THE POETICS OF EMBODIMENT

IN ISLAMIC MYSTICAL PHILOSOPHY

By

Katharine Denise Loevy

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Religion

August, 2012

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Professor William Franke

Professor Charles Scott

To my maternal aunt,

Denise Celeste Belcher Crenshaw

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

What modes of reading can be provoked by reading different kinds of texts and textual practices? How might these alternative modes enable us to rethink our conception of the relationship between discourses and embodiment, and the functioning of discourse upon bodies that is identified by the notion of discursive mediation? In what follows, I will be considering texts and practices that emerged from traditions of Islamic mysticism, and that demand a transformation in the reader and in the usual modes of reading through their ability to engage and to mobilize certain subtleties and complexities at the site where embodiment and discourse interact. The analyses that follow thus bring literary, religious and cultural products of sufism to questions of reading and of undergoing texts, and thus have the power to turn philosophical discourse on reading toward a new rereading of itself. In this regard, what we stand to gain from this engagement with Islamic mysticism is a reorientation toward texts and textually-mediated practices as a result of these experiences of reading that have thereby opened up new horizons for us with regard to the nature of embodiment in relationship to text.

Before beginning, it is important to note that the term mysticism is typically applied within any number of religions in order to name those orientations, traditions and practices that are focused upon approaching intimacy with divinity. For this reason, we have Christian mysticism that includes Catholic mystics such as Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint Catherine of Siena, we have Jewish mysticism in various forms including Kabbalah and Hasidism, and we have Islamic mysticism, often called sufism. In each case, the appellation "mysticism" identifies practices, texts, material sites and lifestyles

1

that are unique to the specific religious tradition and historical and geographical moment from which they develop. Each form of mysticism emerges through particular engagements with the doctrines and practices deemed relevant to the experience of the religion in any particular case. The texts and practices that we gather under the name "Islamic mysticism" are thus fully and completely Islamic in the sense that they are developed through deep engagement with the Islamic practices and doctrines of their own place and time. Every mystical text or practice is locatable geographically, historical, culturally, linguistically, and in terms of its particular religious tradition.

On the other hand, the term "mysticism" is applied to texts and practices of different religious traditions and different historical and geographical locations, and this is because they each share in some way in literary, philosophical and religious forms of writing and practices that can be characterized by an orientation toward interruption, disruption, and transformation. Mysticisms characteristically develop extremely refined techniques of writing and of ritual practice for the sake of disrupting and transforming the writer, reader, listener or practitioner. This is done in order to bring about an intensified connection to God, and hence it is the doctrinal or most relevant image of "God" in any particular time and place that is often engaged, mobilized, disrupted and transformed through these mystical, creative endeavors. While the beliefs and images at play in any mysticism will be specific to each time, place, and religious tradition, it is the effort to mobilize doctrinal beliefs and images in different and disruptive ways that justifies our thinking of mysticisms across religious traditions and through historical time and geographical space as an emergent genre of philosophy, literature, and practice.

The specific examples of discourse that I will be considering in this study consist in both textual fragments and examples of discursively mediated practices that are all drawn from the traditions of Islamic mysticism, and each one in some way engages with historically and culturally specific ideas about intimacy with the divine. My examples span from the earliest texts in this tradition to its most recent manifestations, and the theoretical claims I am able to make about the relationship between discourse and embodiment owe everything to what we find at work in these specific examples of discourse.

My analysis is divided into three parts. I will begin with the poetry of Niffari for the way in which his text provokes rather than describes disorientation. Part of my analysis draws upon certain Freudian notions of mourning and memory, since it is Freud who first tracks the process by which indeterminate or unconscious energies become discursively determinate and meaningful. In many ways, this is the most important and revealing discursive moment that I will be considering. Niffari's text gives us a glimpse into the way in which indeterminate anxieties become determinate such that we see specific moments of discourse become invested with otherwise unbound anxiety. Niffari's text thus functions such that we can almost witness the process of mediation itself, and as a result it also demonstrates where certain textual effects depend upon the embodiment of the reader as a source of anxieties and vulnerabilities that the text can then put to work.

My analysis will then turn to the ritual practice of *dhikr* (remembrance) and the related discursive phenomenon of the ecstatic utterances or *shatahât.* The practices of *dhikr* and the *shatahât* perform a dialectical rather than a unidirectional relationship

between embodiment and discourse, and this is because in each case the phenomenon at stake requires that mediation actually wait for that which it mediates. If the very notion of mediation carries with it the idea that a passive, choric body is the inert matter upon which discursivity or ideality impresses its form, the practices of *dhikr* and the events surrounding the *shatahât* depend upon reversing these terms of activity and passivity. It is only by virtue of having to wait for certain bodily events to take place that the practices of *dhikr* and the *shatahât* earn their legitimacy. Certain effects of discourse are thereby shown to depend upon the opacity, the indigestibility, the quasi-independence of at least the temporal dimension of bodily events in order to be rhetorically effective. In this way, we encounter a mode of discourse that requires that there be certain dimensions of embodiment that the discourse cannot fully master or fully mediate.

In the final section I will consider several examples of discourse that depend upon embodiment insofar as human beings are sites of desire and of vulnerability. These texts require a situated desire in order to mobilize different meanings in relation to one another in rhetorically powerful ways. The conceptual and ethical tensions and conflicts within these texts are meaningful insofar as there are certain modalities of investment on the part of readers. In such instances, the rhetorical force of the text cannot be understood outside of the context of this having-something-at-stake. Thus certain textual ambiguities and ambivalences admit of a much fuller, richer meaning when we connect them to the ambiguities and ambivalences of love and attachment insofar as these are ultimately reflections of the dependencies and vulnerabilities that come with mortal life. These texts can thereby be shown to be engaging with the human existential condition of desire and finitude, outside of which they would lose their force and significance.

4

In all three sections, the discursive effects that are at play ask us to return to the question of the relationship between embodiment and discourse, since in each case we find evidence that certain effects of discourse are only made possible through a relationship to something that exceeds the limits of the power of discursive mediation. I find such a moment of excess in Niffari's poem in its use of confusion to concretize the feeling of physical threat. I find it in the waiting for ecstatic states through practices such as *dhikr* and in the unruly speaking that is the phenomenon of the *shatahât*. Finally, I find it in the use of heterogeneity, scandal, and ambivalence in certain sufi writings that function in tandem with the readers investments and desires and such as to infuse the writings with energy and with significance. Ultimately, therefore, I hope to show that when we consider different kinds of texts and discursively mediated practices, and when we identify certain rhetorical effects that depend upon the failure of successful or complete mediation, we start to see the relationship between discourse and embodiment otherwise.

CHAPTER I

NIFFARI'S POETRY OF DISORIENTATION

In what follows, I will offer a reading of a mystical poem by the 10th century

Islamic philosopher Niffari as an extraordinary example of the mystical use of language.

Through the textual deployment of precise pairings of contradiction and imagery,

Niffari's text disorients the reader in such a way as disrupt, not the meaning of the text,

but our ability to confidently locate ourselves and our experience of reading vis-à-vis the

text. Regardless of whether or not Niffari's text succeeds in provoking a mystical

experience, the text most certainly achieves what Michael Sells calls a "semantic event"

that is meant to in some way reproduce or mirror mystical experience with a particular

experience of reading. It is this experience of reading, and what it reveals to us about the

relationship between language and embodiment, that is the subject of this essay. That

which Niffari has achieved through the semantic event of the poem is likewise an event

of the experience of a disrupted sense of one's own embodiment, and hence it is a poem

that lays bare in particular ways the complex relationship between language, meaning,

and human finitude.

In order to conduct this analysis, I will turn at a certain point to Freud's account

of mourning and to a contemporary revision of that account. Freud's insights into

mourning are relevant to what takes place in Niffari's poem because it is within the

context of Freud's account of mourning that he is able to track the transference of love

from an object to its substitute. Freud describes in his analysis of mourning a process

whereby impetus—i.e., what in this case is the energy of attachment or love—is distinguishable from its object—i.e., from what gives it its gravitational orientation and its meaning—as shown by the way in which its object can be changed. In ways that I hope will become clear through the course of the paper, it is the non-identity between impetus and meaning, and the transferability of impetus to new centers of meaning, that Niffari uses disruptively so as to undo the self and uncover a certain madness at the heart of any act of reading.

<div align="center">The Poem</div>

Biographers tell us that this 10th century poem is a part of a collection of poems that were compiled by Niffari's son from the scraps of paper that Niffari left behind after his death.[1] These poems are to be understood in relation to the Islamic notion of *fanâ* – a term that names the phenomenon of the extinction of the self as a result of proximity with the divine beloved. The poem is number forty four of the *Book of Standings* (*Kitâb al-Mawāqif*), and is called "Who are you and who am I?":

> He stood me in place, saying
> > Who are you and who am I?
>
> He said to me
> > In my sea stream nothing remains you have not seen
>
> Everything came toward me—
> > Nothing remained that did not—
> > > Kissed me between the eyes
> > > > Blessed me
> > > > > And stayed in the shadow
> He said
> > You know me but I know you not

---

[1] Niffarî (d. 965) quoted in Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 281-283.

I saw him clinging to my robe not me

He said to me
        This is my devotion

I did not incline
        Only my robe inclined

He said Who am I?

Sun and Moon were veiled
        The stars fell
                The lights died out
                        All save he enveloped in darkness

My eye did not see
        My ear did not hear
                My perception failed

Everything spoke saying
        Allahu Akbar!

Came toward me lance in hand

He said to me: Flee!
        I said: Where?
                He said
                        Fall into the darkness

I fell into the darkness
        And beheld myself

He said
        Behold yourself only yourself forever

Never will you leave the darkness

But when I release you from it
        I will reveal myself

You will see me
        And when you do
                You will be the farthest of those most far away.[2]

---

[2] Quoted in Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 288-289.

The text offers itself to be read in terms of two levels of analysis. On the one hand, the poem consists in descriptions of scenes and events—powerful images, but straightforward with regard to discourse in its capacity to render and to represent. On the other hand, what lies in and between these images are textual events in which the words seem to trip up and to become tangled such that they do not fit properly or make sense. Our expectations with regard to the logical progression of the narrative are episodically thwarted, and we find ourselves struggling at the purely conceptual level to hold the text together coherently.

If we pay attention to the placement of these moments of incoherence, we find that they come immediately before images and scenes that are physically threatening or that describe the disintegration of the I/me's powers of perception. The text thus provokes anxiety purely at the conceptual level insofar as it introduces moments of textual incoherence, and these provocations of conceptual anxiety are then followed by concrete images and scenes of violence and perceptual collapse. My claim, therefore, is that the moments of textual incoherence provoke anxieties in the reader or listener that are then fed into the experience of the scenes of violence and perceptual disintegration. Anxieties provoked in the reader at the level of the sense-making of the text as textual object become bound to images and scenes of physical and perceptual vulnerability and endangerment within the text's imaginative universe.

The shift in the text between its two major sections provides us with the strongest example of this textual effect. This occurs between "He said/You know me but I know you not" and "Sun and Moon were veiled." Across these lines, the poem shifts from

overwhelming yet positive images to frightening images and scenes of being overwhelmed in ways that for an injurable, mortal, and perceptual being are decidedly negative. This transition from awesome to terrifying occurs through passages that are themselves ambiguous and difficult to understand simply at the level of their meaning and in terms of the confusions they introduce into the narrative ("He said/ You know me but I know you not/ I saw him clinging to my robe not me/ He said to me/ This is my devotion/ I did not incline/ Only my robe inclined/ He said Who am I?/ Sun and Moon were veiled"). These passages provoke a series of questions that admit of no definitive answers (Who or what is speaking?[3] Why is the "He" now saying he does not know the "you"? Why is devotion in the direction of from "He" to "you"? How can the robe act independently of the wearer?). Directly after the scene of the robe is the collapse of the perceptual experience of the "I/me," both externally and internally, through the veiling of the sun and moon, the falling of the stars, and through an incurred blindness and deafness.

As the poem continues into its second section, we encounter another pulse of incoherence (the strangely placed line "Everything spoke saying /Allahu Akbar!), after which comes a fully concretized image of physical violence in the figure of all things advancing toward the "I/me" with a lance. The rest of the poem continues with interruptions of incoherence or of thwarted expectation followed by concretized images of physical and psychological endangerment and abandonment—a movement back and forth that finds no resolution—and such that the highest pitch of this oscillation comes

---

[3] Niffari writes "I did not incline/ Only my robe inclined" followed by the reiteration of the question "Who am I?," but such that the word in Arabic translated here as "He said" [qâla] could just as well have been translated "It said," and hence such that it is not unambiguously clear whether it is "He" or the robe that is speaking.

10

with the last line of the poem: "Never will you leave the darkness/ But when I release you from it/ I will reveal myself/ You will see me/ And when you do/ You will be the farthest of those most far away."

The play between conceptual incoherence and scenes and images of perceptual disintegration and physical threat is *the* principle textual effect of Niffari's poem. What I propose, then, is that this is a textual effect *that depends upon the reader's embodiment* even though the body never shows up beyond the mediations of the text. In this regard, I understand the disorientations of the text as producing anxiety in the kinds of beings that we are, and that is to say, in beings like us who are embodied, who are injurable, who are mortally finite, who are perceptual, and who depend upon our ability to understand things cognitively in order to keep ourselves physically safe. On my reading, then, the poem works because indeterminate anxiety produced by moments of conceptual incoherence or confusion at the level of the text are immediately rendered determinate—bound, in other words—through subsequent scenes of physical threat, abandonment, loss of physical control, and perceptual collapse.

In this regard, Niffari's text has essentially reversed the temporal sequence according to which images and scenes provoke in the reader the feeling of endangerment or peril. While the text ultimately renders determinate the anxieties it provokes in the reader, this happens *after* the discursive effect that provokes the anxiety, and it is this former discursive effect that depends upon the reader's embodiment while not itself giving shape to or symbolizing this embodiment. The discursive effect thus *requires* an embodied, mortally exposed being as its reader, since it is only this kind of reader that can experience a vague sense of physical endangerment in relation to moments of purely

11

conceptual incoherence. Ultimately, then, it is through the *failure* of coherent mediation or conceptualization—through the text's incoherence in relation to itself—that the text can have its rhetorically powerful effects, and this suggests that the text is not the only thing at play. By undercutting its own capacity for making the world make sense, Niffari's discourse subverts its power of mediation. That such self-subversion is rhetorically powerful is how a discursive dependence upon the reader's embodiment shows through—making itself felt in the form of unbound or not-yet bound anxiety. In this regard, there is some trace of ourselves—a trace of our investments in our physical survival but not symbolized as such—that can be felt in the rhetorical effects of Niffari's discourse.

Niffari's text thus shows that embodiment can be at work in certain effects of discourse in a manner that is *different* from the potentiality of the body to be constituted in and through discourse. And where Niffari's text enacts this difference, what we have is an intimation of the body's prevailing claim showing through the cracks in the text's own potential for meaning-making, and hence in the *breakdown* of the text's functioning as a site of discursive mediation.

Mere Disorientation in Bistami and al-Ghitani

Niffari's poem is not the only text from within traditions of Islamic mysticism that mobilize disorientation as an essential feature of its rhetorical functioning. We find another example in the *Mi'raj*—the "*Ascension*"—of Bistami. While describing what he witnessed in the seventh of the heavens, Bistami writes: "With every angel was a standard of light and under every standard were one thousand angels, the height of each

12

angel a journey of five hundred years."[4] Height is thus measured in units of time, and in

this way a conceptually inconsistent statement of measurement mirrors or in its own way

performs an analogue of Bistami's experience of the angles' overwhelming stature—

namely, that the angels' height overwhelms our ability to perceive and to comprehend.

Conceptual incoherence becomes a rhetorical effect that communicates the awesomeness

of the image, and hence the text makes meaning in ways that cannot be explained as a

matter of discourse operating either descriptively or as constituting our experience

through conceptual mediation.

We find another mode of the rhetorical employment of conceptual incoherence in

Egyptian writer Gamal al-Ghitani's *Pyramid Texts* from 1994—a text which can in many

ways be read as the practice of mysticism within the 20th century literary medium of the

modern novel, and hence as an example of a dynamic and creative contemporary Islamic

sufism. At one point in the novel, a character undergoes dramatic transformations while

at the apex of a pyramid—transformations that can be read as an imaginative account of

fanâ, the mystical extinguishing of the self in union with the divine, but as externalized as

an event in the world.[5] The text reads as follows:

> That circling, bounding, movement of his was but a prelude to
> the onslaught of an unending series of illuminations that bore
> upon him from all sides, permeating him and sweeping over him,
> driving him to and driving to him the still center of the song, the
> source of every dream, the root of every yearning, the secret of
> the upsurge of desire and if its extinction, the force that both
> bends the bough and rips it from the trunk.[6]

---

[4] Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 247-8.
[5] While the pyramids are Pharonic, this text of al-Ghitani's is in the tradition of many non-Pharonic religious practitioners who have lived by Pharonic archeological sites and who have redetermined these sites in relation to their own spiritual traditions.
[6] Al-Ghitani, Gamal, *Pyramid Texts*, Humphrey T. Davies (trans.) (Cairo: New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), p. 69.

Al-Ghitani's text is descriptive, but it also makes use of a series of disconnected images—"the still center of the song, the source of every dream, the root of every yearning, the secret of the upsurge of desire and if its extinction, the force that both bends the bough and rips it from the trunk." Al-Ghitani's text offers provocative images that flow like water, one after another, and that serve neither a descriptive role nor to advance the text's narrative. To the contrary, this quick succession of disconnected images provokes a feeling of disorientation that then mixes with the provocations produced by the images themselves and in their association. The disconnection of the images is thus an important part of the rhetorical effect of these passages along with the nature of the images themselves and their associative play in relation to one another. Like Niffari and Bistami, al-Ghitani's text thus mobilizes discourse in and through disconnection for what disconnection provokes in us. The disorientating experience of disconnection mingles with the experience of the text's imagery, but without being represented or conceptualized as such.

But while both Bistami and al-Ghitani make rhetorical use of conceptual incoherence, Niffari's text can be distinguished from both insofar as Niffari's text opens a perceptible gap between the emergence of anxiety and its binding into discursively-mediated determinacy. Niffari's text, unlike Bistami's or al-Ghitani's, provokes an effect that depends upon embodiment where this effect asserts itself *prior* to the introduction of binding imagery. The text makes us feel anxiety, and only then gives us an image to which we can bind this anxiety. Although arguably nothing takes place outside of discourse, the moment of mediation is nevertheless separated in Niffari's text from what

14

it mediates. By reversing the usual sequence such that anxiety comes before image,

Niffari's text enables us to witness mediation as a process.

Cathecting the Substitute Object of Poetry

We can begin to make sense of the discursive phenomenon at play in Niffari's

text with a turn toward Freud on mourning and with the revision of Freud's theory given

by Gregg Horowitz in *Sustaining Loss*. For Freud, mourning is a process by which

substitute objects are asserted in the place of the lost love object. Through this assertion,

attachment to the lost love object is transferred, and the substitute object becomes the site

that pulls toward itself and concentrates those attachments that have lost their original

object. Through this substitution and transference, a temporal space is opened within

which the work of mourning can take place, since mourning is a process that takes time.

The mourning process is thus the process by which attachments are transferred over to a

substitute object from which they are then gradually unhinged, and thereby becoming

available for reattachment elsewhere.

The service performed by the substitute object is thus that it enables the

continuation of the relationship with the original love-object in spite of the loss. This is

significant, since the time it takes to lose the love object and the time required for giving

up the love object do not coincide. Libidinal attachments to the love-object are not

immediately unhinged with the loss, in other words, or "the love for the object" as Freud

explains, is "a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up."[7]

Transference of attachment to a substitute love-object gives the reality principle time to

---

[7] Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay (ed.) (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 587.

take over gradually, and in this way the loss of the original love object is gradually accepted and the love for the lost love object is gradually let go. The purpose of the substitute, in other words, is that it opens up the temporal space for the work of detachment. The ambivalence of mourning—the refusal to accept the loss, on the one hand, and the desire to live in reality, on the other—is given the time to work itself through with the substitute as that which holds open the space for this possibility.

What we find in Freud, therefore, is an account through mourning of how psychological energies can be oriented and concretized in different ways, and how the same energies, in the face of loss, must go through processes of reorientation and re-concretization. Mourning as understood by Freud thus gives us at least one version of how certain psychological energies can come into and move out of different forms of determinateness.

The movement of psychological energies into and out of determinacy is an essential component of Gregg Horowitz's revision of Freud's account of mourning. For Horowitz, the work of mourning is actually the work of making the libidinal attachments to the lost object explicit—and in this regard it is the work of *turning unconscious libidinal attachments into conscious memories.* Through making attachment explicit to oneself for the first time, attachment to the love object can be sustained despite the loss, or, as Horowitz writes, "The lost object is permitted to go its way, the de-cathected memory traces theirs, and thus the joy in having suffered love is sustained."[8] For Horowitz, then, it is only with the loss of the love object that the ego-attachments to the

---

[8] See Horowitz, Gregg M., *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 153.

love object are made evident for the first time, and the process of mourning is a matter of memory-making in the wake of the loss.

According to Horowitz, these newly experienced "memories" are thus themselves the substitute objects to which we transfer our attachments to the lost love-object, and the emergence of these memories is the occasion of our first explicit or conscious encounter with our libidinal attachments to the lost love. While Freud held that the purpose of mourning is to let the loved one go, Horowitz argues instead that memory-making as the production of alternative sites of ego-cathexis enables us to continue to have a relationship to the loved one despite the loss. Our relationship continues in the mode of a relationship to memories.

In both Freud's and Horowitz's accounts, what we see are ultimately variations on a story about the emergence of determinacy and meaning. In Freud, the process is described in terms of an investiture of significance or meaning into the world that can be transferred from one object to another, and in Horowitz this investiture happens specifically with regard to ego-attachments that only become available to consciousness once the object of these attachments has been lost. In either case, the process of mourning is one in which determinacies shift and in which the indeterminate becomes determinate and meaningful. The account of mourning in each case relies upon the positing of unconscious energies that never show up as such, but that are attested to in the phenomenon of mourning insofar as mourning shows itself to be a working process of transformation. Mourning is a process, in other words, and it is a process driven by energies or forces that we cannot encounter directly, but without which there would be no need for the work of mourning in the first place.

Like mourning, then, the experience of reading Niffari's poem is a phenomenon within which mediation can be tracked as a working process. Anxiety brought about by conceptual incoherence is invested in concrete scenes and images that follow. Niffari's scenes and images are nourished by an anxiety that precedes them, just as love for the substitute love object is nourished by the energies of attachment that once constituted the love for the love-object that is now lost. Anxiety provoked by conceptual incoherence in Niffari's poem is brought about but not described. It thus moves from indeterminacy to determinacy as it is brought into association with the subsequent images and scenes. In this way, the poem performs a process of meaning-making that echoes the process by which attachments move from indeterminacy to determinacy in the memory-making of the process of mourning. This opens a gap between the anxiety and the image to which it becomes attached, hence Niffari not only vexes this attachment (the relationship is not fully sealed, the anxiety is only linked with the image by association), but also unveils the process by which indeterminate anxiety can come to invest images with its agitation, energy, and power. Nifarri's text thus provokes energies of agitation and anxiety that function through the text without immediately being made determinate by the text, and that the text then catches like a sail by then bringing this anxiety into contact with concretizing images.

Poetry and Embodiment

What, then, is the dimension of embodiment that is approached through the experience of Niffari's poem? Note that in mourning we experience intimations of the limits of mediation as provoked by a loss—by what Lacan calls the emergence of a gap in

18

the Real—and hence by a moment in which the Real in its uncanniness and resistance to symbolization asserts itself as the ultimate limit to our power to symbolize. In this regard, what emerges through Niffari's text is suggestive of the Real as the non-symbolizable kernel that betrays the insufficiency and uncanniness of all successful mediations wherein the world comes into view through what are ultimately the arbitrary and slippery mediations of the symbolic order. What we learn from Niffari's text is that it is not just a hole in the Real through loss followed by mourning that allows us to witness the limits of mediation. On the contrary, Niffari's text demonstrates that we can witness these limits by turning discursive mediation against itself, and hence by incorporating moments of textual incoherence into discursive practice. In so doing we not only see the process of mediation slowed down through its reversal such that we become able to track its occurrence, but we likewise discover that discourse has been dependent upon unsymbolizable or not-yet-symbolized dimensions of our embodiment all along.

In Niffari's poem, this dimension shows through insofar as the neutral fact of conceptual incoherence is a source of anxiety for beings like us, and that is to say beings whose mortal existence is intimated in moments of the failure of mediation. But this means that when the text provokes anxiety in us through its introduction of incoherence, our experience of anxiety is the one *we* bring. The reversal of the provocation of anxiety and its concretization in scenes and images has the effect of drawing us into the inside of the text in such a way that we are uniquely implicated in its functioning. We find ourselves on the *inside* of the text in this regard insofar as it is our anxiety that is provoked and only afterwards brought into association with the images that the text

subsequently provides. The distinction between inside and outside of the text is thus subverted, and a part of ourselves is put to work within the text while also being left both underdetermined and belatedly determined by the text.

What, then, is the significance of this encounter between certain psychoanalytic accounts of the mourning process and Niffari's textual provocations of anxiety and its subsequent textual concretization for how we come to understand the dependencies of discourse upon embodiment? It means that unmediated or not-fully mediated dimensions of the body are touched by mediation where mediation fails, and hence as evidence of mediation's internal limits. It means, moreover, that more happens in the discursive mediation of experience than can be accounted for simply by discourse, or even by the "body" understood as the mere potentiality for mediation, since there are significant rhetorical effects that can be produced by the *failure* of mediation. Hence part of human experience is the experience of the limits of mediation, of its failure to be total, of its inadequacy to the Real, of its insufficiency and incompleteness, and of its dependence upon energies for which it cannot account. For this reason, we must look at what discourse does in terms of its diverse rhetorical effects in order to see that the relationship between discursive mediation and embodiment is more complex than can be accounted for by the notion of the body as produced as an effect of discourse.

CHAPTER II

DHIKR AND *SHATAHÂT*

In the previous section I identified a particular discursive effect in the poetry of

Niffari through which we see discourse in relation to sites of embodied agitation and

energy that it has not simply mediated or formed. This is evidence of that dimension of

our existential condition that vibrates at the limits of mediation—evidence that was

unearthed through an analysis of the rhetorical effects of a text in its dependency upon

the reader's relationship to his or her own embodied vulnerability and mortal finitude.

The relationship between embodiment and discourse can likewise be approached

through analyses of practice, and this is the case with regard to practices that operate so

as to achieve meaning and significance through their mobilization of the limits of the

formative power of discursive mediation. This turn to practice is thus not motivated by

the idea that practices are somehow less discursively mediated phenomena, but rather that

discursively mediated practices can also reveal to us still other ways in which discourse

and embodiment are mutually implicating in a variety of relationships, including some

that are better characterized by disjunction and by modalities of non-coherence rather

than by conjunction or formation.

Dhikr's Incalculable Ecstasies

An example of practice wherein discourse does not simply form and/or make

meaningful bodily action is the practice of *dhikr*. Also drawn from the traditions of

Islamic mysticism, the practice of *dhikr* gets its name from the Arabic word meaning "remembering," and is used to refer to a wide variety of practices that are designed to provoke ecstatic states of mystical union with the divine. "*Dhikr*" identifies practices that have been developed and transformed over hundreds of years and across many cultural landscapes. It thus names a wide variety of ritualized practices, and this is to say modes of physical activity that are infused with a high degree of religious significance. Known principally outside the Islamic world through its Turkish iteration in the meditative practices of the whirling dervishes, *dhikr* is thus arguably the most widely recognized disciplinary practice developed within sufism for bringing about an experience of intimacy with the divine.

Practices of *dhikr* are backed by a complex literary tradition that likewise contributes a great deal of the theological terminology and ideas of Islamic mysticism. The practices of *dhikr* in particular also have a relationship to poetry that is quite deep, one aspect of which is the relationship between the pre-Islamic Arabic *nasīb* and the notion of *dhikr* as remembrance. The *nasīb* is the initial section of the Arab epic poem, and, as Michael Sells explains, in its traditional form the *nasīb* presents love and remembrance such that the two are inextricably entwined. The *nasīb* will typically begin with remembering the beloved who has been lost, and this remembering is often presented through a series of key symbols which Sells lists as "the ruins of the beloved's campsite (*atlâl*)", "the apparition (*khayâl, tayf*) of the lost beloved to the poet," and "the recalling of the secret (*sirr*) of the relationship between poetry and the beloved." [9] The madness of the lover for the beloved that we see, for example, in the famous epic love

---

[9] Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 57.

poem of Majnun and Layla is especially relevant to practices of *dhikr* insofar as

proximity to the divine is often understood in terms of the undoing or emptying of the

self and of the association between madness, love and remembrance. Sells refers us to

the tradition of Majnun and Layla in this regard as perhaps the most famous pre-Islamic

love story, and as a story of love, longing, separation, and madness. As Sells quotes from

one of the traditional versions of the story: "I pass by the ruined abodes of Layla,/ kissing

this wall and that./ It is not love of the ruins that inflames my heart/ but love of the one

who inhabited the ruins."[10] Interestingly, the name "Majnûn" literally means "jinned,"

where the jinn (genies) are spirits that can take possession of a human being. According

to Sells, the jinn are associated with madness, love, and poetic inspiration.[11] There is thus

an extensive and complex relationship between love, love-madness and poetry that takes

a variety of shapes within sufi traditions, and practices of *dhikr* are one domain in which

this relationship to traditions of pre-Islamic Arabic literature and poetry takes shape and

is elaborate in a variety of ways in Islamic religious practice.

Perhaps most characteristic of the many practices of *dhikr* is that they consistently

involve the ritualized repetition of chants and/or dance, and it is precisely these

movements and/or vocalizations that are designed to bring the practitioner to a state of

ecstatic union with the divinity. The chants and/or ritualized movements will vary

depending upon time and place, as will the manner and the degree to which both men and

women participate. The kind of musical accompaniment, if any, will also vary, and so

will the degree to which clapping is incorporated. The role played by a *shaykh* or a

---

[10] See Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 70.
[11] Sells also notes that the jinn may have some historical relationship to the Greek muses. See Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 70.

shayhka (female) in directing a *dhikr*, and or the role played by a *munshid* (a traditional

singer) as part of the musical dimension of the *dhikr*, will also vary. But in each case,

dhikr is typically characterized by the ritual use of movement and sound that are intended

to cultivate out of the ordinary psychological states that are understood in terms of an

ecstatic annihilation of the self in union with God.[12]

      In this regard, the role of music in the practice of *dhikr* is not to be

underestimated, and it is often with regard to music that the mystical union with the

divine gets its controversial associations with sexuality, on the one hand, and

drunkenness, on the other. As Jean During writes:

> Les peuples du monde arabe et du Moyen-Orient avaient toujours
> associé la musique au plaisir, et le plaisir à l'ivresse. Le plaisir
> musical intense (*tarab*), l'ivresse et la sexualité entraînent des
> états comparables, de sortie hors de soi-même, de perte de la
> raison, d'euphorie.[13]

Within the Islamic context, the association between music, drunkenness, and sexuality is

reflected in several hadith, which is to say, in the traditional "narrations of the Prophet"

that serve as the most authoritative textual source in Islam after the Qur'an.[14] In this

---

[12] See de Bruijn, J.T.P., *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Poems* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), p. 69.

[13] "The people of the Arab world and of the Middle East have always associated music with pleasure, and pleasure with drunkenness. The pleasure of intense music (*tarab*), drunkenness, and sexuality entails comparable states, states of escaping beyond oneself, of the loss of reason, of euphoria" [my translation]. During, Jean, "Le grincement de la porte du paradis: La double structure du phénomène musical dans la culture islamique" in *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel zum 7. April 1992, dargebracht von Schülern, Freunden und Kollegen*, Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (eds.) (Bern: New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 165.

[14] To take one example from the Sahih Bukhari: "Narrated Abu 'Amir or Abu Malik Al-Ash'ari: that he heard the Prophet saying, "From among my followers there will be some people who will consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk, the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the use of musical instruments, as lawful. And there will be some people who will stay near the side of a mountain and in the evening their shepherd will come to them with their sheep and ask them for something, but they will say to him, 'Return to us tomorrow.' Allah will destroy them during the night and will let the mountain fall on them, and He will transform the rest of them into monkeys and pigs and they will remain so till the Day of Resurrection"

regard, and as During also points out, the incorporation of music into spiritual practice must be seen alongside these hadith that condemn music, and that do so in association precisely with drunkenness and illicit sexuality.

Nevertheless, a defense of rituals such as *dhikr* was put forward by no less than the brothers Ahmad and Muhammad Ghazâlî in the early twelfth century.[15] The defense depended upon maintaining the strict distinction between the spiritual and the profane, or, as J.T.P. de Bruijn writes, the defense was "not without certain restrictions which were to prevent such expressions of mystical ecstasy from becoming entangled with the sinful promptings of the lower soul."[16] The ecstasies of *dhikr* are thus affirmed as defensible spiritual practice, but would seem to bring with them the risks of their contamination by a profane ecstasy and a profane love that is a necessary consequence of the traditional association of music.

Whether with regard to the dangers of music, or with regard the pre-Islamic literary tradition that associates love with madness and madness with the undoing or unhinging of the self, the practices of *dhikr* in their many forms are examples of highly regulated, explicitly repetitive, and fully entrenched embodied action that invest the body with cultural significance. In *dhikr,* often contested notions about the nature of intimacy with the divine are exercised as cultural practice so as to be explicitly productive of embodied experience.

(Book 69, 494v). Retrieved on April 6, 2012, at:
http://www.searchtruth.com/searchHadith.php?keyword=music&translator=1&search=1&book=&start=0
[15] One would also include in this regard traditional practices of *samâ'* –literally "hearing"—that are composed of dance, poetry and music.
[16] See de Bruijn, J.T.P., *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Poems* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), p. 69.

For our purposes, the importance of the practices of *dhikr* is that they provide the context for the surfacing of certain dimensions of embodiment that complicate how we understand the relationship between body and discursive mediation. As practices designed to engender ecstasy, all the mediations of meaning and significance *must wait* for that which is mediated, and hence mediation is in at least one regard *passive*. Waiting for the undergoing of an experience of ecstasy—practices of *Dhikr* show us that this is an event that we can cultivate and toward which we can strive, but which will come when it comes. Although ecstasy occurs as a fully socially and culturally invested phenomenon with a rich and complex literary, philosophical, and social history, the time of its occurring is importantly unpredictable and uncontrolled.

One way to approach the temporal occurring of the ecstatic moment of *dhikr* is through the phenomenon of death as described by Emmanual Levinas. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas states that death is not something we can go to meet ourselves, but rather death always meets us. "Death is thus never assumed," writes Levinas, "it comes."[17] Death in this regard is a phenomenon intrinsic to our embodiment that in its own way reveals a certain gap between mediation and what mediation mediates. Physical death is a matter of forces and processes that can never be made fully intelligible, and hence that can never be fully accessed by mediation. This relative obscurity—this resistance and this ever so subtle assertion of autonomy at the level of the timing of death—is thus part of what mediation makes meaningful, although without mediation producing or mastering the mediated. Hence while the phenomenon of death cannot be encountered in a certain sense apart from its cultural and historical significance, the gap between

---

[17] (Levinas, Emmanuel, "*Time and the Other,*" in Sean Hand (ed.) *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989; this edition, 2000), p. 42.) For this reason, Levinas argues that suicide is a contradictory concept.

26

mediation and what it mediates is made evident in so far as the moment of death is a function of dimensions of embodiment that are essentially beyond our reach both practically and conceptually. In the practice of *dhikr*, as also in Levinas's account of death, we see the opening of a gap in the temporal separation between the invitation of an event and the event itself. In *dhikr*, as in death, the claims of the body *over* mediation show in the fact that in either case one has to wait.[18]

Interestingly, the incalculability of ecstasy sought after in *dhikr* does not disqualify ecstasy from its mobilization within the spiritual context of sufism. To the contrary, this temporal dimension is perhaps the most important part of ecstasy's spiritual appeal. In this regard we might say that practices of *dhikr* consist in equal parts of disciplined and ritualized action, on the one hand, and of uncontrolled occurrences, on the other. Indeed, Carl Ernst extends this marriage of the regulated and the chaotic to the sufi pursuit of mystical experience more generally. According to Ernst:

> While the manuals of Sufi discipline presuppose a disciplined
> teaching situation where progress could be regulated, the Sufi
> terminology for mystical experience clearly indicates that there
> were whole ranges of spiritual states that were far beyond the
> control of the individual.[19]

Whether within or beyond *dhikr* as one of many practices designed to bring about mystical union with the divine, Ernst makes clear that the rigors of sufi practice work in tandem with uncontrolled spiritual occurrences such that disciplined, intentional action is

---

[18] While Niffari's text opens a gap between mediation and what it mediates by provoking anxiety *before* supplying the images and scenes to which this anxiety then binds and henceforth feeds, we see in the practices of *dhikr* the opening of another gap—this time between invitation and event such that mediation is dependent upon temporalities that it cannot incorporate or render intelligible.
[19] Ernst, Carl, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 115.

combined with having to wait for experiences that may or may not happen, and that will happen or not in their own time.

In this regard, it is considering hunger as another bodily event that is often inflected with a great deal of religious significance within many religious traditions. With regard to Islamic Sufism, Ernst cites practices of fasting during certain times of the year, of fasting every other day (the fast of David), and practices of eating a greatly reduced diet as three common forms of mobilizing hunger for spiritual purposes. Ernst gives as the reason for the ubiquity of fasting as a spiritual discipline in sufism that "a full stomach creates a sense of self-satisfaction and indifference, while hunger is an acute reminder of one's dependency on God."[20] Alternatively, I was told by a woman fasting at the Dome of the Rock that one fasts in Islam in order to know hunger, and that we strive to know hunger so that we become compassionate toward those who are hungry.

But regardless of what is given as the reason for fasting, the relevant feature for our purposes is that hunger has the same temporality as both death and ecstasy insofar as we can invite hunger but we must always wait for the moment of its arrival. The meaning of hunger within the context of religious fasting will often be well (though perhaps differently) defined, and the practices of inviting hunger will often be highly regulated, codified and determinate, and yet the hunger pangs will come when they come, with each practitioner's experience on its own timetable. Once again, a gap is opened such that what is mediated stands in relation to its mediation, but without being identical with this mediation.

The practices of *dhikr* present us with yet another example of the opening of this gap. The purpose of the movements and/or chanting of *dhikr* is to provoke an ecstatic

---

[20] Ernst, Carl, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 99.

state, but when this state is reached and whether or not it comes at all is not something within the practitioner's control. The discipline of *dhikr* may indeed be one in which we get better and better at achieving ecstatic states as we practice, and our bodies can thus be educated in their ability to effectively achieve ecstasy just as they can become more and more proficient at balancing a handstand. But in either case, we cannot know in advance how many attempts will be required and how much time it will take before the desired state is achieved. We prepare the ground, and we push the body through practice and repetition, but as such we are nevertheless passively in attendance in relation to a dimension of ourselves that is essentially beyond our reach.

The Inflamed Speaking of the *Shatahât*

The mediations that make meaningful the moment of ecstasy in *dhikr* are thus dependent upon aspects of the body that mediation cannot itself produce or call forth. Additionally, this relationship of dependence—this limitation imposed by opaque and quasi-independent aspects of embodiment—is important as such with regard to a certain history of controversial statements within sufi traditions, and hence in relation to explicitly discursive moments. Passivity in relation to the event of ecstasy has been critical with regard to the justification of the most controversial "texts" of the tradition— the *shatahât* or ecstatic utterances—whose controversial character has been an issue with regard to the justification of sufism itself. In relation to the historical debates surrounding the *shatahât*, certain justifications *depend* upon the passivity of the practitioner in relation to the event of ecstasy. Without this passivity, or where this

passivity is suspected of having been feigned, the meaning and value of the *shatahât* are

radically called into question.[21]

The structure of such justification is as follows: The *shatahât* are statements

made when the speaker is in the throes of ecstasy or *fanâ,* and as a result such statements

are to be exempted from sanction. Nevertheless, the degree to which the speaker is held

responsible has been fiercely debated over the centuries in relation to the most famous

and most controversial *shatahât*—Bistami's "Glory be to me" and Hallaj's "I am the

truth." The acceptability of these statements depends upon whether in each case we have

an instance of the divine speaking through a human vessel, or whether a human speaker

speaking for and referring to himself. If Bistami (d. 874) and Hallaj (d. 922) made these

statements in moments of ecstatic union with the divine, then the human body and voice

have become vehicles for God's self-proclamation. Ernst mentions the explanation given

by 'Attar in this regard, whereby 'Attar makes reference to the burning bush. As Ernst

writes, "while Moses heard the words, "I am I, God," coming from the bush, it was really

God who was speaking. In the same way, when Hallaj said, "I am the Truth," it was

really God who spoke, since Hallaj was not really there."[22] On the other hand, if the

human speaker is *not* in a state of mystical union, then the declarations made are

instances of illicit self-glorification that transgress against the demand for consistency

with monotheism and with the value of obedience. In defense of these *persons*, in other

words, the effort from their day up to the present has been to establish the sincerity of the

---

[21] According to Ernst, the *shatahât* may be related to the boasting contests of pre-Islamic Arab tribes. See Ernst, Carl, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 119.
[22] Ernst, Carl, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 117.

practitioner and the veracity of the practitioner's claim to having made these statements while undergoing a state of *fanâ*.[23]

The sincerity of the *shatahât* of both Bistami and Hallâj thus depends upon the degree to which either of them have actually achieved mystical union. In this regard, Hallâj refers to his union with God in his poetry when he writes "So if you see me . . . you see Him,/ And if you see Him, you see us," and, "I saw the Lord with the eye of my heart./ I said who are You, He said you."[24] Likewise, we get a dramatic rendering of the sincerity of Bistami's *shatahât* in the scene describing the event of their utterance as relayed through 'Attar (d. 1230) in his compilation of the stories and sayings of the sufi saints from the time of Muhammad to Hallaj (d. 922). As 'Attar writes:

> Once in a private place, the words *"Glory be to me! How great is my nature!"* slipped from Bâyazid's [Bistami's] tongue. When he came to his senses, his disciples said, "You spoke these words." The sheikh said, "May the mighty and glorious Lord be your enemy if you hear this again and do not rip me to shreds!" Then he gave everyone a knife, so they would kill him if he spoke those words again. It happened that Bâyazid said the same thing again, and his followers were determined to slay him. They saw the room fill with Bâyazid, as though he occupied every corner of it. They stabbed with their knives, but it was like someone stabbing water. After some time passed the image shrank, until Bâyazid appeared no bigger than a sparrow sitting in the prayer niche. His followers told the sheikh what happened. He said, "Bâyazid is this that you see. That was not Bâyazid."

---

[23] The historical outcome with regard to each controversial case makes clear the capacity of the *shatahât* to put the fate of the practitioner on the line. Hallaj, for example, was publicly executed. On the other hand, the political climate surrounding Hallaj's execution may have made his *shatahât* valuable as justification for what many would argue was in fact a political execution. As Herbert Mason writes, "Hallâj was to become the protagonist (and in subsequent legend the tragic emblem) of intoxicated love, who brought mysticism into history's dangerous, and, for him, self-destructive public glare." Mason, Herbert, "Hallâj and the Baghdad School of Sufism, in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300),* Vol.I, Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 67.

[24] Al-Husayn ibn Mansûr al-Hallâj, *Diwân al-Hallâj*, Sa'dî Dannâwî (ed.) (Beirut: Dar al-Sâdir, 1998), p. 65; quoted in Lumbard, Joseph, "From *Hubb* to *'Ishq:* The Development of Love in Early Sufism," *Journal of Islamic studies,* 18:3 (2007), p. 363.

He continued, "*God the all-powerful declares himself through the tongue of his servant.*"[25]

According to this account, Bistami is taken over so fully by the divine within the context of his *shatahât* that he breaks free of the limits of material existence. That Bistami pits the threat of death against himself through his followers serves as a guarantor of the fact Bistami himself would oppose someone who spoke such words outside of the context of mystical union. Likewise, the threat of death and the stabbing at Bistami of his followers materializes in a literal mode those metaphors according to which mystical union involves the extinction of the self in *fanâ*. Bistami's distance from the actions he appears to perform within the scene is further amplified insofar as he had to be told about his uttering of the *shatahât* after the fact. Finally, Bistami interprets the miracle of the physical transformations that he underwent within the context of the speaking of the shatahât, saying, "That was not Bâyazid", and "God the all-powerful declares himself through the tongue of his servant."

Anecdotal support for the notion of the practitioner as pure vessel abounds across Islam well beyond the issue of the *shatahât* that emerges from within the sufi context. Muhammad's great miracle is that he transmitted to humanity the Qur'an itself even though he was illiterate.[26] Muhammad's illiteracy is thus part of what substantiates the Qur'an as a divine text, and this is to say that it consists in the words of God rather than of a human being. Within the context of sufism, a distinction is made between the stations and the states of sufi practice (*maqamât* and *ahwâl*, respectively) where the

---

[25] *Farid ad-Din 'Attâr's Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis*, Paul Losensky (trans.) (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), pp. 194-195.
[26] Although this is Muhammad's only miracle as attested to in the Qur'an, many miracles are attributed to Muhammad in the hadith.

stations are arranged in order and are a part of sufi discipline and where the states are

gifts of God and can be manifested even in non-sufis.[27] A famous example of a non-sufi

undergoing a spiritual state in this regard is the story of a Luri tribesman attested to by

the Persian sufi Najib al-Din Buzghush of the 13th century (d. 1280), where like

Muhammad the tribesman's illiteracy is part of what lends credibility to his claim to

having reached a spiritual state. As al-Din Buzghush reports of the speech of the

tribesman:

> I am an illiterate Luri tribesman, and I don't know anything. I
> used to be happy taking care of the horses, and taking care of the
> horses was my job. One day I was sitting at the stable in front of
> the horses. Suddenly a spiritual state was unveiled to me, and a
> divine attraction occurred. The veil of ego was taken away from
> me, and I became unconscious. I fell and rolled under the horses'
> hooves. When I regained consciousness, the whole divine unity
> was revealed to me.[28]

This anecdote functions precisely because the person in question is described in a manner

to suggest that he would not have been in a position to want to fake having a spiritual

state. His status as illiterate and his complete disinterest in sufism prior to the moment of

revelation substantiates his claim that the state he underwent was from God. The

inclusion within the story of the little miracle according to which he falls under the horses

hooves and is uninjured only adds to the legitimacy of his claims. Just as with the

miracle of the transmission of the Qur'an to Muhammad, it is the emptiness of the vessel

that guarantees the divine source of the event in question.

---

[27] As Ernst states, "Because the states were essentially regarded as divine grace, they do not figure as
prominently in manuals of Sufi practice; the stations, insofar as they are accessible to human effort, are
typically described at much greater length." Ernst, Carl, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston:
Shambhala, 1997), p. 103.
[28] 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Nafahat al-uns* (Breezes of Intimacy) quoting Najib al-Din Buzghush (d. 1280).
Quoted in Ernst, Carl, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 116.

The *shatahât* are thus the most salient and controversial manifestation of what the practice of *dhikr* is supposed to achieve, and that is the annihilation of the self (*fanâ*) in mystical union with the divine. The justification of the *shatahât* depends upon a relationship to ecstasy itself, where ecstasy is precisely a bodily event that shares the same temporality as death and of hunger in the sense that it comes to us rather than we to it. The sincerity of the practitioner, the veracity of the attribution to the practitioner of the achievement of an ecstatic state, and the justification of the *shatahât* all go together in this regard. The opaque dimensions of embodiment that introduce this particular temporality of having to wait for certain bodily events is thus essential. It is because we *cannot* produce ecstatic states in a completely intentional way, and hence because the body makes us wait, that ecstatic states can be understood and mobilized as reflections of sincerity, of being out of control, and hence of having received an experience from the divine as a mode of grace. What the *shatahât* demonstrate, therefore, is the way in which the *limits* of mediation can be mobilized discursively *precisely as such limits.*

Practices of *dhikr* thus show us that the body can be meaningful through framing of its opaque and unmasterable processes so as to display the body's resistance to its disciplining. A relationship between body and discourse is at play in which the body in its unmasterability is mobilized strategically to support certain social meanings. These meanings depend upon the place where the influence of discourse over body is contested and breaks down. As such, the phenomena of *dhikr* shows us that certain rhetorical effects depend upon the limits of mediation as they emerge in relation to certain dimensions of bodily life.

CHAPTER III

PASSIONATE LOVE, DIVINE LOVE

The spiritual ecstasies of *dhikr* and the *shatahât* cannot be thought apart from the human experience of erotic love, and this love cannot be understood apart from the extensive, highly developed, and highly refined literary tradition of Arab love poetry. In this regard, practices of *dhikr* represent one of many occasions within the context of Islamic mysticism in which religious texts and secular texts intervene into one another. Not limited in its influence to only sufism, this poetry has had an enormous impact upon Islamic culture at all levels—juridical, philosophical, and religious.

Interestingly, then, when the tenth century Iranian sufi Sarraj defends Bistami's *shatahât*, he makes reference to the love story of Majnun and Layla."[29] Majnun—crazy for love—is so overwhelmed by love for Layla that Layla is all he can think of and even see, and it is this interpretation of the love epic that Sarraj uses in his defense of Bistami's *shatahât*. As Sarraj writes, "[Majnun] would say, when looking at a wild animal, "Layla," when looking at the mountains, "Layla," and when looking at other people, "Layla," to the point that when he was asked his name and condition, he said "Layla".[30] In this way, Sarraj uses the pre-Islamic love story of Majnun and Layla in order to illustrate an example of how one can be so filled with love that one speaks as if one is the beloved. According to Sarraj, then, Bistami is overcome by the love-madness of Majnun

---

[29] The story of Majnun and Layla comes from the 'Udhrî poets of the pre-Islamic Arabic literary tradition.
[30] Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufî, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 69.

as the one who answers 'Layla' when asked his name.[31] The literary tradition of the pre-

Islamic Arab love epic of Majnun and Layla is thus a reference point for Sarraj in

describing the nature of mystical union as the manifestation of an overwhelming and all-

consuming love, since the defense that Sarraj offers for the *shatahât* of Bistami is

precisely that they were uttered under the force of such love.

Hence while on the one hand the passivity of the bodily experience of ecstasy is

one way in which the *shatahât* of Bistami are justified, it is likewise the case that specific

literary references are mobilized as a way of illustrating and defending the experience of

this passivity. Sarraj's turn toward the story of Majnun and Layla is evidence of how

deeply rooted the traditional texts of Arab love poetry are as an orienting cultural and

philosophical reference. Indeed, there is nothing particularly noteworthy about reference

to Majnun and Layla or to any of the other literary treatments of love within an Arab,

Persian, or other Islamic context, and this is because Islam has always been backed by a

rich literary engagement with the subject of love. Sarraj's treatment of Bistami's

shatahât is thus relevant as one of a great many examples of the way in which

heterogeneous discourses can be mobilized for historically specific and situated purposes.

The heterogeneity of discourse evidenced in Sarraj's defense of Bistami's

shatahât is thus a third way in which we can approach the question of the relationship

between embodiment and discourse. On the one hand, the heterogeneity itself suggests

that there needs to be a situated desire to mobilize discourses that do not of themselves

demand their coming together, and hence in order for these discourses to bear upon one

another in ways that would not have happened in the absence of that specific desire.

---

[31] I am following the discussion in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 69.

Moreover, the desire at play manifests as action, since action is required for the mobilization of one set of discourses in relation to another. Such movement can only come from a being of desire, and that is to say, from an embodied being, since discourse *per se* has no body, no agency, and no desire. Sarraj mobilizes discourses in order to purposefully manage the interpretation of Bistami's *shatahât* because of his own historically grounded and discursively mediated commitments to the practice of sufism, and the energy that drives this action—discursively mediated as it is—cannot be *reduced* to discourse. Sarraj's defense of Bistami's *shatahât* is an event that takes place because Sarraj supplies the activity or energy required for precisely the project of mobilizing available discourses and meanings. In this regard, discourse is dependent upon embodiment to contribute the critical dimension of desire—desire that, while itself mediated in all kinds of ways, gives life to mediation.

In this final section, I will consider several examples of the sufi discourse from a variety of historical and cultural origins that concern the topics of desire and love, on the one hand, and that manifest the desire that can mobilize heterogeneous discourses with one another in unexpected and unpredictable ways, on the other. Desire, or love, will be the focus in each case—both as the topic of the texts, and as a name for the vital powers of embodied existence that produced them.

Qushayri and the Beauty of Joseph

The particular heterogeneity of sufi discourse on love has meant that at different times and in a variety of ways the question of how to think love in relation to the divine has been a source of much scandal, and at the same time that there are many textual

examples of the cohabitation of images of erotic love existing seemingly

unproblematically alongside statements of prohibition against carnal love. We find one

compelling example in Qushayri's eleventh century treatise on love.[32] On the one hand,

Qushayri writes: "Whoever abandons acts that in the language of the *shari'a* are

blameworthy is said to have passed away from his carnal desires. When he passes away

from his carnal desires, he endures in his intention and sincerity in worshipfulness."[33]

Passing away from carnal desires is thus put forward in this statement as important for

sustaining one's sincerity of devotion. Shortly thereafter, however, Qushayri quotes *sura*

12:31 of the Qur'an in which the women of Egypt cut their hands when they first see

Joseph and witnessed his beauty. Qushayri writes: "This is how a creature can disregard

his own states on meeting another creature. What do you think would happen to a person

when the veil is parted and he witnesses the Real, Most Praised? If he were to disregard

himself and those of his own species, would that be such a marvel?"[34] Having just made

the claim that sincerity of worship depends upon abjuring carnal desires, Qushayri uses a

scene from the Qur'an in which women are overwhelmed by the carnal beauty of a man

in order to talk about how one would be overwhelmed in the presence of God by God's

beauty. The experience of being overtaken by desire in relation to another *human* is used

by Qushayri as a reference point for imagining the encounter with the divine.

Citing the story of Joseph and the women of Egypt is not uncommon within the

Islamic tradition. The early sufi Rabi'a, a woman and also an extremely authoritative

---

[32] 'Abd al-Karîm ibn Hawâzin al-Qushayrî (d. 465/1074). Qushayri was born near Nishapur in what is present-day Iran. His text is known today simply as *Qushayri's Treatise.* See Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 97-99.

[33] Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 120.

[34] Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 121.

figure in sufism, herself makes use of the story of Joseph and the women of Egypt when she illustrates love of God. As Rabiʻa writes:

> No one is sincere in his claim who does not forget the wound of
> the blow in the vision of his master. There's nothing strange in
> this. The women of Egypt did not perceive the wound of the
> blow while they viewed Joseph, peace be upon him. Why should
> it be strange if someone is like this while viewing the creator?[35]

Rabiʻa's text precedes Qushayri's by almost 300 years, and may very well be a reference point for him. It is thus not all that noteworthy that Qushayri would comfortably reference a frequently cited Qur'anic passage within the same text in which he sanctions against carnal desire between humans. The human desire for other humans portrayed in the story of Joseph functions for Qushayri as a literary trope and as a mechanism for imagining the human experience of the encounter with God in His radiant beauty. Human erotic desire is thereby incorporated into the text while at the same time being held explicitly at bay. Both already inside and pushed to the outside, this double-position accorded to erotic desire seems to take place within Qushayri's text without incident.

Qushayri's text continues, as does the oscillation back and forth between the explicit sanction against carnal desire and the mobilization of scenes of carnal love. Almost immediately after making reference to the story of Joseph, Qushayri states that "[w]hoever passes away from his carnal desire endures through his contrition"[36], thereby repeating the sanction on carnal love. And almost immediately thereafter, Qushayri

---

[35] Râbiʻa al-ʻAdawiyya (d. 185/801). Quoted in Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 168.

[36] The entire line reads: "Whoever passes away from his ignorance endures through his knowledge. Whoever passes away from his carnal desire endures through his contrition. Whoever passes away from his appetitive nature endures through his renunciation . . ." Quoted in Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 121.

makes use of another literary reference in order to further illustrate the experience of

intimacy with the divine, this time drawing upon a fragment of secular Arab love poetry.

As Qushayri quotes the unnamed poet:

> A people wanders
>   lost in the wasteland.
> A people wanders
>   lost on the plain of love.
> They passed away, passed away,
>   then passed away again,
> Then abided in abiding
>   of nearness to their lord.[37]

Qushayri uses this poem to illustrate the experiences undergone by the practitioner on the

path toward achieving mystical union. Qushayri offers a religious interpretation of these

lines, thereby using secular love-poetry to analyze the phenomenon of *fanâ*. As Qushayri

states:

> The first passing away is the passing away of the self and its
> attributes to endure through the attributes of the real. Then there
> is the passing away from the attributes of the real through
> witnessing of the real. Then there is a person's passing away
> from witnessing his own passing away through his perishing in
> the ecstatic existentiality (*wujûd*) of the real."[38]

Within the same group of several paragraphs, then, Qushayri rehearses the censure on

lust, uses an image of human lust to make a point about the experience of intimacy with

the divine, repeats the censure on lust, and then quotes secular love poetry in order to

make another series of points about the nature of intimacy with the divine. The text

---

[37] Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 121.
[38] Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 121.

moves back and forth between the censure of lust and the mobilization of Arabic literary references to the love-madness between humans as a way to understand intimacy with God. While Qushayri himself appears to be consistent within the text with regard to his voicing of the sanction against human lust, Qushayri's text in its reference to literary love imagery is thus strangely and interestingly ambivalent in its relationship to the phenomenon of passionate love.

<center>*'Ishq* and *Hubb*</center>

Sufism in general is quite explicitly a heterogeneous tradition with regard to the topic of love. Ideas and images of love have moved back and forth between sufi religious contexts and secular contexts from the earliest days of sufism. Likewise, sufi texts have been as much an influence on secular ideas of love as the reverse. Part of what this cross-influence has meant is that Islamic mysticism has often been confronted from both within and without by concern over erotic love, and specifically by whether it is licit in any particular case to mobilize ideas and images of erotic love within a religious context. The heterogeneity of the discourse has thus not been without its tensions, and yet there are also instances where we might expect to find tensions, and we discover that they are strangely absent. These tensions, or lack of them, give us insight into the complex possibilities for the relationship in any particular case between discourse and embodiment.

A critical moment in history of the sufi engagement with love comes with the introduction of the non-Qur'anic word *'ishq* into the sufi context as a way of describing the nature of intimacy with the divine. Both the word *'ishq* and the word *hubb* mean

<center>41</center>

love, but *'ishq* has specifically erotic connotations. When some sufi theologians starting

using the word "*'ishq*," the term became a site of contention within sufi circles and within

Islam more generally. The carnal implications of the word *'ishq* meant that for many it

seemed inappropriate even if one was clear that the beloved was God and hence that the

love in question is spiritual as opposed to earthly and therefore describing the love or lust

directed toward another human being. Annemarie Schimmel makes this point when she

writes: "The word *mahabba* [a form of *hubb*] had been objected to by the orthodox, but

when the first attempts were made to introduce the word *'ishq,* "passionate love," into the

relation between man and God, even most of the Sufis objected".[39] The issue, as

Schimmel explains, is that *'ishq* as a term for an eroticized love and longing should

neither be attributed to God in relation to human beings or to human beings in relation to

God. As Schimmel writes:

> …this root [referring to the word *'ishq*] implies the concept of
> overflowing and passionate longing, a quality that God, the self-
> sufficient, could not possibly possess; nor was it permissible that
> man should approach the Lord which such feelings."[40]

The issue thus stems from the scandal of thinking about the human relationship to God

and God's relationship to humans as one would think about and/or experience the

relationship to a lover.

Nevertheless, while many sufis and non-sufis understood the term to refer to an

illicit kind of love that would be inappropriate as a description of the love offered to God,

others saw in it reference to the love-madness that in its suffering bespeaks of true

---

[39] Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 137.
[40] Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 137.

devotion. Joseph Lumbard draws this distinction in his study of the historical movement

from the use of the term *hubb* in sufism to the introduction of the word *'ishq*. As

Lumbard writes:

> Though no strict definitions were agreed upon, it [*'ishq*] was
> regarded by many as a state of passionate love, or as a raw
> physical lust to be tamed and avoided at all costs. Many had
> serious misgivings about the use of this term... But for all those
> who opposed it, there were also other scholars such as
> Muhammad b. Dâ'ûd al-Isfahânî (d. 297/910) who admonished
> them for failing to understand the tender nature of those
> susceptible to the storms of true love.[41]

According to Lumbard, Muhammad b. Dâ'ûd al-Isfahânî's retort against the censor of

'ishq is to reorient away from a focus on lust *per se*, and to aim the discussion toward the

emotions associated with love—to its longing, its grief, and hence also its sincerity.

These are precisely the love-sick emotions that are explored and developed at length in

the Arab and Islamic literary traditions of engagement with the topic of love, and upon

which sufism drew and to which it contributed. *'Ishq* in this regard would refer to the

kind of love for which everything is given up and in the name of which anything is

suffered. As such, *'ishq* could seem to many as an appropriate term describing the

relationship of the sufi to the divine within a religious tradition that already extensively

incorporated the images and ideas developed within the Arab traditions of love poetry.

Despite enduring controversy, love either in the form of *hubb* or of *'ishq* is a

central term of Islamic mysticism, and sufism has thus always drawn upon and

contributed to images and ideas of erotic love. Tracking the episodic eruption of outcry

against the use of the word *'ishq* is thus one way to locate the tensions that we find within

---

[41] Lumbard, Joseph, "From *Hubb* to *'Ishq:* The Development of Love in Early Sufism, *Journal of Islamic studies,* 18:3 (2007), p. 357.

the sufi engagement with love. These tensions are at least in part attributable to the

particular heterogeneity of sufi discourse—and that is to say, to the influence of secular

love poetry on every aspect and every branch of Islam—both sufi and non-sufi.[42] In this

regard, the attraction to the word *'ishq* is consistent with the ubiquity of erotic and/or

passionate love imagery that has been in play in Islamic mysticism since its beginning.[43]

Since the introduction of the word *'ishq* into the sufi tradition, much of the debate

concerning its usage was often predicated upon asserting a sharp division between a

divine versus a human beloved. In this regard, Jean During writes that the sufi theologian

Ahmad al-Ghazâlî (the philosopher's younger brother)[44] was the first to explicitly defend

the use of *'ishq*,[45] but only on the condition, as During writes, that "*l'auditeur la ramène*

---

[42] While love is discussed across all dimensions of the Islamic tradition, sufism is unique in the sense that it is only here that love is associated with states and/or stages. As Carl Ernst writes, "Mystical classifications of the stages of love differed from secular, legal, and philosophical analyses of love in that the Sufis consistently placed love in the context of their mystical psychology of 'states' and 'stations', with an emphasis on love as the transcendence of the self." See Ernst, Carl, "The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism, from Râbi'a to Rûzbihân," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300), Vol.I* Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 435.

[43] As Lumbard writes, "By citing al-Bistâmî, al-Junayd and al-Hallâj as proponents of the term *'ishq*, al-Daylamî is making a strong case for its legitimacy, as these are three of the most renowned figures of early Sufism" (Lumbard, 358). According to Lumbard, Daylamî's references suggest that some texts are no longer extant, since, for example, we do not have attestation in Junayd with regard to *'ishq* in the texts that are available to us. According to Lumbard, then, we have good evidence for thinking that *'ishq* and other important topics on love were occurring in periods previous to the 6th /12th century Persian sufism for which *'ishq* is the central figure, but that much of this has only survived through the oral tradition. See Lumbard, Joseph, "From *Hubb* to *'Ishq:* The Development of Love in Early Sufism, *Journal of Islamic studies,* 18:3 (2007), esp. p. 364. Also worth noting is that Daylamî refers to Heraclitus in his discussion of the nature of *'ishq*, and Rûzbihân to Heraclitus through Daylamî. See Ernst, Carl, "The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism, from Râbi'a to Rûzbihân," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300), Vol.I* Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 450, fn. 50.

[44] Shaykh Ahmad al-Ghazâlî (d. 1126). The text referred to here is the *Sawânih*, written in Persian in 1114 CE.

[45] While al-Ghazali was the first to make *'ishq* the ultimate principle of mystical union and of creation, he was not the first sufi to employ the word *'ishq* within a religious context. We have attestation of the word as early as the seventh century in the work of 'Abd al-Wâjid ibn Zayd of the school of Basra. See Ernst, Carl, "The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism, from Râbi'a to Rûzbihân," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300)*, Vol.I*,* Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 438. By contrast, Annemarie Schimmel attributes the introduction of the word 'ishq' to the sufi Nûrî (d. 907). See Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 137. According to Lois Anita Giffen, quoting Massignon, it was also introduced by 'Abd al-Wâhid bin Zaid (d. 793) (see Massignon, *Opera Minora II [Hallaj: Mystique, langue, et pensée islamiques]* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1969, ©1963),

à un sens spirituel".[46] By contrast, many sufis did all they could to make the identity of

the beloved ambiguous, and this practice becomes so common in Persian sufi poetry from

the 12th century onward that it is literally an identifying trait of the genre. "Since then,"

writes J.T.P. de Bruijn, "the fusion between the secular and the mystical in Persian

ghazals has become such an essential characteristic that, in most instances, it is extremely

difficult to make a proper distinction between the two."[47] As de Bruijn goes on to

explain, the classification of particular poems was often based not on the poem itself but

on the identity of the writer, hence the question became whether the writer was a sufi or a

court poet. Although reasonable in some respects as a principle of literary interpretation,

this procedure risks domesticating the ambiguity at work in the poems by diffusing it

through reference to information that is in fact external to the poems, and hence it can

miss the fact that the poems need to be read precisely as ambiguous.

 The scandal of not knowing whether the beloved is human or divine gives these

poems their scandalous attractiveness, and may also play a spiritual role in unhinging the

reader's sense of conceptual mastery both in relation to the poem and in relation to the

experience of the encounter with the divine. To risk everything, including scandal, and to

lose one's way conceptually and with regard to a clear sense of the sure path of piety, can

---

pp, 246-47; Giffen, Lois Anita, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre*
(New York: New York University Press, 1971), pp. 86-87). Citing al-Daylamî's suggestion that there was
censorship of discussions of love, Joseph Lumbard speculates that the word *'ishq* may have been used in
sufi circles from very early on through an oral tradition. Lumbard mentions the lost treatises attributed to
Junayd and Ibn al-Khafîf. Later texts suggest that they included discussions of love, and may have
employed the word *'ishq*. See Lumbard, Joseph, "From *Hubb* to *'Ishq:* The Development of Love in Early
Sufism, *Journal of Islamic studies,* 18:3 (2007), p. 364.
[46] "the listener draws from it [the word *'ishq*] a spiritual meaning" [my translation]. During, Jean, "Le
grincement de la porte du paradis: La double structure du phénomène musical dans la culture islamique" in
*Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel zum 7. April 1992,
dargebracht von Schülern, Freunden und Kollegen*, Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (eds.) (Bern: New
York: Peter Lang, 1994), fn. 11, p. 173.
[47] See De Bruijn, J.T.P., *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Poems*
(Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), p. 55.

all be steps on the way toward the overturning of the self in pursuit of intimacy with God. The sufi tradition of the *qalandar* is significant in this regard. *Qalandars* would typically transgress Islamic law and socially and religiously appropriate behavior as a way of undoing their ego-centered investments in their reputations as good Muslims—what was seen as yet another obstacle to complete devotion to the divine and the overturning of every last trace of narcissistic investment in oneself. In this regard, de Bruijn states that: "The true follower of the Path of Love is equal to the *qalandar* dervish who is eager to sacrifice his good name as a pious Muslim for the sake of his total submission to the Beloved."[48] Likewise, as Javad Nurbakhsh explains: "From the perspective of the Sufis, as long as 'you' remain 'yourself', you cannot know God: the greatest veil between you and Reality is being 'yourself'. Only the fire of divine love can burn away this egocentricity."[49]

Embodied Vulnerability and Qudat's Slave-ring

Certain trajectories of the Islamic mystical tradition have thus elaborated the account of the experience of intimacy with the divine such as to enrich it with the extensive Arab and Islamic traditions of reflection upon the psychological experience of

---

[48] de Bruijn, J.T.P., *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Poems* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), p. 80.

[49] Nurbakhsh, Javad, "The Key Features of Sufism in the Early Islamic Period," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300),* Vol.I Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. xix. (xvii-xli). Following Annemarie Schimmel, we can identify several variations of this idea of submitting oneself fully to the beloved within Islamic sufi traditions. Even Iblis, the name of Satan in Islam, is sometimes described in this way insofar as his refusal to bow down before Adam is taken as a sign of the sincerity of his singular love for God and of his willingness to suffer damnation for this love. For this reason, some sufi texts will refer to Iblis as the only true monotheist. Schimmel reports of Sarmâd in this regard, a poet with a Judeo-Persian background at the Mughal court who was executed in 1661 for heresy. Sarmâd is reported to have stated: "Go, and learn the art of true service from Satan./ Choose *one* direction of prayer and don't fall down before anyone else!" Quoted in Schimmel, Annemarie, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 61.

human love. As such, and in addition to their deployment of scandal, these texts offer us

yet one more way to rethink the relationship between embodiment and discourse. Having

oriented themselves to God as lover, the sufis make use of the full range of literary

imagery of both profane and sacred love and of the account of profane desire and ecstasy

as it is typically censured by religion. In this regard, it is not just the emotional

experience of love—mostly negative or painful—but also the ecstasies of beauty and of

drunkenness that are mobilized, particularly in Persia, as the imagery of the experience of

the divine. Many sufis thereby subvert the language of censure, and risk censure

themselves, but also elaborate in highly nuanced and psychologically complex ways the

imagery for the experience of mystical union.

We find an example of an eroticized love scene in a text by the Persian sufi

Rûzbihân Baqli (d. 1209). The scene is as follows:

> They were standing before God, and Junayd and Abû Yazîd
> [Bistami] and several great masters saluted me, wishing to come
> nearer to God than I was. They all longed for him, and they
> shouted, turned away, and agitated, so that the world trembled
> from them. I saw God on a holy mountain, and he made me
> approach. The mountain was high, and God made me sit near
> him, and repeatedly poured me the wines of intimacy. He graced
> me in a form that I cannot tell to any of God's creatures, and he
> was unveiled and there manifested from him the lights of his
> beautiful attributes. The Sufis were on the foothill of that
> mountain, unable to ascend the mountain, and God called that
> mountain Mt. Greatness. The lights of the world of unicity were
> joined to that mountain. I was intoxicated there, in such a state
> that the people of the world would melt from the extreme beauty.
> God clothed me with the sublimities of his description, and he
> was scattering red roses on my face and tresses. A rose fell from
> my face in the midst of the Sufis, and they shouted at that and
> began to dance.[50]

---

[50] Ernst, Carl, *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 55.

This scene from Ruzbihan is a scene of love, and there are many ways in which it can be approached. The scene works precisely insofar as it mobilizes a multiplicity of experiences in relation to the divine beloved, each of which is a different mode of being under the beloved's control. In this regard, the scene incorporates the complicated emotions and the emotional risks of at least some forms of human love into its staging of intimacy with the divine. By staging an eroticized encounter as his illustration of the experience of mystical union, Ruzbihan's text is an example within the sufi tradition of deploying the passions of the human experience of love as a vehicle of religious devotion.

The mobilization of this level of psychological complexity is relevant within sufism if for no other reason than as a result of the sufi literary heritage of profane love poetry. Insofar as the heroes of secular love poetry provide the image of the suffering of the truly devote lover, this becomes an orientating feature for understanding the appropriate nature of religious devotion. We see this kind of sentiment expressed in statements like the one made by South Asian thirteenth century sufi Diyâ' al-Dîn Nakhshabî (d. 1350) when he writes "One who does not suffer from the pangs and distress of love / is not a human but a wild beast devoid of devotion."[51] To be able to suffer love is for Al-Dîn Nakhshabî a mark of our humanity. But this also means that love of God is often portrayed in terms of the longing and the madness that we find in the secular poetic contexts. Al-Asmaʿî reports of his interview with a Bedouin Arab that

---

[51] Excerpt taken from Simsar, Muhammed (trans.), *Tûtî-Nâma: Tales of a Parrot by Ziya' u'd-Din Nakhshabi* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), p. 131, Quoted in Kugle, Scott Alan, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 5.

"*Ishq* is a kind of madness. Madness has its varieties and *'ishq* is one of them.'"[52] The account of love at play in both secular and religious contexts is thus more often than not a matter of very negative emotions.[53]

A text by Persian sufi 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani (d 1132) is an example of just such a high degree of psychological complexity. There we find an erotically charged scene of intimacy with the divine that strongly incorporates the lover's abjection in the face of God as a physically dominating beloved.[54] Qudat al-Hamadani's text is as follows:

> Last night my idol put his hand upon my breast,
>   he seized me hard and put a slave-ring in my ear
> I said: "My beloved, I am crying from your love!"
>   He pressed his lips on mine and silenced me.[55]

This textual moment is ambiguous in several respects: It is not clear whether the beloved is divine or earthly, and therefore whether the love at issue is spiritual or carnal. It is not evident how we are to understand the physical force described in this stanza—whether it is to be understood as passion or as physical violence. The abjection of the lover by the beloved is communicated insofar as to put a slave ring in someone's ear is to claim him or her as one's slave. The torments of love-madness and love-sickness in the context of

---

[52] Ibn Qayyim al-Jauzîya, *Raudat al-Muhibbîn wa Nuzhat al-Mushtâqîn*, 139, quoted in Giffen, Lois Anita, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 64.

[53] See, for example, the discussion in Giffen, Lois Anita, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

[54] According to Leonard Lewisohn, abjection to the beloved in Persian Sufism is arguably modeled after the customary relationship between subjects and sovereign within the Persianate court. See in this regard Lewisohn, Leonard, "In Quest of Annihilation: Imaginalization and Mystical Death in the *Tamhîdât* of 'Ayn al-Qudât Hamadhânî," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300),* Vol.I, Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 288.

[55] From the *Tamhîdât* (Preliminaries), quoted in Ernst, Carl, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 157. The translation is by Ernst.

this abjection are given voice in the line "my beloved, I am crying from your love." The ambiguity exploited in this stanza between eroticism and violence and between consent and domination reaches its apex in the final line with the silencing of the lover through a kiss.

This is a love scene, in other words, but also a scene of abject devotion along with physical and psychological domination. As such, his Qudat al-Hamadani's text mobilizes the psychological effects of love in a manner consistent with what Claude-Claire Kappler writes in relation to the Persian novel *Vîs et Râmin*: "*L'amour passe le coeur au feu*"[56], and that to love, again following Kappler, is "*de devenir humble et nu, de reconnaître sa solitude et son désespoir.*"[57] In this regard, we are reminded of the Persian poet Hafiz and his interpretation of Qur'anic verse 33:72, which reads "We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: But man undertook it; —He was indeed unjust and foolish." The "Trust," according to Hafiz and his followers, is love, thus as Annemarie Schimmel writes of Hafiz's interpretation "the burden of love which heaven and earth refused to carry" was accepted by humans "without knowing what they were doing."[58] Qudat al-Hamadani's text in this regard can be read as a stunning example of the abject love that we find quite frequently in Persian sufi poetry.[59]

---

[56] "Love draws the heart through fire" [my translation]. Kappler, Claude-Claire, "La Beauté dans "Vîs et Râmin" puissance transformatrice, appel à l'Eveil," in Giese, Alma and Bürgel, J. Christoph (eds.), *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 318.
[57] "to become humble and naked, to recognize one's solitude and one's desperation" [my translation]. Kappler, Claude-Claire, "La Beauté dans "Vîs et Râmin" puissance transformatrice, appel à l'Eveil," in Giese, Alma and Bürgel, J. Christoph (eds.), *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 326.
[58] Schimmel, Annemarie, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 58.
[59] It is likewise the case that part of the spiritual path of the devotee in 12th century Persia was to love the shaykh. As Leonard Lewisohn writes, "the mystic must die to selfhood through love of God—a love which

Feminist politics *requires* that the line between consent and non-consent be unambiguously clear, and that violence and love be kept safely apart, yet the vicissitudes of attachment that begin with our psychological pre-history as infants is one in which these lines could not be drawn and these terms may not have always been clearly distinguishable or clearly kept apart. We might thus read Qudat al-Hamadani's text as resonate with the dilemma of the infant who is not in control, and who is utterly dependent upon forging attachments to his or her caregivers even when these caregivers are violent or neglectful.[60] That the "violence" in the Qudat al-Hamadani's poem is a kiss is thus perhaps not so far removed from the wager of the infant who counts on care but who is at the mercy of caregivers that he or she will not have chosen. So much has to do with the play of attachment and loss and with the intense emotions that multiply around these dynamics. In this regard, Qudat al-Hamadani's text engages with the very nature of the mystery of desire as a question of life and survival, of embodied vulnerability, and hence of the very material difference between biological flourishing and death.

How, then, does Qudat al-Hamadani's text help us to think about the relationship between embodiment and discourse? Qudat al-Hamadani's text blurs the line between consent and non-consent, and presents us with a highly eroticized scenes of physical and

---

is beheld in the mirror of the spiritual guide." See Lewisohn, Leonard, "In Quest of Annihilation: Imaginalization and Mystical Death in the *Tamhîdât* of 'Ayn al-Qudât Hamadhânî," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300),* Vol.I, Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 307. In this regard, the ambiguity within Qudat al Hamadani's and other Persianate texts with regard to identity of the beloved—whether earthly or divine—may reflect an essential dimension of sufi spiritual practice in that historical and geographical context—the context in which, moreover, "the term most central to the Persian sufi love tradition," says Joseph Lumbard, is "*'ishq.*" Lumbard, Joseph, "From *Hubb* to *'Ishq:* The Development of Love in Early Sufism, *Journal of Islamic studies,* 18:3 (2007), p. 357.

[60] See in this regard Judith Butler's recent work on embodied vulnerability, as in, for example, *Precarious Life* from 2006.

psychological domination, and it depends upon and purposely deploys this ambiguity.

Love is ambivalent, in other words, and for this love-madness with all its paradoxical and

ambivalent emotions can indeed be capable of overturning the "I" and pushing the

practitioner ever closer toward *fanâ*.[61] The ambiguities of the text are what for During

are the ambiguities of the emotions of love insofar as they are explored within the sufi

context, and wherein the identity of the beloved is left ambiguously unclear. As During

writes with regard to earthly versus divine love within the context of sufism:

> *Le lien entre les deux est évident: si leur objet et leur registre*
> *sont différents, il s'agit toujours de variations sur le mode de la*
> *séparation et de l'union, sur la peine et la joie, avec toutes les*
> *nuances émotionelles qui en résultent. Dans l'ensemble, ces*
> *passions sont totalement ambivalentes et paradoxales, apportant*
> *simultanément le plaisir et la douleur, la joie et la peine.[62]*

According to During, this is the way love, whether profane or divine, is explored within

at least some literary traditions of Islamic sufism. Or as al-Qudāt Hamadani states within

a different context, "The bread and butter of men is calamity and pain and adversity.

Their meals are set for lunch and dinner at the door of Iblis… It requires a man who is

detached from both the worlds and has become uniquely isolated in his contemplation, to

be able to eat pain in place of bread and water."[63] Love is at play, but love is a mystery

---

[61] "The connection between the two is evident: if their aim and their register are different, it consists always of variations on the mode of separation and union, on pain and joy, with all the emotional nuances that result. In the ensemble, the passions are totally ambivalent and paradoxical, bringing at once pleasure and sorrow, joy and pain" [my translation]. During, Jean, "Le grincement de la porte du paradis: La double structure du phénomène musical dans la culture islamique" in *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel zum 7. April 1992, dargebracht von Schülern, Freunden und Kollegen*, Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (eds.) (Bern: New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 173.

[62] During, Jean, "Le grincement de la porte du paradis: La double structure du phénomène musical dans la culture islamique" in *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel zum 7. April 1992, dargebracht von Schülern, Freunden und Kollegen*, Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (eds.) (Bern: New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 173.

[63] From Tamhîdât, p. 91, from one of the epistles. Quoted in Lewisohn, Leonard, "In Quest of Annihilation: Imaginalization and Mystical Death in the *Tamhîdât* of 'Ayn al-Qudât Hamadhânî," in *The Heritage of*

that emerges from a site of opacity and that is itself an ambiguous and paradoxical

phenomenon. To solve the mystery of love would be to illuminate an essential ground of

these texts, but these texts function precisely because love is their abyssal ground.

Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300), Vol.I Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 326.

CONCLUSION

What is the significance of the discourses and discursive practices of the Islamic

mystical tradition for the question of the relationship between discourse and

embodiment? In section one, we tracked the way in which Niffari's poem uses

conceptual incoherence produces anxieties and an indeterminate sense of endangerment

that can then feed into determinate images of physical and emotional danger. His text

alerts us, therefore, to the way in which moments of incoherence or disjunction can draw

out embodied anxieties that then attach to subsequent textual determinacies. His work

introduces us to a mode of reading that would have an eye for incoherence or

inconsistency—not in order to solve the incoherence and clarify the text, but rather to see

how this incoherence is experienced by its readers and then how this experience impacts

the rhetorical power of what follows in the text.

In the second section, we saw that certain discursively mediated practices and

certain mystical modes of textuality (the *shatahât*) must wait for bodily events whose

timing is essentially inscrutable, and in this regard we found a temporality at work

according to which mediation must wait for what it mediates. How can this passivity,

this resistance to intelligibility, and this particular temporality of having to wait help us

formulate a new mode of reading, either in the sense of reading texts or interpreting

events? This having-to-wait is shown to be the source of the rhetorical power of certain

practices and the justificatory anchor for certain controversial texts. We thus see that

certain bodily effects are worth mobilizing precisely because of this temporal dimension,

and hence that some competing interpretations and/or rhetorical effects count on the very limits of interpretation and/or of conceptual mastery in order to function as such. Having-to-wait can be more powerful rhetorically than conceptual transparency and mastery. In this regard, we would start to look for where those embodied phenomena that make us wait are put to work rhetorically in texts and practices, and hence where the *resistance* to intelligibility is how certain interpretations can become established. Such interpretations demonstrate their dependence upon aspects of embodiment that discursivity cannot control, shape, or master.

What understanding of the relationship between discourse and embodiment can we gather from the third and final section? On the one hand, the mobilization of heterogeneous texts in relation to one another requires a situated desire in order to preform this mobilization. Since *all texts are heterogeneous*, this means that all texts have a relationship to situated desire in some approximate way. The situatedness of desire that forms the heterogeneity of texts reminds us that all texts are heterogeneous and that they are formed at particular historical moments with specific purposes in mind. From its origins and throughout its history, any text will be engaged by a situated desire that will constitute the text's formation and its subsequent interpretation.

Second, certain tensions can exist in texts, and the manner in which these tensions are borne can vary immensely. In this regard, tensions can persist without issue, they can provoke discussion of how to ameliorate the tensions, and the tensions can be the source of energy in the form of provocation and scandal that are then mobilized precisely as such. Engagement with the multiple ways in which texts bear internal tensions enables us to keep this multiplicity in mind. We can learn to recognize thereby not only the

tensions themselves, but also the specific ways in which these tensions are present differently within any text, and way in which the mode of presence can differ across texts of the same tradition. We can become aware of the way in which tensions can be present without acknowledgement, when we are encountering rather an effort at accommodation, and finally when the tensions are being exploited for their rhetorical effects. Lastly, sometimes the most productive way of reading the ambiguities of certain texts is in relation to the ambiguities of our shared human vulnerability, and hence insofar as we bring these ambiguities to the experience of reading.

In all three sections, then, we found that certain discursive effects could not have their rhetorical force or power if we did not make reference, however obliquely, to ourselves as readers who are implicated in the vulnerabilites and investments of embodiment. Moreover, in each case the exact nature of this embodiment—of our vulnerabilities and investments—is never made clear by the texts and discursive practices, and yet these discourses had their force and power nonetheless. Indeed, it is the indeterminacy, the unreadability, or the reticent ambiguity of those traces of our embodiment as readers that makes these rhetorical effects effective, and hence it is the body's enigmatic presence in its unreadibility which is that upon which these discourses depend. In order to be able to read, in other words, and in order for these texts and practices to be able to speak, we are engaged as embodied beings, and hence as ambivalent, as opaque to ourselves, and yet as invested in what we read and what it will mean for our ability to survive and to love.

REFERENCES

De Bruijn, J.T.P., *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Poems* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997).

During, Jean, "Le grincement de la porte du paradis: La double structure du phénomène musical dans la culture islamique" in *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel zum 7. April 1992, dargebracht von Schülern, Freunden und Kollegen*, Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (eds.) (Bern: New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 153-180.

Enderwitz, Susanne, "Homesickness and Love in Arabic Poetry," in *Myths, Historical Archetypes, and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature* (Beirut: In Kommission bei Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1999), pp. 59-70.

Ernst, Carl, *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996).

------------, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

------------, "The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism, from Rābiʿa to Rūzbihān," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300), Vol.I,* Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999).

Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay (ed.) (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), pp. 584-588.

Al Ghitani, Gamal, *Pyramid Texts*, Hymphrey T. Davies (trans.) (Cairo: New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2007, ©1994).

Giffen, Lois Anita, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

Horowitz, Gregg M., *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Kappler, Claude-Claire, "La Beauté dans *Vis et Râmîn: puissance transformatrice, appel à l'Eveil*" in *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel zum 7. April 1992, dargebracht von Schülern, Freunden und Kollegen*, Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (eds.) (Bern: New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 305-330.

Levinas, Emmanuel, "*Time and the Other,*" in Sean Hand (ed.) *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989; this edition, 2000).

Lewisohn, Leonard, "In Quest of Annihilation: Imaginalization and Mystical Death in the *Tamhīdāt* of 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadhānī," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300), Vol.I* Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999).

Losensky, Paul (trans.), *Farid ad-Din 'Attār's Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009).

Lumbard, Joseph, "From *Hubb* to *'Ishq:* The Development of Love in Early Sufism, *Journal of Islamic studies,* 18:3 (2007), pp. 345-385.

Mason, Herbert, "Hallāj and the Baghdad School of Sufism, in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300), Vol.I* Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999).

Massignon, *Opera Minora II [Hallaj: Mystique, langue, et pensée islamiques]* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1969, ©1963).

Nurbakhsh, Javad, "The Key Features of Sufism in the Early Islamic Period," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300), Vol.I* Lewisohn, Leonard (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999).

Schimmel, Annemarie, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

------------, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

Simsar, Muhammed (trans.), *Tūtī-Nāma: Tales of a Parrot by Ziya' u'd-Din Nakhshabi* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978).