INTRODUCTION

The lengthy, mocking reply by a cantankerous maverick, obsessed with lexicography and grammar, to a rambling, groveling, and self-righteous letter by an obscure grammarian and mediocre stylist: this does not sound, prima facie, like a masterwork to be included in a series of Arabic classics. It is even doubtful whether it firmly belongs to the canonical works of Arabic literature. The maverick author, Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, was certainly famous, or infamous, as we shall see, but in the entry on him in the biographical dictionary by Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282),¹ who calls him the author of “many famous compositions and widely known epistles,” the present work is not even mentioned; in the very long entry on him in a somewhat earlier, similar work by Yāqūt (d. 626/1229) it is merely listed in a long list of works, without commentary.² It is true that the same Yāqūt has an entry on the rather obscure author of the original letter, the grammarian Ibn al-Qāriḥ, whom he describes as “the one who wrote a well-known letter to Abū l-ʿAlāʾ, known as ‘the Epistle of Ibn al-Qāriḥ,’”³ which suggests that Abū l-ʿAlāʾ’s reply was famous. However, the work is not often mentioned or discussed in pre-modern times, unlike Abū l-ʿAlāʾ’s poetry.

As happens occasionally in the history of Arabic literature, the Risālat al-Ghifrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness), owes its present fame mostly to the rediscovery in modern times, by a western Arabist. Reynold A. Nicholson, in a letter to the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,⁴ describes a collection of manuscripts gathered by his grandfather, to which, as he writes, “I would call special attention,
because it is, as I believe, a genuine work, hitherto unknown and undescribed, of the famous blind poet and man of letters, Abū l-ʿAlā al-Maʿārī.” Over the following few years, between 1900 and 1902, he published a partial edition with a summary and at times paraphrasing translation of the contents in a series of articles in the same journal. The Epistle’s subsequent rise to fame is mainly due to the fact that it seemed to prefigure Dante’s Commedia Divina and that misguided attempts were made to prove the influence of the Arabic work on the Italian. This thesis has now been abandoned and one can appreciate Risālat al-Ghufrān in its own right.

Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿārī

The earliest appearance of al-Maʿārī in Arabic literature is found in a work by a contemporary, one of the greatest anthologists of Arabic literature, al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038). In the supplement to his Yatīmat al-dahr, he quotes a certain poet, Abū l-Ḥasan al-Dulafī al-Maṣṣīsī, who told him:

In Maʿārrat al-Nuʿmān I came across a true marvel. I saw a blind man, a witty poet, who played chess and backgammon, and who was at home in every genre of seriousness and jesting. He was called Abū l-ʿAlā’. I heard him say, “I praise God for being blind, just as others praise Him for being able to see. He did me a favor and did me a good turn by sparing me the sight of boring and hateful people.”

Our author is usually called Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿārī, the first part (literally “Father of Loftiness”) not being a teknonym in this case—for he never had children—but an added honorific name or nickname, and the second part derived from his place of birth, Maʿārrat al-Nuʿmān, or al-Maʿārrah for short, a town in northern Syria, between Aleppo and Homs. The medieval biographical dictionaries, usually arranged alphabetically, list him under his given name, Aḥmad, and supply not only the name of his father, ‘Abd Allāh, and grandfather, Sulaymān, but also some twenty to thirty
further generations, tracing him back to the legendary realm of pre-Islamic Arab genealogy; he belonged to the famous tribal confederation called Tanūkh, entitling him to the epithet al-Tanūkhī. He was born toward sunset on Friday, 27 Rabīʿ Awwal, 363 (26 December AD 973) in a respectable family of religious scholars and judges. At the age of four he lost his eyesight due to smallpox. He made up for this disability by having a truly prodigious memory, about which several anecdotes are related; apparently he had the aural equivalent of a photographic memory and he stood out in a milieu that was already accustomed to memorization on a large scale. His blindness meant that he wrote his numerous works by dictating them; his pupil al-Tibrīzī mentioned that al-Maʿarrī at one stage had four well-qualified secretaries and a servant girl (jāriyah), who wrote down his dictations. As a boy he studied with several teachers, including his own father, in his hometown and Aleppo; his main interest was poetry and he became an ardent admirer of the great poet al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965), on whose poetry he was to write a commentary, entitled Muʿjiz Aḥmad (Aḥmad’s Miracle), exploiting not only the fact that he shared his given name with the poet but also, rather daringly, alluding to the Qur’an, which was the prophetic “miracle” (muʿjizah) of the Prophet Muḥammad, who is sometimes called Aḥmad.

It seems that his own poetic efforts date from an early age, when he was eleven or twelve. Normally the poetry of a poet is collected in a single dīwān, in which poems are arranged alphabetically on rhyme letter, or chronologically, or thematically. Most of al-Maʿarri’s poetry however, as far as it is preserved (for many of his works are lost), is contained in two very distinct major collections; yet more poems are found in some minor works. His early poetry, in a dīwān called Saqṭ (or Siqṭ) al-zand (The Spark of the Fire Stick), shows the influence of al-Mutanabbi. The second collection contains his later poetry and it is very different. Instead of more or less conventional odes, it offers nearly sixteen hundred mostly short pieces. Thematically and stylistically the collection is unusually coherent:
it is a sustained invective on mankind in general, a glorification of wisdom and reason, and it expresses skepticism to a degree that made the poet very suspect in pious circles. Dogmatically, however, it cannot be called coherent, for doubts about the Resurrection and afterlife or the value of prophethood alternate with professions of orthodox belief. The title, Luzūm mā lā yalzam,11 literally “the necessity of what is not necessary,” could also be translated as “the self-imposed constraints,” one of these being a form of rich rhyme, involving two rhyme consonants instead of one and using all the letters of the alphabet as rhyme consonant. Another constant trait is the sustained use of figures such as paronomasia. The poems are riddled with allusions and studded with rare words and recondite expressions.12 In order to refute allegations of unbelief detected in this collection he wrote a work called Zajr al-nābiḥ (Chiding Away the Barking Dog), parts of which are extant.13

Al-Maʿarri’s gloomy outlook on the world probably has something to do with his unsuccessful attempt to settle in Baghdad in 399/1008. He returned to al-Maʿarrah after some eighteen months, partly, it seems, because he was unable to secure suitable patronage and because he fell out with a leading personality in the cultural and literary life of the metropolis, al-Sharif al-Murtaḍā. They quarreled about the merits of al-Mutanabbī; when al-Murtaḍā made a disparaging remark about the poet, al-Maʿarri retorted with a cleverly allusive and insinuating quotation, after which he was unceremoniously dragged by his feet from the literary gathering. Henceforth, for the rest of his long life, with only one brief exception, he remained in his birthplace, describing himself as rāhin (or rahn) al-maḥbisayn, “hostage to two prisons,” meaning his blindness and his seclusion; in an epigram he mentions a third prison, his soul being confined to his body.14 Although contemporaries mention that he was wealthy and greatly esteemed in his town, he lived like an ascetic. He was obviously fond of various forms of self-imposed constraints. He abstained from marriage and sexual intercourse; the inscription on his grave says “This is my father’s crime against me, | a crime that I
His diet was extremely frugal, consisting chiefly of lentils, with figs for sweet; and, very unusually for a Muslim, he was not only a vegetarian, but a vegan who abstained from meat, fish, dairy products, eggs, and honey, because he did not want to kill or hurt animals or deprive them of their food. This was an attitude he had to defend when he was attacked by the famous Ismāʿīli ideologue and “chief propagandist” (dāʿī l-duʿāh), Abū Naṣr al-Muʿayyad fī l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, a kind of Grand Mufti of the Fāṭimids in Cairo (whose influence extended to Syria). This attack branded him as a heretic who tried to pose as someone “more merciful than the Merciful,” i.e., God, who, after all, allowed the consumption of meat. The interesting exchange of letters between the theologian and Abū l-ʿAlāʾ has been preserved. It is not clear from where he derived his ideas; his critics speculated that he might have adopted the vegan lifestyle from the Indian Brahmans.

In spite of his ascetic attitude, Abū l-ʿAlāʾ was no true recluse, someone who cuts himself off from society. On the contrary, people flocked to him and scholars and viziers visited him, paying their respect and hoping to learn from him. Among his pupils were famous philologists such as the poet and critic Ibn Sinān al-Khafājī (d. 466/1074) and Abū Zakariyyā ʿAlī al-Tibrīzī (d. 502/1109). The latter reported that when Abū l-ʿAlāʾ died, after a short illness at the age of eighty-four in the month Rabīʿ al-Awwal of 449 (May, AD 1057), eighty-four poets recited elegies at his grave; whether or not this is true, several such elegies have been preserved. Abū l-ʿAlāʾ also took a lively interest in the intricate politics of his own time and place (involving several dynasties and realms, such as the Ḥamdānids, Būyids, Mirdāsids, Fāṭimids, and the infidel Byzantines); an interest that is apparent from references in his poetry and from some of his letters and prose works. Probably the most interesting work in this respect is his Risālat al-Ṣāhil wa-l-shāḥij (The Epistle of the Neigher and the Brayer), a lengthy work in which the main characters are animals, notably a horse and a mule. Speaking animals had been familiar to the Arabs since the famous
collection of animal fables, *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*, was translated from the Pahlavi into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. ca. 139/756), but Abū l-ʿAlāʾ’s book, composed around the year 144/1021, does not contain fables; it is a commentary on contemporary politics involving the Mirdāsid and Fāṭimid dynasties and the Byzantines. It also discusses matters such as taxation. At the same time, like other works of his, it is full of digressions on highly technical matters in the fields of grammar, lexicography, poetics, prosody, and rhyme.

Abū l-ʿAlāʾ ranks as one of the great poets in Arabic literary history. Unlike most poets of the first rank he also excelled as a prose writer. In addition to the present work and the Epistle of the Neigher and the Brayer, mention should be made of a controversial work of his: *al-Fuṣūl wa-l-ghāyāt* (Paragraphs and Periods). It is composed in an exceptionally difficult idiom (the author regularly interrupts his text with a commentary and explanation of obscure words and expressions), but once one has grasped the sense the work is, at first sight, not shocking: it is a series of homiletic, sermon-like texts, containing praise of God, which call for piety, asceticism, and submission to Fate. The controversy that arose about the book is on account of its style and its form, together with the suspicion that the author’s intention was to outdo the Qurʾan. It is composed in an intricate form of rhymed prose, with rhymes interwoven on two text levels: short range within the various sections or paragraphs (*fuṣūl*), and long range, because the last words (“ends”, *ghāyāl*) of successive sections also rhyme in an alphabetic series. It uses many idioms that have a Qurʾanic flavor. Altogether, it is not surprising that some thought that its author intended to surpass the Qurʾan, an attitude clearly blasphemous to orthodox Muslims, who believe that the style of the Qurʾan, God’s literal words, is inimitable and unsurpassable. When someone rhetorically asked how *al-Fuṣūl wa-l-ghāyāt* could possibly be compared to the Surahs and *āyāt* (“verses”) of the Qurʾan, Abū l-ʿAlāʾ reputedly replied, “Wait until it has been polished by tongues for four hundred years; then see how it is,” an answer that would not endear him to the pious.
Although he has been called “the poet among philosophers and the philosopher among poets,” it does not do him justice to consider him a philosopher. It is probably wrong to see a consistent world view in his works. He is a humanist who generally hates humanity and loves animals, a Muslim who expresses many unorthodox thoughts (such as his frequently expressed doubts about a bodily resurrection), a rationalist, a skeptic, and a stoic, a precursor of Arthur Schopenhauer. But above all he is a witty and erudite man of letters, a satirist and moralist, with an incredible command of the Arabic language.

Among his other works that have been preserved is a treatise on morphology (Risālat al-Malāʾikah); a “prosimetrical” work, Mulqā l-sabīl, in which each section consists of a very short ethical paragraph in prose followed by a versification; a collection of letters in ornate style; and commentaries on the collected poetry by famous Abbasid poets: Abū Tammām, al-Buḥturī, and al-Mutanabbi. Many other works listed in the ancient sources are no longer extant.

Al-Maʿarrī lived at the end of what has been called “the Golden Age” of Arabic literature. Whether or not this qualification and this periodization are justified, he firmly belongs to the “classic” Arabic authors. But his reputation has always been mixed throughout the pre-modern period. “People have different opinions about Abū l-ʿAlāʾ,” says Yāqūt, “Some say that he was a heretic (zindīq) . . . , others say that he was a pious ascetic who subsisted on little and who imposed on himself a harsh regimen, being content with little and turning away from worldly matters.” Against the many admirers there are as many detractors. One of the latter, a certain Abū Ghālib ibn Nabhān, apparently had a dream shortly after al-Maʿarrī’s death:

Last night I had a dream in which I saw a blind man with two vipers on his shoulders, dangling down to his thighs. Each of them raised its mouth toward his face, biting off the flesh and devouring it. The man was yelling and crying for help. Shocked and frightened as I was by seeing the
man in this state, I asked who he was. “This is al-Ma’arrī, the heretic (mulḥid),” was the reply.24

With this fancy about the afterlife of a presumed heretic we turn to the present work, al-Ma’arrī’s imaginations about life in heaven and hell, much of which is devoted to heresy. It also has several passages about snakes.

Risālat Ibn al-Qāriḥ and Risālat al-Ghufrān

Around the year 424/1033 Abū l-ʿAlā’ received a long and somewhat rambling letter from a grammarian and Hadith scholar from Aleppo, called ʿAlī ibn Manṣūr ibn al-Qāriḥ, also known as Dawkhalah.25 The elderly writer, already in his seventies, obviously tries to ingratiate himself with the famous inhabitant of al-Ma’arrah. He complains at length of his infirmities and indigence, apologizes for his foibles, and attempts to impress the addressee in the customary ornate style, employing rhymed prose (sajʿ) with much display of erudition and orthodoxy, in the course of which he digresses with a discussion of a number of notorious heretics.26 One of the aims of the letter to Abū l-ʿAlā’, whom he praises volubly, is to exculpate himself of allegations, which he knows Abū l-ʿAlā’ has heard about him: he had been accused of ingratitude toward a family that had patronized him, a family some of whose members had close links with al-Ma’arrī. Abū l-Ḥasan al-Maghribī (d. 400/1009–10) was a man of letters who became state secretary, serving under the Ḥamdānids in Aleppo and later under the Fāṭimids in Cairo. He made Ibn al-Qāriḥ the tutor of his children, in particular Abū l-Qāsim (d. 418/1027), who later became vizier. When the family fell into disgrace and several were executed at the orders of the notorious Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākim, Abū l-Qāsim was the only prominent member of his kin who escaped. Ibn al-Qāriḥ not only disassociated himself from his former patron but even composed invective poems lampooning him.27 One might expect that in his letter to Abū l-ʿAlā’, Ibn al-Qāriḥ would apologize for his vicious attacks on al-Ma’arrī’s friend. Instead,
he goes to some length in trying to justify his views, by describing Abū l-Qāsim as a madman, and a very unpleasant one at that.

It is easy to imagine Abū l-‘Alā’ being not a little irritated by this rather incoherent and self-righteous appeal and the attacks on a friend. Apparently he took some time before replying, and when he did it was in the form of this strange book known as *Risālat al-Ghufrān, The Epistle of Forgiveness*. Formally it is a *risālah*, a letter, but it is longer than many a book, and like many Arabic “epistles” addressed to one person it is obviously meant to be read by many. Abū l-‘Alā’ does not openly refute or rebuke his correspondent; he remains as polite and respectful as Ibn al-Qāriḥ. Both epistles are brimful with pious wishes and blessings, parenthetically added whenever the other is addressed or mentioned (in the polite epistolary style of the time, the third person is used instead of direct address, to refer to the recipient). Abū l-‘Alā’’s work opens with sections expressing his affection for Ibn al-Qāriḥ and praise of his letter, and the second part of *al-Ghufrān* opens with a discussion of hypocrisy, of which Ibn al-Qāriḥ is said to be wholly free. The reader will not be fooled, however: it is clear that all this is ironical. The very difficult Preamble (usually omitted by translators)28 ostensibly expresses al-Maʿarrī’s affection for Ibn al-Qāriḥ, but it is an exercise in double entendre, where words, said to refer to the writer’s “heart,” are closely linked to words for “black” and “snake.” It is an odd way to open a friendly letter, and Bint al-Shāṭiʾ has suggested that al-Maʿarrī, with these snakes and the blackness, obliquely refers to what he really thinks of Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s hypocrisy and malice.29 There is a problem with this interpretation, because al-Maʿarrī is speaking of his own heart in this preamble, not that of Ibn al-Qāriḥ,30 but in any case the ambiguous and punning diction seems to suggest that the fulsome praise is not to be taken at face value: al-Maʿarrī’s epistle is steeped in sardonic irony, even though it is not always clear when he is being ironic.

When Abū l-‘Alā’ extols the qualities of Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s letter, his irony takes a different direction. He imagines that this letter will
help the writer to secure God’s favor and forgiveness. Taking the theme of forgiveness as his starting point and as a leitmotiv for his text, he then embarks on a lengthy and extraordinary flight of fancy, which takes all of the first part (Gh §§1–20) of his Epistle. He imagines that on the Day of Resurrection, at the end of the world, Ibn al-Qāriḥ is revived like all mortal beings. He is admitted to Paradise, but not without difficulty. He has to cope, even at the Last Day, with what one could call the hardships of bureaucracy: one cannot be admitted without a document stating one’s true repentance of sins. Unfortunately, the Sheikh (as Ibn al-Qāriḥ is often called) has lost this crucial document amidst the hustle and bustle and he must find someone to testify for him. When at last he has taken this hurdle and someone has duly attested that Ibn al-Qāriḥ showed true repentance in the nick of time, he still needs the intercession of the Prophet and the help of the latter’s daughter and son. Having arrived in Paradise, after crossing the narrow Bridging Path in a rather undignified manner, riding piggyback on a helpful girl, he decides to go on an excursion. He meets with poets and grammarians—he is, after all, himself a grammarian with a great knowledge of poetry—and asks them how they have been able to attain eternal bliss. Some poets died before the coming of Islam; others composed verses of a dubious, irreligious nature, and one may wonder why they have been forgiven. The conversations are often about points of morphology, syntax, lexicography, and matters of versification, such as irregularities of meter and rhyme; in general, the Sheikh’s interest is keener than that of the poets themselves, many of whom have forgotten, on account of the terrors of the Last Day, what they produced in the “Fleeting World.”

The blessings and pleasures of Paradise are also described: the quality of the wine, at last permitted, and hangover-free; the food (a banquet is depicted), and the heavenly singing of beautiful damsels. Ibn al-Qāriḥ meets some ravishing girls who tell him that they were ugly but pious on earth and have been rewarded. Not all paradisial females had a worldly pre-existence: other black-eyed beauties
emerge from fruits that can be plucked from a tree; Ibn al-Qāriḥ acquires his personal houri in this manner. Before settling with her he leaves for another excursion. He visits the part of Heaven reserved for the jinn or demons (for some of them are believing Muslims). There he meets the extraordinary demon called Abū Hadrash, who boasts in long poems of his devious exploits, but who has been forgiven because of his repentance. Then the Sheikh heads for the spot where there is (as the Qur’ān states) a kind of peephole, through which one can look into Hell and gloat. Our Sheikh converses with poets who have been consigned to Hell for various reasons; he pesters them with queries about their poetry, but mostly meets with a less than enthusiastic response. He also talks to the Devil, who in turn asks him some perplexing questions about Paradise. On his way back the Sheikh visits yet another region: the relatively dusky and lowly Paradise of the rajaz poets, rajaz being an old and rather simple meter that is deemed inferior. Finally he rests, seated on a couch, carried by damsels and immortal youths, surrounded by fruit trees, the fruits of which move toward his mouth of their own accord.

This concludes the first part of the Epistle of Forgiveness. The author admits that he has been rather prolix and says, “Now we shall turn to a reply to the letter.” This he does in the second part (Gh §§21–45), which is a point-by-point discussion of Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s epistle. The bulk of this part is devoted to the various heretics and schismatics mentioned by Ibn al-Qāriḥ, after which al-Maʿarrī turns to the Sheikh’s “repentance” and other matters. He concludes by apologizing for the delay in replying. The first part can be read on its own; indeed, most existing translations do not even contain the second part.

Yet the two parts hang together. Al-Maʿarrī’s irony is present on a deeper level. There are strong indications that the true purpose of his Epistle is to enjoin Ibn al-Qāriḥ to repent of his insolent and ungrateful behavior toward a former patron, of his self-confessed self-indulging in the past, of his hypocrisy in his own Epistle, of his
sometimes tactless and self-righteous condemnation of poets and heretics, and of being generally obsessed with himself. The fictional Ibn al-Qāriḥ, in *al-Ghufrān*, only acquires forgiveness and reaches Paradise with much difficulty; it turns out that he only truly repented of his sins at the last moment: it may still happen in reality, implies al-Maʿarrī, if God wills. He also implies, therefore, that in his view Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s own letter does not amount to true repentance. He mocks Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s obsession with himself and his own profession (grammar and poetry) by imagining him in Paradise as being interested only in poets and philologists; even when he meets others, such as Adam, Abū Hadrash the jinn, or the devil, the conversation is mostly about poetry. The first part is therefore an elaborate and extremely lengthy introduction to the proper reply to the original letter. In the second part several points reappear, such as the importance of true repentance. The fictional Ibn al-Qāriḥ had seen the poet Bashshār in Hell, but al-Maʿarrī says in the second part that he will not categorically say that Bashshār’s destination will be Hell; God is merciful and kind.

One of al-Maʿarrī’s prominent methods in responding to Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s letter is to treat the points made by Ibn al-Qāriḥ with profound and pervading irony, for it is rather obvious that, just as in the first part, the writer is mocking his correspondent. This begins right at the start: when al-Maʿarrī declares the Sheikh to be free of hypocrisy we can be certain that he means exactly the opposite of what he is saying. Much of the rest of the point-by-point reply should be read in the same light. When he objects to the Sheikh’s praise by playing down his own learning, one suspects that he was not unaware of his superior erudition. The clearest instance of mockery is the passage in which he ponders the Sheikh’s potential prowess on the marriage market, if he were to seek a mature spouse in the prime of life. It is impossible to decide to what extent, if at all, the lengthy section on heresy and heretics is to be read as irony. Abū l-ʿAlāʾ is a master of dissembling.
Another conspicuous method of al-Maʿarrī in commenting is to take up a theme or even a word and toy with it, in a manner that evokes the well-known description of the sermons of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626); a “Scotish Lord,” asked by King James I how he liked them, replied that:

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

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

Potentially the most interesting part of al-Maʿarrī’s reply is his reaction to the lengthy passage in Ibn al-Qārīḥ’s letter about heretics.
in Islam, particularly in the light of the many accusations leveled at al-Maʿarri himself on account of his numerous aberrant or even heretical statements. Alas, he does not discuss theology or doctrine. One could hardly expect him to defend any of the alleged heretics listed by Ibn al-Qāriḥ, but he does not even discuss or attack their views apart from condemning them in general and strong terms. The long section on heretics contains much that is interesting, but one searches in vain for the author’s ideas that could be connected with the often startling utterances that can be found the poems of his Luzūmiyyāt collection. Most of his “refutation” of Ibn al-Rāwandī consists of a long and somewhat excruciating series of puns on the titles of Ibn al-Rāwandī’s books, as mentioned above, in a passage full of prose rhyme, without any comments on what these books actually contain. It seems that Ibn al-Qāriḥ, with his insistence on the subject of heresy, wanted to provoke al-Maʿarri. But the latter does not take the bait and carefully makes it clear from which heretical views he distances himself and presents himself as “orthodox.”

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

While Risālat al-Ghufrān did not receive as much attention from pre-modern authors as his al-Fuṣūl wa-l-ghāyāt or the poems of Luzūm mā lā yalzam, it met with some mixed criticism. A note by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) encapsulates it all: “It contains Mazdakism (mazdakah) and irreverence (istikhfāf); there is much erudition (adab) in it.” Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s imagined experiences in Heaven (with glimpses of Hell) as told by al-Maʿarri form an interesting kind of fiction. Overt fiction was often frowned upon in pre-modern Arab literary culture; hence, for instance, the condemnation of fairytales and fantastic stories such as are found in The Thousand and One Nights. But al-Maʿarri did not pretend that his fantasies about
his correspondent actually happened: the events are set in the future and the Arabic present tense (which can refer to the future, for events that will or merely might happen) is used consistently, rather than the perfect tense normally employed in narrative texts. If he cannot be accused of writing fictions or lies, one might think that his apparently irreverent descriptions of Paradise border on the blasphemous. There can, in fact, be no doubt that he is mocking popular and pious beliefs about the hereafter; after all, he himself frequently questioned the reality of bodily resurrection, one of the central dogmas of orthodox Islam. Yet he does not introduce anything in his descriptions of Paradise and Hell that has not been, or could not be, imagined or written by pious Muslims. As is well known, Qur’anic descriptions of the Last Day and the Last Things (Heaven and Hell) are vivid and full of concrete images; popular pious literature greatly expanded and elaborated the Qur’anic images, turning Paradise into a Land of Cockayne, where birds fly around asking to be consumed, not unlike the peacock and the goose in the Epistle of Forgiveness that are instantly marinated or roasted as desired, and are then revived again. The Qur’an (56:20–21), after all, promises the believers “whatever fruit they choose and whatever fowl they desire.”

Eschatological tourism is known from several literatures, notably through Dante’s Divine Comedy. That the latter was inspired partly by al-Ma’arrī was a hypothesis put forward by several scholars, notably Miguel Asín Palacios, and eagerly embraced, naturally, by some Arab scholars such as Kāmil Kaylānī, whose abridged edition of Risālat al-Ghufrān also contains a summary of Dante in Arabic, and who provides the first part of al-Ghufrān with the subtitle Kāmīdiyā ilāhiyyah masrāhuhā l-jannah wa-l-nār, “A Divine Comedy, Staged in Paradise and Hell.”36 One Arab writer even argued that Dante, having stolen al-Ma’arrī’s ideas, produced a greatly inferior work, in which he should have made al-Ma’arrī his guide rather than Virgil.37 The hypothesis that Dante was influenced by al-Ma’arrī has now been largely abandoned; if there is an Islamic
root to Dante’s *Commedia*, it is more likely to have been inspired by popular ideas about the Prophet’s celebrated short excursion, his ascension to heaven (*al-miʿrāj*) after his “nocturnal journey” to Jerusalem (*al-isrāʾ*); a European translation of the anonymous *Kitāb al-Miʿrāj* (of which Latin, French, and Castilian versions were popular) was probably known to Dante. It has also been suggested that Dante may have been inspired by a Hebrew version of a work by Avicenna, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, describing an imaginative “cosmic” journey.³⁸

Nicholson rightly remarks³⁹ that while the *Risālat al-Ghufrān* “faintly” resembles the Sixth Book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where Aeneas visits the Underworld, the *Divine Comedy*, or the Zoroastrian, Middle Persian *Book of Ardā Virāf*, a more significant parallel can be found in Lucian (d. ca. AD 180), who like al-Maʿarrī was a Syrian, though Greek-educated. In his ironically entitled *True Histories* (or *True Fictions*) Lucian describes his fantastic journeys on earth and even to the moon. He visits a Blessed Isle, the delights of which are depicted in some detail; there he meets not only ancient worthies such as heroes of the Trojan War but also Homer, whom he questions about his poetry.⁴⁰ All this is written in a lively and very irreverent style, altogether akin to that of al-Maʿarrī, who shared Lucian’s rationalism, skepticism, and pessimism. It must not be supposed, however, that al-Maʿarrī knew Lucian’s work, for he was not translated into Arabic and al-Maʿarrī did not know Greek. But Lucian was popular with the Byzantines: his works were much copied, annotated, imitated, and taught in schools⁴¹ and one could imagine that some of Lucian’s themes reached al-Maʿarrī orally. One also notes that the motif of the tree woman, exploited in *The Epistle of Forgiveness*, admittedly known in Arabic popular lore,⁴² is also found in Lucian’s *True Histories*.⁴³

It has been suggested⁴⁴ that *Risālat al-Ghufrān* was inspired by *Risālat al-Tawābiʿ wa-l-zawābiʿ* by the Andalusian Arab poet and prose-writer Ibn Shuhayd (d. 426/1035), who composed it only a few years before al-Maʿarrī wrote his work. In this short, incompletely
preserved work, translated by James T. Monroe as *The Treatise of Familiar Spirits and Demons*, the author takes as his starting point the ancient Arab idea that a poet is inspired by a demon or genius, an idea that survived in Islamic times even though many would not take it more seriously than European poets would literally believe in the existence of the Muses or a personal muse. Ibn Shuhayd describes his imagined conversations with the demons of some famous poets: the pre-Islamic Imru’ al-Qays, Ṭarafah, and Qays ibn al-Khaṭīm, and the Abbasid poets Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām; he boldly expands the idea by assigning similar demons to prose writers such as ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ibn Yaḥyā, Badi’ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, and al-Jāḥiẓ (who no doubt would have been surprised by the fancy), and by describing some animal genii: a mule and a goose. It is not impossible that al-Ma’arrī (who in fact composed a short epistle on the same topic) was aware of this work, but one would underestimate his powers of invention if one assumed he was unable to compose his *Epistle* without such inspiration.

The *Epistle of Forgiveness* builds to some extent on his own *Risālat al-Malāʾikah* (*The Epistle of the Angels*), mentioned above as a work on morphology. In this work, composed probably a few years before the *Epistle of Forgiveness*, al-Ma’arrī imagines that he himself discusses oddities of the Arabic lexicon with angels in the afterlife. He surprises the angels with his analysis of the word for “angel” (*malak*, pl. *malāʾikah*), and he discusses other words with them. He argues that those who end up in heaven enjoying the *ḥūr* (black-and-white-eyed damsels) and other delights such as the *sundus* and *istabraq* (“silk and brocade”) should at least be aware of the morphology and etymology of these words. The imagined conversations are at times very similar to those in *al-Ghufrān*, for instance when al-Ma’arrī quotes poets and grammarians to prove a point, whereupon an angel exclaims, “Who is this Ibn Abī Rabī’ah, what’s this Abū ‘Ubaydah, what’s all this nonsense? If you have done any pious deeds you will be happy; if not, get out of here!” There is clearly some self-mockery here.
Similarly, although al-Maʿarrī is clearly mocking Ibn al-Qāriḥ in *al-Ghufrān*, one suspects that many of the philological concerns of the latter were also his own. Ibn al-Qāriḥ’s fictional persona often uses obscure and rare words, which he immediately explains in plainer language; it looks as if he is being mocked for his pedantry. However, al-Maʿarrī does the same when he writes in his own voice; he appears to flaunt his extraordinary knowledge of the Arabic lexicon. A passage in the second part hints at another, practical reason why he added his glosses: our blind author fears that his dictations, with their recondite diction, may be misunderstood or garbled by his scribes. Likewise, one assumes that some of the criticism voiced by Ibn al-Qāriḥ on points of grammar and versification is shared by al-Maʿarrī. A similar preoccupation with philology is found in other works by him, such as *The Epistle of the Neigher and the Brayer*. It is clear that for al-Maʿarrī and, as he imagines, for Ibn al-Qāriḥ the expected delights of Paradise are not primarily sensual but intellectual. The various delights provided by pretty girls, music, food, and drink are generally described in a somewhat ironical vein and the comparisons of heavenly substances with earthly equivalents are couched in ludicrously hyperbolic expressions; but the pleasures of poetry and philological pedantry are taken, on the whole, rather more seriously, even though here, too, a modicum of mockery is not altogether absent.

It is not surprising that in almost all translations of *The Epistle of Forgiveness* such passages about grammar, lexicon, and prosody have been drastically curtailed or omitted altogether, for a combination of reasons: they will not greatly interest those who do not know Arabic, they will seem an annoying interruption of the narrative to those who read the text for the story, and not least because they are rather difficult to translate and in need of copious annotation. When Bint al-Shāṭiʿ published her adaptation of the first part of the *Epistle of Forgiveness* for the stage, as a play in three acts, she naturally excised much of the philology, even though she lets the actors discuss some matters regarding grammatical case endings.
and poetic meters on the stage. It is not known if the play has ever been performed and one cannot but have some doubts about its viability.\(^{52}\)

Al-Ma’arri’s rationalist critique of religion has influenced and inspired neoclassicist and modernist Arabic writers and poets, such as the Iraqi poets Jamīl Ṣidqī l-Zahāwī (1863–1936) and Ma’rūf al-Ruṣāfī (1875–1945). The former wrote a verse epic, *Thawrah fī l-jaḥīm* (*Revolution in Hell*, 1931) in which he offers an interesting and subversive interpretation of the *Epistle of Forgiveness*, involving many well-known figures from Western and Arab history and culture. Heaven is the place for the establishment, Hell for the maladjusted and the socially ambitious, who are punished for their courage. Finally, supported by the angels of Hell, they storm Heaven, claiming it as their rightful place since it is they who have advanced mankind.\(^{53}\)*Hadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām* (*The Story of ʿĪsā ibn Hishām*), a well-known work of fiction first published serially between 1898 and 1902 by the Egyptian author Muḥammad al-Muwaylīḥī (1858?–1930), is often linked with the *Maqāmāt* of Bādīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008) but it has several things in common with *Risālat al-Ghufrān*: a protagonist who is resurrected from the dead before an imaginary journey, implicit and explicit criticism of contemporary beliefs and customs, and a style in which rhymed prose alternates with ordinary prose.

The varied fate of the text, with its incomplete, truncated translations and its transformation into a play, clearly shows how difficult it is to classify it, to those who love neat classifications. Although called a *risālah* and addressed to one person, it is not an ordinary letter, nor is it intended to be read only by the addressee. While containing a narrative complete with a lengthy flashback it is not a normal story, *qiṣṣah, hadīth, khabar*, or *ḥikāyah*. It incorporates much of what normally belongs to the genre of philological “dictations,” *amālī*. It contains, in al-Dhahabī’s words quoted above, “much *adab*,” which here has all its meanings of erudition, literary quotations including much poetry, moral edification, and
entertaining anecdotes. Searchers for the “organic unity” of this heterogeneous literary work will have an arduous task. One could argue that part of its originality and its attractiveness lies precisely in the impossibility of pigeonholing it; but not every reader, critic, or publisher will be charmed by this.