

GOD IN AL-MA'ARRĪ'S *LUZŪM*

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Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d.1058)¹ is indeed one of the most original poets and thinkers in medieval Arab intellectual history. In the West, al-Ma'arrī won fame due to his "Letter of Forgiveness" (*Risālatu l-Ghufrān*), a parody of heaven which has been considered by some as a forerunner of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.² More complex is the copious collection of poems *Luzūm mā lā yalzam* (roughly translated as

¹ Abū 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī was born in 973 in Ma'arrat an-Nu'mān near Aleppo in a noble family of Banū Sulaymān whose Shāfi'ī members held the office of *qāḍī*. At the age of four the poet was struck by smallpox and almost totally lost his eyesight. He possessed an extremely good memory, however, which later continued to fascinate every author who wrote about him. Al-Ma'arrī started to compose poetry at the early age of eleven. He received a traditional education under the training of various *shaykhs*. It is recorded in the sources that al-Ma'arrī spent some time in Antioch and Tripoli to use libraries there, and visited the Christian monastery of Dayr a-Fārūs in Latakia. To enhance his education, al-Ma'arrī traveled to Baghdad, probably also with the hope of establishing a career there. He attended *Dār al-'Ilm* and *Dār al-Kutub* in Baghdad. However, al-Ma'arrī's stay in Baghdad did not last long, and he returned to his home country after only one and a half year. Al-Ma'arrī spent the rest of his life in his native town, Ma'arrat an-Nu'mān where he died at the age of eighty-five. See "al-Ma'arrī" in *Et*² and Van Gelder, "Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī" in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 1, eds. J. Meisami and P. Starkey (London, New York: Routledge, 1998).

²This is an obsolete topic by now in the scholarship: A. Palacios was the first to put forward the thesis that Dante was influenced by al-Ma'arrī; A. Palacios, *La Escatología Musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (Madrid: 1919). The thesis later on has been disputed, cf. Nāshid Sayfayn, "La Comédie Divine," *al-Muqataḥaf* 81(1932): 201-205.

Necessity of what is Unnecessary, henceforth-*Luzūm*) some aspects of which will be in the center of this article.³

*Luzūm*⁴ is considered unconventional both in form and content. One way of reading *Luzūm* is through literary and *Angst* mannerisms.⁵ With its verbal mannerism, *Luzūm* stands out as a work through which the author aims at astonishing his reader through uncommon rules of

³That al-Ma'arrī and his reception matter for our days and that examining his output is an important academic enterprise has been once again confirmed by the recent events in Syria. It was reported in February of 2013 that the armed fighters of *Jubhat al-Nuṣra* beheaded the statue of the eleventh century blind poet in Ma'arat al-Nu'man where he was born. Although the speculations over the reason for the beheading varied, the major reason was al-Ma'arrī's reputation as a heretic and a critic of Islam. Thus, centuries after his life the poet's name was revived, and his image as a freethinker, heretic, skeptic or religious critic came onto the scene again. See:

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyrialatestnews/armed-men-behead-syria-poet-statue>;
<http://observers.france24.com/en/20130214-jihadists-behead-statue-syrian-poet-abul-ala-al-maari>;

<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35745962> (all accessed 25 July, 2016).

⁴ The edition I am using is the second complete edition (after a lithographic publication by *Ḥusaynīyah* printing house in Bombay, in 1885, edited by Amūn bn Ḥasan al-Ḥalawānī) in two volumes (440 and 438 pages each), published in Cairo, in 1891 by *Mahrūsa* printing house. The editor is 'Azīz Zand who relied on a manuscript dating back to 1235 provided by the library of Yusūf Bek Wahābī in Egypt. This is the earliest attempt at an edition with a critical apparatus. In many cases the editor relies on the Bombay edition, however, much more attention is given to the study of the accuracy of the text, and apart from that, the notes and explanations are extensive. The verses are mostly checked against the Leiden manuscript MS 100 of *Luzūm* in the handwriting of Ibn al-Jawāliqī (d. 1145) who copied it before 1103-1203 from the manuscript of al-Tibrīzī (d.1109), a known disciple of al-Ma'arrī, who had read the poems with its author. It is said that Ibn al-Jawāliqī, after copying the manuscript and comparing it with the original one, also read the book with al-Tibrīzī. See more in S. M. Stern, "Some noteworthy Manuscripts of the Poems of Abū'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī." *Oriens* 7, no.2 (1954):322-347. See also J. J. Witkam, "The *ijāza* in Arabic Manuscripts" in *The History of the Book in the Middle East*, ed. J. Roper (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2013), 91. The references will indicate the volume, page and lines, respectively. Translations are mine however whenever I consult with Lacey's translations, I give the reference.

⁵ In my doctoral thesis I suggest to read *Luzūm* within the scope of tripartite mannerism-literary, *Angst* and ethical--thus bringing the generic features of *Luzūm* together with ideas, intention and meaning. This approach will cover the gap in the scholarship which dealt either with literary aspects of the collection or with the content without an effort to interweave the two. The thesis suggests in general that the displayed ambivalence and tension are not meant to be solved by the poet however if there is a way to reconcile opposing ideas and views on God then it has to be sought in the realm of ethics.

prosody⁶ and linguistic virtuosity. The literary or verbal mannerism is identified with “formal eccentricity, verbal ornamentation, and pointed thought.”⁷ The second one which Mirollo calls *Angst* mannerism is intrigued by religious, social and political causes. The determinant notions in this case are “tension, anxiety, alienation, ambiguity, strain, discord, doubt,” and their analysis might be grounded in the history of ideas.

⁶The structure and rhyming principles in *Luzūm* are unique. As al-Ma‘arrī explains in the prose introduction of *Luzūm*, he composed it according to three main “inconveniences” (*kulaf*). 1) First among them is that there should be sections (*fusūl*) in the *Luzūm* corresponding to all the 28 letters (from *hamza*’ to *yā*’) of the alphabet. 2) Each letter should be used in all three vocalizations (i.e., *su*, *sa*, *si*) plus the final one in the quiescent form (*sukūn*). 3) The third and very challenging restriction is that al-Ma‘arrī rhymed his poetry not only through the repetition of a syllable with a consonant and vowel, but also through a repetition of the consonant which precedes the syllable. Yet according to the rules of Arabic prosody, rhyming is completed by the repetition of a syllable at the end of every verse. See Lz1, pp.9-10. All these techniques of Abū ‘Alā are well explained by Lacey and Friedman. See K. Lacey, *Man and Society*, 7-14; Y. Friedmann, “Literary and Cultural Aspects of the *Luzūmiyyat*,” in *Studia Orientalia Memoriae D.H.Beneth Dedicata* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1979):349-52. It is important to note here that according to a theory, by now a convention, the verses of *Luzūm* were composed in different times and then put together according to the formal criteria mentioned above, and therefore the chronological order in *Luzūm*’s composition is not fixed. ‘Umar Farrūkh has convincingly shown this; see Farrūkh, *Ḥakīm al-Ma‘arra* (Beirut: Dār al-Lubnān li’l-Ṭibā‘awa’l-Nashr, 1986), 65-81. Another rule that al-Ma‘arrī imposed on the collection, though he does not mention about this, is that within each chapter, poems are arranged according to the meter arranged in the circles of *Khalīl*. Frolov has diligently examined all the chapters of *Luzūm* according to their metric arrangements and presented the results in a detailed table: see D. Frolov, “The Circles of Khalīl and the Structure of *Luzūmiyyāt* of Abū l’-‘Alā al-Ma‘arrī,” in ed. P. Zemánek, *Studies in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures* (Prague: Oriental Institute, 1996). 223-236.

⁷See J.V. Mirollo, “The Mannered and the Mannerist in Late Renaissance Literature,” in F.W. Robinsom and S.G. Nichols eds, *The Meaning of Mannerism* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England Hanover, 1972), 12-13. For literary mannerism see Curtius, *European Literature and Latin Middle Ages* (translated by W.R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 282. This remains one of the most central books until now discussing literary mannerism for many reasons, but more importantly for its claim that mannerism is a recurring style in the history of literature. For mannerism in medieval Arabic poetry see S. Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry: A Structural Analysis of selected texts* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

What interests us here is *Angst* mannerism, which will be exposed through the notion of God in *Luzūm* in the light of accompanying tension and contradictions. It is claimed that the displayed ambivalence and tension related to the notion of God are not meant to be solved by the poet, and poetic ambivalence has to be taken into account without an exaggerated endeavor to explain every contradiction away in *Luzūm*.⁸ The central premise to this approach is that *Luzūm* is not a philosophical treatise with a systemic thinking and argumentative conclusion but poetry with a wide space for ambivalence, insoluble tension and playfulness--a point that has been underlined in the modern scholarship but not given enough recognition in terms of its applications.

Perhaps nothing in *Luzūm* appears as intriguing and ambiguous as the image of God. The tension in the language relevant to God prevails throughout the whole work and remains unsolved. Al-Ma'arrī's ambivalence towards the Creator, often with an emotional engagement and provoking language, keeps the reader continuously alert. God is everywhere in *Luzūm*--it is the one who is challenged, reproached, believed and relied on. He is often the one, the omnipotent and just, and often the one who prompts or at least does not prevent evil. Al-Ma'arrī both asserts and denies the ways of God; he relies on God but also rebukes, urges to obey God's commands but also warns. Al-Ma'arrī's

⁸This is will be against the most dominant readings that has been offered by both Western and Arab authors: according to this reading al-Ma'arrī uses contradictions aiming at concealing or dissimulating religiously dangerous ideas in order to avoid persecution thus applying technique of *taqīyah*: see See A. von Kremer, *Über die philosophischen Gedichte des Abul'alā Ma'arry : eine culturgeschichtliche Studie* (Wien: Tempsky, 1889), 13-14; R. A. Nicholson, "The Meditations of Ma'arrī," *Studies in Islamic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 146-147; Ṭ Ḥusayn, *Tajdīd DhikrāAbī 'Alā* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'āif, 1963), 243-245; U. Farūkh, *Hakīm*, 81; H. Laoust, "La vie et la philosophie d'Abou'l-'Ala' al-Ma'arri," *Bulletin d'études orientales* (1944), 143; R.K. Lacey, *Man and Society in the Luzūmiyāt of al-Ma'arrī* (Harvard University, 1984), 48-50.

God is the perpetual confounder, the creator of the ambiguous as al-Ma'arrī is for his reader.

The poet does take issue with God but in such a manner that leaves both himself and the reader with no conclusion, rather with a stable and in some way appealing bewilderment through expressing in the same text contradicting thoughts and ideas. The poet does not in fact raise any new question, nor does he aim at solving any problem be it theologically or philosophically driven. He does not oblige himself with any affiliation of thought, he is often driven by an instinctive impulse, often with reasoned statements, at times with anger and self-submission.

As mentioned above, al-Ma'arrī challenges, but does not deny God.⁹ The idea that the poet was a monotheist has been put forth by the earliest scholars of al-Ma'arrī such as von Kremer and Nicholson. Von Kremer's statements however remain somewhat confusing: on the one hand he thinks al-Ma'arrī is a monotheist in appearance but not more than that: poet's mentioning of God's name is merely a traditional dressing to his text¹⁰, and al-Ma'arrī names God in order to deceive and conceal his real ideas. On the other hand, verses about his creeds, von Kremer writes, do not permit any definite conclusions about matters of belief, but witness to his faithful monotheism which however does not equal to "orthodox" Islamic tenets.¹¹ Von Kremer does not develop this idea but states that in all cases al-Ma'arrī's concept of God is not driven by any materialistic understandings, moreover his God is the source of

⁹ Those who are claimed by polemicists to deny God are never identified either as individuals or as a group; the notion is there without any specific reference. In the same manner the notion appears in al-Ma'arrī's verses. See S. Stroumsa, "The Religion of Freethinkers in Medieval Islam," in *Atheismus in Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, eds. F. Niewöhner and O. Pluta (Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, 1999), 46; J. van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere*, Vol. 2 (Berlin, New York: Der Gruyter, 2011), 1298, passim.

¹⁰ See von Kremer, *Über die philosophische Gedichte*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

all the good: "Sein Gott ist der oberste Schutzherr der Gerechtigkeit und alles Guten."¹²

Nicholson gives more of a complex picture. On the one hand, al-Ma'arrī, as a staunch monotheist, believes in a Creator and identifies Him with Allah.¹³ He quotes the following verse as a proof:

Perception¹⁴ demonstrates [the existence of] One
who is wise, omnipotent, and uniquely perfect in His majesty.

ḥukmun tadullu 'alā ḥakīmin qādirin
mutafarridin fi 'izzihī bi-kamālī. (Lz2. 238.7)

However, speculation on His attributes and essence are useless since human intelligent, even though necessary for the belief in the Supreme Being, does not enable humans to comprehend them.¹⁵ Al-Ma'arrī, as Nicholson states, was a monotheist, but again, one who could not reconcile his monotheism with the one pertinent to the "Semitic concept of God" since for him time and space were infinite, therefore the Creator could not be outside of them.¹⁶ This description would be close to accuracy if we ignore or explain away the verses where al-Ma'arrī denies the eternity of time, matter, and space. Nicholson's summary however does express the desperate struggle of the poet to reconcile himself with notions of God:

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ Nicholson, "The Meditations of Ma'arrī," 158.

¹⁴ Nicholson translates the "ḥukm" as "philosophy" though in my opinion "perception" would be more appropriate translation.

¹⁵ Ibid., 159.

¹⁶ Ibid., 160. This is close to how T. Hussayn sees al-Ma'arrī's understanding of God, monotheistic but incompatible with Muslim God; see Hussayn, *Tajdīd*, 354-355.

If reason convinced him [al-Ma'arrī] that the world is eternal and has a Creator, a divine *intelligence* which eternally moves and maintains it, the facts of life as he saw them stood hopelessly against this theory and threw him back upon the notion of an all-powerful and inscrutable *will* working throughout the universe of evil which it created for some mysterious end. Beyond this he seems to have been unable to go, and here his rationalism breaks down. He finds the world so radically unreasonable that in order to account for it he must call in *dues ex machine*-the Allah of the Koran. The decree of Allah, i.e. Fate, makes things what they are.¹⁷

'Umar Farrūkh writes that al-Ma'arrī has a firm belief in God without trying to know Him and being contented only with God's attributes in the way described in the Qur'an. Al-Ma'arrī's faith in God is a sentimental one (*iyman wijdānī*) and is a primeval conviction according to Farrūkh. However, the verses in which al-Ma'arrī talks of God vary-some of them are only poetic and some are philosophical. In any case, God is one and omnipotent as Farrūkh states.¹⁸

Building up on what earlier scholars had brought forth about al-Ma'arrī's God, Henri Laoust confirms that al-Ma'arrī affirms and celebrates the existence of one God the Creator. This certitude though is based not on the scriptural tradition but rather on an innate intuition and reason. Quoting Nicholson, Laoust states that speculations to understand God's essence and attributes are futile due to the limits of mind. Al-Ma'arrī's God appears as the one, eternal, omnipotent and supremely wise. His wisdom is demonstrated by His works, even though the predominance of evil tempts us to deny this wisdom.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 160-161.

¹⁸ Farrūkh, *Hakīm*, 100-103.

¹⁹ Laoust, *La Vie*, 146-147.

What is then al-Ma'arrī's concern with God? Perhaps the most troubling questions, al-Ma'arrī struggles with, would be: could God create a better world at will? If yes, why did He not, if no, is He then incapable? Could God prevent evil, if yes, why did not He? A pronounced summary of these troubling inquiries is found in al-Ma'arrī's letter to the chief missionary of Egypt Hibat Allah where the theme of the discussion is the poet's vegetarianism:

If God wills nothing but good, then of evil one of two things must be true. Either God must know of it or not. If He knows of it, then one of two things must be true. Either He wills it or not. If He wills it then He is practically the doer of it, just as one might say "The governor cut off the robber's hand," even though he did not do it with his own hands. But if God did not will it, then He has suffered what such a governor should not suffer upon earth. If there be done in his province what he dislikes, he reproves the doer and commands that the practice stop. This is a knot which the metaphysicians have tried hard to solve, and found insoluble.²⁰

This "knot" indeed triggered the tensest disputes and was at the heart of debates since the beginning of Muslim theological speculations. Different theories of theodicy were formulated in reaction to these questions. Mu'tazilites and 'Asharites took serious issue with the notion of theodicy.

For the Mu'tazilah God's justice was of cardinal importance. This school categorically denied any relationship between God and evil. God did not create evil and then command people not to follow it, the same

²⁰D. S. Margoliouth, "Abū'l 'Alā's Correspondence on Vegetarianism," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Studies*, (1902):318.

way God did not create unbelief and then command people to believe. God is justified for whatever He does, and Divine justice cannot be arbitrary. By insisting on God's justice, Mu'tazilites held that He grants people with something of His power through which people gain capacity to perform certain deeds or their opposite. It is left to human reason to apprehend good and evil-- a necessary consequence for their belief in divine justice. The Mu'tazilī school thus exposes advocacy of free will. Man is therefore responsible for all his acts despite them being dictated by God. Divine justice meant not only that God does only good to humans but also that He is obliged to make the most salutary for His creatures.²¹ The absolutization of divine justice held that God is incapable for injustice, a conclusion that questions God's omnipotence, a prime article in 'Asharite theology. 'Asharites held that God's unlimited omnipotence does not exclude injustice, arbitrariness and unpredictability. God is capable to create everything and all He creates is bounty, moreover God's will is absolute free and thus God may create good and evil at the same time if He wills.²² Everything is a result of divine decree. 'Asharites insisted that God alone can create acts, thus rejecting the notion of free will. They instead adopted the notion of *kasb*--acquisition or appropriation. This means while God created all the actions, man undertakes particular actions by the capability created and given to them by God. What man has then is mere a capability to appropriate and acquire an act.

Al-Ma'arrī would have been familiar not only with aforementioned disputes among theologians but also with aggressive and intrusive language towards God with deep dissatisfaction and antagonism that

²¹ See E. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: the Dispute over al-Ghazalī's "Best of all Possible Worlds"* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 21.

²² See Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000),16-20; Al-Azmeh, *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies* (London: Croom, Helm, 1986), 82.

existed before the time of the poet. A staunch critic of religion Ibn al-Rāwandī (d.911) had already showed his attitude towards the “stupid and petty, vindictive and cruel God” that appears in the Scripture.²³

Let us now put together some of his sharply conflicting verses related to God in order to see if one could fit al-Ma'arrī' in any organized scheme. It is an unjust God whose creatures are absolutely deprived of any free will and act, and thus all the blame of the injustice goes to the Creator:

If someone commits deadly sins compulsory
 then to punish him for what he does is unjust.
 God, while creating metals, knew that
 white sword would be made from them, with which
 men who hold horses, curbed with iron and shod, would shed
 blood.

in kāna man fa'ala l-kabāi'ra mujbaran
 fa-'iqābuhu ḡulmun 'alā mā yaf'alū
 wa-l-lāhu idh khalaqa l-ma'ādina 'ālimun
 anna l-ḡidāda l-biḡa minha tuj'alū.
 safaka d-dimā'a bi-hā rijālun a'ṣamū
 bi-l-khayl i tuljamu bi-l-ḡadīdi wa-tun'alū. (Lz2.181.3-6)²⁴

And if man is unjust due to predestination,
 then He who created him so that he does
 injustice towards mankind is more unjust.

wa-in yakuni l-insānu bi-l-jabri ḡāliman

²³ Ibid., 50

²⁴ See also Lacey, *Man and Society*, 137.

fa-khāliqihu kay yaẓlima l-khalqa aẓlamū. (LMS, 107)²⁵

Men are like pasturing beasts devoid of reason,
who are driven to the fates by a tyrannical driver.

wa-n-nāsu mithlu sawāmin lā ḥulūma la-humu
yaṣūquhu li-l-manāyā sa'iqun ḥuṭamū. (Lz2.266.6)²⁶

God is unjust especially when He makes sinless children suffer (Lz1.387.3-4) and leaves men alone in the hands of evil (Lz1.311.3-5). This God is unjust also in His unwillingness to prevent people from making sin (Lz1.110.8-10; Lz2.12.9; Lz1.110.2-3; Lz2.5.2-3).²⁷

But God often appears in *Luzūm* as just, true and omnipotent. Here are verses where al-Ma'arrī' talks about God with a tongue of a pious believer:

God is just, even if your thoughts hesitate,
your greatest duty is that you heed Him.

wa-l-lāhu ḥaqqun wa-in mājat ẓunūnukum
wa-nna awjaba shay'in an turā'ūhu. (Lz2. 399.5)

²⁵ This verse is not found in the edition but it is in the Leiden manuscript, p.107; Lacey, *Man and Society*, 138.

²⁶ Ibid., 141

²⁷ Nicholson suggested that some verses in *Luzūm* hint at the notion of *kasb*, that is to say al-Ma'arrī' approved that all the acts are created by God but men are given capacity to appropriate them, such as the following: "I perceived that men are naturally unjust to another, but there is no doubt of the justice of Him who created injustice" (ra'aytu sabāyā n-nāsi fī-hā tazālumun wa-lā rayba fī 'adli l-ladhī khalaqa ẓ-ẓulmā, Lz2.280.6). This means that if God is creating injustice does not mean He is unjust. But Nicholson rightly concludes that had al-Ma'arrī' really wanted to ascribe himself to the theory of *kasb*, he would have done it strongly and explicitly and not just give scarce hints. See Nicholson, *Meditations*, 163.

Perhaps life is restlessness and deception,
and death will bring my rest in dream.
And God is but justice
who will not diminish my strength and make my complain last
long.

la'alla l-'aysha tashīdun wa naşbun
wa-rāḥatīya l-ḥimāmu atā bi-naumī.
wa-ma kāna l-muḥayminu wa-huwa 'adlun
li-yaqşira ḥīlatī wa-yuṭīla lawmī. (Lz2.311.13--312.1)

This God is wise and omnipotent who resurrects the dead (Lz2. 247.
10; Lz2.334.4; Lz2.334.8; Lz2.92.6; Lz1.185.14). To highlight few verses
only:

People are in darkness, and no meditation
brings them to light besides the wisdom of the Almighty.

wa-l-insu fī ghimmā'in lam yatabayyanū
bi-l-fikri illā ḥikmata l-qahārī. (Lz1.403.17)

The power of God is real, and it is not impossible
for it to resurrect creatures and raise the dead.

qudratu l-lāhi ḥaqqun laysa yu'jizuhā
ḥaṣharun li-khalqin wa lā ba'thun li-mwātī. (Lz1.185.14-16)

It would seem from some of the quoted verses that al-Ma'arrī inclined to the notion of predestination (Lz2.181.3-6; LMS, 107; Lz2.266.6). Indeed one might encounter verses such as the following to confirm full predestinism:

Neither my birth nor my old age is by my choice,
my stay and departure are in the hands of fate.

mā bi-khtiyārī milādī wa-lā haramī
wa-lā iqāmata illā 'an yaday qadarin
wa-lā masīra idhā lam yaqḍa taysīrū. (Lz1.322.3-4)

However, in this case again al-Ma'arrī does not push anything so far so that he makes a conclusion either for free will (*qadarīyah*) or predestination (*jabrīya*):

If I am asked about my school, it is fear of God,
I decide neither on power nor on determinism.

wa-in sa'alū 'an madhhabī fa-huwa khashyatun
mina l-lāhi lā ṭawqan abuttu wa-lā jabrā. (Lz1.351.1-2)

Do not live as a determinist, neither as someone who believes in free will,
but strive for an intermediate way between the two.

la ta'ish mujbiran wa-lā qadarīyan
wa-jtahid fī tawassuṭin bayna baynā. (Lz2.358.9)

The notion of God becomes more complex in *Luzūm* when we relate it to the attribute of eternity. Al-Ma'arrī's God often appears as co-eternal with matter, time and space:

We return to the origins, and every living species
is related to the four eternal.

nuraddu ilā l-uṣūli wa kullu ḥayyin
la-hu fī l-arba'i l-quḍumi intisābū (Lz1.91.6)

We shall pass away like our ancestors did
while time will endure the way you see it.
A day passes by, a night flows in,
a star disappears, a star being seen.

nazūlu ka-mā zāla ajdādunā
wa-yabqā z-zamānu 'alā mā tarā.
nahārun yamurru wa-laylun yakurru
wa-najmun yaghūru wa-najmun yurā. (Lz1. 86. 12-13)

As for Space it is permanent not perishing,
time though goes away and is not permanent.

ammā l-makānu fa-thābitun lā yanṭawī
lakin zamānuka dhāhibun lā yathbitū. (Lz1.169.8)

Seeing God as not the only eternal might position al-Ma'arrī among the materialists, or eternalists-*dahrīyūn*, as they were called, who

believed in the eternity of time and matter.²⁸ This also makes al-Ma‘arrī comparable with Abū Bakr ar-Rāzī (d. 925)- a physician, philosopher and a freethinker according to whom, God, although eternal, does not have an absolute power on other eternal beings though He is “benevolent, omnipotent, compassionate and caring.”²⁹ However, ascribing al-Ma‘arrī to any of these teachings is a dubious task, to say the least, since as we have seen, his God is not always benevolent and compassionate. Moreover, his God is often the only eternal principle, and the rest are subject to His decree:

It is not my judgment that stars are eternal,
nor is it my teaching that the world is eternal.

laysa intiqādī khulūda n-nujūmi
wa-lā madhhabī qidama l-‘alamī. (Lz2.320.11)

They say creation is made by the seven planets, yet
it is merely from the Lord of planets.

yaqūlūna ṣun‘un min kawākiba sab‘atin
wa-mā huwa illā min za‘īmi l-kawākibī. (Lz1.122.7)

Do you not see that the stars move in their spheres
by the power of the unmoved Lord?

a-mā tarā sh-shuhba fī aflākihā ntaqalat

²⁸ See Lacey, *Man and Society*, 275-277. For a more complex picture of who these people were see P. Crone, “dahrīs”, in *EF*.

²⁹ See Stroumsa, ‘The Religion of the Freethinker,’52-53; idem, *Freethinkers of Islam*, 121-130.

bi-qudratin min malīkin ghayri muntaqilī. (Lz2. 219.14.)³⁰

How to deal with this dissonance? Is it a way of concealing as it is viewed by the modern scholars? If we agree that these contradictions are for hiding the “dangerous unorthodox ideas,” then we must give credits to only one discourse in *Luzūm* and ignore the other one. If we look at the dispositions of the contradicting verses in *Luzūm*, which ultimately form a thoroughly ambiguous image of God, we will see that they are located on pages apart from each other. According to Leo Strauss, one of the most obvious methods to conceal contradictions, “is to speak of the same subject in a contradictory manner on pages apart

³⁰ For a discussion about al-Ma'arrī's views on cosmology see: K. Lacey, “An 11th century Muslim's Syncretic Perspective of Cosmology: Abū 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's philosophical poetical Reflections in *luzūm mā lā yalzam* on Make-up and Dynamics of the Universe,” *The Muslim World* 85, No.1-2 (1995):122-146. Lacey, in the light of his explanations to contradictions in *Luzūm*, concludes in a straightforward manner that al-Ma'arrī's God is-co-eternal together with time, space, and matter. See also, Lacey, *Man and Society*, 269-272. Nicholson pointed out that in al-Ma'arrī's cosmogony there are similarities with that of Abū Bakr ar-Rāzī who claimed the Creator, space, time, matter, and Universal Soul to be the five eternal, and this shows al-Razī's Neo-Platonic affiliations with some modifications as Fakhry puts it. See M. Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, 31-32. See also P. Adamson “Abū Bakr ar-Rāzī,” in *Islamische Philosophie: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. U. Rudolph (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2012), 202-207. T. Hussayn attempted to explain notions of eternity and cosmology in *Luzūm* through philosophical means: he states that his research on metaphysics of al-Ma'arrī leads to the conclusion that the poet saw matter, time, and space eternal. Al-Ma'arrī's understanding of divine concept, Hussayn claims, is Aristotelian in many ways: al-Ma'arrī for example describes God as silent and unmoved (Do you not see that the stars move in their spheres by the power of the unmoved Lord? (a-mā tarā sh-shuba fī aflākīhā ntaqalat bi-qudratin min malīkin ghayri muntaqilī, Lz2.219.14). To explain how the unmoved mover could create a moving universe, Hussayn refers to Aristotelian distinction of two types of motion-- material and the one defined as potential passing into the actual. The latter is what pertains to God: pure actuality is tantamount to pure motion, and thus God, being in essence a pure motion, is the cause of the motion in the world. See Hussayn, *Tajdīd*, 254-258. Laoust is also inclined towards an Aristotelian presentation of al-Ma'arrī's God though he goes even further to claim Bāṭinī (especially Carmathian) influence in al-Ma'arrī's thought generally and in his views of God particularly; see Laoust, *La Vie et Philosophie*, 147, 156. These are over-readings: *Luzūm* by no means can be put in such a coherent philosophical frame. Lacey rightly thinks too that Hussayn over-interprets parts of *Luzūm*, and argues also against Laoust's claim on the proximity of al-Ma'arrī's and Carmathian thought: see Lacey, *Man and Society*, note 26, p.284 and note 42, p.188.

from each other” (the symbol of this method is $a=b$ (page 15)-- $a\neq b$ (page 379)).³¹ This claim might have been relevant to *Luzūm* if we were to deal with a philosophical or a theological work. If contradictions are there to hide and conceal the poets true belief, that is to say his unbelief, and if his “heterodox” ideas are the only ones to be taken valid, as for example Lacey insists on, then there remains no space for poetic ambivalence, for any tension in mind and angst and for any kind of poetic agency at all. Unlike the Maimonides’s *Guide* which Strauss refers to, *Luzūm* is not about a teaching or a truth. The poetic quality endows the text with a certain freedom and privilege to be inconsistent, contradictory and incoherent (and playful if you wish). Instead of concealing, this allocation of the contradictory verses creates two parallel discourses for readers: the reader might easily extract whatever part that is suitable for him/her-- “orthodox” or “heretic,” in fact a readership practice that has been applied to *Luzūm* from the middle ages to nowadays. If someone wanted to prove that al-Ma‘arrī was an unbeliever or at least “unorthodox,” (for different reasons) he relied on the anti-religious verses in *Luzūm* (e.g. al-Jawzī in the 13th c. and T. Ḥussayn in the 20th c.).³² If another reader wanted to prove al-Ma‘arrī’s piety and faith or that al-Ma‘arrī was a great poet, then the “orthodox” or “neutral” verses were selected (e.g. Ibn Adīm (13th c.) and ‘Aisha ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān (20th c.)).³³ Contradictions served in the end not for hiding the truth since

³¹ See L. Strauss, “The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980): 70.

³² Ibn al-Jawzī, “*Al-Muntaẓam fī Akhbār al muuk wa-l-Umam*, [The Well-Organised [Book] Concerning the History of Kings and Peoples)]” in *Ta’rīf -Qudamā’ bi-Abī l-‘Alā* [The Ancients’ Explication of *Abī l-‘Alā*], ed. Ṭāha Ḥusayn (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmīyah, 1944), 18-26.

³³ Ibn al-Adīm, “*Kitāb al-Inṣāf wa’t-Taḥarrī fī Daf’i’l- Zulm wa’t-Tajarrī ‘an Abī’l-‘Alā al-Ma‘arrī* [The Book of Just Treatment and Inquiry for the Defense of Abū ’l-‘Alā al-Ma‘arrī from Injustice],” in *Ta’rīf*, 483-578; Aisha ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, “Ma‘ Abī l-‘Alā’ [With Abū l-‘Alā’]” (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-‘arabī, 1972).

there is no one and only truth in *Luzūm*, but for providing a choice to the reader what to read and what to verify. The poetic liberty freed the poet both from the confines of theologians who, as Ibn Rushd noticed, formulated their theses “not because they were arrived at by way of reason, but rather to sustain matters whose truth they presupposed...and sought to demonstrate what was consistent with them and refute that which was not,”³⁴ and from that of philosophers whose logical reasoning remained limited for explaining matters of faith. Because there is no task to arrive at one determined conjecture there is the liberty to contradict, and there is a place for a genuine and insoluble ambivalence. Al-Ma'arrī, overwhelmed by thorough skepticism, does not provide answers to any of the questions that himself is deeply concerned with.

If we give credibility to only one part of *Luzūm*, let us say to the one expressing unbelief, it will be very hard and problematic to ignore indeed a large portion of the text with mostly meditative verses expressing piety, fear from and reliance on God such as those:

Your Lord, He is with no peer,
 deluded is the one who denies and disbelieves.
 Have faith in Him, and the soul will ascend,
 even with the last breath,
 so that you might ask for forgiveness from Him,
 when you dig the grave, you then relinquish.

mawlāka mawlāka l-ladhī mā la-hu
 niddun wa-khāba l-kāfiru l-jāhidū.
 āmin bi-hi wa-n-nafsu taraqā wa-in
 lam yabqa illā nafsun wāhidū.

³⁴ Cited in Al-Azmeh, *Arabic Thought*, 83.

tarjū bi-dhāka l-‘afwa min-hu idhā
ulḥidta thumma unṣurifa l-lāhidū. (Lz1.267. 17-268.1-2)

And if you trust God, your protector,
then leave things to him in word and perception.

idhā kunta bi-l-lāhi wāthiqan
fa-sallim ilayhi l-amra fi l-lafzi wa-l-laḥzī. (Lz2.75.10)

Luzūm is full of such verses ((Lz1.280.3-5; Lz2.115.3; Lz2.166.8; Lz2.220.5; Lz2.341.11; Lz2.249.1; Lz2.351.6; Lz2.63.12-13), and it is unfair to ignore the discourse of piety and belief in God for the sake of finding a coherence and consistence by all means.³⁵ The modern readings of *Luzūm*, especially by western scholars (see f.n. 6 above), have gone too far in their enthusiasm for finding a coherence in the collection and in al-Ma‘arrī’s thought, and this is what resulted in treating *Luzūm* as a treatise or an affirmative text and hence in a clear-cut and definite interpretations.

When reading *Luzūm* continuously, one can notice how the dissonance becomes somewhat a genuine character of the text, and how it very well expresses the inner tension of a person, a true skeptic who does not believe in any epistemological system and often finds resort in God without ever making peace with Him.

³⁵God is only one source of uncertainty and only one aspect of the overarching ambivalence, others being such important notions as reason and prophecy which also undergo uncertainty and ambiguity in *Luzūm*. For prophecy see Lz1.52.12-15 and Lz1. 134.8 in comparison; for reason see Lz1. 288.6-7 and Lz1.197.10.

ԱՍՏՈՆ ՀԱՍԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆ ԱԼ-ՄԱ՛ԱՐԻԻ «ԼՈՒՋՈՒՄԻՅԱԹ»
ԱՇԽԱՏԱՆՔՈՒՄ

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Բանալի բառեր՝ Ալ-Մաարի, Լուզումիյաթ, Աստված, երկակիություն, մանկրիզ, լարվածություն, հակասություններ

Սույն հոդվածում քննարկման կենտրոնում է միջնադարյան արաբական պոեզիայի թերևս ամենաբարդ տեքստերից մեկը՝ Աբու Լ-Ալա՛ ալ-Մա՛արիի (973-158) «Լուզում մա լա յալգամ» («Ոչ անհրաժեշտի անհրաժեշտությունը») հավաքածուն՝ ուշադրության կենտրոնում տեղակայելով Աստծո հասկացությունը, դրա արտահայտումները հավաքածուում և թեոդիցիաի հասկացությունը: Քննարկումն ի ցույց կդնի պոետի հակասական ու երկիմաստ մոտեցումն Աստծո հասկացությանը՝ միատեղ ուսումնասիրելով իրարամերժ բանաստեղծական տողերն ու մտքերը: Հոդվածն ընդհանուր առմամբ նպատակ ունի խոսափել սույն ստողծագործության պարզունակ ընթերցումից՝ վերագրելով նրան այնպիսի տրամաբանական սխեմա, որ գրկում է գրական գործն իր պոետիկ հատկանիշներից:

GOD IN AL-MA‘ARRĪ’S *LUZŪM*

Summary

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Keywords: *Al-Ma‘arrī, Luzūm, God, ambivalence, mannerism, tension, contradictions*

The article will discuss one of the most complex texts in the history of medieval Arabic poetry--namely *Luzūm mā lā yalzam* (*Necessity of what is Unnecessary*)-- penned by Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d.1058), with a focus on the notion of God, the way it appears in *Luzūm*, and the notion of theodicy. The discussion will illustrate the ambivalence of the poet towards the notion of God bringing together contradicting verses and ideas. The article aims at avoiding a simplistic reading of *Luzūm* through putting it in such a coherent framework that deprives it from its poetic faculty at all and leaves no room for ambivalence.

ПОНЯТИЕ БОГА В “ЛУЗУМИЙЯТ “ АЛЬ МААРРИ

Резюме

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Ключевые слова: *Аль Маарри, Лузумийят, Бог, амбивалентность, манерность, напряженность, противоречия*

В данной статье будет обсужден один из наиболее сложных текстов в истории средневековой арабской поэзии, а именно *Лузум ма ла йалзам* (“Необходимость необходимого”), принадлежащий перу Абу л-‘Ала’ ал-Ма‘ари (973-1058) с акцентом на понятие Бога, способ его проявления в *Лузум*, и понятием теодицеи. Обсуждение продемонстрирует амбивалентность поэта к понятию Бога, соединяя противоречивые стихи и идеи. Данная статья ставит своей целью избежать упрощения прочтения *Лузума*, ставя его в такие логически связанные рамки, которые лишают его поэтического дара и не оставляют места амбивалентности.