from the orientalist representations of the other American authors, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. As the next section will demonstrate, Irving is indeed keen not to track the veracity of important events in the Prophet's life, and is eager to give free rein to his storytelling skills, using most of the time Islamic folk traditions as simple pretexts for further storytelling rather than as reliable source information. However, *Life of Mahomet* remains, as it is, a book about the Orient, and as such falls under the scope of Orientalist literature.

Edward Said defines Orientalism as "a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, describing it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, as a style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (2003: 3). From this definition it follows that even though *Life of Mahomet* cannot be fully equated with those ideological objectives of corporate Orientalism, it remains a narrative that authorises views and circulates knowledge about Islam and its Prophet. The previous section has demonstrated how biased Irving's attitude towards the prophetic mission of Mohammed is, and how many of his theses are pegged to a Western tradition that has always been hostile to Islam, due to the belief that this religion stands as its great religious and political foe. In the present section, it suffices to remind ourselves that, by affirming that the Prophet instituted a religion of violence to ensure the propagation of his religion, Irving is imposing a theory on the religious and military success of Islam, whose triumphs Christianity could not rival. In so doing, he barely succeeds to remove his narrative from his time's imaginative and epistemological constraints and his contemporaries' attempts to distinguish the Orient from the Occident, Islam from Christianity. Had he transcended this ideological and ontological impulse/impasse, his biography would have gained more in terms of both authenticity and objectivity.

IV- *Life of Mahomet* as a Romantic Quest

In my view, if some critics of Irving's biography of Mohammed have positively received it is due to the literary quality of his work, not to any other feature among those already studied above. By literary quality I mean the romantic aesthetic that imbues his narrative with an exotic Oriental temper similar to the atmosphere of the stories of *The Arabian Nights*. For, it should be reminded, Irving manipulated at leisure his source information and did not really intend to produce a scholarly-historical work. Indeed, the free licence with which he tackled his subject freed him from the constraints of scholarly biographies and enabled him to produce a narrative that gave shape to the literary ambitions encoded in his romantic imagination. Thus, Irving, the convinced romantic, whose reputation and originality lay heavily on his discovery of the culture and civilisation of Moorish Spain, relished also at the folklore of the Arabs' sense of honour, chivalry and hospitality, and the legends attached to the life of their Prophet. For this reason he sketched a life story of Mohammed that reflects his romantic quest for exoticism, the sublime and narrative form.

Oriental exoticism, Bedouin folklore and Arab legends loom large in *Life of Mahomet* which aims: "to digest into an easy, perspicuous and flowing narrative the admitted facts concerning Mahomet, together with such **legends and traditions as have been wrought into the whole system of oriental literature**". For example, in narrating the prophet's birth, Irving relates some Arab folk traditions which report that in that "eventful night", "heaven and earth were agitated", "the palace of Khosru shook to its foundations" and the Kadhi of Persia "beheld in a dream, a ferocious camel conquered by an Arabian courser". These anecdotes can never constitute the lore of a master historian. Irving keeps distance from them by stating repeatedly "if Moslem traditions are to be credited", "according to similar traditions", etc. And yet, his narrative is full to the brim by such folk beliefs, what drives me to say that the Oriental tale, which was in full bloom during Irving's lifetime, was his true concern and ambition, not the painstaking tracking down of the actual events in the life of the Prophet.

The sublime is the other quest in *The Life of Mahomet*. A true heir to Edmund Burke, Emmanuel Kant and Hegel, who all were

stirred by the issue of the sublime, Irving, too, felt concerned with this subject. In his biography, he seems to delight at relating the supernatural occurrences related in the Koran in connection with the life of Mohammed. For example, when he reports the Prophet's night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and from there to the Seventh Heaven, he proceeds to tell the story in all its novelistic amplitude, devoting to it no less than a nine page chapter, disregarding the verisimilitude of its details and focusing on every detail which is likely to inspire a feeling of awe, limitlessness and timelessness. But then, as if to reassert his faith in scientific scepticism and the Christian *doxa*, he concludes the chapter by saying that the story "rests almost entirely upon tradition [...]. The whole may be a fanciful superstructure of Moslem fanatics on one of these visions of ecstasies to which Mohammed was prone" (p. 66). Thus, Irving's narrative method seems always to rely on keeping the reader in awe by narrating supernatural events, and then infirming these same events by evoking scholarly scepticism.

Finally, *Life of Mahomet* can also be read as an attempt by Irving to achieve a narrative form that parallels, echoes and recreates Western master narratives about Islamic culture. As already developed above, in the chapter "Person and Character of Mohammed", Irving distinguishes two distinctive periods in the Prophet's life: the pre-Hegira period when his life was "regulated according to the tenets" of Christianity (such as forbearance, long-suffering and resignation), and the post-Hegira period when he succumbed to "vindictiveness" and "ambition of extended rule". This distinction is reminiscent of the career and tragedy of William Shakespeare's Othello, the Moorish army general of Venice. Othello converts to Christianity, marries a white princess, and reaches a high position in the Venetian court thanks to his valour and noble spirit. But then, he is brought to his doom, when he suspects his wife of infidelity. Actually, Othello falls victim to his own culture, since the impulses of jealousy and vindictiveness are too powerful in his mind and heart to be repressed.

The portrait of the Prophet in *The Life of Mahomet* evokes this Western archetype/stereotype. He is described as a person "of an extraordinary kind", and his education is said to pertain to the highest Christian moral code. But when he achieved military successes in Medina, he gave up his initial principles and engaged in a ruthless

career of military conquests and acts of vengeance. Therefore, like his literary surrogate in Shakespeare's play, Irving's Mohammed is more a literary character than a historical person. His portrait is mystified to evoke not a historical person of flesh and blood, but to fit a Western stereotype that denies the moral highground to the Arabs and their religion. Here is yet another form of Orientalist bias in Irving's representation of the Prophet of Islam, a representation that disavows the claim of those critics who praise his work and present it as a sympathetic portrayal of the character and deeds of the Prophet.

Conclusion

Life of Mahomet is a hybrid biography that blends fact and fiction, poetical and polemical discourses. Permeated as it is by inaccurate historical data, biased Orientalist and pernicious Christian theses, it can shock its Moslem readership. For, it should be reminded, Irving wrote the Prophet's biography as a true son of the 19th century, with all the licence and limitation of the term. However, when approached as a literary work, through its author's quest for narrative style and novelty, through its exploration of the witticism of the Arabs and their ancestral culture, it can still be a very readable work.

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