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The rise and transformation of emotion in English romantic poetry: Aesthetic Foundations, Philosophical Dimensions, and Cultural Implications

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Abstract

Myths and legends constitute one of the most significant sources nourishing the Arab imagination and contributing to the development of narrative forms since pre-Islamic times. They transitioned from an oral storytelling tradition to systematic written compilation in the Abbasid period. Andalusian literature continued to draw upon this fantastic heritage, particularly during the cultural flourishing of Cordoba, where Ibn Shuhayd offered a unique model in blending imagination and myth within a narrative text that interweaves the marvelous with satire and critique. Ibn Shuhayd devised a supernatural character named Zuhayr ibn Numayr to serve as a bridge between the human world and the realm of the jinn, using him as a narrative device to break the barriers of the unseen and expand the possibilities of fictional representation. He transformed Wādī ʿAbqar—associated in the Arab imagination with the inspiration of poets—into a dramatic space hosting events, dialogues, and literary debates, imbuing it with humorous and suspenseful dimensions uncommon in epistolary prose. The importance of this epistle lies in its enduring cultural impact, as it opened vast horizons for interpretation and reception across generations, and contributed to establishing Ibn Shuhayd's prominent narrative status in Andalusian literature.

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Introduction

Artistic prose in al-Andalus underwent a profound transformation that enabled it to transcend traditional boundaries between poetry and prose, particularly through the rhetorical and poetic talents that writers infused into their prose works — especially epistolary compositions. These letters acquired a distinctive cultural character reflecting the intellectual and social life of the Andalusian environment, blending contemplation, satire, imagination, and critique. Among the figures who shaped this creative trajectory stands Ibn Shuhayd, who, through his celebrated *Epistle of the Followers and the Whirlwinds*, succeeded in merging the fantastic with the mythical to devise an unprecedented narrative model. Drawing on popular heritage and the Arab imaginary conception of the world of jinn and demons, his epistle became a vast space for narrative experimentation, combining humor, imagination, and critical insight. This enabled the work to secure a distinguished place in Andalusian literature and to remain a vibrant subject of reading and scholarly investigation to this day

Summary of the Narrative

The work presents a fictional tale in which Ibn Shuhayd recounts a journey into the realm of the jinn. During this fantastical expedition, he encounters the demonic companions of major Arab poets, engages them in dialogue, debates their views, listens to their recitations, and presents his own poetry, prose, and critical reflections. Through these encounters, he defends his literary talent, critiques his opponents, and secures—within the fictional framework—testimonies from the supernatural inspirers of classical poets and writers acknowledging his superiority. All of this is narrated with abundant humor, wit, and narrative playfulness.

Ibn Shuhayd titled his work *The Epistle of the Followers and the Whirlwinds* (*al-Tawābiʿ wa-al-Zawābiʿ*), as its events unfold entirely within the world of the jinn, and its dramatis personae (besides the author) belong to the realm of supernatural beings. The *tawābiʿ* are jinn or jinniyāt who accompany human beings, while *al-zawābiʿ* refers to demonic entities or chiefs among the jinn. He addresses the epistle to a figure he refers to with the kunya Abū Bakr, and the narrative opens with a prelude in which Ibn Shuhayd recounts his early education, his precocious literary talent, and the astonishment of his companion Abū Bakr, who swore that such brilliance could only be the work of a supernatural ally—a *tābiʿa* or *zābiʿa* guiding and supporting him, for what he produced in literature surpassed the capacity of mortals.

At this point, a jinni named Zuhayr ibn Numayr appears to Ibn Shuhayd in the form of a mounted warrior and completes for him a poem—out of love for his giftedness and a desire to accompany him, as the supernatural inspirers had done with earlier poets. The jinn companion also teaches him certain verses that, when recited, would summon him whenever the poet needed inspiration. Thereafter, whenever Ibn Shuhayd's creativity faltered, he would recite the lines, and Zuhayr would appear to stimulate his poetic faculty—thus solidifying their companionship.

After this introduction, Ibn Shuhayd transitions into the main body of the narrative. He recounts a conversation with his supernatural companion, during which they exchange anecdotes concerning poets, orators, and their respective demonic inspirers. Ibn Shuhayd then asks whether it is possible to meet these figures, and Zuhayr promises to seek permission from his elder. He flies off, returns with consent, and invites Ibn Shuhayd to mount behind him. Together they traverse the air with incredible speed until they reach the land of the jinn.

There, Zuhayr leads him to the companion of Imruʾ al-Qays, then to the companions of Ṭarafa, Qays ibn al-Khaṭīm, Abū Tammām, al-Buḥturī, Abū Nuwās, and al-Mutanabbī. In each encounter, Ibn Shuhayd carefully depicts both the setting and the supernatural double of the poet, emphasizing features that reflect the known characteristics of the poet in earthly life. The poet listens to the recitations of the jinn, presents his own verses, and earns their admiration.

He then asks to meet the supernatural counterparts of the great prose writers—those he calls "orators." Zuhayr escorts him to a gathering of these beings, among them the companion of al-Jāḥiẓ and the companion of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib. Ibn Shuhayd is first introduced to the jinn companion of al-Jāḥiẓ, who praises him but criticizes his excessive reliance on ornate rhymed prose. Ibn Shuhayd defends himself vigorously, prompting the companion of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd to intervene with further criticism. Yet Ibn Shuhayd counters both, impresses them, and, upon their request, reads selections from his writings. They approve his style and treat him cordially.

He then complains to them about his Andalusian detractors, among whom is Abū al-Qāsim al-Iflīlī, a grammarian known for his sharp criticism of Ibn Shuhayd. Summoning their supernatural counterparts, Ibn Shuhayd engages in disputes that culminate in his refuting all their objections. The jinn companion of Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī then appears and challenges him with a descriptive passage. Ibn Shuhayd responds with a depiction of water that stuns him into silence. In recognition of his mastery, the companions of al-Jāḥiẓ and ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd grant him their symbolic approval. Later, Ibn Shuhayd joins a literary assembly among the jinn in which discussions revolve around comparative poetics and varying expressions of a single theme by different poets. The debate then shifts to the topic of literary thefts—how they occur and how a plagiarist might disguise them. Ibn Shuhayd participates actively, offering both insightful criticism and melodious poetry.

Toward the end of the narrative, he and his companion enter a land inhabited by the animal-like jinn—mule-like and donkey-like beings. There he finds them divided over two amorous poems: one composed by a lovesick mule, the other by an enamored donkey. They ask him to judge between them, and after hearing the verses and posing some questions, he issues an informed verdict. He then encounters a goose standing in a pond, the supernatural counterpart of a linguist, who challenges him to a debate in grammar and lexicography. Ibn Shuhayd dismisses her insolence and mocks her foolishness, closing the surviving portions of *The Epistle of the Followers and the Whirlwinds* (Haykal, 1968)

From this summary, it becomes evident that Ibn Shuhayd achieved remarkable innovation in crafting this new narrative form in al-Andalus. Andalusian critics regarded his work as a pioneering creative endeavor unprecedented in the region's intellectual and literary life. Although Ibn Shuhayd was not the first to employ fantasy—al-Maʿarrī's *Epistle of Forgiveness* had explored similar imaginative realms—he reworked these themes with fresh narrative strategies and new semantic, poetic, and critical dimensions, all framed within a tone of humor and playful satire.

The entire narrative orbits around the axis of imagination and draws on ancient myths regarding poetic inspiration, especially the belief held by early Arab poets that jinn served as muses who bestowed poetic talent upon chosen individuals—elevating their standing among tribes and in literary markets (ʿAjīnah, 1994)

The Mythological and Folkloric Substrate

Before addressing the accounts of the jinn, it is useful to provide a concise conceptual outline of *myth* and *folklore*, given their significance as structural elements in Ibn Shuhayd's narrative.

2.1. Myth and Folklore: Conceptual Framework

The term *myth* in Arabic is semantically linked to a constellation of expressions such as *nabaʾ* (report), *khabar* (tale), *ḥadīth* (narration), *khurāfa* (folktale), *qiṣṣa* (story), and *mathal* (parable). In Islamic heritage, the word appears in the Qur'an exclusively in the plural form—*asāṭīr al-awwalīn* ("the legends of the ancients")—derived from *saṭr*, meaning a written line, a row of trees, or simply a line of text. Some Western scholars have noted an affinity between *asāṭīr* and the Greek–Latin *historia*, in the sense of stories inherited from earlier peoples. By contrast, *khurāfa* (folktale) derives from the root *kh-r-f*, conveying meanings such as mental confusion or fanciful talk. Classical sources relate the figure of *Khurāfa*, a man from Banū ʿUdhra who was allegedly abducted by jinn, lived among them for a time, then returned to tell his people extraordinary—and often unbelievable—stories. Others explain the term as stemming from *ikhtirāf al-samar* (inventive nighttime storytelling). Thus arose the expression "*ḥadīth Khurāfa*," eventually semantically broadened to denote fantastical or implausible tales. An oft-cited line illustrates this sense: (Zakī Mubārak, 2013)

"Life, then death, then resurrection—
A tale of Khurāfa, O Umm ʿUmar."

Against this conceptual backdrop, Ibn Shuhayd's narrative probes the boundaries between myth, wonder, and literary creation.

2.2. The Jinn as a Source of Poetic Inspiration

One of the central mythic motifs in Ibn Shuhayd's text is the belief—deeply rooted in pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetic culture—that exceptional poets are aided by supernatural companions who inspire their verse. Ibn Shuhayd adopts this belief not merely as inherited folklore but as an active narrative device shaping the world of *The Epistle of the Followers and the Whirlwinds*. He explicitly aligns himself with this tradition, stating:

"Indeed, he must have a demon to guide him,
and a *shayṣabān* who comes to him.
I swear he has a *tābiʿa* that supports him
and a *zābiʿa* that aids him—for such artistry exceeds human capacity (Shuhayd, 1996)

Thus, the author not only reproduces the cultural motif but also reinforces it through oath and narrative performance. This reflects a conscious attempt to situate himself within the lineage of famed poets who believed—or were believed—to possess supernatural creative allies. The notion is deeply anchored in Arab heritage. As early sources attest: "The ancient Arabs maintained that every great poet was accompanied by a jinni who whispered verse to him, stirred his poetic tongue, and aided him whenever he faltered" (abbas, 1988)

The Qur'anic allusion to human reliance on jinn—{"...men from among humankind sought refuge with men from among the jinn..."}—provided further cultural scaffolding for the belief, though Islamic theology restricts knowledge of the unseen to divine revelation.

In this sense, Ibn Shuhayd's use of the theme is not theological but literary. The jinn serve as metaphors for inspiration, anxiety of influence, and poetic rivalry—tools that enable him to craft a hybrid text where reality and imagination constantly interchange roles.

2.3. Names of the Followers (*Tawābiʿ*) and Whirlwinds (*Zawābiʿ*)

Arab literary heritage abounds with names attributed to the supernatural inspirers of poets. Ibn Shuhayd draws on this reservoir, populating his narrative with entities whose identities echo centuries of poetic lore. Classical anecdotes describe two principal "demons of poetry": **al-Hūbar** and **al-Hawjal**. In a famous account, a young man recites verse to al-Farazdaq, who responds:

"O my nephew, poetry has two demons:
one called al-Hūbar and the other al-Hawjal.
If al-Hūbar inspires a poet, his verse is refined;
if al-Hawjal takes hold, the poem is corrupted." (al-Qurashī, 2000)

The story continues with al-Farazdaq mapping the classical poets onto the "body" of poetry, distributing its finest parts among Imruʾ al-Qays, ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm, Zuhayr, al-Aʿshā, al-Nābigha, Ṭarafa, and Labīd. Notably, these are precisely the poets Ibn Shuhayd encounters in jinn-form during his voyage—an intertextual gesture linking his Andalusian narrative to the core of the classical canon. Jāḥiẓ similarly records an extensive catalogue of such supernatural figures:

"They spoke of Shanqanaq and Shayṣabān,
and of Simalqa and Zawbaʿa,
of al-Madhhab, the *saʿlāh*,
of Barkawīr and Darkādhāb..." (Al-Jāḥiẓ, 1998)

These names vary in connotation: some signify chieftains of the jinn; others serve as metaphors for creative frenzy, poetic madness, or extraordinary verbal facility. Poets themselves frequently invoked their supernatural counterparts. Ḥassān ibn Thābit declares:

"I had a companion from the clans of Shayṣabān—
at times I speak, and at times he speaks through me." (IḥsānʿAbbās, 1977)

Bashshār ibn Burd speaks of **Shanqanaq**, who allegedly pressed him to accept his companionship, while al-Aʿshā boasts of **Masḥal**, his poetic double.

Thus, Ibn Shuhayd's invocation of **Zuhayr ibn Numayr** places him firmly within this centuries-old poetic archetype. Yet he innovates by making this companion not only a muse but also a guide, a literary critic, and a mediator between poetic worlds. In this sense, Ibn Shuhayd does not merely inherit names; he transforms them into narrative engines driving the entire allegorical structure of his epistle

The Spatial Substrate: *Wādī ʿAbqar* (The Valley of Abqar)

A close reading of Arab cultural heritage reveals that the belief in poetic inspiration by jinn is inseparable from the belief in *a specific place* where such beings dwell. Ibn Shuhayd deliberately situates his narrative within this mythic geography, choosing *Wādī ʿAbqar*—the legendary valley of inspiration—as the principal spatial nucleus of his epistle. (IḥsānʿAbbās, 1977)

3.1. The Real and Imagined Geography of ʿAbqar

Tradition locates Wādī ʿAbqar in Yemen, a region long associated with sites of supernatural presence. The valley is repeatedly described as the symbolic homeland of poetic genius, such that the Arabs coined the adjective ʿ**abqarī** to describe anyone of exceptional talent or ingenuity. As early sources note: "May God bear witness that you are more ingenious than the jinn of ʿAbqar." (IḥsānʿAbbās, 1977). The term ʿ**abqarī** thus evolved semantically from a geographical reference to a marker of extraordinary human excellence. (Thābit, 1994)

3.2. Classical Descriptions

Lexicographers and literary scholars—such as al-Aṣmaʿī, al-Jāḥiẓ, and Labīd—provide vivid portrayals of the valley:

- **Al-Aṣmaʿī**: "ʿAbqar is a land known to be inhabited by jinn."
- **Al-Jāḥiẓ** (in a comparative cultural analysis):

"Just as the Arabs distinguish the lions of al-Sharā and the wolves of al-Ghaḍā,
they distinguish the dwellings of the jinn.

When they attribute something astonishing to a particular place,
they make ʿAbqar the highest exemplar."

- **Labīd**: "Among their elders and youths alike are those as formidable as the hosts of ʿAbqar."

Thus, the valley functions as a mythic topography where creativity originates, and where poets encounter supernatural forces that shape their artistic destinies.

3.3. Expanded Mythical Geography

Arab lore also assigns other regions to the jinn: desolate deserts, ruins, graves, abandoned valleys, and locations struck by divine punishment (such as the dwellings of ʿĀd and Thamūd). Yet none achieved the symbolic weight of *Wādī ʿAbqar*. In these liminal spaces, travelers addressed the unseen beings with greetings such as: "ʿAmū ẓalāman" (May your darkness be filled with safety), acknowledging their presence and seeking protection. (Manṣūr, 1999). For Ibn Shuhayd, therefore, ʿAbqar is not merely a setting but a **semiotic engine**: a spatial metaphor for imaginative liberation, poetic empowerment, and a return to the archetypes of Arab creativity.

4. The Imaginative Substrate in the Epistle

The dominance of the imaginative mode in Ibn Shuhayd's narrative is neither accidental nor ornamental. Rather, imagination is the structural backbone of *The Epistle of the Followers and the Whirlwinds*, enabling the author to transcend societal constraints, face his critics, and construct a literary space where he reigns supreme.

4.1. Imagination as a Strategy of Artistic Self-Assertion

Facing criticism and rivalry in Córdoba, Ibn Shuhayd turns to fiction as a means of symbolic resistance. Through fantasy, he stages encounters with two elite groups:

1. **The great poets of Arab antiquity**, whose approval grants him symbolic legitimacy.
2. **The legendary prose stylists and rhetoricians**, whose debates he navigates with confidence, ultimately securing their "authorization."

Thus, imagination becomes a **rhetorical shield** and a **vehicle of self-fashioning**. As al-Māzinī notes regarding the function of imagination in artistic creation:

"Imagination is the foundation of imagery,
through which the poet surpasses all others." (Shuhayd, 1996). In Ibn Shuhayd's hands, imagination is both a creative faculty and a social instrument.

4.2. Imagination and the Natural World

Like many Andalusian writers, Ibn Shuhayd exhibits a profound sensitivity to nature. Andalusi literature is replete with pastoral images, luminous descriptions, and botanical symbolism. These elements permeate the epistle as well, where nature becomes:

- a backdrop for encounters with jinn,

- a generator of metaphors,
- and a repository for Andalusia's aesthetic heritage.

The interplay between fantasy and natural imagery creates a layered narrative texture, blending sensory richness with supernatural spectacle. (Haykal, 1968)

4.3. Fiction Interwoven with Reality

Despite its fantastical surface, the narrative contains embedded references to real disputes, rivals, and social dynamics in Ibn Shuhayd's intellectual milieu. He incorporates these lived experiences into an imaginative framework, transforming personal grievances into literary allegory. Thus, the epistle's fictional façade conceals a **critique of cultural politics**, self-defense against detractors, and an assertion of creative sovereignty.

5. Reception and Interpretation (Hermeneutics)

In this section, the study applies the concept of **Historicity of Reception** (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*) as formulated by Wolfgang Iser, one of the principal theorists of reader-response criticism. Iser's model highlights how a literary work acquires meaning through successive waves of reception across time.

Ibn Shuhayd's epistle provides a rich case study: it has elicited diverse readings across centuries, each shaped by distinct aesthetic and cultural paradigms.

5.1. Butrus al-Bustānī's Reception

The modern editor of the epistle, Butrus al-Bustānī, offers a critical philological reading. He challenges Brockelmann's dating of the text, arguing that the poems embedded in the epistle indicate a later composition. Al-Bustānī concludes that the epistle was likely written **after 414 AH**, when Ibn Shuhayd was in his early thirties. (Manṣūr, 1999)

He remarks: "Ibn Shuhayd's novelty consists in weaving himself into the fabric of older models, yet without achieving a distinctive stylistic signature."

Elsewhere he states: "He did not multiply such texts because of his inclination toward the classical style."

These observations reflect an editor concerned with the stylistic genealogy of the text more than with its narrative innovation.

5.2. Al-Thaʿālibī's Reception

Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī includes excerpts from the epistle in his *Yatīmat al-Dahr*, yet his reading is limited to evaluating the individual pieces rather than appreciating the text as a unified work of fictional prose. His comment: "His prose is supremely graceful, and his poetry of consummate eloquence," (ʿAjīnah, 1994) captures admiration but not hermeneutic engagement. The epistle, for al-Thaʿālibī, is a repository of literary jewels—not a pioneering narrative form.

5.3. Chādhilī Bū Yaḥyā's Reception

Bū Yaḥyā advances a more sophisticated reading, arguing that *The Epistle of the Followers and the Whirlwinds* is an entirely new literary form with no prior analogue in Arabic prose. He links the narrative to *the story of the Miʿrāj* and to the *Iblīsiyyah Maqāmah* of al-Hamadhānī, suggesting that Ibn Shuhayd draws on both religious and literary sources while reworking them into a distinctive fictional vision.

His conclusion: "Ibn Shuhayd harnessed the cultural residues of Arab-Islamic memory and produced through his personal genius a unique fictional narrative unmatched in his era." This reading situates the epistle at the intersection of myth, rhetoric, and narrative experimentation.

5.4. Emilio García Gómez's Reception

The Spanish Arabist Emilio García Gómez regards Ibn Shuhayd as: "A pure intellectual, for whom literature was not a profession but an aristocratic vocation."

He further claims that Ibn Shuhayd **preceded** both al-Maʿarrī and Dante in composing a visionary journey into the supernatural world—a bold but illustrative statement of the text's imaginative magnitude.

Gómez highlights the author's philosophical tone, spontaneity of style, and ability to blend humor with profound literary critique. (Al-Jāḥiẓ, 1998)

Conclusion

This study concludes that Ibn Shuhayd's narrative emerges from a historical and cultural environment that was exceptionally conducive to literary production. The author belonged to a distinguished ministerial family renowned for its intellectual refinement—*Āl ʿĀmir*—and was surrounded by friends and contemporaries who were themselves accomplished men of letters. This milieu provided fertile ground for the creation of an innovative work such as *The Epistle of the Followers and the Whirlwinds*.

Furthermore, the flourishing of authorship in al-Andalus during his lifetime—and the vigorous encouragement offered by Umayyad rulers—contributed significantly to the evolution of narrative and literary expression. Andalusi prose writing in particular achieved a level of diversity comparable to the Abbasid "Golden Age," leading some modern scholars to describe the Cordoban period as *the Andalusian Golden Age*.

Within this vibrant context, Ibn Shuhayd crafted a fantastical journey that allowed him to assert his creative superiority and introduce a genuinely new narrative form. The epistle reflects his awareness of the density of literary production in his era and his desire to distinguish himself through originality and imaginative daring.

Ultimately, this work played a major role in establishing Ibn Shuhayd's fame. It stimulated abundant commentary, inspired extensive critical writing, and generated a continuous tradition of reception, interpretation, and debate through different historical periods. The epistle stands today as a unique monument in Andalusi literature—a testament to the author's ingenuity and the richness of the cultural world that shaped him.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on the critical analysis of classical literary texts and secondary scholarly sources. It does not involve human participants, personal data, experiments, or sensitive materials. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required for this research. The author confirms that all sources have been appropriately cited and that the study adheres to established academic standards of integrity and originality.

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Conflict of Interest

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