

The Light of the Blessed Tree

Islam's Intellectual Imperative in
Modernity



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Table of Contents



Introduction	1
<i>Neither East nor West: The Akbarian Prism</i>	3
<i>Neither East nor West: The Ghazalian Prism</i>	9
Seek Knowledge in the East and West: <i>Expanding the Abrahamic Box</i>	14
<i>Ad Finem ... Ad Infinitum: Contours of the Modern Ḥayr</i>	26
References	36



“God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fueled from a blessed olive tree from *neither east nor west*, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it - light upon light - God guides whoever He will to His Light; God draws such comparisons for people; God has full knowledge of everything”¹

“Seek Knowledge even if in China, for the seeking of knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim.”²

“Ibn al-‘Arabi and the other Sufi sages will help us to define the imaginal realm in Shakespeare.”³

Using his well-known conversational writing style, Jacques Derrida informs us that all poetry “is a secret attestation and has no truth outside of its own performativity, outside of its own attestation”⁴. In an attempt to follow Derrida’s advice with some poetic license, and perchance that the reader is bewildered by my choice to follow a verse from the Qur’an and Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) with a quote by Harold Bloom, I wanted this endeavor to gleam its first remnants of meaning by performing its own hope: to voice the answer through asking the question. In this way, the stage dynamically embodies the performance and does not merely allude to or support it.

If this explains the mere use of a quote by Harold Bloom, the question remains as to why this specific quote. In what continuum does Shakespeare belong in the same intellectual space

¹ The Qur’an 24:35.

² “While the authenticity of the Hadith’s reference to China is open to questions, its reference to the obligation of seeking knowledge is not. Al-Bayhaqi, a famous transmitter of Prophetic Traditions (Hadith), transmits the report on the authority of the Companion Anas Ibn Malik in the form cited. Famous Hadith scholars like al-Khatib al-Baghdadi and Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr also transmit it. Traditional Muslim scholars generally regarded the Tradition as weak or fabricated. However, it is so frequently transmitted and by such a variety of chains of transmission that some scholars held it to be acceptable (*hasan*)” Abd-Allah, 14.

³ Harold Bloom, preface to *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, by Henry Corbin, xiv.

⁴ Sherbert, 1.



as Ibn al-‘Arabi or Suhrawardi? Inevitably and understandably, such a question creates a dissonance that reverberates uncomfortably between the lines; in that empty space where actual reflection occurs. The reader in a sense distances him/herself deep within that intellectual blind spot. It is precisely at that moment that Derrida’s *secret attestation* presents itself behind the veil of perplexity, dissonance and confusion as the answer to this important question: “Why this quote?”

Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi’s (d. 1238) intellectual conversation with Shakespeare in Bloom’s preface to Corbin’s *Alone with the Alone* reflects the author’s own succinct description of what he perceives to be a dire intellectual crisis in modern times: “There has ceased to be an intermediate level between empirically verifiable reality and unreality pure and simple”⁵. This *mundus imaginalis*, or what Ibn al-‘Arabi calls *‘ālam al-khayāl*, is what captivates Bloom. Indeed, he perceives Puck’s curtain call in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “And this weak and idle theme. No more yielding but a dream”⁶ or the *Tempest*’s soliloquy: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep”⁷ as a resounding testimony to Shakespeare’s ownership of an *imaginal* pen; his membership in a fraternity with the likes of Ibn al-‘Arabi.

Alas! The desire here should not be to merely repeat Bloom’s performance. A new symphony must be composed; a new narrative remains to be told. One is inclined actually to begin by incessantly parting way with some of this literary critic’s statements, such as: “For our culture, at this time, it may be more pragmatic for seekers to discern the reality of the Active

⁵ Corbin, xiii-xiv.

⁶ Shakespeare, 173.

⁷ Shakespeare, 17.



Imagination in Shakespeare, rather than in Ibn al-'Arabi or Suhrawardi"⁸. As one takes this proposition by Bloom into consideration, it becomes a new empty space between the lines for our own *secret attestation*; our own moment of reflection. We do not wish to do away with Bloom's hope, but only to mold it anew; to witness ourselves in his mirror; to clothe the meaning behind his words in our own narrative garment of expression and ambition.

Neither East nor West: The Akbarian prism

It is said that *al-shaykh al-akbar* (The Greatest Master) - Ibn al-'Arabi's most well-known epithet - had his first mystical experience at the age of 15, while migrating with his family from Murcia to Seville. He observed the trees in the Iberian countryside and noticed that they change, constantly and incessantly, yet remain the same. A constant always makes its presence known behind the veneer of diversity and alteration in the cosmos. Nevertheless, it is of paramount difficulty to witness that constant directly. One may be able to decipher the ode from the code, but once again, it can only be heard in that empty space between the lines, in that moment of *secret attestation*.

For Ibn al-'Arabi, that moment is vivid and real ... Nay! The essence of Real. Moreover, it is anything but empty, rather full of presence ... Nay! The essence of Presence, a Deleuzian Transcendental⁹. The Andalusian mystic's *secret attestation* was at once silently beholden yet clearly witnessed in everything. It could not be spoken of - with what words? - And yet it could

⁸ Corbin, xiv.

⁹ Through his various writings, Gilles Deleuze modified Emmanuel Kant's concept of the Transcendental to that of Being prior to individuation. The Deleuzian Transcendental/Transcendental Field is a set of conditions that is constantly morphing into individuation. Taking into consideration the various differences between Deleuze and Ibn al-'Arabi, the similarity between the former's 'Transcendental' and latter's 'Real' provides yet another performative moment in this paper's own *secret attestation*.



not be unobserved. The endlessness of this Real, manifesting through the apparitions of forms and images, can only be grasped by the *qalb* (heart). Ibn al-'Arabi, preceding Derrida in his passion for performativity, understands etymology as language's ontological womb. Through their roots, words take the one who speaks them from names to the named, across the continuously flowing river of time.

Therefore, it is through its root that the *qalb* (heart) performs its ontological role of witnessing the *taqallub* (continuous change) in the images and forms of the cosmos. But in order to survive these unrelenting waves in the ocean of reality, the *qalb* must remain silent; like a dead body, it moves only when moved:

“The sea is a sea, as it were in eternity
Accidents are merely waves and streams
Let not their forms obscure you
From whom they reveal, they are screens”¹⁰

Roland Barthes perceives the pleasure, actually ecstasy, of a text to lie at the seam between Language's imposed order and Meaning's embossed border¹¹. The latter's malleability dissents against the former's stasis; yet, like yin and yang, they are constantly, incontrovertibly in union; one defines the other; the first sustains the second; and at the seam, pleasure finds its solace.

It is at a similar seam that Ibn al-'Arabi finds pleasure, or ecstasy; in the *barzakh* (isthmus), that is the *qalb* (heart)'s abode. At the deafening juncture of stillness and movement, the Real is embossed, present through the constantly flowing images and forms. Most importantly, the

¹⁰ Qaysari, 157.

¹¹ Barthes, 8-13.



Andalusian mystic would also perceive the performative *secret attestation* that lies at the heart of Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text*: it is in the cosmos itself – the Great Book – that the seam is most vivid and pleasure most fervid:

“On that Day, We shall roll up the skies as a writer rolls up [his] scrolls. We shall reproduce creation just as We produced it the first time: this is Our binding promise. We shall certainly do all these things”¹²

However, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, that ecstasy itself does not give way to stillness. On the contrary, this *barzakh* (isthmus) that is *coincidentia oppositorum* (unity of opposites) is anything but stillness; it is *ḥayra* (perplexity), wonder and amazement. In *Fusus al-Hikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom), the Andalusian mystic poetically describes the ontological root of *ḥayra*: “Guidance is for man to be guided to perplexity. Then he knows that reality is perplexity; perplexity is anxiety and movement; movement is life. No stillness, no death. Only Being and no nihility”¹³. A performative moment! *Hadī* (guidance) is to be a *hadī* (sacrifice) at the altar of manifestations; to witness reality in all its glory.

The *secret attestation* of Language, its embossed womb is too vast and generous to halt at this single etymological symbiosis. We must cross the river of meaning and signification longer still, in order to fully explore the depths of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s intellectual prism. *Ḥayra* (perplexity) intertwines with *hadī* (guidance) precisely because the former is also a *ḥayr* (harbor/safe-house); a locale that is distant from the provocation of *shakk* (doubt). On the contrary, it is an intellectual

¹² The Qur’an 21:04.

¹³ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, 199.



space that invokes the need for a moment of reflection, in that seam between the endless writing that is the cosmos.

In the abyss of *shakk* (doubt), there is no constant, only chaos. The ocean is no longer visible, only the endless stream of waves. In that chasm, *shakk* (uncertainty) is the ether. Such qualms exist there because the veneer of forms and images have been *shukkat* (adjoined) together. No distinction between them and no awareness of who they allude to: the meaning is forgotten within the words, no longer visible, no longer present. Whereas, as Lacan informs us, the signified continuously slides under the signifier, here the former is altogether overwhelmed and lost¹⁴. As Winters describes eloquently: “The signs have distracted us from the signified”¹⁵:

“God puts forward this illustration: can a man who has for his masters several partners at odds with each other be considered equal to a man devoted wholly to one master? All praise belongs to God, though most of them do not know.”¹⁶

One master, one constant. The realization that there is only One does not efface the multiplicity of forms and images, but rather firmly roots them in the One. As long as the otherness of the seeker lingers, the curtains of diversity and alteration must also necessarily persist, veiling the One sought after. Like an ephemeral treasure, this One reveals itself while hiding; remains unheard when spoken to or addressed, but in an eternal act of speech while others endure in silence:

“Say [Prophet], ‘If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted’ - even if We were to add another ocean to it.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Lacan, 153.

¹⁵ Winters, *Essence*.

¹⁶ The Qur'an 39:29.

¹⁷ Ibid, 18:109.



This is *tawhīd* (unity/unification), to perceive the *wahdāniyya* (oneness) in the forms and images; as Ibn al-‘Arabi mentions above: “Only Being and no nihility!” Winters succinctly describes this Muhammadan imperative:

“Sufism quickly developed to provide a mystical tradition more fully recognized by mainstream thought than was the case with the other monotheisms. It is not entirely clear why this should have been the case, but we may speculate that the process was facilitated by the Qur’an’s radical monotheism, which, by resisting any hint of dualism, thoroughly sacralized the world as a matrix of signs.”¹⁸

Tawhīd (unification) in this moment of reflection and *secret attestation* may be construed as a crossing-over from signifiers to the signified; from names to the named; from images and forms to the underlying, constant meaning. All in order to enter into the *ḥayr* (harbor) of *ḥayra* (perplexity) and *hadī* (guidance). To tread our path, we return to our point of origin, Ibn al-‘Arabi, to revel in his *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (Meccan Revelations) and further unmask this intricate intellectual kaleidoscope: “*Hudā* (guidance), as in *bayān* (elucidation), may grant happiness and it may not. However, it does grant *‘ilm* (knowledge) for it must necessarily do so.”¹⁹

Knowledge is the key to decipher the ode from the code; the way to perceive the ever flowing signified behind the stream of signifiers. In that sense, *‘ilm* (knowledge) is not only *bayān* (elucidation), but also *bayān* (eloquence) and a *bayān* (declaration). To appropriately capture this etymological richness, we must contemplate *bayān*’s ontological symbiosis with *‘ilm* (knowledge), and the latter’s own fortress of meaning. For as we have seen, words in a sentence, when spoken by Ibn al-‘Arabi, are not strangers on different paths, but rather living organs of a

¹⁸ Winters, 2.

¹⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* VIII, 54.



sentient ballad. Together, they pave the way for capturing the essence of our intellectual imperative.

Among the many cures Ibn al-'Arabi's Weltanschauung has for the modern man, his masterful harmony between ontology and epistemology is of utmost importance to us; especially for our journey here. To know and understand reality, for the Andalusian mystic, is first and foremost an existential/ontological excursion across a vast desert wherein the intellectual and rational contours of this voyage are mere traces in the sand. Such vestiges are elusive, for they disappear in the dust, just as the intellect halts at the gates of *ḥayra* (perplexity). They are also illusive, for they tread under the authority of *'aql* (intellect) that attached (*'aqala*) them to specific forms and images. Whereas the *qalb* (heart) fluctuates (*yataqallab*) across the contours of the ode, the *'aql* (intellect) halts at its code.

“But the deeds of disbelievers are like a mirage in a desert: the thirsty person thinks there will be water but, when he gets there, he finds it is nothing. There he finds only God, who pays him his account in full - God is swift in reckoning.”²⁰

Therefore, we must venture into the ontological roots of *'ilm* (knowledge), for it is the fabric of our meadows and springs in the *ḥayr* (harbor). To have *'ilm* (knowledge) of the *'ālam* (cosmos), is to be able to perceive it as a *'alam* (flag/mark) and *'alāma* (sign). They are precisely signs and flags because they point to none but the *'ālim* (Knower). Unlocking these treasures, deciphering their codes and crossing the river of signification is naught but learning and understanding. Essentially, knowledge is to perceive the signifier's veil over the signified. That in

²⁰ The Qur'an 24:39.



its entirety, as we mentioned before, is *tawhīd* (unification): to “sacralize the [*‘ālam*] world as a matrix of [*‘alāmāt*] signs.” Ibn al-‘Arabi says:

“Know that the *‘ālam* (world) refers to everything except God, and is [the world] naught but the possible things, whether existent or not. They are in themselves *‘alāmat* (signs) of *‘ilmunā* (our knowledge) or *‘ilm* (knowledge) of the necessary existent, who is God.... It is for this reason that it was called *‘ālam* (world), from *‘alāma* (sign), because it is a proof of the Maker. So know this!”²¹

“Then God - may He be glorified and praised - will come to them in a form other than the one they know and will say: ‘I’m your Lord’. They will say: ‘We seek refuge in God from you; this is where we remain until our Lord comes to us; when He comes to us, we will know Him.’ Then God almighty will come to them in the form they know and will say: ‘I’m your Lord’ and they will say: ‘Indeed, you are our Lord’ and will believe in Him.”²²

An eternal act of speech! A *bayān* (declaration) full of *bayān* (eloquence), intended for *bayān* (elucidation). The One utters incessantly and continuously, but is only heard in silence. In that moment of *secret attestation*. The images, forms and signs decipher their own code, to be heard clearly by those who listen: “God, who gave speech to everything, has given us speech!”²³

Neither East nor West: The Ghazalian prism

“When studying the ancients, I am struck by the epistemic openness and the liberty with which many thinkers and authors energetically engaged with a wide variety of knowledge traditions. They did so without allowing the provenance of knowledge to be a decisive veto factor. Hence a good portion of early Muslim intellectuals were open to the spirit of knowledge, whether it came from Greek, Indian, Biblical, or other philosophical traditions... This picture contrasts radically with many strains of contemporary Muslim intellectual thought, especially religious discourse. The provenance of an idea or a practice is more significant in contemporary thought than the substance of the idea. The prevalence of this condition has not only resulted in the atrophy of knowledge, but the process of knowledge production itself has suffocated. Knowledge related to religious

²¹ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *al-Futuhat* VI, 262-263.

²² *Sahih Muslim* 1:301.

²³ The Qur’an 41:21.



discourse, such as ethics, law, theology, and philosophy, is quarantined from intercourse with ideas that have a non-Islamic genealogy.”²⁴

In the above excerpt, Ebrahim Moosa gives the reader the synopsis for his intellectual journey with the 11th-12th century Muslim thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). This voyage, *Ghazali & the Poetics of Imagination*, is Moosa’s own *secret attestation* uttered resoundingly; his own moment of *Poiesis*. We cross paths, engage and part way with his excursion all at once; that is the nature of *Poiesis*, as Ibn al-‘Arabi says: “There is no repetition in creation!”²⁵ Moreover, a real *Poiesis*, a Heideggerian “bringing-forth”, occurs truly at the crossing of journeys, much more so than the timed unfolding of each separate voyage. T.S Eliot eloquently captures such fleeting conclaves as:

“Men's curiosity searches past and future
and clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
the point of intersection of the timeless
with time, is an occupation for the saint.”²⁶

Moosa’s journey and ours are naught but conversations “With time”, as Eliot describes. They, like all images and forms in the cosmos, are reflections of the One in mirrors of light and knowledge. But it is when such excursions meet, that the constant meaning from which they both spring reveals itself. Once again, it reveals itself only *bi lutf* (subtly) and *bi lutf* (gently) for fleeting moments. Such ephemeral instants, as we have described above, are the *secret attestations* and spaces between the lines that we hope to capture here and now. Just as Moosa perceives the cure to Islam’s intellectual crisis in modernity to lie with Ghazali, we discern the door to that

²⁴ Moosa, 25-26.

²⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *al-Futuhat* IV, 578.

²⁶ Eliot, 40.



intellectual imperative to be Ibn al-'Arabi. Therefore, much more than simply two historical projects, the hope is to engage two close historical contemporaries at “the point of intersection of the timeless with time.”

As Moosa explains, Ghazali’s importance to the Muslim subject in modernity pertains to certain similarities between the latter’s milieu and ours. “Life in the main cities of Khurasan and Baghdad was swathed in a cosmopolitan air: diverse ethnic groups lived side by side under the influence of an Arabizing political culture”²⁷. Forms and images, different languages, races, ideologies, and cognitive paradigms; all signifiers, at times in harmony but often in contention with each other. However, they all are naught but apparitions, specters of the One; that is their most vivid similarity, that which bonds them. To know how each of them veils the One is precisely to gain full knowledge of them.

Ghazali’s own *secret attestation* may be construed as attempting to find that harmony between the images and forms of his time; to elaborate how they all veil the One. In works such as *Maqasid al-Falasifa* (Objectives of the Philosophers), *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (Incoherence of the Philosophers) and *al-Munqid min al-Dalal* (Deliverer from Error) the author does not just decipher the codes of the various cognitive paradigms of his time, but rather hierarchically rectifies which of these forms manifests, reflects and declares the One with the most *bayān* (eloquence/elucidation). However, it is in Ghazali’s magnum opus, *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* (Revival of the Islamic Sciences), that the final movement and climax of the author’s grand symphony comes

²⁷ Moosa, 11.



to a stunning, masterful closure. The intellectual imperative's embossed border is established and its imposed order serves as the prism through which signifiers are crossed to the signified.

Just as Ibn al-'Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam* (Bezels of Wisdom) may be considered the space between the lines of his magnum opus *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations), so is Ghazali's *Mishkat al-Anwar* (The Niche of Lights) the *secret attestation* of his magnum opus *Revival of the Islamic Sciences*. The *Bezels* and *Niche* are more than summate. They are allusions for those who understand and comprehend and elusions for those who cannot yet transcend. Most importantly, these works share an intimate connection with their authors' respective magnum opuses. A single word in the *Bezels* fosters paragraphs in the *Meccan Revelations*. Likewise, the water of knowledge gushing forth from Ghazali's *Revival* is a mere droplet from the spring of his *Niche*.

From this vast Ghazālian oasis, Moosa sojourns at the *dihlīz* (threshold/interspace; lit. corridor). This concept, Ghazali's own *barzakh* (isthmus), fascinates his contemporary interlocutor much like Ibn al-'Arabi's own *barzakh*, *'ālam al-khayāl* (mundus imaginalis), captivates Bloom. Although each conversation renders its own distinct ambiance, the same wind blows through both colloquies. Moosa envisions the *dihlīz* as a corridor of confession, contention and completion; the liminal, interstitial space where differing paradigms declare their front and then collide. At this limit, the author acknowledges that the contention/collision is the bane of Islam's contemporary intellectual dialogue with modernity, but he hopes that the resolution/completion still lies in the very fabric of this *dihlīz*, as Ghazali weaved it:

"In his own complex space, or the *dihlīz*, the intermediate space or the threshold space that Ghazali identified - one with intersecting boundaries and heterogeneous notions of practices and time - he forged different narratives of



religion. These narratives were the outcome of his encounter with both inherited and contemporary forms of knowledge... The parallels between his world and our twenty-first-century universe provide the ingredients for painful but sobering irony. Just as Ghazali was dealing with formidable intellectual and political challenges, so too do postcolonial Muslims, whether they are resident in Jakarta or Jersey City, Calcutta or Casablanca, face enormous challenges.”²⁸

Whereas Bloom hosts Ibn al-‘Arabi and Shakespeare under the shade of *ta‘bīr* (expression/metaphor), creativity and language, Moosa finds Ghazali’s *dihlīz* to be at the ‘*ubūr* (crossing point) of various *i‘tibārāt* (viewpoints/considerations). The familiar presents itself here yet again; the power of language and its ontological womb. Such etymological crossing-points are not fortuitous, for there are no *ṣudaf* (coincidences) in the speech of Ibn al-‘Arabi and Ghazali, only lustrous pearls extracted from *ṣadaf* (shells). These are wonders from the ocean of reality thrown every now and then on the shore by the waves of signifiers and veils: an ocean without a shore and a shore without an ocean.

Moosa delineates the contours of the *dihlīz* in modernity through an intellectual, social, political and religious prism. However, much like Ibn al-‘Arabi, Ghazali’s intellectual footsteps belie a deeper conviction that is found only at the union of ontology and epistemology. Incidentally, Moosa insists that to the contrary, his subject “dented the Platonic link between ontology and epistemology.”²⁹ Here, we must refer to Ghazali’s own testimonies in the *Niche* from which the *Lights* of his thought emanated and are succinctly uttered:

“Therefore, the one who emphasizes the outward is an exotericist; and the one who emphasizes the inward is an esotericist; and the one who combines between them is complete/perfect... This is *i‘tibār* (consideration/expression), meaning

²⁸ Ibid, 27.

²⁹ Moosa, 27.



'*ubūr* (crossing over) from something to another and from the outward to its secret."³⁰

The constant signified fluctuates across the odes of Ghazali and Ibn al-'Arabi; the following excerpt from the Andalusian mystic's works vivifies the wind of meaning, mentioned above, that breezes across both their thoughts:

"And so I have opened up for you the *i'tibār* (metaphor/expression) according to the sharī'ah, and it is the passage from the form which manifests its property in the sensory domain to what is interrelated in your essence, or at the Side of the Real, from among that which signifies God. This is the figurative meaning of *i'tibār*. It is like "You have '*abarta* (crossed over) the valley when you have forded it and traversed it."³¹

Yet another birth from the ontological womb of '*ubūr* comes forth: the '*ibra* (significance/lesson) of this wind that fills the auras of both Ibn al-'Arabi and Ghazali and unveils the One, the singular meaning speaking clearly in both their works. The intellectual conversations taking place in Ghazali's *dihlīz* are merely the footprints, the elusive and illusive mirage in the desert of Ghazali's actual journey: his *qalb* (heart)'s narration of the *taqallub* (fluctuation) between the images and forms, all the while attempting to understand how they all veil and unveil the One. This is naught but Ghazali's own *ḥayr* (harbor/abode) of *ḥayra* (perplexity). This *dihlīz* is then reborn and reflected in Ibn al-'Arabi's own *barzakh* (isthmus), '*ālam al-Khayāl*.

Ghazali understood very well, as did Ibn al-'Arabi, that to engage the panorama of ideologies of their own time as secluded waves in a vast ocean would lead to *shakk* (doubt) - as was clearly the case in the beginning of Ghazali's own life³². However, they were also certain that *li kay ya'lamū* (to know) the '*ālim* (Knower), they must know and drown in His '*ilm* (knowledge).

³⁰ Ghazali, *Mishkat*, 160-161.

³¹ Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futuhat I*, 762. Also cf. Winkel, "Ibn 'Arabi's Fiqh".

³² Cf., Ghazali *al-Munqid*.



Therefore, they sought him in the *‘alāmāt* (signs) He left for them and *a‘lām* (flags/marks) which signified and manifested Him. At the threshold, they *‘abarū* (crossed) the river of signification and reached the *‘ibra* (lesson/significance). There, where speech and silence met, the harmony they perceived ontologically left its traces intellectually and epistemologically in the vestiges they left for us; and from those traces we build anew.

↑There is a *‘ibra* (lesson) in the stories of such people for those who understand”³³

Seek Knowledge in the East and West: *Expanding the Abrahamic Box*

In chapter 167 of *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations), Ibn al-‘Arabi recounts his Muhammadan, spiritual *mi‘rāj* (celestial voyage), in the seven heavens of his own reality. As the author narrates this cosmic epic in third person, he presents the reader with two travelers: the Muhammadan protagonist and accompanying intellectual who attempted to reach the Signified solely by following the rational footsteps in the sand, through the *‘aql* (intellect) that *‘aqala* (bound) him to the chaos of signifiers. As both wanderers meet the Divine prophets and messengers in each celestial heaven, they are finally greeted by the prophet Abraham (ﷺ) the *khalīl* (beloved/dear friend) in the seventh heaven. In a lengthy meeting, Ibn al-‘Arabi mentions the exchange between the two travelers and this messenger/signifier of the One:

“So he [the intellectual traveler] came to him [*khalīl-u-Allah* (the beloved of God), Abraham] and found him leaning upon *al-bayt al-ma‘mūr* (the Oft-Frequented House), while the Muhammadan follower is sitting before him, as a son sits before his father, and he says to him: ‘What an excellent and devoted child!’ Then, the Muhammadan follower asks him about the three lights; he [Abraham] said: ‘They are my proofs against my people, God has given them to me as a sign of his enveloping care of me. I did not utter them as associations [with God], but rather

³³ The Qur’an 12:11.



made them like the bait of a hunter, in order to capture what has been lost on my people's intellects'. Then he said to him: 'Oh [Muhammadan] follower, distinguish between the ranks, know the [different] creeds, be upon a clear proof from your Lord in your matters and do not disregard your own tradition; for you are neither disregarded nor left in vain. Make your heart like this Oft-Frequented house in your constant presence with the Real in every state; and know that nothing, from what I have seen, can envelop the Real except the *qalb* (heart) of the believer and that is you."³⁴

The three lights which the Muhammadan follower asks the prophet Abraham (ﷺ) about refer to the three signifiers which the latter delineated for his own people, in hope of assisting them to cross over to the signified:

"In this way We showed Abraham mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth, so that he might be a firm believer. When the night grew dark over him he saw a star and said, 'This is my Lord', but when it set, he said, 'I do not like things that set.' And when he saw the moon rising he said, 'This is my Lord,' but when it too set, he said, 'If my Lord does not guide me, I shall be one of those who go astray.' Then he saw the sun rising and cried, 'This is my Lord! This is greater.' But when the sun set, he said, 'My people, I disown all that you worship beside God. I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists."³⁵

In order to fully extract the pearls from the *ṣadaf* (shells) of this encounter between the prophet Abraham (ﷺ) and Ibn al-'Arabi, we must further trace the intellectual footsteps in the above scriptural excerpt that has been interweaved into the very "fabric of this vision". As Ghazali mentions, only the one who combines the inward and outward is complete, perfect. Attempting to understand the exoteric yin and esoteric yang in this fortress of meaning erected by Ibn al-'Arabi will be our *'ubūr* (crossing-over) from the signifiers, the three lights, used by prophet Abraham (ﷺ) in order to reach the signified meaning.

³⁴ Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futuhat* III, 503.

³⁵ The Qur'an 6:75-79.



The star, moon and sun. These are the traces through which God’s messenger hoped to help his people cross the river of signification. The space between the lines of the scriptural verse and our own *secret attestation* regarding these three forms revolves around the reason Ibn al-‘Arabi called them lights. *Fa lammā janna ‘alayhi-l-laylu* (When the night grew dark over him), these three were the glowing yang in the stygian, shady yin ambiance. Exoterically, they were indeed lights. However, as the star and moon set beneath the horizon, prophet Abraham (ﷺ) witnessed a ‘greater’ source of light, the sun.

Ibn al-‘Arabi *‘abara* (crossed over) from the lines of this verse into the inner *‘ibra* (lesson) of prophet Abraham’s use of the adjective “greater” to describe the sun. Through *i’tibār* (metaphor), we find the Andalusian mystic’s *secret attestation* and confession regarding this ‘greater’ sun somewhere else in *al-Futuhat*:

“The moon has no light in respect of its essence, nor is the sun or the light of the sun within it. However, eyesight perceives it like that. So the light that is in the moon is nothing other than the sun. So also is the *wujūd* (being) that belongs to the possible things. It is nothing other than the *wujūd* (being) of the Real, like a form in a mirror. The sun is not in the moon, but the light that the moon deploys upon the earth at night when the sun’s light is absent is no other than the sun’s light, though it is ascribed to the moon.”³⁶

This *‘ibra* (parable) forms the foundation for Ibn al-‘Arabi’s refutation of *ḥulūl* (inherence) and *ittiḥād* (union): there is only One being, One in being; the being of the One. All else are reflections in the mirror. If He were to withdraw His light and *tawajjuh* (inclination) towards the

³⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *al-Futuhat* VI, 185.



images and forms, their true state of darkness and nothingness would be revealed; “Everything will perish except His *wajh* (Face [countenance])”³⁷.

As the dust settles away from Ibn al-‘Arabi’s reflection over prophet Abraham’s use of the three signifiers, we must further decipher the code of this intricately woven ode. There remains at the heart of this *secret attestation* the connection between prophet Abraham (ﷺ) and the parable above. For this, we turn to *Fusus al-Hikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom), specifically to the chapter designated for prophet Abraham (ﷺ). There, Ibn al-‘Arabi journeys, as expected, into the etymological depths of this messenger’s epithet: “*Khalīl-u-llāh*” (the beloved of God) in order to uncover the ontological reality dormant therein:

“*Al-Khalīl* (the beloved) was named so *li takhallulihī* (because he permeated) and enumerated all that which the Divine essence has been attributed with ... Just as color *yatakhallal* (permeates) that which is colored.... Or he was named so because the Real *takhallala* (permeated) the being of the form of Abraham (ﷺ).”³⁸

The words of the *Bezels* foster paragraphs in the *Meccan Revelations*, just as this excerpt is the bezel and adornment for the voyage narrated above. Between these two oceans of words, the scriptural verse stands as both the *barzakh* (isthmus), seam, *dihlīz* (corridor) and also the space between the lines, the *secret attestation* for Ibn al-‘Arabi’s own moment of reflection. The prophet Abraham has been permeated with the constant, the One. However, that permeation is naught but the light of being shining upon the depths of his form and image. There is certainly

³⁷ The Qur’an 28:88.

³⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, 80.



intimacy and proximity here; after all, prophet Abraham (ﷺ) is *khalīl-u-llah* (God's beloved) and as we mentioned the exoteric yin and esoteric yang are both needed for perfection.

However, this is not the kind of intimacy that Dufourmantelle highlights so eloquently as Derrida's subject of criticism in *Of Hospitality*:

"A proximity that would not be the opposite of an elsewhere come from outside and surrounding it, but 'close to the close,' that unbearable orb of intimacy that melts into hate. If we can say that murder and hate designate everything that excludes closeness, it is insofar as they ravage from within an original relationship to alterity."³⁹

Alterity, otherness and distinction are maintained in this *khilla* (friendship) between God and prophet Abraham (ﷺ). The former's image and Real's *wujūd* (being) have not been *shukkū* (attached/sown together). Therefore, we remain away from *shakk* (doubt) and within the valleys of *ḥayra* (perplexity), wonder and amazement. It is the perplexity of friendship and love, where both otherness and inherence meet. The subsistence of the lover is naught but his effacement at the altar of the beloved. The former must become a *hadī* (sacrifice) in order to receive *hadī* (guidance). These reminiscent pearls do not glance at us from their *ṣadaf* (shells) *ṣudfatan* (coincidentally); but rather, this is our own *secret attestation* blooming as we follow the vestiges to this endeavor's hope and premise. As Dufourmantelle highlights once again, there is an act of speech that can only endure in silence:

"The difficulty of giving its due to the night - to that which, within a philosophical kind of thinking, does not belong to the order of the day, the visible, and memory. This is to try to come close to a silence around which discourse is ordered, and that a poem sometimes discovers, but always pulls itself back from unveiling in the very movement of speech or writing. If a part of night is inscribed in language, this is also language's moment of effacement."⁴⁰

³⁹ Dufourmantelle, 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 2.



Alas! We must be allowed to continue to speak. We must contemplate further and dig deeper in order to fully fathom the Abrahamic imperative within this intellectual infrastructure we have constructed so far. As Dufourmantelle points out above, there is a discourse somewhere waiting to be unveiled; a conversation which lies at the heart of our own journey revolving around *‘ilm* (knowledge) and *‘alāmāt* (signs). For further clarification, we turn back towards Ibn al-‘Arabi’s narrative of his celestial *mi‘rāj* (ascension) in chapter 167 of the *Meccan Revelations* to continue where we last halted:

“Then the intellectual traveler wanted to get near to him [prophet Abraham] whereupon Abraham said to the [Muhammadan] follower: ‘who is this foreigner with you?’ He said: ‘My brother’. He said: ‘Your milk or blood brother?’ He said: ‘My water brother’. He said: ‘You are right, it is for this reason that I did not know him. Do not befriend anyone except he be your milk brother; just as I am your milk father. For indeed the presence of supreme bliss does not accept except the brothers, fathers and mothers of milk. Indeed, it is the only beneficial brotherhood in the sight of God. Do you not see that *‘ilm* (knowledge) appears as *laban* (milk) in the presence of imagination for this very reason?”⁴¹

Ibn al-‘Arabi ornaments his overarching vision of prophet Abraham (ﷺ) in the *Meccan Revelations* and *Bezels of Wisdom* with this essential epiphany of the latter’s role in his journey as the patriarch of knowledge. Indeed, the prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) himself had set the *‘ubūr* (crossing-over) from *laban* (milk) as the signifier to *‘ilm* (knowledge) as the signified in the oft-narrated hadiths:

⁴¹ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *al-Futuhat* III, 505. Also, for more on this concept of ‘Brotherhood of Milk’ in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought cf. Hirtenstein, *The Brotherhood of Milk*.



“While I was sleeping, a cup of *laban* (milk) was brought to me, so I drank from it until I saw it pouring from my fingers... They said: ‘What have you interpreted it as, messenger of God?’ He said: ‘*ilm* (knowledge).”⁴²

“The night I was carried I saw Jesus; he is a medium-sized man, his skin is red as if he exited from a catacomb. Indeed, I resemble him the most from the sons of Abraham (ﷺ). Thereafter, two containers were brought to me; in one of them milk and the other wine. I was told to drink... So I took the milk and drank it. I was told: ‘Indeed, you have chosen the *fiṭra* (primordial instinct).”⁴³

The *fiṭra* (primordial instinct) is the defining seam here between the signifier and signified. It is the secret of the *fāṭir* (maker/originator), who *faṭara* (split) the signifiers from the signified. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s true ornamentation of this intricate intellectual voyage lies in the ‘Brotherhood of the Milk’; the genealogy of knowledge. The exoteric yin in prophet Muhammad’s (ﷺ) description of himself as the most similar to Jesus (ﷺ) out of all the children of Abraham (ﷺ) converses with Ibn al-‘Arabi’s own meeting with the patriarch of knowledge as the esoteric yang; together they complete the circle of meaning.

What is most significant about this Abrahamic prism is that it vividly poises the intellectual “Abrahamic box” - an aphorism that delineates the cognitive paradigms in Judaism, Christianity and Islam - as a mere trace in the sand in a cosmic ontological reality; a genealogy of knowledge. Here, the embossed border of the union between ontology and epistemology presents itself again clearly. The prophet Abraham (ﷺ) is not only the patriarch of ‘*ilm* (knowledge) that gushes forth from the blood or water brotherhood of prophecy, but is also at the head of all ‘*alāmāt* (signs) that flow within the (*ma‘mūra/‘ālam*) cosmos, with its forms and images, once they have

⁴²*Sahih Bukhari* 9:7007.

⁴³*Sahih Bukhari* 4:3437.



been crossed over to the signified. At that moment, as he informed Ibn al-‘Arabi, the heart becomes, like *al-bayt al-ma‘mūr* (the oft-frequented house), at the side of the One in every state.

‘Umar Abd-Allah, in his masterful exposition “Seek Knowledge in China: Thinking beyond the Abrahamic Box”, highlights the development of a distinct Islamic intellectual paradigm in China. It was distinct at least from the other models that had developed elsewhere in the Muslim world at the time - and certainly until our milieu. This was a template that was vividly Neoconfucian in form and image; yet in meaning, it was as full of *bayān* (elucidation and eloquence) to the native Hui Chinese Muslim population as Ibn al-‘Arabi and Ghazali were to the Iberian Peninsula and Baghdad, respectively. In a sense, all of them belonged to the aforementioned brotherhood of the milk.

Incidentally, as Sachiko Murata highlights, the Andalusian mystic was an important catalyst in the *Poiesis* of that Neoconfucian prism⁴⁴. As far back as the 17th and 18th century, Chinese Muslim thinkers such as Wang Tai-yu and Liu Chih had been exposed to the works of ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492). This latter Persian poet had treaded numerous steps journeying into the depths of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought. One of his famous works, the *Lawā’ih* (Statues), had been translated by Liu Chih from Persian to Chinese. In this way, the Akbarian prism had served as a foundation for Chih’s crossing over from his native Neoconfucian shore to Islam’s metaphysical coast, and back again. Indeed, this Chinese thinker’s monumental intellectual achievement is naught but his own moment of reflection; his own *secret attestation*:

“The things are not mutual obstacles
and the human is not weary with
desire. The subtle meaning of each is

⁴⁴ Liu Chih in Murata, 1.



disclosed and seen here is the Root Suchness.

In the beginning was the Reality-principle and now is the Reality-guise.

When Reality-being and Reality-guise are seen, the seed and the fruit are complete.”⁴⁵

Ibn al-‘Arabi himself stands as the *barzakh* (isthmus) between the Yin in Liu Chih’s Neoconfucian conversation and the Yang dormant in Toshihiko Izutsu’s Taoist excursion. To know, to comprehend and fathom the expansive domain of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Weltanschauung is to be able to witness him at this *dihlīz* (corridor) and seam between the imposed order of Neoconfucianism and chaos of Taoism. Our journey with the Andalusian mystic in this regard must remain at the seam, because only there will the “Root Suchness” reveal itself; at the *‘ubūr* (crossing-point), “the point of intersection of the timeless with time”. Only by overlapping these exoteric and esoteric spheres can perfection be reached and the circle completed: “Indeed time has circled to its original form the day God created the heavens and earth.”⁴⁶

“It would seem, that there is some real Ruler. It is impossible for us to see Him in a concrete form. He is *acting* - there can be no doubt about it; but we cannot see his form. He does show His *activity*, but He has no sensible form.”⁴⁷

Izutsu states his motivation for pursuing a comparative study between Sufism and Taoism as giving life to Henry Corbin’s imperative for “un dialogue dans la métahistoire.”⁴⁸ To pay homage to the vestiges, to ignite the living spark and allow them to utter the last words: “He who

⁴⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁶ *Sahih Muslim* 28:29.

⁴⁷ Chuang Tzu in Izutsu, 483.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 469.



has given speech to everything, has given us speech” is a wind that blows beneath this supra-history. The real story, the story of the Real. The grand performance on the cosmic stage; the endless perception of the hidden treasure. To truly enjoy ... nay! Experience ... this performance, one must ‘break the fourth wall’ of the images and forms. Without the One manifesting His being within them, there is no performance. Without His utterance, there is no symphony.

Glancing from behind the curtain at this stage of *la métahistoire* is Shakespeare. Listening to both Ibn al-‘Arabi and his Taoist kinsmen, in that genealogy of knowledge. He is there, at that conversation, because he too was masterful at shattering the fourth wall:

“Our revels now are ended. These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.”⁴⁹

Ibn al-‘Arabi and his kinsmen listen and echo. They perform their *‘ubūr* (crossing-over) from the eloquence of *i‘tibār* (expression and metaphor) to the ontological *‘ibra* (parable). The vestiges of “the baseless fabric of this vision” in 16th century Renaissance England resonates clearly in their being, for they have uttered the same *bayān* (declaration) with the same *bayān* (eloquence):

⁴⁹ Shakespeare, 17.



“The world is an illusion; it has no real existence ... Know that you yourself are an imagination. And everything that you perceive and say to yourself, ‘this is not me’, is also an imagination.”⁵⁰

“Suppose you dream that you are a bird. You soar up into the sky. Suppose you dream that you are a fish; you go down deep into the sea. While you are experiencing all this in your dream, what you experience *is* your ‘reality’.”⁵¹

From England, China and the Iberian Peninsula, traversing the river of time, *la métahistoire* persists and subsists. The cosmos as *‘ālam al-khayāl* (mundus imaginalis) is, as Ibn al-‘Arabi informs us, *barzakh al-barāzikh* (The isthmus of isthmuses); the grand stage of manifestation. It exists within *al-‘ālam al-akbar* (the greater world. macrocosm. cosmos) as *al-khayāl al-munfaṣil* (the stand-alone imaginal realm) and also within *al-‘ālam al-asghar* (the smaller world. microcosm. man) as *al-khayāl al-muṭṭaṣil* (the connected imaginal realm). For the Andalusian mystic, “To be or not to be” was not a question of epistemological proportions under the guise of *i’tibār* (metaphor) and *bayān* (eloquence), but rather an ontological reality at the heart of *ḥayra* (perplexity), which is the nature of this cosmos, *barzakh al-barāzikh*.

Just as he witnessed, during his first journey from Murcia to Seville, the forms of the trees that change incessantly and meaning within them that is constant, Ibn al-‘Arabi later in his life highlights that those forms and images are also the ones that perish continuously, while the meaning subsists. The former is “not to be”, while the latter is “to be”; rather, it is *wujūd* (being). Always in being, always (*mawjūd*) found. But there is also an “orb of intimacy” that does not “melt into hate” between the lines of Ibn al-‘Arabi, Shakespeare’s and Chuang-Tzu’s writings.

⁵⁰ Ibn al-‘Arabi in Izutsu, 479.

⁵¹ Chuang Tzu in Ibid.



There is a *wajd* (ecstatic love) to be tapped into at the heart of this imagination: “Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord”.

This is first and foremost a journey of knowledge. Just as *al-insān al-kāmil* (the Perfect Man) is Ibn al-‘Arabi’s polished mirror wherein the manifestations of the One are perfectly reflected, so are the sages of Taoism and Neoconfucianism those who have internalized the chaos and unity of the *Tao* (Way) with the diversity of the *Ten Thousand Things*, the cosmos in all its forms and images. The Andalusian mystic however, remains a *barzakh* (isthmus) between these two Eastern traditions. Between the *Zuowang* (sitting in oblivion) and *fanā’* (annihilation) of the Taoists and Continuity or *baqā’* (subsistence) of the Neoconfucianists, Ibn al-‘Arabi is *fānin fī baqā’ihi wa bāqin fī fanā’ihi* (annihilated in his subsistence while subsisting in his annihilation).

Chuang-Tzu’s Taoism and Liu Chih’s Neoconfucianism collide at the harmonious *zāwiya* (angle) of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *ḥayr* (harbor) of *ḥayra* (perplexity). For the latter, remaining in the Yang, darkness of oblivion and annihilation is not completion; nor is drowning in the Yin waves of apparitions, forms and images, which would lead to *shakk* (doubt). It is not enough to see the moon or sun, but to see the sun behind the facade of the moon. Perhaps also as Shakespeare would concur, it is not sufficient to admire the performance, but also to appreciate the “baseless fabric of [its] vision” while it is being performed on stage.

“Marvel, a garden among the flames!

My heart can take on any form:
a meadow for gazelles, a cloister
for monks. For the idols a sacred
ground, Ka’ba for the circling
pilgrim, the tables of the Torah,
and the scrolls of the Qur’an.



I profess the religion of love;
wherever its caravan turns along
the way. That is the belief, the
faith I keep.”⁵²

Ad Finem ... Ad Infinitum: Contours of the Modern Ḥayr

“Ah! When to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason?
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?”⁵³

Reluctance! That is the name of the poem by Robert Frost, from which the above excerpt has been chosen. There is indeed a certain reluctance to end a journey such as ours in the valleys and mountains of the *ḥayr*. Nevertheless, if *la métahistoire* has been our imposed order throughout this excursion, pragmatism will be our embossed border that shall bring all to life. It is the last needed and most important performative moment in this entire endeavor. The ontological act waits and hearkens for the epistemological thought. Once that Heideggerian “bringing-forth” moment materializes, the *ad finem* of the Epistemological gives way to the *ad infinitum* of the Ontological in all its stripes: social, political and cultural.

However, we continue to remind ourselves of Dufourmantelle’s ‘discourse’ that is “ordered around a silence”. Pragma must not be divorced from dogma. The prerogative of the meaning, the constant, the One must remain the *secret attestation* of the Social, Political and Cultural. This ensures not “the end of a season”, but rather a full continuous bloom. This is an

⁵² Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, 149-150. Also, cf. Sells, “Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘Gentle Now ...’”.

⁵³ Frost, 54.



initial collision between the *qalb* (heart) and *'aql* (mind) that cultivates into a dialogue within the confines of a *'hayr* and only there. Because only within such a harbor can the heart and mind be free to roam and “go with the drift of things” while subsisting in *wajd* (love), *wujūd* (the Ontological) and the *mawjūd* (the Epistemological).

Our letter has been written in the ink of metaphysics and will be sealed by a pragmatic glance towards a call to action. The intellectual imperative has always been a conversation that must be initially taught, in its most rudimentary, abstract and yet difficult expressions and concepts. Thereafter, it must be given time to ferment, almost parasitically, within the depths of the listener. That moment, when it contends, questions and also seeks reconciliation is the *secret attestation*. In that regard, this entire journey should not be considered a blueprint for say, an educational institute; but rather, a motivation for a blueprint for all kinds of institutions. The narrative of the voyage was intentionally written closer to the language of meaning than form precisely so that it manifests properly within the activist, scholar, artist, scientist and all others.

We concur with Ebrahim Moosa that in the modern Islamic religious discourse, “the provenance of an idea is more important than its substance”. However, the discussion does not halt at the word “substance”, but actually circles around back to “Provenance”, with a capital p. This is the real “providence” and potential of any idea; its root, its departure and destination. As the numerous performative moments in this paper have shown: through their roots, words take their speaker from names to the named and from signifiers to the signified. What is an intellectual imperative other than contemplating the meanings of words and what they signify? Where they lead? How they cross to and fro?



Such an intellectual imperative can only flourish in a *ḥayr* of *ḥayra*: institutions where neither the provenance or substance of an idea is neglected, but rather substance is sought through Provenance, enclosed within it. This is both a project of historical and linguistic (etymological) contextualization. Such a confluence is the “occupation for the saint”, as Eliot mentioned above. Any attempt at the intellectual imperative without such a conviction, one is merely a convict whose crime has been to con the text of its context. Unfortunately, that indeed has been the bane of contemporary Islamic discourse in the West and elsewhere.

Of course, religious discourse itself has not been neglected in the contemporary Islamic institutions. However, the solitary monologue that this discourse has had to engage in within the intellects of the contemporary Muslim subjects has, in a sense, delimited the meaning to a singular form and image. No dialogue can occur within the spirit of a meaning that has been constrained and ravaged of its diversity. The prerogative of any idea and our responsibility towards it is to reconcile its provenance with its Provenance; to decorate its linguistic tomb with its ontological womb. To this end, four disciplines should be at the fluctuating (*mutaqallib*) heart (*qalb*) of every Islamic institution, especially in the West: philosophy, history, literature and the arts.

“A philosopher refers to one who loves wisdom, because *sophia* in the Greek tongue is wisdom; it is also said to refer to love. Therefore, *filosophia* (Philosophy) means love of wisdom; and every sagacious person loves wisdom”⁵⁴. With this resounding testimony, Ibn al-‘Arabi describes the niche *filosophia* (philosophy) occupies in his vast Weltanschauung. For a realizer

⁵⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *al-Futuhat* IV, 281.



like this Andalusian mystic, whose heart has become “accepting of every form”, the substance of any idea is enveloped by the providence of its provenance and Provenance. It is the accuracy of the description and semantics, the harmony between the etymological tomb and ontological womb that serves as Ibn al-‘Arabi’s criterion for judging an idea as right or wrong; regardless of who utters it:

“It is only the fact that the mistakes of the people of intellectual deliberation in regards to Divine matters are more than their correct opinions. This is true whether they are philosophers, Mu‘tazilites, Ash‘arites or any of the people of intellectual deliberation. Therefore, philosophers are not to be admonished simply because of this name [philosophy].”⁵⁵

Ibn al-‘Arabi himself was known as the “son of Plato” and even regarded the latter as “Plato the Divine”⁵⁶ - the former epithet probably due to the Andalusian mystic’s perceived neo-Platonic emanative metaphysics. Whereas he admired this distant ‘milk-brother’ of his from Greece, Ibn al-‘Arabi was a lashing critic of Muslim philosophers such as Averroes and al-Farābī. The meeting between the former and a young Ibn al-‘Arabi is particularly worth recounting:

“I spent a good day in Cordova at the house of Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd. He had expressed a desire to meet me in person, since he had heard of certain revelations I had received while in retreat and had shown considerable astonishment concerning them... I was at the time a beardless youth... He said to me ‘Yes!’ and showed pleasure on seeing that I had understood him. I, on the other hand, being aware of the motive for his pleasure, replied, ‘No!’ Upon this, Ibn Rushd drew back from me, his color changed and he seemed to doubt what he had thought of me. He then put to me the following question, ‘What solution have you found as a result of mystical illumination and divine inspiration? Does it coincide with what is arrived at by speculative thought?’ I replied, ‘Yes and no. Between the Yea and the Nay the spirits take their flight beyond matter, and the necks detach themselves from their bodies.’ At this Ibn Rushd became pale and I saw him

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 280. This should not be understood as Ibn al-‘Arabi’s belief that Plato was divine in any way. However, it alludes to Plato’s vast wisdom and obtainment of knowledge as it should be understood from the Divine, not solely through intellectual deliberation.



tremble as he muttered the formula, 'There is no power save from God.' This was because he had understood my allusion."⁵⁷

One can clearly see from the preceding that Ibn al-'Arabi, and al-Ghazali as well, were very much entrenched in and engaging with the intellectual trends of their respective milieus. The *Poiesis* of magnum opuses such as *The Meccan Revelations* and *Revival of the Islamic Sciences* can only occur as a result of an author's *secret attestation*; his contentious yet reconciliatory dialogue with the forms and images of his time. Without a doubt, the contemporary Muslim subject is hearkening for the modern *Meccan Revelations* and *Revival of the Islamic Sciences*; a reflowering that pays homage to the spirit and meaning of these works but speaks with the *bayān* (declaration/eloquence/elucidation) that remains ever flowing with the waves of time and its contemporary apparitions.

This has been my primary motivation for excluding any mention of the classical philosophers during our preceding metaphysical excursion; but rather, I resorted to the works of modern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Harold Bloom. Their brief mention was certainly not intended for satiation, but rather attraction and initiation. Their *secret attestations* are the contemporary prisms through which the classics can and should be revisited: Derrida's contemplation on the trial of Socrates offers a tremendous insight into the realities of *l'etranger* (the foreigner/immigrant) in modernity. Meanwhile, Foucault's expedition into *Oedipus at Colonus* is the foundation for his discussion on knowledge and power in modern politics - which itself was the basis for Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

⁵⁷ Coates, 27.



“History is philosophy teaching by examples”⁵⁸

Philosophy is a moment of reflection at the “point of intersection of the timeless with time” and history is His story, the story of the Real. The overarching narrative of the cosmic performance. Therefore, history in the *ḥayr* is not merely a recounting or memorization of dates, persons or events. On the contrary, it is a search for meaning amidst the *āthār* (vestiges). These remnants of the past, if treated with respect, will engage in long and timeless conversations with the historian. This is also not an attempt to interrogate, question or project the contempt of the contemporary subject on a temporary vision of the past. This is beyond even learning of or from the past. No, this is really about listening and waiting.

Such an endeavor can benefit from an Aristotelian approach: beginning with the particulars of the vestiges, their intricacies and ornamentations, the forms and images of the past can begin to reveal themselves. Then comes the perception of the forces that transitioned one form to the other, the causes and effects of the death and life of these memories. Having an understanding of these causes and effects adds depth to the vestiges and one can begin to penetrate their humanity through their actions and inclinations. However, the actual reward of history arrives last; when the historian begins to perceive him or herself as a vestige-in-becoming, a future memory and actually views his own being through his subject of study, by listening and waiting.

⁵⁸ Dionysius, 72. Although this quote is falsely attributed to Thucydides, author of *History of Peloponnesian Wars*, it is generally agreed that he adhered to and agreed with this statement.



If, as Thucydides informs us, “history is philosophy teaching by examples”, then literature (*adab*) is a feast (*ma’duba*) of memories and experiences. Whereas history is a monologue to be appropriated and analyzed, literature is a dialogue and conversation. The author of a novel or poem, like a thespian, must show not tell the audience his world through the spaces between his words. He must also speak closer to a meaning that can ignite the vestiges within the *mundus imaginalis* of each reader; within their own personable cosmos. Stories (*qaṣaṣ*), are a way for the reader to follow the traces (*iqtiṣāṣ al-athar*) and footsteps of the storyteller (*qaṣṣāṣ*) into the latter’s own *mundus imaginalis*.

The contemporary Muslim subject is in a dire need to know the past, on its own terms, both analytically through studying history and conversationally by sitting at the feast (*ma’duba*) of literature (*adab*) with etiquette (*adab*). Again, this must occur by simultaneously opening one’s imaginal arms to ideas from all shades of provenance and substance while also enveloping them closely and tightly within the womb of Provenance. For the purposes of the modern Western Muslim *ḥayr*, this means a comprehensive and patient engagement with both history and historiography: *histoire* and *la métahistoire*. With literature, this entails tasting, drinking and quenching one’s thirst from both the lore of prose and poetry.

Ibn al-‘Arabi specifies that the Qur’an was not revealed as poetry because revelation must be clear in its injunctions and free of ambiguities. However, the Greatest Master is quick to note that this does not indicate poetry’s blameworthiness as a medium⁵⁹. On the contrary, this fact vivifies poetry as the *lingua franca* of *i’tibār* (expression/metaphor) and *bayān* (eloquence). There

⁵⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *al-Futuhat* III, 496.



are subtle forms and images that can only be conveyed through a poetic meter's imposed order and an incessant meaning's embossed border. Just as the *Bezels of Wisdom* is the spring from which the *Meccan Revelations* gushed forth; Ibn al-'Arabi's poetry was the very spirit and life of his entire thought. As Shakespeare has showed us, once the provenance of literature is adjoined with the Provenance, this reality becomes apparent in the lore of all creeds and genealogies, Islamic and otherwise.

Art, in all its forms, resides deeper still than literature as the very conscience of an epoch. This medium is also a more vivid conversation because it transcends the boundaries of speaker and listener; it must be taught and cultivated, not simply be a subject of discussion. For the well-being of the intellectual imperative, the contemporary Muslim must unchain Art from the prison of names and signifiers and allow it to prosper in the *ḥayr* of the named. This means that Islamic Art proper (literary, fine and performing arts) in the West should concentrate on Provenance instead of provenance. English poetry requires a different *adab* (etiquette) than its Arabic counterpart, for example. The *bayān* (eloquence) of the former is not as the latter. Moreover, the literal translation of art across both languages pays homage to syntax more than semantics, where real meaning lies.

Therefore, in a sense, Harold Bloom is correct in stating that Shakespeare is a more viable medium for exploring the Active Imagination than Ibn al-'Arabi, at least in the West. This is certainly also true if the Greatest Master's works were to be simply translated, at the level of syntax, from Arabic to English. Without a doubt, Shakespeare conveys these subtle meanings with a profound English *bayān* (eloquence). However, there remains a space for Ibn al-'Arabi in the English language, if and only if he is listened to at the level of semantics and meaning as



opposed to syntax and names. Abdelwahab Meddeb's *Tombeau of Ibn Arabi and White Traverses* is an example of such a stunning work that engages the Andalusian mystic and his Italian counterpart, Dante Alighieri, in a conversation about migration and foreignness, reflecting the author's own biography in the post-colonial Mediterranean.

These four cornerstones of the intellectual imperative and cultural production: philosophy, history, literature and the arts must have both a harmonious yet dialogical and slightly contentious presence within the *ḥayr*. Each of the disciplines must be given its own intellectual space to 'breath' so to say. At the same time, there must exist a third opening, the liminal *barzakh* (isthmus), wherein the *secret attestation* and moment of reflection may take place and bloom. This intellectual *dihlīz* is essentially what delineates the *ḥayr* and distinguishes it from any other contemporary Islamic institution. It defines both the region and act of witnessing the confluence of forms and images; be they ideologies, theorems, creeds or any other signifiers.

Such an opening can indeed be an entire discipline by itself, such as Comparative Literature, which might be construed as the liminal space between literature and philosophy. However, for a thriving **Islamic** intellectual imperative, there has to exist as well a performance with the same spirit as our journey here; a stage where Ghazali, Ibn al-'Arabi and other Masters may be hosted to engage with Derrida, Deleuze and thinkers who represent all provenances. The hope is that the listener, the student's own being and *qalb* (heart) will slowly drink from such conclaves and eventually become the real *barzakh*, the real *ḥayr* where, as prophet Abraham (ﷺ) told Ibn al-'Arabi, the Divine may finally be enveloped and contained in His infinite manifestations.



The various organs of such a *ḥayr* are not transgressing their bounds but are also well aware of each other's presence and interact harmoniously to form a symbiotic whole. There can be no *shakk* (doubt) in this harbor because disciplines, signifiers and all other images have neither been *shukkat* (adjoined together) nor perceived as flowing waves and streams without an ocean. There is a singular mission and deafening *zāwiya* that gives life to this *ḥayr*: to take in forms and images from all provenances in order to explore their Provenance. We may describe this process using the language of religious discourse, philosophy, literature or history; as long as the meaning subsists, providence from all provenances will persist.

We now end our journey and return at the inner sanctum, the place of origin that has been so vividly present throughout our voyage, yet never mentioned by name once - all the same, the named does not actually require names to be present. We arrive at the blessed tree, whose oil ignites from an olive that is neither from East or West, but rather from East, West and all directions. Such an all-embracing lamp can only give the light of knowledge and gnosis. It is for this reason that this light was not only attributed to, but actually identified with the Divine. Here is a subtle meaning which only a sage from the brotherhood of the milk can fathom; one whose being has perished as a mere mirror and instead enveloped the reflection of the sun in all its forms.

“The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Tolkien, 38.



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