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2. ISLAM
Sufism and Poetry

At a first reading, the Qur'ān does not seem to favor poets. Sūrah 26, entitled "The Poets" (*al-Shu'arā'*), concludes with four verses that appear to contain strong words against poetry:

> And the poets—the deviators follow them.
> Seest thou not that they wander in every valley,
> And that they say that which they do not?
> Except those who believe and do good and remember Allāh much, and defend themselves after they are oppressed. And they who do wrong, will know what final place of turning they will turn back.[1]

Circumstantially, these reproaches are addressed to those among the poets who opposed the Prophet of Islam by casting doubts on his message. These verses should therefore not be read as an indictment of poetry as such, as is moreover clearly indicated by the "exception" (*illā alladhīna āmanū wa 'amilū as-sālihāti*, "except those who believe and perform good deeds"). Actually, there were among the Prophet's contemporaries, poets such as Hassan ibn Thabit who put their talents in the service of Islam.[2] Moreover, as Toshihiko Izutsu has demonstrated in his works on the Qur'ān, the Islamic revelation was, in a certain sense, circumstantially situated within a poetic context that was conducive to it. Some major Qur'ānic themes and expressions can be interpreted as a spiritual counterpoint and a response to pre-Islamic poetry.[3] In addition, the linguistic usage of Arabic words in pre-Islamic poetry has become in Islam a basic principle of Qur'ānic commentary (*tafsīr*).[4]

[1] *The Holy Qur'ān*, trans. Maulana Muhammad Ali, pp. 224-27.

[2] See Anne-Marie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil, Mystical Poetry in Islam*, p. 14.

[3] Commenting on the pessimistic conception of earthly life that prevails in pre-Islamic poetry, Izutsu states as follows: "It is important to remark also that this bitter consciousness of the absolute impossibility of finding 'eternity' in this world was at once the dead end into which heathenism drove itself and the very starting point from which Islam took its ascending course" (*Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān*, p. 48).

[4] "Ibn 'Abbās … is given the credit for having emphasized one of the basic principles of *'ilm al-tafsīr* which has remained important to this day, namely, that the meaning of words, especially

Notwithstanding these qualifications, it should be added, on a more profoundly spiritual plane, that the reproach of "wandering" that is addressed to poets in the aforementioned verses points to the lack of direction that characterizes poetry in the absence of faith or contemplative intellection. Moreover, a poetry that is disconnected from a sense of the Ultimate Reality reveals its futility in that it entails spiritual "hypocrisy" by positing two separate and irreconcilable realities, that of "saying" (*yaqulūna*) and that of "doing" (*yaf'alūna*). Divorced from "doing," "saying" amounts to little more than nothing; it is deprived of ontological and spiritual reality and therefore pertains to the domain of "vain talk" (*bātil*). This "vain talk" is the fundamental opposite of the Qur'ān, since it is basically deprived of any ontological reality. As with the Greek poets at the time of Plato, the deluded poets whom the Qur'ān chastises are producers of a phantasmatic reality which they substitute for God's works. Given the tension between the poetic power of the Qur'ān—as well as the poetic vigor of the Bedouin culture that envelops its outer manifestation—and the fundamental "associationism" (*shirk*) and negation of transcendence that is the fatal bent of the worldly poetry of the time, there is no category of human activity—painting excepted—that is considered with more ambivalence than poetry, while yet having been exalted and practiced in a most varied and original way by Muslims as early as the first centuries of Islam.

Arab poetry, as manifested prior to the development of Islamic poetry, appeared to most Muslims as a kind of semi-magical and semi-prophetic manifestation of idolatry, chiefly characterized by its individualistic and passionate tendencies; but also—whence its ambiguity—as a repository of tribal virtues that Islam alone was able to bring to spiritual fruition. On the one hand, poetry was associated with an exaltation of the individual ego and worldly life—as epitomized by wealth and wine—that is the very antithesis of contemplative extinction. Moreover, passions and occult powers seemed to rule poetical practice, and the latter was therefore perceived as a potential—if not actual—locus of rebellion against God's law. On the other hand, Islam found consonant elements in the moral undertones and modes of expression of pre-Islamic *Jāhilīyah* poetry. Accordingly, and with a keen sense of awareness of the extraordinary creativeness of Muslim civilization in the domain of poetic expression, a foremost expert on Islam such as Anne-Marie Schimmel has justifiably asserted that "despite the attempts by later poets to

of unusual words in the Qur'ān ought to be traced back to their usage in the language of pre-Islamic poetry" (Ahmad Von Denffer, *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, p. 126).

rehabilitate poetry and despite the fact that 'no people in the world … are so moved by the word … as the Arabs' (Philip Hitti), it cannot be denied that the words of Sūrah 26 point to an important truth, namely, the strong tension between the words of revelation and the words of poetry."[5]

In such a problematic and ambivalent context, genuine prophecy is at the same time culturally embedded in a certain poetic and moral climate that "predisposes" its themes and modes of expression, while it is still constantly summoned to distinguish itself from profane poetry. The Islamic Revelation appears in the form of a book, i.e., in a verbal form of the Word, in contrast to Christianity, where the Word is made flesh in Christ. In a cultural climate in which poetry is central, this is both an asset and a danger. On the one hand, the level of inspiration of the Qur'ān is taken by Muslims to be directly reflected in the poetic incomparability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ānic text. In this connection, the Qur'ān may be considered as the major "miracle" of Islam, a testification to its supernatural origin. On the other hand, however, the all-pervasiveness of poetic inspiration in the pre-Islamic era allows for the possibility of dismissing the Revelation as one more occurrence of the verbal magic of poetry. Poetry is therefore both exalted and rejected, and in this respect the Qur'ān is both a reference and a counter-model for poetry.

The positive and "prophetic" status of poetry is primarily actualized in Islamic spirituality: the intimate relationship between poetry and the Qur'ān is clearly highlighted—although not exclusively so—by the fact that poetic texts are often intertwined with Qur'ānic quotations. It would actually be more accurate to consider these quotations as being integrated into these contemplative poems in a way that reflects a profound interiorization of the Qur'ānic revelation.[6] Qur'ānic "poetry" has become the very substance of the contemplative soul to such an extent that it becomes, so to speak, the very texture of its utterances. In Islam, the contemplative poetry of the mystics is both a commentary upon the Qur'ān and a kind of prolongation of the sacred text; the integration of Sufi poetry—along with Qur'ānic passages—within the mystics' ceremonial gatherings bears witness to this fact. The case of Rūmī is particularly instructive in this regard since much of his poetry is interspersed with Qur'ānic passages, such that Anne-Marie Schimmel has argued that "it

[5] Anne-Marie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, p. 13.

[6] "Being the inner dimension of the Islamic revelation, Sufism is related in both form and content to the Noble Quran, and the language of the Sacred Text, its rhythms and rhymes, its metaphors and symbols, has continued to echo in Sufi literature throughout the centuries" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 171).

would be useful to read Mawlana's [i.e., Rūmī's] poetry as a kind of *tafsir*, a commentary on the Koran, and to reconstruct his interpretations from the numerous quotations."[7] In parallel, some experts have been able to show that thousands of verses from both the *Diwān* and the *Mathnawī* can be considered as translations of Qur'ānic verses into Persian poetry.[8]

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr has emphasized the relationship between logic and poetry in Islam by highlighting the fact that the two domains have become separated in the West in the wake of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance split between the thinking "I" and the world of nature. The Cartesian separation between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is one of the major philosophical episodes of that scission, as are also—in an even more radical way—the epistemological conclusions of Kant's critical idealism. In the pre-modern world, by contrast, the anthropocosmic unity of man and nature was characterized by a situation in which the domain of discourse on the one hand, and that of the archetypes as manifested in the cosmos on the other hand, was still profoundly connected. In Islam, and particularly in the world of Sufism or *tasawwuf*, the term *āyāt* refers both to the cosmic "signs" that are like the "signature" of God upon Creation, and to the verses of the Qur'ān. Intelligence (*'aql*) is conceived as a fundamentally contemplative faculty since it is manifested primarily in the ability to read these *āyāt*. The unbeliever is repeatedly characterized in the Qur'ān as one who is unable to read the signs of God on the horizon; this incapacity being both the cause and the consequence of his lack of islām, or "submission" to God.

The Qur'ān and the book of Creation are the two fundamental aspects of the Word of God. They are "poetry" in the highest sense. Logic and poetry are therefore intimately connected as complementary modes of knowing in Islam: they both manifest the Divine Intelligence in the realms of nature and language. Michel Foucault's concept of a "prose of the world" that would have the semantic "transparence" of a book to be read should actually be prolonged here by that of a "poetry of the world," since the latter refers more

[7] Anne-Marie Schimmel, *I am Wind, You are Fire, The Life and Work of Rumi*, p. 116.

[8] "One of the greatest living authorities on Rumi in Persia today, Hadi Ha'iri, has shown in an unpublished work that some 6,000 verses of the *Dīwān* and the *Mathnawī* are practically direct translations of Qur'ānic verses into Persian poetry" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 145).

explicitly to the idea of a qualitative and orderly correspondence between nature and language. Seyyed Hossein Nasr expresses the meaning of this correspondence in the following terms:

> According to the traditional doctrine, the inner reality of the cosmos, which unveils itself to the inner eye or to intellectual vision—for which the inner eye is the instrument of perception—is based upon a harmony which imposes itself even upon the corporeal domain. This harmony is, moreover, reflected in the world of language, which is itself a reflection of both the soul of man and of the cosmos.[9]

On its highest level, poetry therefore reproduces the qualitative order of the cosmos. God can be contemplated both in the order of nature and in the harmonic structures of poetic language.

As with the signs of God on the horizon, the phenomena that constitute poetic language may be considered from two standpoints: they can be envisaged on the one hand as a set of formal appearances and structures, as they may also be interpreted in light of their inner significance. Islamic poetics therefore distinguishes between two components of poetic expression: that of form (*sūrah*) and that of meaning (*ma'nā)*. As George Cave puts it:

> *Sūrah* means the appearance of the poem, and comprises all that is not inherent in the meaning of the poem. By this is meant structure, metrical arrangement, rhyme scheme, rhetorical devices, etc., in other words all that can be concretely viewed and objectively treated. *Ma'nā* simply means "meaning" or that which must be subjectively treated or intuited.[10]

Notwithstanding its clarity and relevance, this definition may present the inconvenience of lending itself to a misinterpretation of the two adverbs "objectively" and "subjectively." It would in fact be erroneous to reduce *ma'nā* to a kind of equivalent of "feeling" or "emotion": if *ma'nā* is to be "subjectively treated or intuited" it is not by reason of its purely emotional character, but simply because the "meaning" has to be apprehended by the intelligence and the sensibility of the auditor—therefore "subjectively"—in order to be actualized. *Ma'nā* is an inner reality whereas *sūrah* is like the outer shell through which the latter may manifest itself. *Ma'nā* is akin to

[9] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, pp. 88-9.

[10] George Cave, *Sufi Poetry*, p. 3.

the intelligible seal (*eidos*) that informs the material substratum (*hylē*). The combinatory fusion of these two principles is effected in a variety of proportions: the more clearly determinative *ma'nā* is, the more integrally the intelligible radiance of the poem may be unveiled:

> As this impression of *ma'nā* upon *sūrah* increases, the external form becomes transparent and reveals more readily its inner meaning.[11]

As with the most expressive forms of human and natural beauty, the poetic ideal is therefore one in which *sūrah* has been completely crystallized by *ma'nā*. Sufi poetry is in no way intent on allowing language freedom from the intellective form of *dhawq*, or intuitive taste of reality. A true poem is one in which a profound spiritual intuition manifests itself in the perfect clothing of a prosodic gem. Mystical poets like Rūmī have utter disdain for poetry conceived as an art for art's sake, as a formal perfection in kind: "in face of meaning, what is form? Very contemptible."[12] If it is so, it is most fundamentally because meaning is akin to God's informing and intellective power, or because, as William Chittick quite plainly puts it: "in the last analysis the meaning of all things is God."[13] The complementary relationship between *sūrah* and *ma'nā* does not, however, amount to a situation where *sūrah* has no intellectual dimension in itself. In fact, the form of the poem tends to reproduce a structure that is entailed by the spiritual vision of the world. In other words, the material substratum cannot but "reproduce" in its own way the qualitative essence of the archetype. This reproduction is primarily effected through quantitative structures that pertain to the form of the poem. Form and essence cannot be completely severed from one another since reality is one. Poetry is a "logical" language, but one in which the symbolic potentialities of the latter are brought to exceptional heights. Symbolic meaning is a capacity to reveal the formless in and by a form. In this connection, Seyyed Hossein Nasr quotes Jāmī as a poet who is most explicit about this union of form and essence in poetry:

> What is poetry? The song of the bird of the Intellect.
> What is poetry? The similitude of the world of eternity.

[11] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 89.

[12] Rūmī, *Mathnawī* I. 3330, cited in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love, The Spiritual Teachings of Rūmī*, p. 19.

[13] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 19.

The value of the bird becomes evident through it,
And one discovers whether it comes from the oven of a bath house or a rose garden.
It composes poetry from the Divine rose garden;
It draws its power and sustenance from that sacred precinct.[14]

The Intellect (*'aql*) is the reality through which man connects with higher realities, and particularly with the Divine realm. As the song of a bird, poetry is therefore a spontaneous expression of that connection. In a sense—and with the exception of jaculatory prayer and other possible modes of spontaneous utterances of the Self—poetry is for mankind the closest utterance there is to what singing is for birds. Rūmī emphasizes this parallel when longing for an expression that would match bird songs in their "meaning" and not simply in their "form":

Birdsong brings relief
To my longing.
I am just as ecstatic as they are,
But with nothing to say!
Please, universal soul, practice
Some song, or something, through me![15]

The ideal of poetic creation to which Rūmī aspires is therefore one in which the *modus operandi* of nature occurs in the animal realm: it consists in a perfect receptivity toward the spiritual and animic resonances of nature as God's message. However, in contrast to birds, it may be that the difficulty experienced by the mystic in finding "something to say" is in fact paradoxically a consequence of the metaphysical and epistemological privileges of mankind. Birds always have "something to say" because the very form of their "saying" is "meaningful": it is only in man, by virtue of his "poetic" freedom and as a consequence of his ability to "disassociate" levels of reality by cutting himself off from the One, that formal expression may not necessarily fit consciousness. Man has potentially more to say than animals since he is able to pronounce the Name of God and to gain access to a wide array of images and words to crystallize the central metaphysical consciousness that a full awareness of this pronunciation entails. In him, intellective intuitions "want"

[14] Jāmī, cited in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 91.

[15] Rūmī, *Birdsong*, trans. Coleman Barks, p. 13.

to be "fixed" in poetic forms whose function in relation to truth is analogous to that of a crystal with respect to light. The poetic crystal transmits the light of truth while focusing and refracting it by virtue of its particular mode of perfection.

The spiritual implications of the contemplative function of poetry that have just been sketched have been most suggestively encapsulated by Hafiz:

> Good poetry
> Makes a beautiful naked woman
> Materialize from words
> Who then says,
> With a sword precariously waving
> In her hands,
> "If you look at my loins
> I will cut off your head,
> And reach down and grab your spirit
> By its private parts,
> And carry you off to heaven,
> Squealing in joy."
> Hafiz says,
> "That sounds wonderful, just wonderful."[16]

First of all, the experience of poetry implies the ability of words to make spiritual reality "materialize." In other words, it is through words that contact is effected with the "imaginal world" (*'ālam al-khayāl*) where spiritual realities take on form. The imaginal world—the locus of the images that are expressed by poetry—is the intermediary realm that mediates between the supra-individual kingdom of the Spirit and the zone of multiplicity and matter. On this imaginal level, the "beautiful naked woman" is the most direct image of the hidden beauty of God, which intoxicates those who contemplate it. Her nakedness is all the more significant in that poetry seems to imply, by definition, a formal "clothing" of truth: good poetry proceeds in such a way as to reveal naked reality through the "clothing" of words. Poetry makes words transparent: it unveils the body of the goddess through a dance of a thousand words. When actualized by words, this most direct image of ecstasy and union with God is depicted as a terrible reality, through an evocation that almost conjures up visions of the Goddess Kali, the destroyer. Beauty holds a sword

[16] Hafiz, "That Sounds Wonderful," cited in *The Subject Tonight is Love, 60 Wild and Sweet Poems from Hafiz*, trans. Daniel Ladinsky, p. 32.

as an attribute of rigor and justice that will not tolerate any complacency or weakness. Interestingly however, the punishment that awaits the one who looks at the woman's loins is also, quite paradoxically, a reward. In fact, the matter is not so much one of indiscretion and passion which would result in a symbolic castration of man; it is rather as if the "head," organ of the discursive faculty, were to be neutralized by the more direct experience of rapture that results from the contemplation of the naked woman, the inner ecstatic power of poetry. Accordingly, the ambiguity of the vision is akin to the ambivalence of eroticism in general; the "beheading" is also a liberation; what is dangerous and painful is also a key to delivering the most precious reality of the self. The translation "squealing in joy" is also highly significant in this respect since it evokes both feelings of pain and pleasure, therefore suggesting that on the highest level, poetry is jointly an experience of beatitude and an inner torment that is related to the limitations of the human self. In a sense, poetry functions as a kind of ruse: it exerts a fascination upon its reader or auditor; but this fascination must find its outcome in a "sacrifice" of the rational faculty, which entails a total abandonment of oneself to the pull of grace.

Sufism, in its methodical or operative dimension, makes use of artistic means to awaken and strengthen a psychophysical consciousness of the Divine that may open body and soul to the irradiation of celestial archetypes. In this respect, the contemplative role of poetry can be defined as a prolongation of the act of remembrance through the invocation (*dhikr*) of the Name of God. No practice is more central to Sufi spirituality than the remembrance of God through the methodical and, in principle, constant invocation of His Name. Essentially, the practice of the invocation is the very act of the Spirit (*Rūh*); but, from the standpoint of the soul, it may also be supported and heightened by artistic means. Poetry, music, and dance are particularly apt to foster this type of existential remembrance and they may even be combined in the *samā'*, or session of the Mevlevi and Jarrahiyyah orders, the former tracing its ceremonial practices to Jalāl ad-Din Rūmī. Mystical verses from Mawlānā may thus be accompanied by melodies while dervishes perform their traditional whirling dance. In such a context, poetry may be deemed a prolongation of the Divine Name itself; the synthetic mode of presence actualized by a Divine Name, whether it be the Supreme Name Allāh or one of the ninety-nine traditional names that express some of the countless qualities of the Divine, is so to speak analytically unfolded in the poetical text. The latter proceeds in a certain sense from the former: the contemplative concentration on the most synthetic expression of the Divine brings about a kind of spiritual unification and "simplification" of the

soul that "cleanses" the human consciousness from the complex network of dispersing and peripheral thoughts and feelings, thereby making way for the "simple complexity" of inspired poetry. By using the paradoxical expression "simple complexity," we refer not only to the multiplicity of the imaginative, linguistic, and auditory components of the poem, but also to the flowing unity of the whole work as it freely and spontaneously springs forth from the consciousness suffused with grace.

Such considerations help us understand why poetic creation constitutes in a sense a criterion of the spiritual maturity of the contemplative. This is so because the free and inspired flow of words can result only from a perfect conformity to the Divine Presence; such conformity is referred to by Sufis as *faqr* (spiritual poverty), whence the name of *faqīr* and *fuqarā'* that is often used in the Arab world to refer to practitioners of *tasawwuf*. The "centrifugal" creative motion that characterizes Sufi poetry can therefore be characterized as an overflowing or outpouring of grace through the channel of words. There is no trace of virtuosity in such a practice of poetry: the poet is too overwhelmed by the flow of images and words to be able to manipulate them in a technical way. The formal cohesiveness and regularity of the poetry is less the result of a conscious and painstakingly skillful composition on the part of the contemplative poet, than the "quantitative" reflection and manifestation of a qualitative perfection. As Frithjof Schuon has pointed out, the art of poetry is characterized—by contrast with music—as one in which the "essence" moves toward the form in order to meet with it. The form is therefore like a kind of outer crystallization of the very unfolding or "exteriorization" of the essence. In music on the other hand, it is rather the form that moves toward the essence, the former echoing the "vertical music" of the latter.

The exteriorization of the poem, which is the literary fruit of contemplation and union with the Divine, is quite evidently not an end in itself. It is, to use Schuon's phrase, an "exteriorization with a view to interiorization." It could also be added that, strictly from the standpoint of contemplation, poetry is in no way "needed"; in fact silence could be deemed—and is actually deemed—by many mystics as the only language fit for the contemplative experience.[17] The exteriorization that poetry implies must therefore be understood as a sort

[17] Writing about the first manifestations of Sufi poetry, Anne-Marie Schimmel gives voice to some of the mystics' concerns: "Who could and who would tell what was going on in the blissful solitude of love, in prayer and ecstasy, when the lover does not want anything *from* God but only God Himself? Was not poetry therefore a treason to mystical experience, and complete silence the only legitimate way a Sufi could choose?" (*As Through a Veil*, p. 16).

of complementary realization that "projects" the inward into the outward. It is in this sense that Seyyed Hossein Nasr has perceived Shams ad-Dīn al-Tabrīzī as a kind of catalyst who prompted Rūmī to "exteriorize" his purely inner state of being into contemplative poetry.[18] In this connection, mystics tend to emphasize the "necessity" of "words," even though that necessity might be elsewhere denied by the same mystics in view of the distance separating union from its utterance. Rūmī may thus refer to poetic language in an almost derogatory way, while writing elsewhere that "faith may be in the heart, but if you do not express it in words, it has no profit."[19] In this sense poetry becomes an occurrence of testimony, which is the very principle of belonging to Islam. A faith not expressed in a testimony is not a fully "profitable" faith in the sense that it lacks the actualizing "magic" of the vow, while being incommunicable to others. In Islam, speech is the very principle of being, even though a "witnessing" of the tongue is not in itself sufficient in the absence of a correct intention.

This "exteriorization in view of interiorization" that is at the core of contemplative poetic utterances may however be considered from a slightly different standpoint, depending on whether one envisages the point of view of the contemplative poet or that of the contemplative reader or auditor. Let us remark in this connection that the contemplative, in normal circumstances, will most likely be an auditor rather than a reader. As Dana Wilde has rightly indicated,[20] the actual reading aloud of poetry entails a mode of spiritual assimilation that is much stronger and much more direct than that which would be offered simply by the more discursive and indirect mode of silent reading. Oral communication entails a more direct spiritual, and also animic and physical, imparting of reality than does the written word. In this sense, poetry may be considered as the "wine" of Islam. There is a profound

[18] "It seems that Shams ad-Dīn was a divinely sent spiritual influence which in a sense 'exteriorized' Rūmī's inner contemplative states in the form of poetry and set the ocean of his being into a motion which resulted in vast waves that transformed the history of Persian literature" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī: Supreme Persian Poet and Sage*, p. 23).

[19] Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, cited in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 269.

[20] "Poetry can literally be intoxicating. A brief anecdote, one among many that might be told: Years ago a couple of friends and I were reading poems of Robert Frost aloud in the living room, and although we were temperately drinking black tea (not beer or wine as we well might have been), I began to feel quite tipsy, the early sweet fuzzy stages of drunkenness that incite one to intensify the pleasure by drinking more" (Dana Wilde, "Poetry and Sufism: A Few Generalities," www.unc.edu/depts/sufilit/Wilde.htm).

analogical correspondence between the "wine" of Christ's blood and the "poetry" of the Qur'ānic substance.

The connection between the methodical use of the Divine Name and that of poetry in Islam allows us to place this fact in a clearer light. The Name not only corresponds to a graphic sign and to the mental associations that it entails, it also and above all is an auditory form that recapitulates the Presence of the Divine. The graphic representation of the Name is in this respect more akin to the dimension of truth as consciousness, whereas its auditory vibrations point to the ontological presence of God in His Name. In the case of the contemplative poet, the poetic vibrations that result in the creation of a poem "trace" a cyclical whole that involves both a manifestation and a reintegration through the word.

The poet is also an auditor, in the sense that he may listen to the voice of inspiration as he would listen to the voice of God speaking through him. In the *Wasiyah 'arūsiyah*, we read that the Sufi Sheikh, when God speaks through his mouth, must listen as if he were himself one of his own auditors. In fact, the all-pervasiveness of God is the very key to the de-centering of the subject; for, as Rūmī expresses it, "when I write letters to my friends, He (the Beloved) is paper, pen and ink-well."[21] The poetic experience is therefore a wonderment and an awe: it points to a transcendent voice that is the real "I" or the supreme Self or Witness (*shuhūd*); or, as Rūmī puts it, "That voice which is the origin of every cry and sound: that indeed is the only voice, and the rest are only echoes."[22] Sometimes, this metaphysical priority of the Divine voice is a source of confusion for the Sufi poet who does not seem to retain a clear perception of the respective identities of the speaker and the hearer. A poem of al-Hallāj's *qasida* highlights this kind of indecision and the disorienting inversion it entails:

> Here I am, I am, my secret, my bliss
> Here I am, here I am, my goal, my thought
> I call you, no you call me, how can
> I call you if you do not whisper to me?
> O eye of my being's eye, O end of my wish
> O my speech and my terms and my stammering.[23]

[21] Rūmī, *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī* 2251, cited in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 234.

[22] Rūmī, *Mathnawī* I.2107, cited in *Rumi Daylight*, trans. Camille and Kabir Helminski, p. 55.

[23] Al-Hallāj, *Selections from the Poems of Zuhair ibn Abi Sulma and Husain ibn Mansur al Hallaj*, trans. Arthur Wormhoudt, p. 79.

The ambiguity of the status of the poetic utterances implicitly refers to levels of subjectivity. The Qur'ān states: "We are nearer to him (man) than his jugular vein" (Sūrah Qaf, 50:16), whence a recognition that speech ultimately stems from that profoundly hidden source of being which is the core of the self. It is when considered from the standpoint of this immanent ocean of being that the work of poetry and all its components may be referred to as being aspects of the Divine itself. Conversely, it could also be said that in this respect poetry may constitute for the writer an experience of objectification and extinction. The contemplative is "extinguished" in the flow of words and images emanating from the Word. This utterance becomes the center of his consciousness to the point of making his ordinary self (*nafs*) peripheral. Rūmī has emphasized this pervasive immanence of God in the very act of poetic creation, highlighting both the material immanence and the productive efficiency of the Divine:

> And when I write a letter
> To my beloved friends,
> The paper and the inkwell,
> The ink, the pen is He.
> And when I write a poem
> And seek a rhyming word—
> The one who spreads the rhymes out
> Within my thoughts, is He![24]

"He" is the very substance and fundamental reality of all poetic manifestation, just as He is also the creative Act that is immanent to all creation. To be a poet, as to be an artist in general, ultimately consists in "participating" in the Divine Act on a given level of being. The Divine Word as Act is the essence of poetic creation in Sufism; William Chittick has also underlined the importance of this reality for Islam at large:

> Moslem thinkers have always stressed the importance of God's creative Word in the natural order of the universe and man, just as they have emphasized the central role of His written Word in guiding man to salvation.[25]

[24] Rūmī, cited in Anne-Marie Schimmel, *I am Wind You are Fire*, p. 45.

[25] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 268.

The poet is not so much a creator as he is a transmitter of That which is expressed through Him. In his *Dīwān*, a contemporary Sufi Master such as Sheikh Ahmad al-'Alawī, expresses this de-centering in the following distich:

> Allāh! Allāh! I speak only of Him
> My whole and only word is His Splendor.
> (*Nahnī bihi, kulli nutqī bisanāhu*)[26]

All contemplative utterances may ultimately be reduced to the Divine Name, which is the essence of all words; and the Divine Name is nothing other than the very voice of God, the utterance of Reality.

From another standpoint, poetry may be considered as a means of bridging the gap of absence. In his article entitled "Mystical Poetry," Martin Lings has emphasized this important aspect of poetry in the world of Sufism, highlighting its role as a means of actualizing presence in absence. The Sufi way is often described as an alternation of contraction (*qabd*) and expansion (*bast*), these two states of the soul corresponding respectively to separation and union, or absence and presence. As distinct from the Divine Substance, the soul of the contemplative experiences separation and distance from God; fear and longing are two most common expressions of this sense of absence. The soul is in a state of contraction because it is "sent back" so to speak to its limited identity, severed from the Source that gives being and life to it. However, this separation is never absolute in itself; it is not due to the radical absence of God—since God is ever present—but to a state of "absence," distraction (*ghaflah*), or lack of consciousness in the soul itself.

On the other hand, the soul may also experience a profound sense of union and participation in the Divine life, which is the expansion of love that dispels limitations and lifts the veil of separation. In such a state, the soul is so penetrated by the Divine presence that it cannot even reflect upon itself as a separate being. However, given the rhythm of alternation that presides over all manifestation—since the latter cannot have the same degree of being and permanence as God himself—the soul is necessarily subjected to variations that alternate between *qabd* and *bast*. Even in the case of the highest contemplative mode of being and consciousness, the very participation of the soul in the sequential nature of time and the fragmented reality of manifestation entails some measure of animic "unevenness" due to

[26] Ahmed Ben Mustapha al-'Alawī, *Extraits du Dīwān*, pp. 54-5.

the unavoidable consequences of the transcendence of the Divine. As Martin Lings puts it:

> Mystical systems are in agreement that for one who reaches the end of the path itself in this life, the divine presence, which constitutes that end, is a framework that admits of temporary "absences" of the Beloved, although these are relative and illusory.[27]

As an expression of separation from the One, poetry is at the same time a way of experiencing His presence in a so to speak symbolic and indirect manner. A poignant cry may sometimes fulfill this function, as in the *Dīwān* of al-Hallāj:

> O surfeit of sadness, that I should forever
> Be calling upon Thee as if I were far
> Or as if Thou wert absent![28]

The distance between the Divine and the human is only an appearance, as indicated by the conditional mood, but it remains nevertheless true that the soul must experience it in a very concrete way. The sighs of love that are immanent in the wording of the poem are not only a discourse addressed to God, they are also an attempt at making Him present. We could also synthesize this function of poetry by relating it to that of the Divine Name which is invoked by the Muslim mystic. According to this contemplative approach, God makes Himself present in His Name, and the contemplative may participate in this presence through his invocation of the Name.[29] God "bridges" the gap between Himself and His creature by uttering His Name. This utterance is immanent in the sacred scripture of Islam in so far as the name Allāh is part of the Qur'ān, and is actually considered by Sufis as constituting its very essence. The whole tradition can be understood, in a certain sense, as the outward manifestation of the Divine Name: from Allāh to the testimony of faith, the *shahādah*, from the latter to the whole Qur'ān, and

[27] Martin Lings, "Mystical Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: 'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, Julia Ashtiany et al. (ed.), p. 236.

[28] *Le Dīwān d'al-Hallāj*, 44, cited in Martin Lings, "Mystical Poetry," p. 237.

[29] Louis Massignon, and after him Louis Gardet, have rejected the idea that this concept of the Name is the result of a Hindu influence. In fact, as Anawati and Gardet point out, this idea refers to a "specifically Semitic meaning attached to the value of the Name" (Cf. G.C. Anawati and Louis Gardet, *Mystique Musulmane*, p. 199).

from the sacred scripture to the entire traditional world that derives from it, both directly and indirectly, Islam may be interpreted as an outer and complex manifestation of the Word.

As we have just seen, poetry may be conceived as a way of filling the gap that separates the human soul from the Divine Presence: we could say that this function of poetry is akin to *tashbīh* or analogy, i.e., to the mode of thinking and speaking based upon an affirmative and symbolic definition of the One. However, in keeping with the overall spiritual economy of Islam, Sufism remains keenly aware of both dimensions of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, of "other-ness" and analogy. The latter refers to the continuity between God and the world, referring to its symbolic and theophanic dimension—and being therefore related to an understanding of poetry as "making God present," whereas *tanzīh* establishes a clear distinction between the One and His creatures, thus stressing the discontinuity between the Divine Essence and manifested forms. The second perspective is decidedly emphasized in some of the most elliptic expressions of Sufi gnosis, particularly in the *Book of Spiritual Stations* and in the *Book of Spiritual Addresses* by Muhammad Ibn ʻAbd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī. The *Mawqif* (Station) of the Ineffable in the *Kitāb al-Mawāqif* is particularly interesting in this respect:

> Expression is a swerving: when thou witnessest that which never changes, thou wilt not swerve.
> The divine word turns unto ecstasy: and using the divine word to induce ecstasy turns unto the raptures induced by words.
> Raptures induced by words are an infidelity according to definition.
> Listen to no letter concerning Me, and receive no information of Me from any letter.
> Letter cannot inform of itself: how then should it tell of Me?[30]

Even though this text is not technically poetic, its aphoristic form is quite akin to the symbolic and gem-like modality of contemplative poetry. The concise and elliptic form of expression that is used by Niffarī appears to be in full consonance with the fundamental tenet of his concept of language and expression. Whereas the word may be conceived *a priori* as a way in which God reveals Himself to men through the Scriptures and through His Name, thereby allowing for a sacramental participation of mankind in His nature, it

[30] Al-Niffarī, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, 4-8, in *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt of Muhammad Ibn ʻAbdi'l-Jabbār al-Niffarī*, ed. and trans. A.J. Arberry, pp. 69-70.

may also be envisaged, as it is here by Niffarī, as a separative reality that leads one astray from the One, causing the contemplative to "swerve" instead of realizing the unity of being. As Rūmī puts it, "although in one respect speech removes veils, in ten respects it covers and conceals."[31] Words have more chance of covering than unveiling precisely because they most often proceed from a human subject and not from the Divine Word. When stemming from the individual, words encounter the ocean of dissimilitude, the gap between the many and the One. It is only when they proceed from the Divine Source, or let us say from a zone of profundity that borders on the Divine, that words may become a means of unveiling the Mystery. That is why in Niffarī's text, the divine word that "turns unto" ecstasy refers to the Qur'ānic scripture: its mystical use is "infidelity" when considered from the standpoint of mere definition, or according to the exoteric outlook that sees the letter and not the spirit.

In another passage, Niffarī alludes to these two opposite outcomes of the use of words when he states "by it (the Ineffable) thou art concentrated in the effable" and "if thou witnessest not the ineffable, thou art confused by the effable." In other words, there is no real "concentration" on the Word, or words in general, except through That which lies beyond It, or beyond them, and that is their essence and their principle of unity. The actual understanding of the linguistic, aesthetic, and poetic forms presupposes a centering upon That which transcends all forms and all language. To be "concentrated" upon the effable amounts to being conscious of its essence, i.e., its formless root. By contrast, a relationship with language—and particularly with poetic language—that is not rooted in a clear perception of the One can only be a source of ignorance and straying.

In Islam, as indicated by Niffarī, spiritual centering takes the form of a "witnessing" (*shahādah*) that relates everything to its Source. The supreme *shahādah* is a witnessing of the Ineffable (*mā lā yanqāl*) that is the precondition for the validity of all other utterances. In parallel, God as *Logos*, God as effable, is the very principle of creation. To understand the Word is therefore, by way of consequence, to understand things in their determinative and limiting reality, as well as in the concatenation and relationships that bind one to the other. The Word "utters" and "spells out" the various created realities, and these realities result from a compound of archetypical reality and substantial form. However, a true understanding of the limitless and

[31] Rūmī, *Mathnawī* I. 2973, cited in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 269.

inner meaning of beings can only be reached through a consciousness of the ineffable:

> The ineffable causes thee to witness in everything my Self-revelation towards it, and causes thee to witness of everything the places of its gnosis.[32]

On the level of the ineffable, which is supreme and unmediated contemplation, both dimensions of knowledge are revealed: the Divine Self knows Itself in every being, and every being is known through the Divine Knower and as a particular mode of knowledge of the latter. "I" is the Divine Self who is ultimately the only Knower; "thou" is the human self as central and conscious refraction of the One; while "everything" refers to all other creatures whose modes of knowledge of the One are both more peripheral and more limited than that of man as primary interlocutor of God. In the contemplative silence of pure consciousness, man witnesses God as the Only Knower and everything as a mode of knowledge of Reality. Such a "witnessing" can take place only through and in the ineffable, for any discourse would necessarily introduce a duality that would sever the human self from the Divine Self-revelation. In pure contemplation, man knows things as they are known by God and, in a concomitant way, he then knows God as He is "known" by things in the form of their archetypical necessity.

Niffarī pursues this exposition of contemplative gnosis by referring to the delicate relationship between writing and contemplation:

> Thou wilt write so long as thou reckonest: when thou reckonest no more, then wilt thou write no more.
> When thou no more reckonest nor writest, I shall assign to thee a portion of illiteracy: for the illiterate Prophet neither writes nor reckons.
> Neither write nor study nor reckon nor examine.
> Study writes true and false alike, and examination reckons taking and leaving alike.
> He belongs not to Me nor to my lineage who writes truth and falsehood, and reckons taking and leaving.
> Every scribe recites his scripture, and every reciter reckons his recitation.[33]

[32] Al-Niffarī, *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt*, ed. and trans. A.J. Arberry, p. 69.

[33] Al-Niffarī, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, 12-17, in *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt*, ed. and trans. A.J. Arberry, p. 70.

Writing and reckoning are intellectual activities that presuppose multiplicity: the former takes place by virtue of the sense of multiplicity that is entailed by the latter. The very act of reckoning presupposes a kind of quantitative and analytical consideration of Being that is infinitely transcended by its object. As Rūmī also expresses it:

> Speech is an astrolabe in its reckoning.
> How much does it really know of the sky and the sun?
> Or of that sky which holds this heaven as a speck;
> And the Sun which shows this sun to be a grain of sand?[34]

In addition to this "faltering" in the face of the Absolute, reckoning also implies an individual subject who wants to account for realities for the sake of his own sense of being and centrality; "every scribe" and "every reciter" limits reality by his own "reciting" and his own "reckoning." Writing implies truth and falsehood insofar as it adulterates reality with representation; it cannot encompass the sphere of reality with the planimetric surface of its graphic wording. Similarly, reckoning presupposes more and less, addition and subtraction, whereas everything is infinitely present in the actuality of the Divine Ineffability. Such perspectives are therefore incompatible with the simplicity and totality of the Supreme Subject, the essential "I." Considered primarily as a consequence of reckoning, writing is envisaged in its aspect of self-fulfillment, as a way of substituting individual consciousness for Self-consciousness of the One. In a sense, writing has no intrinsic meaning when considered from the exclusive standpoint of gnosis: its function can only be extrinsic, either as an "accounting for" spiritual consciousness to itself or as an imparting of that consciousness to others.

The mention of illiteracy, as opposed to reckoning and writing, is most telling in that it points both to the inner "virginity" of the Prophet, and to the primacy of oral expression over the written word. The "illiteracy" of the Prophet is in fact the passive or receptive dimension of his spiritual perfection. The "illiteracy" of the Prophet (*an-nabī al-ummī*) refers to the utter "poverty" of his soul before the divine inspiration and command. If the Prophet were not illiterate, he would not be the perfect recipient of the divine Word; human interferences would affect the integrity of the Message. For that reason, writing may appear as a potential act of spiritual betrayal. As a

[34] Rūmī, *Mathnawī* II. 3013-15, cited in *Rumi Daylight*, trans. Camille and Kabir Helminski, p. 172.

guarantee of fidelity and legitimacy, what matters most of all, from a human standpoint, is the integrity of the oral transmission (*isnād*). Even from a ritual standpoint, "the whole experience of the Qur'ān for Muslims remains to this day first of all an auditory experience and is only later associated with reading in the ordinary sense of the word."[35] The superiority of the spoken word over the written word is most profoundly connected to the intimacy of the Divine Word with the heart of man when the latter is in a state of primordial purity. In his *Mathnawī*, Rūmī can thus write:

> The book of the Sufi is not black lines and words,
> It is none other than the whitened heart which is like snow.[36]

Beyond its aspect of graphic exteriority, writing becomes identified—in its essence—with the very heart of the contemplative, but that heart is white as snow: it is both blankness and silence, a silence that is however vibrant with the Divine Word. Arberry reminds us, in this connection, that at times "Rūmī signed his verses with the soubriquet Khāmūsh, the Silent, a reference to the ineffable nature of the mysteries."[37] Symbolically and operatively speaking, the absence of writing is not so much a lack of graphic representation as it is a lack of appropriation of the Divine that would result from a sort of fixation of consciousness. In Islam, writing is God's privilege, so to speak: He is the One who, with the Calamus, writes destinies on the supreme Tablet. When studying and writing are associated with the pair of opposites truth and falsehood, the implication is that writing takes us away from the pure Presence in which, through the contemplative life, there is neither truth nor falsehood but only pure Being. Writing introduces the writer into the realm of distinction and opposition while making it possible to lose spiritual contact with the Divine. As Arberry very profoundly points out when referring to Niffarī's doctrine of the letter (*harf*):

> Letter does not reach Presence (*hadrah*), and the people of presence transcend letter and banish it: those that depart from letter are the people of presence, and those that have departed from themselves have departed from letter. God is nearer than the letter, though it should speak, and He

[35] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Oral Transmission and the Book in Islamic Education: the Spoken and the Written Word," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 3:1 (1992):1.

[36] Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, ed. and trans. R.A. Nicholson, pp. 40, 59.

[37] A.J. Arberry, *Mystical Poems of Rūmī*, p. 2.

> is farther than the letter, though it should be silent: for he is the Lord of *harf* and *mahrūf*.[38]

It should be noted that letters occupy a very important place in Islam, and especially in Sufism, in that the Arabic alphabet, as graphic means of the transmission and calligraphy of the Qur'ān, is imbued with profound symbolic and mystical significance. The science of letters (*'ilm al-hurūf*) is actually one of the most central hermeneutic disciplines of Sufism: it is fundamentally based on the correlation between Divine Names and letters and, operatively, upon the correlation between letters and numeric values. It is noteworthy that, in the perspective of radical gnosis which is Niffarī's, the theophanic letter becomes a veil, as also is the name—and even the meaning and the thing named—since "when thou departest from meanings, thou art fit for My gnosis."[39] On a methodical level, it is important to notice that, in the passage of Niffarī which we have quoted above, the mystic appears to suggest that there exists a profound solidarity between the letter and the self. The letter is not the "name" that was taught by God to Adam (Qur'ān, 2:31).[40] By contrast with the "names" that were taught to Adam in his state of primordial perfection, "letters" are utterly dependent upon the individualized self; as a "separated" and rational being, the individualized self is situated within the realm of limitations, determinations, and articulations that are part and parcel of the world of relativity:

> I have joined every pair of letters with one of my qualities, and the existences have been brought into existence through the qualities joining them together.[41]

To transcend letters therefore consists in transcending the domain of exclusivity, a domain of differentiation whose unity is guaranteed only by the "ineffable" and by divine qualities. It is also in a certain sense to return to a primordial state of perfection that precedes the descent (*ahbitū*) into "water and clay" and the expulsion from the Garden. In this sense, it is the realm of multiplicity as negation of Unity, not as theophany. We must however note that the verb which is used to refer to this "descent" has also the meaning

[38] A.J. Arberry (ed.), *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt*, p. 22.

[39] Al-Niffarī, *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt*, ed. and trans. A.J. Arberry, p. 47.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 269.

[41] Al-Niffarī, *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt*, ed. and trans. A.J. Arberry, p. 105.

of "living" and "settling" so that it would be more accurate to speak here of a separation rather than a fall. The Qur'ān also strongly emphasizes that this "settlement" in the terrestrial world can only constitute an abode for an ephemeral time (2:36), therefore giving a legitimacy to human terrestrial endeavors while being no less adamant—to say the least—of the very constraining limits imposed upon these endeavors in light of the primacy of transcendence and the hereafter. In Islam, there cannot be a Fall in the sense of a fundamental loss that would leave mankind as if crippled and unable to enjoy its theomorphic norm. Man remains God's *khalīfah* or vice-regent of Creation. He is therefore allowed to "live" and "settle" in the world inasmuch as he remembers who he is and also that he must needs return to God. He is "real" because he still participates in the Reality of God, and the reality of what he creates is dependent upon a fuller consciousness of that participation. On all levels of creation, "reality" is therefore contingent upon God's "holding together," as silent and ineffable Principle, the multiplicity of letters, names, and meanings. Now God's ineffability is primarily experienced in the mode of presence; it is God's presence that "guarantees" the mysterious unity of everything.

By contrast, letter, as name, implies a qualitative determination that has to do with intelligence as consciousness. God's intelligence spells out the multiplicity of beings in their respective uniqueness. The spiritual orientation to which Niffarī alludes in the passages we have quoted seems to be akin to the unity of presence rather than to the unity of consciousness: it is related to intelligence as presence, i.e., to a mode of apprehension of reality which is more centered upon the pole of "being" than upon the pole of "consciousness," these two poles being fundamentally one on the highest level while still quite distinct at all lower planes. This emphasis on presence is to some extent akin to the spiritual bent of poetry—at least by comparison with other domains of literary expression: poetic language is less discursive than it is synthetic and in this capacity it may better recapitulate the contemplative mode of presence. This is the reason why poetry is, in Sufism, more often associated with love as a mystical reality of a higher order than with intelligence as a mental phenomenon. Rūmī founds this superiority of poetry over other modes of expression by suggesting its affinity with the essentiality of a central desire:

> Love lit a fire in my chest, and anything
> That wasn't love left: intellectual
> Subtlety, philosophy
> Books, school.

All I want now
To do or hear
Is poetry.[42]

Poetry appears in this connection as an essential language, the language that is left when all other types of language are powerless on account of the limits of language. It is the language of Love, the "language that cannot be said, or heard." Poetry is the tentative and liminal language of the supra-formal realm where the individual "expires" in Pure Being. As such poetry is always on the verge of being extinguished or silenced by the contemplative experience: "Love has come and covered my mouth: 'Throw away your poetry and come to the stars.'"[43]

Notwithstanding the fact that poetry is an attempt at the expression of presence, it also presupposes a mode of keen consciousness of this presence, a consciousness that necessarily involves the mental mirror of the contemplative poet. As such, poetic expression may be defined as a kind of intermittent projection of spiritual presence onto the mirror of mental and imaginal consciousness. Rūmī is once again our guide in approaching this subtle interplay between presence and consciousness, between existential love and intellectual vision:

In your light I learn how to love.
In your beauty, how to make poems.
You dance inside my chest,
Where no one sees you,
But sometimes I do, and that
Sight becomes this art.[44]

The "dance" that takes place within the chest of the contemplative is akin to the penetrating infusion of presence that is like a breathing in of the divine ether: this presence no one can see or define, for grace eludes any attempt at appropriating it. It can only be glimpsed in the instant of consciousness that is fixed into poetry, when "sight becomes this art."

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[42] Rūmī, cited in *Birdsong*, trans. Coleman Barks, p. 20.

[43] Rūmī, *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī* 182, cited in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 226.

[44] Rūmī, cited in *Birdsong*, trans. Coleman Barks, p. 41.

Between absence and presence, the theme of love and its spiritualization, occupies a central position in Sufi poetry and literature. The famous story of Laylā and Majnūn typifies the complexity and depth of the dialectics of absence and presence in love, and the subtlety of its relationship with poetic expression. Majnūn represents the figure of a lover who is "possessed" by the *jinn* of love to the point of becoming insane. Intoxicated with his inner image of the beloved, Majnūn flees into solitude and wilderness. There, his interiorization of Laylā's image is so profound that he is led to exclude the physical presence of his beloved. When Laylā comes to visit him in the desert, Majnūn refuses to see her under the pretext that she would distract him from the essential reality, the imaginal form of Laylā that he contemplates.

The Sufi tradition has generally interpreted Majnūn's loving madness as a metaphor for the individual's extinction in God's presence. The "alienation" of Majnūn therefore refers to the contemplative station of *fanā'* or disappearance. The figure of the beloved, whose name refers to the Night of the Divine Essence, embodies or symbolizes the Divine Presence and Divine Wisdom. The seat of individual consciousness becomes so powerfully and profoundly "occupied" by the Divine that it amounts to a radical "alienation" in which "I" becomes "Thou."

Jad Hatem has opposed this traditional understanding of Majnūn's intoxication with the love of Laylā by suggesting that far from reducing Majnūn's ego to utter nothingness, his erotic experience leads to the dissolution of the very being of Laylā. In other words, the extinction is not Majnūn's but rather Laylā's.[45] There is but little distance from such an understanding to the interpretation of Majnūn's love as an exaltation of his own ego. In fact, such an opposition is fundamentally illusory, in that it participates in a discursively dualistic reduction of a profoundly non-dualistic experience. It is certainly possible to interpret Majnūn's loving madness in terms of an "exaltation," but reducing the latter to an expression of the egoic identity would be missing the point. The fact is that, through his loving experience, Majnūn is not the "same" as he was: he has been made "other," "alien" and he has abandoned

[45] "Le désir ne manque plus de rien, s'engendre pour accroître le sentiment de soi. C'est plutôt la personne de Laylâ qui subit l'extinction, car en dépit de son irréductibilité, elle est entièrement transie par le Moi puisque, par l'intériorisation, elle se mêle à l'affectivité de l'amant [Desire does not lack anything, it engenders itself to increase the feeling of oneself. It is rather the person of Laylā who undergoes a process of extinction, for notwithstanding her irreducible reality, she is entirely deserted by the Ego since, through interiorization, she blends with the lover's affectivity]" (Jad Hatem, *Travaux et Jours*, p. 17).

his former self. The "exaltation" that he experiences is intimately dependent upon a spiritual death in love, and it may therefore be understood in the sense in which "permanence" or "subsistence" (*baqā*) proceeds from extinction (*fanā'*). When the contemplation of God has extinguished man and reduced his individuality to ashes, God "restores" him to his original form as it was "intended" from all eternity. Man knows himself in his most profound reality only when he has accepted to be no more, in the sense of no longer being "independently" (and therefore illusorily) apart from God.

Considering this spiritual process from the point of view of Majnūn and Laylā's love story, one may say that the reason why Laylā appears to be annihilated in Majnūn's experience flows from the fact that the real Laylā is actually none other than the inner essence of Majnūn. In this process of spiritual self-realization, poetry functions as a kind of mediation. Having found a retreat far from the world of men, Majnūn is "severed from his tribe and soon from the commerce of men, and even from language except for the purpose of evoking and poeticizing his beloved."[46] As Rūmī puts it in one of his poems: woman is not created, she is creative, not so much *natura naturata* as *natura naturans*. She is also by the same token transformative. It is through her contemplation that poetry is set in motion and that it culminates in the realization of the inner Self. As Jad Hatem has noted in a most cogent way:

> If the absence of Laylā provokes the interiorization of Laylā, her name opens up an avenue without which poetry would have been impossible.[47]

Poetry may henceforth be the means through which the bridging of the gap between the lover and the beloved results in an interiorization of the name, or the word, that ultimately unveils the identity between the name, the named, and the one uttering the name. In Sufism, this triad is nothing but an exteriorization and a polarization of the only Reality that is. In his *Mathnawī*, Rūmī expresses this mystery by reference to the symbolism of a lover's relationship with her beloved's name:

> Zuleikha applied to Joseph the name of every single thing.
> From a grain of celery to a branch of aloe.

[46] *Ibid*., p. 7: "Qui déraisonne est retranché de sa tribu et bientôt du commerce des hommes, et même du langage sinon pour évoquer et poétiser sa bien-aimée."

[47] *Ibid*., p. 8: "Si l'absence de Laylā provoque l'intériorisation de Laylā, son nom ménage une issue sans laquelle la poésie eût été impossible."

> She hid his name under all other names, and only let
> Her special confidantes into the secret….
> This is what the name of the Beloved can do
> When you are truly and finally lost in love.
> When the soul has truly been united to God
> To speak of God is to speak of the soul
> And to speak of the soul is to speak of God.[48]

The one who invokes (*dhākir*) becomes so infused with the presence of the beloved who is invoked (*madhkūr*) that everything becomes an invocation (*dhikr*) of the name of the beloved. Perceived in this sense, and as a prolongation of the "invocation" of the One through the multiple "names" of the many, poetry can be considered a kind of ruse through which multiplicity, or duality, is give access to unity. Laylā is the theophany, and at the same time the autophany, that reveals the unity which precedes all dualities, this unity being both objective and subjective, or rather, situated beyond the level on which this polarity functions. As Henry Corbin has remarkably commented, in his exegesis of Rūzbehān al-Baqlī's *Jasmine of Fedeli d'Amore*: the contemplation of human beauty must be founded upon *iltibās* or double meaning. Corbin uses the term "amphiboly" to translate this difficult concept of *iltibās*. In English the terms "amphiboly" and "amphibolic" denote ambiguity and uncertainty, and there is little doubt that the contemplative experience which Corbin has in mind presents an element of ambiguity that is actually the sign of its depth and also its pitfalls. As Frithjof Schuon puts it when evoking the mystery of the contemplation of God in formal and erotic beauty:

> The ambiguity of earthly pleasure—above all sexual pleasure—is that on the one hand it is concupiscence or animality in the sense that it implies the desire for what we do not have, and on the other hand it is an angelic and quasi-divine awareness of what we are, of what we are in our ontological and paradisiacal substance. All moral and mystical oscillations and tensions are explained by this; and the ambiguity is not in the experience only, it is in the subject as well as in the object. Man oscillates between sacraments and idols, objectively and subjectively.[49]

This ambiguity is so to speak situated at the point of juncture between extremes: the divine and the corporeal; and it is what accounts for the powerful

[48] Rūmī, cited in Andrew Harvey, *Teachings of Rumi*, p. 77.

[49] Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*, p. 113.

contemplative potentialities of love and eroticism. In this connection, the concept of "amphiboly" that Corbin has used to refer to this theophanic experience must be understood in light of the etymological meaning of the symbol. If the latter, through the Greek prefix *sym-* (or rather *syn-*) implies the "togetherness" of two elements that are conveyed in a kind of *syn*thetic unity, the concept of "amphiboly" or *iltibās* can then be understood to refer to the co-presence of two "sides" at one and the same time. The contemplative experience of *iltibās* corresponds neither to a situation of exclusiveness—which would retain a dualistic form—nor to one of mere synthesis—which would reduce that duality to unity—but points rather to a situation in which both sides of the same reality are contemplated at the same time, i.e., the physical and aesthetic phenomenon *and* the spiritual meaning or presence. This inner situation is one in which, as Corbin says, the contemplative soul enjoys the "coincidence of reaching and missing the inaccessible, that of the vision refused through the vision that is granted, absence tasted in presence, disquietude of a still beyond in the quietude that is sometimes tasted here below."[50] The ebb and flow of reality is so to speak instantaneously present in the message of beauty since that message is simultaneously an encounter with limitless beatitude and constraining limitation. Poetry is particularly apt at suggesting this most paradoxical state of the contemplative experience of God in theophanic beauty, since it is predicated upon a double-sided and subtle relationship with the word: on the one hand poetic expression may be considered under the aspect of its outer perfection—i.e., as both source of contemplative inspiration and limitation—while on the other hand it can be seen to open onto the infinite silence of blissful plenitude.

The "amphibolic" character of poetry—and of beauty in general—also finds an expression, quite paradoxically, in the poetic acknowledgment of the necessity of absence or void as the center of spiritual contemplation. The word is a means of alluding to the heart of all spiritual life, which is beyond form. In "One-Handed Basket Weaving," Rūmī suggests that the creative core of all arts is emptiness, and that the search for this essential emptiness is actually the main aspect of contemplative and artistic endeavors:

> I've said before that every craftsman
> Searches for what's not there
> To practice his craft.[51]

[50] Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien III*, p. 28 (my translation).

[51] Rūmī, "One-Handed Basket Weaving," cited at www.armory.com/~thrace/sufi/poems.html.

In poetry, this empty center is none other than silence. In this respect, poetry might be defined as a circle of words dancing around silence. The central importance of silence in mystical poetry finds an expression in the fact that early Sufi poets tended to favor a shorter form of expression, that of the quatrain or *rubā'ī*, a form that was most appropriate to express flashes of intuition or emotion independently from a specifically didactic purpose. The brevity of the quatrain is particularly apt to suggest the limits of expression and the meaningful background of silence. Independent of this aspect of brevity, the rhyme scheme—three of the four verses of the quatrain must rhyme, while in the *ghazal* and the *mathnawī* consecutive or alternate pairs of hemistich must also rhyme—introduces an element of harmony that suggests a unity to the whole composition, therefore subtly leading back to silence. This harmonic principle of unity finds a correspondent element in the thematic unity that characterizes the unfolding verses; for, as Laleh Bakhtiar puts it, "each verse corresponds to the primary image of the arabesque in its continuous repetition of a single theme."[52] As with the void in the graphic art of the arabesque, silence—functioning as an allusion to the unity transcending multiplicity—is suggested by the harmonic and thematic texture of the poem.[53]

In this sense, poetry symbolically reduplicates the contemplative process; but it does so by abolishing in some ways its own reality. The contemplative inversion at the core of all mysticism—the passage from multiplicity to unity, in which the initial allure of multiplicity is ultimately superseded by unity—is presented by Rūmī in a most expressive way that implies, in a certain sense, a self-abolishment of language and poetry. The images are strikingly powerful:

> God has allowed some magical reversal to occur,
> So that you see the scorpion pit
> As an object of desire,
> And all the beautiful expanse around it,
> As dangerous and swarming with snakes.[54]

[52] Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, p. 112.

[53] One could apply, *mutatis mutandis*, what Seyyed Hossein Nasr says about the arabesque and the void to the relationship between poetry and silence: "The arabesque enables the void to enter into the very heart of matter, to remove its opacity and to make it transparent before the Divine Light. Through the use of the arabesque in its many forms, the void enters into the different facets of Islamic art, lifting from material objects their suffocating heaviness and enabling the spirit to breathe and expand" (*Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 186).

[54] Rūmī, cited in *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks, p. 24.

The fundamental mystery of the contemplative *opus* amounts to an inversion that only God can bring about through the "magic" of His grace. The image of the "scorpion pit" is evocative of a dark depth, but also of a sense of death and resurrection, a sense of transformation. It also entails an element of "ugliness" that is to be transfigured by the spiritual process. To choose a contemplative life amounts to a kind of jumping into this scorpion pit, a "letting go" of all fear and attachment that is the precondition for spiritual awakening or resurrection. The most luminous light is hidden in the very depth of obscurity, and it is there that it has to be found. It is moreover by virtue of this finding that the soul will be able to free itself from the "beautiful expanse around it." Poetry becomes an invitation to plunge into that "pit" of contemplation and to find in it the plenitude of emptiness. The possibility of this paradox—that of a form calling to the overcoming of all forms—is actually founded upon the very secret of creation: the metaphysical enigma of existence as a consequence of the desire for the essential emptiness:

> Praise to the emptiness that blanks out existence. Existence:
> This place made from our love for that emptiness![55]

The human love for emptiness is the essence of a desire that can be satisfied only by the emptiness of the Supreme, an emptiness that is also fullness, depending upon the standpoint from which one wishes to consider it: a void with respect to the false plenitude of indefinite multiplicity; a fullness by contrast with the vain illusion of reality, which is truly "nothingness." When trying to account for this supreme paradox, poetry reaches a summit and a limit in the sense that it "condemns" itself to disappear in its very utterance; whence the conclusive notes of the poem, which are marked by a kind of contradictory resolution, a *coincidentia oppositorum* in which discourse affirms its own failure:

> These words I'm saying so much begin to lose meaning:
> Existence, emptiness, mountain, straw:
> Words and what they try to say swept
> Out the window, down the slant of the roof.[56]

[55] *Ibid*., p. 21.
[56] *Ibid*., p. 22.

The image of the window evokes the relationship between an inner and an outer meaning, or conversely the contrast between a confinement and a liberation. As for the image of the roof, it connotes both the idea of a peak or a top, and that of a covering: extreme limits of poetic language—touching the infiniteness of the sky—and linguistic "envelopment" of reality. In all respects, poetic language cannot fulfill its mission in complete permanence: it is marked by tension, discontinuity, and disappearance. It springs forth to bear witness to the One, but it can never uphold its testimony to the point of securing an unfailing access to the Source. In a sense, the instability and insufficiency of words have also something to do with their abuse ("these words I'm saying *so much*"): words, especially poetical words, tend to lose their freshness and therefore their evocative power. Rūmī is particularly keen on stressing this very inability of words, while at the same time indicating that poetry constitutes the best means of gaining access to Love, understood here in the sense of an actualization of the Divine Presence.

The relationship between poetry and contemplation may therefore be understood from two standpoints: one that conveys a sense of continuity between words and experience; the other, on the contrary, pointing to the apophatic dimension of contemplation. In the latter perspective, Rūmī highlights the limits of language when it comes to conveying a sense of contemplative fulfillment:

> Whatever I say to explain or describe Love
> When I arrive at Love itself, I'm ashamed of my word.
> The commentary of words can make things clear—
> But Love without words has more clarity.
> My pen was rushing to write its thoughts down;
> When it came to Love, the intellect is impotent,
> Like a donkey trapped in a bog.[57]

Poetry, insofar as it is dependent upon language, can only obscure the contemplative experience while yet trying to convey it: on the highest level, unity can only be obscured by multiplicity. More precisely, and more paradoxically, as principles of clarifying obscurity—or of obscuring clarification—words have a function to play in the economy of contemplation. The acceleration of writing that would suggest an attempt at remaining as close as possible to the very source of the experience, by "keeping up" with

[57] Rūmī, cited in Andrew Harvey, *Teachings of Rumi*, p. 77.

it, cannot in the least equate with the reality of the experience. Rūmī does not repudiate poetic discourse in that it is a way of "translating" the experience of mystical love into the language of human commonality. However, such an attempt presupposes a tension between two poles: that of the identity of words with presence—or the mysterious ability of inspired words to be channels of presence—and that of the region of dissimilitude, to make use of a Neoplatonic concept.

The polarity we have just mentioned actually amounts to a question of perspective. Words, and consequently poetry, are both divine and human realities, and this double nature accounts for the highs-and-lows of a contemplative practice of poetry. This dual nature of language, which leads us back to the mystery of *iltibās*, is to be understood in terms of a distinction between informal essence and formal substance, a distinction that is moreover parallel to that of inward nature and outward manifestation. Rūmī explains this "amphiboly" in the following terms:

> With us, the name of everything
> Is its outward appearance;
> With the Creator,
> The name of each thing is its inward reality.
> In the eye of Moses, the name of his rod was "staff;"
> In the eye of the Creator, its name was "dragon."
> In brief, that which we are in the end
> Is our real name with God.[58]

The ontological and spiritual nature of language is rooted in archetypes, i.e., in realities as they are contained in God's intelligence and "willed" by Him. However, in "normal"—or should one say "abnormal"?—everyday circumstances we have access only to the outer shells of things, which are symbolically designated by their outer and conventional names. To name somebody or something amounts, in a real sense, to knowing their nature, and it ultimately amounts to perceiving that nature from the standpoint of the archetypical reality. The reference to Moses' staff that becomes "dragon" in God's eye suggestively indicates that realities are always much more "real" from the latter standpoint than they may appear to be from the former. "Real" names correspond to higher realities and, consequently, "real" poetry, as a "real" language, reaches the domain of archetypes. However, poetry is not

[58] Rūmī, cited in *Rumi Daylight*, trans. Camille and Kabir Helminski, p. 38.

Revelation, it is still "on our side" of things; it may rather, therefore, be defined as the realm of the extreme formal limits of human language, the point at which human language may so to speak "invert" itself to reveal its hidden "reverse" side. When al-Hallāj writes, "and my words if I wish are inverted," he most likely alludes to these boundaries of expression where opposites meet, when wisdom is folly and vision blindness.[59] When poetry comes close to its ultimate possibility and function, it tends to defy the laws of conventional reality and logic because it has to conjugate extremes in order to capture the formless in a single form. On this level, poetry transcends the realm of distinction and logical exclusiveness. In his *qasida*, al-Hallāj points to this mystery when he juxtaposes in a striking contrast the dualities and distinctions that are entailed by common human arts and endeavors on the one hand and, on the other hand, the literally absurd expressions that "make sense" of the categories of mystical experience. The poet is first intent on emphasizing the dichotomies of terrestrial knowing and being:

> Science is double, rejects, accepts
> The oceans are two: navigable, dreadful
> Time is two days: blamed and praised
> Men are double: endowed and plundered …[60]

Human knowledge is the epitome of a distinctive apprehension of reality since it is founded on discriminating truth from error. As for the two oceans, they probably refer to the two seas of the Sūrah of the Cave, one sweet and the other salty, which may be interpreted as two different planes of reality. Time and mankind are also submitted to this law of exclusion which alternates between highs and lows. However, the supreme contemplative experience, the "foolish wisdom" that al-Hallāj tries to convey in words, reunites contradictions, making the impossible possible. The symbols of the spiritual experience that are evoked are abruptly deprived of their formal and human features to suggest the coincidence of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, transcendence and immanence:

> I climbed a peak without any feet
> Its scaling was hard for others than I

[59] "Blindly seeing and wisely foolish. And my words if I wish are inverted" (Al-Hallāj, *Selections from the Poems of Zuhair ibn Abi Sulma and Husain ibn Mansur al Hallaj*, trans. Arthur Wormhoudt, p. 83).

[60] Al-Hallāj, *Selections from the Poems of Zuhair ibn Abi Sulma and Husain ibn Mansur al* Hallaj, trans. Arthur Wormhoudt, p. 82.

I dived in a sea without setting foot
My soul waded in it, my heart wanted it,
Its pebbles pearls no hand touched
But the mind's hand had plundered them.
I drank its water without a mouth
Much water that mouths often drank from,
For my soul of old thirsted for it
And my body felt it before creation.[61]

Three basic motions or actions recapitulate a symbolic path in which the formal analogies of imagery are as if reintegrated into their supreme *analogon* "before creation": ascent of a mountain (transcendence), descent into a sea (immanence as inclusion), and absorption of its water (immanence as assimilation). The ternary "without any feet … without setting foot … without a mouth" resounds as a rhythmic pattern of apophatic abstraction that quite suggestively illustrates the "reversal" of words and images that characterizes the limits of contemplative poetry. To walk without feet, to drink without a mouth: this is the razor's edge of contemplation, insofar as the linguistic means of poetry can suggest it. Let us note in this respect that the body is characterized as most directly aware of reality: the "soul of old" has nostalgia for what it has lost but the body apprehends most immediately what it experienced "before creation." The immediate spontaneity of the Self is reflected in that of the body, while the soul that lies in the intermediary zone of reality appears as if "torn" between the conflicting objects of its desires.

It follows from what we have said above—just as it also appears in the various works that we have been commenting upon in the context of Sufism—that, set on the confines of expression, mystical poetry may take three different paths: symbolic and imaginal suggestion, paradoxical and self-reversing expression, and extinction into silence. The first mode of expression is primarily akin to *tashbīh* and ultimately proceeds from the crystallization of spiritual insights in the imaginal world. The process of crystallization we are alluding to is analogous to that of theophanic realities in general and it therefore conforms, *mutatis mutandis*, to Henry Corbin's definition of the entrance of spiritual realities into forms:

Just as a divine Name can be known only in the concrete form of which it is theophany, so a divine archetypical Figure can be contemplated only in

[61] *Ibid*., pp. 82-3.

> a concrete Figure—sensible or imagined—which renders it outwardly or mentally visible.[62]

By contrast with this theophanic modality, the second and third modes of poetic expression of the ineffable, in conformity with *tanzīh*, are chiefly characterized by an attempt to suggest the distance that separates their own expressions from reality. In the first case, this is effected through a sort of immanent subversion of common language, a disarticulation of the syntax of horizontal coherence that may take on the mode of a kind of bursting apart of language and reason. This type of poetry is akin to the social behavior of *qalandars* and *malāmat*, the type of mystics who display an often eccentric disdain for normative conventions of conduct and thrive on systematic reversal. The idea is to open up cracks in the world of appearances in order to give way to the perception of Reality. This is the way proposed by Sa'di when he suggests that, "With a sweet tongue and kindness and silence, Can you catch an elephant by a hair."[63] Such a dynamic and negative approach runs parallel with the apophatic language of "unsaying" that has been analyzed by Michael A. Sells in his study of Ibn 'Arabī's "Garden among the Flames": in this connection, to cohere with concepts and images amounts to stopping "at a particular station or experience, however exalted, and bind the real to it." Inasmuch as language involves a "reification" of itself it must "correct" and "negate" itself in order to convey the Real.[64]

As for the choice of silence, it obviously corresponds to a limit that cannot be reached without abolishing poetry and language; however, this extreme tendency can find a suitable outlet through either a semantic or a prosodic strategy of intimation of silence. The poem may enunciate or suggest the primacy of contemplative silence through its meaning—either explicitly or implicitly—or it may more obliquely allude to this primacy through its rhythmical and harmonic patterns and practices. The regularity of rhythm and harmony introduces a sense of unity that suggests the experience of single-pointed concentration through a prosodic centering of the multiplicity

[62] Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, p. 138.

[63] Sa'di, *Gulistān*, ch. 3, p. 108, cited in Anne-Marie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, p. 273, note 135.

[64] "The habits of language pull the writer and reader toward reifying the last proposition as a meaningful utterance. To prevent such reification, ever-new correcting propositions must be advanced" (Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, p. 207).

of linguistic forms. Whether it be through "musical" techniques or through the suggestiveness of meaning, words must in any case undergo a kind of "transfiguration"—i.e., both a "reduction" and an "elation" of their form and meaning—in order to serve as pure witnesses of Reality; so it is that they may be both blurred and fixed (*fi'l fanā' wa'l baqā*, as it were) in the integral and suggestive meaning that "silently" radiates through them, in the image of Rūmī's candle that becomes a "sign without signs":

> Place before the sun a burning candle,
> See how its shining disappears before those lights:
> The candle exists no longer, is transfigured into light.
> There are no more signs of it; it itself becomes a sign.[65]

Islam: Sufism and Poetry

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[65] Rūmī, cited in Andrew Harvey *Teachings of Rumi*, p. 91.