

# The Breath of Miraj

*In the beginning...*

A man retires from the world to a cave. For hours each day. He retires from a world whose perplexities and sufferings are the constant reminder that this cannot be all there is. In that silence, in the darkness, he hears a voice. A voice of surprising force, a voice that fills him with terror and awe. Recite! It cries. And again: Recite! Recite! All at once, the man finds words he did not know he possessed, words of surpassing sublimity.

And so, it is said, the Quran was born. The Revelation. And from this most central of Muslim origin tales is born another enduring sublimity: That in the cavern of human interiority, a soul of sufficient strength can find voice, a voice not delimited by the personal, but strange and wondrous, robust enough to intimate the ineffable.

Such is the shape of the Prophetic calling, and any artist will recognize in this shape, the announcement of a supernal vocation, a royal road into the circle of the elect. To invoke that great pretender to the throne of modern prophecy, James Joyce: What greater work can there be for an artist but to give form to the *uncreated conscience* of her race? So it was for the one-known-as-Muhammad, whose election in the cave at Hira would be but prelude for what was to come: the enduring, articulate *creation* of his own race's conscience...Islam itself.

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To be a Muslim artist operating in the proverbial West means to work in a condition of impairment. This impairment is nothing like the mythic diminishment hinted at in Hemingway's narrator Jacob "Jake" Barnes (*The Sun Also Rises*)—who, of course, by way of allusion, points back at the Biblical Jacob's crippling at the hands of an agon with an angel. No, indeed, it is precisely *not* this sort of divinely-visited attenuation with which the Muslim Western artist toils. In a so-called Western society—impregnated by the Pentateuch and its various non-Quranic progeny—a Muslim artist operates denied any shared sense of the central animating narratives of her own racio-spiritual tradition. For what has Muhammad ever been to the Occident but a phantomic presence at the margins of the Western tradition, vaguely or demonically limned, now an imposter, now a veiled conundrum, ever the patron saint of the archetypal Muslim other? And even in these latter days of globalism's inability to digest the Islamic contrary, Muhammad's ontic, animating power is relegated almost entirely to the interdiction against his image and/or its desecration.

But of course, the Muhammadan tradition—by which I mean to include the Quran itself, a lengthy subject for a lengthy later commentary—is fecund indeed for the Muslim artist, rich and fertile as Ecclesiastes for Hemingway, both Samuels for Faulkner, the New Testament for Marilynne Robinson. Even richer, perhaps, if only because the Quran itself is a beguiling trove of glosses and transmutations of the great Hebraic tropes. At times, the Muslim artist creating in the West can only wonder to herself with frustrated bemusement:

*If only they had ears to hear...*

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Well, what if they did? What, then, would they hear?

The song of Miraj, for one thing. The Prophet's Night Journey. During which, the one-known-as-Muhammad, on the magical conveyance of the buraq—a winged steed with a human face—travels to the sacred mosque at the furthest sanctuary, and thence upward to heaven. Mystical and poetic renditions of the Prophet's subsequent adventures in the heavenly realms were known in medieval Europe, and likely served as part of the inspiration for Dante Alighieri's own imagined journey into Christendom's otherworlds. (How ironic—yet oddly true to the brutalities of the anxiety of influence—that Alighieri would place a formative progenitor of his *Commedia* in the lowest circle of Hell!)

The song of Miraj. Or the journey through the mysteries of creation. It is said that during Miraj, the Prophet was visited not only by the succession of the prophets who had preceded him, but was the only one of them ever to be invited into the abode of the Lord. And that night, with human eyes, he beheld what no mortal eyes had ever seen, the visage of the Lord Himself. Here, the crowning initiation, a shamanic intensification of the dilemmas of election first enacted at Hira, now affirmed and completed in the Prophet's accession to the circle of the greats. Indeed, Miraj is the *mise-en-scène* of Muhammad's ultimacy, a ceremonial of creative investiture enacted on the stage of his forebears, the Hebraic prophets. The Prophet returns, heightened and enlarged, emboldened to speak on behalf of creation itself.

A mythic trope restored and renewed, in his time. And in ours as well. For what else is Miraj if not the fulfillment of any artist's deepest longing: to have made a journey into the great unknown—to have seen the unseeable—and to return to the world as we know it with the capacity to express the inexpressible? What Shahzia and I do not share in terms of our own bases of formal artistic reference—my tradition is literary; hers, visual (as she is, amongst other things, the contemporary heir to the great miniature painters)—we certainly share at a more primary level, the level of *spiritus*, or breath itself. This series of works—an homage to the Prophetic calling as creative template, to the Prophet as *afflatus*, source of inspiration—expresses our own elemental borrowings, the ways we are guided always by traces of the Prophet in our creative imagination. An homage, then, to our own long, winding, yearning journeys into the life-giving, life-defining mysteries of creative revelation.

—Ayad Akhtar