

# Creation, Originality and Innovation in Sufi Poetry

Patrick Laude

Sufism is most often introduced as being concerned with the heart. Although there may be as many definitions of Sufism as there are Sufi Masters, if not more given the variety of inspirations through which a given Master may express himself or herself, it is not rare for these definitions to refer to a purification of the heart, an appeasement of the heart, or a change of heart, or an opening of the eye of the heart, and so on. In his *Minhāj at-tasawwuf* (Epistle on Sufism) for example, the Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawī emphasises the need for a pure heart when writing that ‘the heart should show no bad character, neither jealousy, nor bewilderment, nor pessimism.’<sup>1</sup> In parallel, *tasawwuf* has not uncommonly been designated as the “science of the heart,” or the “heart of Islam.” The term heart, of course, has become highly polysemic, and is frequently reduced to the seat of sentiments and to the physiological organ. Sufi writers understand the heart as a reality that encompasses a variety of levels, from the piece of flesh that pumps blood into the whole body up to the centre of consciousness where the Divine touches the human. In a sense all of the realities that are referred to by the term “heart” share in the same privilege of centrality, and lower manifestations of this principle of centrality are none but reflections of the higher ones; this means that the spiritual heart, which is both the goal and the principle of spiritual work, finds an analogical manifestation in the physical heart itself. This analogy is further reflected in the fact that the physical heart is the means through which blood is purified and pumped into the whole body. The symbolic analogy between the blood and the soul clearly indicates that the heart as locus of contact with the Divine is the organ of purification of the individual psychic substance that animates the whole being. A famous

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*Wa dhahira al-qalb min al-wasfi al-madhmūm lā hasadān lā ‘ajabān lā tashā’um*’ in *Minhāj at-tasawwuf*, Beirut: Albouraq, 2006, pp.30-31.

hadīth refers to this principle: ‘Beware! verily there is a piece of flesh in the body of man, which when good, the whole body is good; and when bad, the whole body is bad, and that is the heart.’<sup>2</sup>

The Arabic term *qalb*, which is one of the most often used in Sufism, conveys etymologically a whole range of meanings that have all in common denotations of alternated motion, such as to turn, to reverse, to tip over, to upturn, to turn upside down, or inside out, and so forth. Although the heart is apprehended as central, intimate, profound and essential, it is not understood as static. The evident reason of these two seemingly contradictory aspects of the heart lies in its being the locus of encounter between the influx of the divine infiniteness and the limitations of the human individuality. The heart is a *barzakh*, an intermediary locus, at which the immensity of the ocean meets with the boundaries of the individual ego, thereby involving an ever moving measure of alternation, change and turbulence, as the waves on the shore. A Qur’ānic source par excellence for such an understanding is to be found in *Sūrat al-Kahf*, the Chapter of the Cave, when the heart of the young men of the cave is described as being both unmoving in its link to the Divine while being ever moved by the influxes of the latter:

We gave strength to their hearts: Behold, they stood up and said:  
“Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and of the earth: never shall  
we call upon any god other than Him.” (Qur’ān 18:14)

Thou wouldst have deemed them awake, whilst they were asleep,  
and We turned them on their right and on their left sides. (Qur’ān  
18:18)

In this sūrah, the two divine motions of the heart are quite suggestive, if not instructive: there is first a strengthening (i.e. *rabatna*) akin to a binding or linking, which results in a standing and outer affirmation of faith. There is, secondly, an outer sleep that is in fact a state of spiritual wakefulness, in the sense that the sleepers are completely abandoned,

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<sup>2</sup> Abdullah Al-Mamun Al Suhrawardy ed., *The Sayings of Muhammad*, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004, p.53.

forgetting their own will in sleep, while being awake in the spirit, obedient to the Divine motion that turns them left and right.

This fundamental disposition of Sufism, which some contemporary masters have equated to the situation of the corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead, bears a relationship with the notion of *waqt*, or instant, and appropriateness to this moment. Qushayri in his classic *al-Risālat fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf* quotes al-Makki as stating that ‘Sufism is that the servant of God’s behaviour in each moment be most appropriate for that particular moment.’<sup>3</sup> The *waqt* expresses and manifests the will of God as it determines the *qalb* in its particular state. The discontinuity in the sequence of the *awqāt*, which is metaphysically expressed in the Akbarian doctrine of *al-khalq al-jadīd*, or renewal of creation at each instant,<sup>4</sup> is in fact none other than an expression of this unending series of alternations.

Any cursory review of Sufi poetry makes it plain that one of its main themes has to do, precisely, with this “changing heart.” As the most fundamental manifestations of this changing heart, Martin Lings comments, in his *What is Sufism?*, on the two basic spiritual expressions of proximity and distance, i.e. expansion, *bast*, and contraction, *qabd*, as being the most fundamental manifestations of this changing heart.<sup>5</sup> These are analogous to the systole and diastole of the physical heart, which are themselves outer reflections of the metaphysical ambivalence of creation. This is the “magic” of the universe which is neither “pure being” nor “pure nothing.” Being is as it were on loan from the Divine, while nothingness is only a tendency that is never reached, to use Schuon’s expressions.<sup>6</sup> This is another way of saying that metaphysical continuity is from God, or more precisely from the Divine Essence, or subjectively from the Heart, whereas metaphysical discontinuity

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<sup>3</sup> Al-Qushayri, *Epistle on Sufism*, tr. A. Knysh, Reading: Garnet, 2007, p.289.

<sup>4</sup> In his *Lawā'ih*, Jamī speaks of the instantaneous renewal of the universe: ‘The universe consists of accidents pertaining to a single substance, which is the Reality underlying all existence. This universe is changed and renewed unceasingly and at every moment and breath’ (*Lawā'ih* 26, tr. E. H. Whinfield & M. M. Kazwini, London: Oriental Translation Fund XVI, 1906, p.42, cited in A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity*, Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae Supplementum Vol. 8, 1947, p.99).

<sup>5</sup> M. Lings, *What is Sufism?*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977, p.82.

<sup>6</sup> See for example F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2000, pp.75 & 20.

proceeds, as a mere appearance, from the point of view of separativeness, a point of view that results from an inadequate perception of reality on our part. ‘We are closer (*aqrab*) to you than your jugular vein’ states the Qur’ān 50:16, while humans are the victims of their own *ghaflah* (heedlessness or inadvertance), the Qur’ān referring frequently to those who forgets that their metaphysical origin is in God as *ghāfilūn* (“the heedless ones”; for example Qur’ān 30:7; 7:179 and 205).

Sufi poetry is an expression of, and a response to, this human sway between presence and absence. The thrust of this paper will deal with this fundamental aspect of the question, but we would like, first of all, to introduce these reflections by a consideration of the concept of poetry in Islam, a consideration that is not without relevance to the substance of our argument, as it will appear in the coming pages.

Sufism is considered by many, today in Europe and in America, as the form, or the movement which, in Islam—when it is in fact deemed to be part of Islam—is the most conducive to creativity and the most independent from the dogmatic, formal, and conventional limitations with which this religion is frequently associated. The usual pairing of mysticism and poetry highlights this sense of freedom and unshackled authenticity that has become the hallmark of Sufism, at least as understood in the West. However, our contention is that such a reputation for originality and innovation cannot be adequately buttressed without a full consideration of the profound anchoring of Sufi poetry in tradition.

The relationship of Islam with poetry is encapsulated in the following Qur’ānic passage, which allow us to understand the ambiguity of the poetic word in Islam.

And the poets—the perverse follow them; hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley and how they say that which they do not?

Save those that believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God oft, and help themselves after being wronged; and those who do wrong shall surely know by what overturning they will be overturned. (Qur’ān 26:224-227)

It must be emphasized at the outset that the main reproach directed by the Qur’ān to the poets is that they “say what they do not.” This is a

reproach that highlights the danger of words as substitutes for actions, the snares of the word as a distraction from being. The “wandering” aspect of poets is both a historical reality that pertains, in pre-Islamic society, to the somewhat unstable and socially marginal existence of poets, such as Hassan ibn Thābit, and to the symbolic straying of their aesthetic “lies.”<sup>7</sup> These are the complacencies and the perils that Plato had also in mind when he proposed to banish poets from the city.<sup>8</sup> Plato condemned the poets for allowing themselves to express images that are not in conformity with the Good, thereby indulging in the realm of moral weaknesses and ontological *phantasmata*, the illusory appearances that prevent us to gaze at archetypal realities. He was therefore focusing on the negative, potentially alienating aspect of poetry. In an Arab context, the perspective in which “poetic lies” are envisaged might be less metaphysical than moral and aesthetic, but it still bears witness to the reputation of poets as verbal magicians, soothsayers and experts in imaginary fallacies. Be that as it may, the Qur’ānic “exception” (*istithnā’*, “except those who believe and work righteousness”) accounts for a kind of bifurcation into two poetic paths, one highly compatible with Islam, and the other not, a bifurcation analogous to Ali Lakhani’s judicious distinction between T.S. Eliot’s “poetry of accomplishment” and a mere “poetry of surfaces.”<sup>9</sup> Such distinctions lead us to conclude that there are, fundamentally, two kinds of poets whom we could call phantasmatic poets and iconic or *āyātic* (from *āyāt* or “signs”) poets. The first are “magicians” inasmuch as they transform and deform reality whereas the second are gifted with a power of perception—from

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<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Asad’s translation and commentary (*The Message of the Qur’an*) offers the following: ‘Art thou not aware that they roam confusedly through all the valleys [of words and thoughts], [The idiomatic phrase *hama fi wīdyān* (lit., ‘he wandered or “roamed” through valleys’) is used, as most of the commentators point out, to describe a confused or aimless—and often self-contradictory—play with words and thoughts. In this context it is meant to stress the difference between the precision of the Qur’an, which is free from all inner contradictions (cf. note on 4:82), and the vagueness often inherent in poetry.]

<sup>8</sup> *Republic*, 3.9.8 A-B.

<sup>9</sup> As Lakhani says, ‘... the highest order of poetry will be consciously rooted in Truth. Such poetry can be termed “the poetry of accomplishment.” Other, lesser forms of poetry may aim ... to express Truth, without authentically achieving such expression. ... Below these forms lies what conventionally passes for poetry, some of which may incidentally express Truth, without intending it. Such poetry might be termed the “poetry of surfaces”’ (*The Metaphysics of Poetic Expression*, Sacred Web Publishing, 2008, p.11).

*sha'ara* (“to perceive,” “to feel”)—that is normally unknown to other men.

It is in this context that the “innovative” reputation of poetry needs to be approached. Let us begin by specifying that the term “innovation” (*bid'ah*) is not, in and of itself, pejorative in Islam. In fact, much of its negative colouring results from the recent ideological influence of pro-Salafi modes of understanding Islam. Normatively, all that can be said is that there is an etymological and metaphysical connection between *bid'ah*, innovation, and the creative power. God alone is, in a sense, entitled to *bid'ah*, since he alone is *Mubdi'* as being the first Creator, Originator of all things, hence the suspicion, sometimes obsessive, concerning human innovation in religious matters in Islam.<sup>10</sup> Actually, the root *BD'* is to be found in the Qur'ān to refer to God's ability to create, or more specifically to create for the first time, to originate: *Badī'u as-samāwāti wa'l ard'* (‘Creator of the heavens and the earth’—Qur'ān 6:101). Human “innovation”, and poetic “innovation” in particular, has been read, in that perspective, as a kind of usurpation of God's power, and a betrayal of the fresh and authentic originality of his creative Word. By contrast with the Qur'ān, any human words would seem “inauthentic.” God is the first and only Creator, which means that every other act of “creation” can only be conceived as a copy of the original, and a copy that can only be either a poor distortion or a dangerous substitute. In so far as Islam is centred on the sense of pristine origin, or *fitrah*, it manifests a particularly acute sensitivity to the alterations and deformations to which this origin may be subjected.

However, poetry is, by definition, a kind of “creation” and “innovation,”<sup>11</sup> and this is in fact the essence of poetic perception. According to the eleventh century rhetorician 'Alī Ibn Rashīq, ‘if the poet did not conceive a concept or invent one, or embellish an expression,<sup>12</sup> or give it an original twist, or expand the concepts others

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<sup>10</sup> The semantic field of *BD'* includes newness, originality, wonder, magnificence, and uniqueness. The science of metaphor is *'ilm al-badī'*, a rhetorical term that refers to an idea of embellishment, adornment.

<sup>11</sup> This aspect of “production” is far more evident in Greek than in Arabic. Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes that ‘the Arabic word for poetry (*al-shi'r*) is related to the root meaning consciousness and knowledge rather than making as is the case with *poiesis*’ (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, SUNY Press, 1989, p.12).

<sup>12</sup> This “embellishment” seems indissociable from Arabic poetry. According to 'Abd al-Qahir the science of figures, ‘descriptive of the means by which verbal structure should be

treated wrongly, or shorten the expressions others made excessively long, or use a concept in a different way than it had been used before, then the name of poet would be given to him in a figurative sense and not in a real one.’<sup>13</sup> Even though the innovative character of poetry is primarily envisaged by poetics on a formal or verbal level, or to the domain of intuitive perception, the two being in fact subtly related, it must be acknowledged that a concern for “originality” is part and parcel of the practice of poetry. Notwithstanding such an acknowledgment, it must be granted that originality may be given quite distinct meanings. As Martin Lings observes, ‘the word “original” has become encrusted with meanings which do not touch the essence of originality but which are limited to one of its consequences, namely difference, the quality of being unusual or extraordinary’; in contrast as Lings notes, ‘The original is that which springs directly from the origin or source’.<sup>14</sup>

In point of fact, mystical poetry is particularly intent on reaching this origin that is the inimitable seal of true originality.<sup>15</sup> To the extent that it is profound, poetry is *dhikr*, a remembrance of the Origin. This remembrance being understood not only nor primarily in a temporal sense, but in a metaphysical, therefore ever concrete and immediate, sense. It bears stressing that *dhikr* is both mention and remembrance. When the Qur’ān reminds its auditors of those whom ‘neither trade nor business distract from the *dhikr* of God’ (Qur’ān 62:8-10) it must be suggested that there may be more, in this remark, than a mere reminder of the ever binding moral imperatives of the consciousness of God, or more than a reference to a purely intentional and general recognition of God: the term *dhikr* is actually more encompassing than this expedient interpretation would allow us to think, reaching to a point that conventional religion cannot envisage for lack of a sense of the self-transcendence involved in the spiritual path. The best evidence of the spiritual demands of the Qur’ān lies in the fact that *dhikr* is not only remembrance but also mention. As mention, it is presence by and

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“adorned,” ... had reached an advanced stage as early as in classical poetics of the 9-11th cc.’ (V. Braginsky, *The Comparative Study of Traditional Asian Literatures: From Reflective Traditionalism to New-Traditionalism*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2000, p.165).

<sup>13</sup> *Kitāb al-‘Umda fī mahāsin ash-shi’r wa ādābih*, in V. Cantarino, *Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age*, Leiden: Brill, 1975, pp.148-9.

<sup>14</sup> Lings, *What is Sufism?*, pp.14-15.

<sup>15</sup> In an analogous sense, Jacques Maritain wrote that only the saint is a true “original.”

through utterance of the Name of God, as remembrance it bears witness to an absence that it fills, precisely, by remembering. *Dhikr* is both mantic and mantric: it pertains to *manteia* and to *mantra*, to prophecy and to invocation. As remembrance it is prophetic or mantic in the sense of speaking of what is absent, and for what is absent. It evokes, quasi-magically in fact, what is not available to the senses; and it does so by means of its mantric power as mention. Sufism derives, in fact, its strong faith in the “presential” (*hudūri*) function of the Names of God from the fact that these Names flow from the same source of revelation as the Qur’ān itself, being both parts of it and the main messages from it.

The dialectic, or coincidence, between presence and absence in mystical poetry is evident in its inspiration. Thus mystical poetry involves both a “manic” inspiration and the language of “logic,” what is called in Islam, *mantiq*. With respect to the first of these characteristics, let us recall that Plato describes poetry as a *mania*, or madness;<sup>16</sup> in other words there is a divinity that moves the poet, and that we refer to as “inspiration.” It results from it that poetry is not “art,” in the sense of a technique to be acquired, but “inspiration,” in the sense of an inner state of “enthusiasm” that takes hold of the poet. In Sufism, an analogon of such a state is to be found in the *shath*, which can be defined as a kind of divine commotion and unveiling. This “manic” dimension is, as it were, the divine side of the poetical work, the grace without which the poem would be nothing more than an assemblage of words, be it relatively harmonious. Attar’s *Mantiq al-tayr* (Language of the Birds) suggests, moreover, an interesting connection between such a “poetic” state, which we today conceive as “irrational” and the domain of rationality. In fact, the *Mantiq al-tayr* refers to a “logic,” or a “conference,” or a “discourse” of birds, thereby suggesting a bridge between the world of poetics and that of logic. The term *mantiq*, in Arabic, refers both to language and to logic, which suggests a connection between the realm of intelligence and that of poetry. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes, the disconnection between the realm of poetry and that of logic, which contemporary discourses tends to highlight, is in outright opposition to the traditional doctrine ‘according to which poetry and logic refer to a single Reality that binds and yet

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<sup>16</sup> *Ion* 534 A-E.

transcends them.<sup>17</sup> This traditional conception echoes the “language of birds,” that is an intellective intimation of the divine, cosmic “numbers” of things which is a prerogative of the traditional poet. The fundamental bond between the two domains is moreover reflected in the fact that traditional poetry includes a logical dimension, while doctrinal expressions of a logical nature often incorporate a poetical aspect. Among Sufi texts of a purely doctrinal nature, the greatest, such as the *Gulshan-i rāz* of Shabistari, are also poetical masterpieces.

What is the relevance of this two-fold understanding of poetry as manic and *mantiq* to the question of presence and absence? Poetic *mania* refers to a human absence in the context of divine presence, in the sense that it presupposes a suspension of ordinary consciousness, which is superseded by divine inspiration, or by a divine mode of consciousness. This is illustrated by a number of poetic utterances which, in the context of Sufism, imply a kind of substitution of identity. The poetry of Hallāj is particularly characteristic of this kind of “theopathic” utterance: ‘*Anā man ahwā wa man ahwā anā...*’ (‘He am I whom I love, He whom I love is I...’).<sup>18</sup> By contrast, poetry as *mantiq* or logic points to a human presence that is as if delegated by the divine Absent. Poetic logic is like a gift, or a legacy from God to man, so that man may recover something of the Divine Presence in the Divine Absence. This is, as it were, the human side of the poetic equation, the human reflection of the Divine Intellect.

It results from the preceding lines that mystical poetry is both analogous to the Qur’ān and dissimilar to it. It is akin to the Qur’ān as *dhikr*, and also in the phenomenology of inspiration as a suspension of ordinary consciousness, as *mania*. However, poetry is also “logical,” i.e. it obeys a certain human, formal logic, of which the rules of prosody are so to speak the formal reflection. The Qur’ān is freed from such human, formal constraints, and such is, in a sense, the secret of its incomparability. The Qur’ān is not only inimitable in terms of its formal, logical or conceptual content but, above all, because of that to which it leads by virtue of its belonging to a higher degree of reality. The Qur’ān testifies to its divine nature not so much in terms of what it

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<sup>17</sup> S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, New York: SUNY, 1987, p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> M. Lings ed., *Sufi Poems: A Medieval Anthology*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2004, pp.38-39.

is itself, as a verbal system, as by what it alludes to by virtue of its divine inspiration. While poetry is like the language of *presence in absence*, springing forth, as a compensation, from a longing of the heart for the Divine Presence from within its very absence, the Qur'ān, by contrast, is akin to a pointer to God's absence, or rather transcendence, within the very texture of His Word as presence. God is present in his Book, but this book is also a recurrent reference to what lies beyond, and cannot be accessed. We could almost say, in a most paradoxical fashion, that with the Qur'ān there is a kind of mysterious *immanence of transcendence*.

With respect to poetry, it must be emphasized that it is, in large measure, a language intent on filling the void left by the divine parting from the soul. Let us quote Martin Lings on this aspect of presence in the midst of absence:

...herebelow Saints are no longer in the Paradise of Eden, and as things are and have been through historic times, the sense of separation from God and the return to the intrusive imperfections of this lower world can be overwhelming, despite the certitude of the Saint that the state of Union cannot be lost and that every apparent absence is within the framework of Presence. The soul spontaneously seeks a means of relief, and the chief means, needless to say, is prayer. Another means of relief, not altogether unconnected with prayer, is to give birth to a poem.<sup>19</sup>

Poetry, like prayer, stems from the gap that is left when the immediacy of union, or presence, has released its blissful hold on the soul. Opposing mystical experience and poetical expression—as it has sometimes been done under the pretext that the former thrives on fullness and presence while the latter flows from emptiness and absence—is therefore inaccurate. It would be more adequate to write that poetry is like the resplendent shadow, if one be allowed this oxymoron, of the pure light of presence. Martin Lings' analogy between poetry and prayer, is therefore highly suggestive of the ambivalent, half-human half-divine, status of poetry. However, his statement also implies that prayer is a more central “means of relief” than poetry, its

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<sup>19</sup> Lings, Preface, *ibid.*, p.viii.

divine focus reabsorbing, as it were, its human locus. This is particularly true of jaculatory prayer (*dhikru-Llāh*) in which, as Schuon has indicated, it is in fact God Himself who utters, in a mysterious but most real way, His Name in us.<sup>20</sup> In poetry, by contrast, the reciprocity between the Divine and the human, conveys a sense of reverse analogy in which the human absorbs the elixir of divine presence, and thereby transmutes the terrestrial language of man.

There is a sense, however, in which this contrast between poetry and the Qur'ān must be qualified, and as it were reversed. Let us note, in this respect, that the mystic generally aspires to become consumed into silence: poetry tends toward silence, which is pure presence. This cannot be better exemplified than by *Khamush*, the Silent One, which is Rumi's nickname. Fatemeh Keshavarz, commenting on Rumi, encapsulates a major dimension of Sufi poetry in general: 'One may see the *Dīvān* as an intense expression of the desire to abandon the spoken word and embrace silence.'<sup>21</sup> This longing for silence, far from being akin to an annihilation, can be considered, in fact, as an ontological fullness. It is extinction, or *fanā'*, from the point of view of analytic manifestation while being permanence, *baqā'*, from the point of view of synthetic implicitness.<sup>22</sup> The higher reality always appears as a "nothing" from the standpoint of the lower one. Schuon's definition of the poem as "form in motion toward its essence" highlights the ontological primacy of the meaningful "silence" which constitutes the archetype or the entelechy of words. In that sense the silence that inhabits and mysteriously informs mystical poetry as a longing testifies to a feeling that language is "not enough." It is the sign of language's impotence and limitations, but also, paradoxically, the index of an excess of language: the need for silence amounts to opening a space in

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<sup>20</sup> 'There is an orison wherein God Himself is in a sense the Subject, and that is the pronouncing of a revealed divine name' (F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, Bloomington, World Wisdom, 1995, p.125).

<sup>21</sup> Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi*, Aiken: University of South Carolina, 1998, p.49.

<sup>22</sup> Jurjānī identifies *fanā'* and *faqr* (poverty) to the 'unfathomable black (*sawād*) of the face in the two domains of *mulk* and *malakūt*,' i.e. the world of manifestation and that of divine Mystery. What this black is to the visual field, silence is to the auditory realm. As for *baqā'*, it is akin, for Ibn 'Arabī, to the letter *hā'* that concludes the Name Allāh and 'expresses the ultimate synthesis of the unconditioned mystery.' Cf. Al-Jurjānī, *Kitāb at-ta'rīfāt*, M. Gloton ed., Beirut: Albouraq, 2005, pp.332 & 356).

the false “plenitude” of language in order to suggest the infinitude of the beyond, which words cannot capture. Language, especially in poetry, can in fact obstruct reality by making a potential idol of its verbal arrangements.

This twofold relationship between poetry and silence results from the Word being both a reflection of God and a separation from God, from its source, a mere echo. This leads us to the recognition of two types of silence, both of which are at work in poetry. The first type of silence hints at the deepest layer of Reality as the unutterable essence of all words. This is the initial and final silence, which bears no connection to the words that follow and precede, while being the underlying substratum of all sounds, like the subjacent silence of a music. It is, as it were, an unarticulated fullness of language from which language derives and to which it returns.

The second type of silence is relational, and is therefore always relative to words. It proceeds by contrasts and alternations. This is silence as the “interstice” between the words. It can be a way to expand the effect of words, thereby suggesting both their power and their limitations. In such cases, the imperfection of language is hinted at by silence, but this same silence can also be a resounding space for the suggestive power of words. So the immanent charge of the poetic word is also informed by a call to transcendence.

Conversely, the transcendence highlighted by the *Qur’ān*, as exemplified by its status of *ijāz* (incomparability) and its leitmotif of *tanzīh* (abstraction) and ever furthering distance, tends to be turned inside out (*qalb*), as it were, by the Sufi unveiling of the dimension of immanence, in and by the quintessential synthesis of the Book, which many Sufis understand to be the *Shahādah* and the divine Name (*al-ism al-‘azīm*). In Sufi practice, the Divine Name becomes the epitome of Divine Presence. The *dhikr* is in fact understood, at its height, as an actualization of Divine Presence, a spiritual synthesis of the whole *Qur’ān*.

The alternation of presence and absence<sup>23</sup> that lies at the heart of mystical poetry is not only a subjective reality.<sup>24</sup> It finds its deepest

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<sup>23</sup> This paradoxical status of the Sufi—between absence and presence—is expressed by al-Rudhbari: ‘Sufism is a vigil at the door of the Beloved, even when you are being chased way’ (Qushayri, *Epistle on Sufism*, p.290).

foundation in the very structure of Reality as a veil upon the Divine Face. As the heart that moves back and forth from presence to absence, and alternates days and nights, the world of manifestation is itself both a veil that hides and one that reveals. In fact, the objective and subjective aspects of this metaphysical hide-and-seek are intimately intertwined. Thus is expressed the ambiguity, or even the mobility, of creation in a famous passage by Mahmud Shabistari:

Were She to shake those fragrant tresses from her face,  
Not one impious soul would be left in the world.

Were She to hold them still so as to hide her face,  
Not one true believer would be left to existence.<sup>25</sup>

The “fragrant tresses” are, in Shabistari, the multiplicity in which the Divine both hides itself and manifests itself. Behind this veil lies the unity of the Divine. When moving or shaking, these “hair” reveal that which they hide, when set in their place they hide the face of the Beloved. Creation is a play of hide-and-seek, as expressed by Ibn ‘Arabi: ‘The universe is neither pure being nor pure nothingness. It is entirely magic: it makes you believe that it is God and it is not God; it makes you believe it is creation and it is not creation, for it is neither this nor that in all respects.’<sup>26</sup> The ambiguous status of creation accounts, metaphysically, for the interplay of silence and words, presence and absence that is so characteristic of Sufi poetry.

‘It makes you believe that it is God’ points to the principle that the world leads us into thinking it is the real God inasmuch as it wants us to envisage it independently from God, while it is actually real only by and through God. So it can make you believe, in “its own terms,” that it is

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<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, in his *Tarjumān*, makes the point that the outer perception of the Beloved is un-needed since His reality is to be found in the heart: ‘*Amā yakfīhi annī bi-qalbi-hī, yushāidnī fi kulli-waqt, amā, amā?*’ [‘Is it not enough for him that I am in his heart and that he beholds me at every moment? Is it not enough?’] (*Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, tr. R. A. Nicholson, London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978, p.57). This verse expresses the very mystery of presence in absence.

<sup>25</sup> Mahmud Shabistari, *Garden of Mystery, Gulshan-i rāz*, tr. R. Abdul Hayy Darr, Cambridge: Archetype, 2007, p.141.

<sup>26</sup> *Futuhat* IV, quoted in C. Addas, *Ibn Arabī et le voyage sans retour*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996, p.87.

in fact God, by making you oblivious of the fact that the unity is to be realised on the level of *wujūd* (Being) and not *mawjūd* (relative beings), on the level of Divine Substance, not accidents. Conversely, the universe of manifestation ‘makes you believe’ it is creation in so far as it is separated from God, and because it makes you envisage this separation as somehow “absolute” by virtue of it being “not nothing,” by and through God. So the separation, albeit relative, is made apparently absolute in that it is not nothing, therefore a reflection of the absoluteness of the One. The universe is therefore a kind of perpetual alternation between an Absolute that is never fully realised in relativity, and a nothingness that is never reached.

This alternation appears, in a symbolic way, in the very manner in which poetry reveals itself as a spiritual medium to Ibn ‘Arabi:

The reason which has led me to utter (*talaffuz*) poetry is that I saw in a dream an angel who was bringing me a piece of white light; as if it were a piece of the sun’s light. “What is that?” I asked. “It is *Sūrah al-shu‘arā* (the *Sūrah* of the Poets)” was the reply. I swallowed it, and felt a hair (*sha’r*) stretching from my chest up to my throat, and then into my mouth. It was an animal with a head, a tongue, eyes, and lips. It stretched forth until its head reached the two horizons, that of the East and that of the West. After that, it shrank back and returned to my chest; at that moment I realised that my words would reach the East and the West. When I came back to myself, I uttered verses that came forth from no reflection and no intellectual process whatsoever. Since that time, this inspiration has never ceased; and it is because of this sublime contemplation that I have collected all the poetry that I can remember. But there is much more that I have forgotten! Everything that this collection contains is thus, thanks be to God, nothing other than [the fruit of] divine projection, a holy and spiritual inspiration, a splendid, celestial heritage....<sup>27</sup>

There is here, besides the obvious sanction of, and justification for, spiritual poetry as a kind of prolongation of the Qur’ān itself, quite a suggestive alternation between the smallest reality, symbolized by the

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in C. Addas, ‘The Ship of Stone’, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 19, 1996 (<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/shipofstone.html>).

hair, and the widest, expressed by the expanse of the horizon. The piece of light, the very element of vision, becomes, when ingested, a hair that is imperceptible to the eye but still perceptible inwardly, in the chest, presumably as an element of discomfort or unease that can only be released through the throat and the mouth. The spiritual reality of the *sūrah* “The Poets” is interiorized by Ibn ‘Arabī, and becomes itself the principle of the production of poetry. This means that the negative assertions of the *sūrah* toward poets can only be deemed to be extrinsic, and do not touch upon the essence of spiritual poetry. The ordinary *tafsīr* (interpretation) of these verses assert that the negative reference to the poets is a way to highlight that the Prophet was not himself a poet and a soothsayer. Poets are to be condemned because they create a verbal reality that does not correspond to what is, and they do so through excessive praises, lies and soothsaying. They do so because they do not perceive reality as it is (*tawhīd*) in the first place, and they are “associationists” inasmuch as their ego is involved in this poetic construction of reality on the sands of delusory words.

In sharp contrast with this illusory, phantasmatic reputation of poetry, it follows from the symbol of the hair, the smallest atom of visibility or perceptibility, that the production of poetry originates both from an assimilation of the Qur’ān and from an inner, quasi-irresistible, urge, since a hair cannot remain in the throat without producing a discomfort that needs to be resolved in and by outer production. Moreover, commenting upon this passage in her biography of Ibn ‘Arabī, Claude Addas has mentioned that the imaginal transformation of the hair into an animal spreading over the horizon alludes to the universality of the message of Islam and Sufism, particularly as expressed in Ibn ‘Arabī’s works.<sup>28</sup> Inwardness and universality are the two poles of the Muhammadan inspiration, as stemming from this passage. This two-fold aspect is expressed by the alternation between the inner locus of perception, the chest, and the outer horizon, the two

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Furthermore, the animal’s expansion presages, according to Ibn ‘Arabī’s own remarks, the future of the Shaykh al-Akbar’s teachings. This vision that announces the diffusion of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work from all appearances falls within the scope of the strictly universal dimension of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ministry, that is, of the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood. In the eyes of Muslims, and especially in Ibn ‘Arabī’s eyes, this characteristic of universality is a privilege (scripturally based on Qur’ān 34:28) of the *risāla muhammadiyahya*, of the mission of the Prophet’ (Addas, ‘The Ship of Stone’).

intermediary elements, or steps, being the mouth and the animal. The most imperceptible, the hair, comes to the mouth, where it becomes word, and then “animal” in the sense of a universal message perceptible by the senses, reaching finally the whole horizon. The near imperceptibility and subtlety of the hair, which is explicitly connected by Ibn ‘Arabī to the Muhammadan Seal, may also be read as an allusion to the principle that the junction between the Divine and the human is of such a subtle nature as to be almost imperceptible outwardly until it manifests itself in and through outer creation, word or poetry. Poetry proceeds from an imperceptible reality that outpours into creation, with a final view to bring us back to the “original” heart.

As production, or creation, poetry connects the innermost and the outermost, it attempts at expressing the imperceptible in the language of the perceptible. The imperceptible is intuitive insight, mystical union, and the perceptible is couched in a language that speaks to the senses and sentiments. Hence, the alternation of poetry between presence and absence, success and failure, fulfillment and lack. These alternations are thus expressed by Rumi:

To capture love whatever words I say  
Makes me a shame when love arrives my way,  
While explanation sometimes makes things clear  
True love through silence only one can hear:  
The pen would smoothly writes the things it knew  
But when it came to love it split in two (...) <sup>29</sup>

In the language of Rumi, love is presence, and intellect absence, while poetry is as if oscillating between the two. If love is experience of spiritual fruition by presence, and intellect discursive distance, therefore exteriority vis-à-vis the mystical source, poetry cannot but be situated on the ambiguous and unstable locus of a kind of “necessary impossibility.” It aims at distilling presence, but cannot do so without a measure of absence. This imbalance accounts for the fact that mystical poetry shifts back and forth between “theopathic utterance” and “theoretical explanation.” This is a paradoxical position, since both ends take us away from poetry as such, the first end verging upon unitive

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<sup>29</sup> Jawid Mojaddedi tr., *The Masnavi: Book One*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p.11.

experience, and therefore immediacy and silence, the second end leading into verbal insubstantiality, and even artifice.

What precedes leads us to conclude that the practice of spiritual poetry could be schematized in the form of a triangular structure, namely an inverted triangle the summit of which is the heart as seat of the divine presence. The upper, horizontal line of the triangle ranges from the mind as organ of mental crystallization and metaphorical representation of presence, to the poem itself as linguistic production. The upper left angle, where the mind is situated, is in fact the very locus of ambivalence since it can either faithfully transmit, or appropriate and betray, the immediacy of the heart's intuition springing forth from the inverted summit, hence the ambiguity of poetry that the Qur'ān suggests: 'They say what they do not.' In that sense, the pretension and hypocrisy of poetry is akin to a more general flaw, which is referred to in Islam as *ri'ā'*. Jurjānī defines *ri'ā'* as a "renunciation to *ikhhlās* (sincerity, rectitude of intention) by paying attention to other than God in the accomplishment of outer or inner acts."<sup>30</sup> The term is akin to the root of *ra'ā*, to perceive, to see, to notice, and also *rā'ā*, to dissimulate. So *ri'ā'* is not only a dissimulation, but an excessive concern for self-perception and even ostentation, i.e. "aesthetic ornamentation."

The closeness and association of the two roots to see (*ra'ā*) and to dissimulate or to feign (*rā'ā*) suggest that seeing is a form of dissimulation of the true Seer: a self-consciousness that obliterates the true *Shāhid*, the Divine Witness who alone can say: '*Lā ilāha illā Anā* (I am God)' (Qur'ān 20:14). It amounts to an inner *shirk*, a veiling or a covering (*kufīr*) of the eye of God, as it were. If poetry is a compensation for the "flowing back" of divine presence, or a nostalgic remnant of that presence, it also runs the risk of substituting itself to that "absence" which it sings, thereby closing the door to the grace of true inspiration. It is at this point that we reach the ultimate paradox of poetry as a genre. Poetry is a *shirk* to the extent that it favours, and savours, self-reflection over pure seeing. The poetic creation is indeed an inner perception that has been verbally crystallized, while being the object of an outer perception as product (poems, images, ideas, etc.). It may become complacency, self-reflection in the first sense, i.e. the hypocrisy

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<sup>30</sup> *Définitions*, p.231.

and insubstantiality of the *Sūrah*'s poets, and outer *shirk* in the second, like Plato's poetic lies. Poetry can reveal, transmit, translate, but it can also cover, hide, and obstruct.<sup>31</sup> This has to do, undoubtedly, with the very modalities of poetic language, which is suggestive and allusive, connotative and imaginal, and therefore little adapted to the didactic and legal needs of the outer religious community. But there is another sense in which the allusiveness and subtlety of poetic language may be envisaged as ambiguous, and perhaps even perilous in the absence of a proper spiritual context and an adequate inner intention. In this sense, mystical poetry is perilous because it lies close to the source, and may very well spoil its purity. There is, in poetry, the seed of an inconspicuous *shirk* that some Muslim traditions symbolize in the form of the track of an ant over a black stone on a dark night.

Because of the subtlety and profundity of its means and goals, it is not surprising that poetry occupies a paradoxical and highly ambivalent situation in the way to the Divine. Louis Massignon used to refer to this ambivalence by contrasting the naked witnessing of the *shath* (divinely inspired utterance) resulting from a mystical unveiling, *kashf*, such as he would see flow from the works of Hallāj and Shushtari, with what he conceived of as the aesthetic and philosophical constructions and complacencies of Ibn 'Arabī and 'Umar Ibn al-Farid.<sup>32</sup> The latter's "preciosity" was, in his mind, the symptom of a self-reflexive inflation. By contrast, Massignon perceived the seal of authenticity of mystical poetry in a certain elemental disorder, or even formal awkwardness, bearing witness to the absence of any formal *ri'ā'*. One certainly does not need to agree with Massignon's particular indiosyncratic preferences and arguable biases<sup>33</sup> to acknowledge that spiritual poetry is genuine to

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<sup>31</sup> As Claude Addas has demonstrated, the association of poetry with the Muhammadan Seal and esoteric knowledge in Ibn 'Arabī, refers to the subtlety of the latter (cf. *supra* n.28).

<sup>32</sup> Massignon contrasts Shushtari and Hallāj who 'would like to shout, as it is, the all so simple coming of the divine touch that has substantially wounded them' with Ibn al-Fārid and Ibn 'Arabī for whom 'the aesthetic concern corrodes the very structure of symbols, to the point of loosening their properly mystical dynamic tension' ('L'expérience mystique et les modes de stylisation littéraire' (1927) in *Opera Minora II*, Paris: PUF, 1969, pp. 374-5).

<sup>33</sup> 'By God, I feel so much love that it seems as though the skies would be rent asunder, the stars fall and the mountains move away if I burdened them with it: such is my experience of love.' If I attributed this quotation to Rūmī or to Ruzbehān Baqlī, no one would be surprised: they are both unanimously acknowledged to be among the most

the extent that it conveys a fresh sense of contact with reality, an immediacy that bears witness to its origin. Sufi poetry eschews *shirk* and *ri'ā'* to the extent that it flows from the heart's intuition and abandonment with the selfless spontaneity of a sign of God, of a sign from God: a traditional innovation in metaphysical originality.<sup>34</sup> Sufi poetry is innovative by espousing and suggesting the renewed creation of the instant, finding therein, without seeking it, the pristine originality of the Real.

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illustrious representatives of the “way of love” which is at the heart of the mystical tradition of Islam. But it is from the *Futūhāt*, the work whose “impassive and icy tone” Massignon denounced, that this cry from an inflamed heart issues. Massignon had read all of it; no doubt he knew this passage, but even if his sight rested on it for a few moments, he probably saw nothing more than a literary device. For him, Ibn Arabī was only a dry, haughty dialectician and nothing ever succeeded in persuading him to re-examine this opinion which he had held since his youth (C. Addas, ‘The Experience and Doctrine of Love in Ibn ‘Arabī’ tr. C. Twinch on behalf of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society for the Symposium at Worcester College, Oxford, May 4-6th 2002).

<sup>34</sup> We would like to suggest that this might also be a lesson for “innovation” in Islam at large. Beyond rationalistic, historical and ideological recipes for adaptation to circumstantial norms, innovation must be “original” in the sense of being concretely grounded on a consciousness of, and concern with, *tawhīd*. As such, the meaning of “innovation” is traditional in the deepest sense. “Innovation” disconnected from metaphysical and spiritual “originality” may confine to ideological patchwork or trendy bricolage. By contrast, tradition remains an inexhaustible source of “innovation.” As Corbin put it, ‘a tradition transmits itself as something alive, because it is a ceaselessly renewed inspiration, and not a funeral cortège or a register of conformist opinion’ (*En islam iranien I*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, p.33).