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THE POETICS OF THE BODY IN ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

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The category of the body is invested with an accumulation of meaning and significance, and it is far from obvious what “the body” does or ought to mean. The body is not, as one might presume, the locus of “nature” as opposed to “culture.” It is not the site of what is given to us without the mediations of language or history, and it does not provide the substrate for an overlay of religious, linguistic, historical, or literary significance. To the contrary, the category of the body is replete with historical meaning, and hence must be approached through the way it comes to appear in each historically determinate case. Far from being already available at the outset of any analytic engagement, the meaning of the body and of experiences of embodiment must be allowed to emerge in their specific historical shape, and must come to light through the rigors of attentive inquiry rather than presumed at the outset according to perpetually redeployed theoretical assumptions.

With this as our starting point, how might our understanding of the body evolve as we approach images of the body and of embodiment within the textual tradition of Islamic mysticism? How might the historical data yield new insight if the body were the focus of our questioning rather than a fixture of our methodology? Islamic mysticism is informed by a great number of discourses and practices, and extends from the early centuries of Islam to the present. Sacred and profane literatures, oral and textual histories, hagiographies, art, and ritual practices all bear upon the condensations of meaning that constitute Islamic mysticism’s most prominent moments and its many historical trajectories. How might regarding the body as a phenomenon in need of elucidation enable us to approach Islamic mysticism differently? How might we catch sight of both Islamic mysticism and the body in a new and different light?

What follows is an analysis of the way the body comes to appear within certain canonical discussions of mystical ecstasy. Our focus will be on images of the embodied event of mystical ecstasy itself. While there are many culturally and historically specific techniques for bringing mystical ecstasy about, what we find across these accounts is that ecstasy happens or not in a manner that is undergone rather than achieved. Rigorous, intentional action is brought together with passive undergoing, and in this way a certain vision of the body is produced.

Our inquiry into the category of the body will consider in particular the incalculable dimension of the embodied experience of ecstasy in relation to the workings of rigorous religious practice. What takes shape is a story about Islamic mystical experience in which the body occupies a very specific place and has a very specific role to play. Rather than something known, the body is the site and the occasion of an

event that is unknowable, unmasterable, and ungraspable, and yet that is overflowing with cultural and religious significance. *This* body—the body at the center of a specific category of unknowable and unmasterable embodied experience—is replete with meanings that link it to an expansive series of religious and literary images in Islamic mysticism, while at the same time coming to appear as the thing we cannot know.

The present essay proceeds in two parts. Part one considers the sufi practice of *dhikr*—the most common ritual employed for the sake of achieving unity or proximity with the divine. *Dhikr* names practices that have taken a wide variety of forms across different cultural and geographical landscapes. Our efforts will be focused on accounts of *dhikr* offered by a handful of canonical figures: Qushayrī, Tustarī, and Bistāmī. A consistent feature of practices of *dhikr* as represented by these figures is its reliance upon embodied passivity—a certain having to wait for the event of *fanāʾ*—where *fanāʾ* names the annihilation of the self through unity with the divine. Integral to *dhikr*’s demonstrative force is whether or not there is evidence that *fanāʾ* has taken place. Accordingly, practices of *dhikr* mobilize a complex relationship between the body and meaning that emerges through the dynamic between activity and control on the one hand and passivity and dependency on the other.

Part two considers the related phenomenon of the *shathiyāt*—sayings uttered when undergoing mystical ecstasy—paying particular attention to the *shathiyāt* of Bistāmī and Hallāj. For both these early Persian sufis, the legitimacy of their *shathiyāt* depends upon the degree to which they have in fact undergone an experience of *fanāʾ*. It is thus in association with a scene of opaque and incalculable embodied experience that the religious significance of these utterances is confirmed.

The “body” thus consists in those embodied aspects of the human being that suffice for the inscription of passivity in relation to something constituted as external and other—something, in other words, that does not appear as such, but that is attested to in the form of its effects on the practitioner’s embodied experience. The body names a certain passivity that manifests in a bodily way, and that is understood to signify a fundamental openness or exposure to something that has an impact on the self from beyond itself. Mystical experience is “sincere” if this passivity can be demonstrated, and the body takes shape as the primary site of demonstration.

Part 1. Dhikr’s Incalculable Ecstasies

Drawn from the traditions of Islamic mysticism, *dhikr*, or *dhikr asmaʾ allāh*, gets its name from the Arabic word meaning “remembering,” or “remembering the names of God,” and is used to refer to a wide range of practices designed to provoke ecstatic states of mystical union. These practices have been developed, diversified, and transformed over hundreds of years and across many cultural landscapes. Known principally outside the Islamic world through the meditative practices of the Turkish whirling dervishes, *dhikr* is the most widely recognized disciplinary practice within sufism for entering into proximity with the divine.¹

Most characteristic of the many practices of *dhikr* is that they involve the ritualized repetition of chants and/or dance—movements and vocalizations that are designed to bring the practitioner toward proximity or unity with God. The chants and ritualized movements will vary depending upon time and place, as will the manner and the degree to which both men and women participate. But what *dhikr* classically involves is a ritual of repetition intended to cultivate events of mystical undergoing. The practices of *dhikr* in their many forms are thus examples of often highly regulated, explicitly repetitive, and fully embodied actions or vocalizations through which the body comes to appear as a site of profound religious significance.

How might we begin to analyze this way of appearing of the body as it occurs within practices of *dhikr*? One place to start is insofar as practices of *dhikr* have historically been a source of controversy. A defense of rituals such as *dhikr* was put forward by no less than the brothers Ahmad and Abū Hāmid Ghazālī in the early twelfth century. This defense depended on 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.”² In this regard, the ecstasies of *dhikr* are such that they risk the undergoing of non-religious ecstasies; hence, the body comes to appear as a source of potentially dangerous or illicit ambiguity.

We find a historical example elaborating the nature of a similar risk in the *Tartīb al-Sulūk* (The structure of wayfaring)—a text that is attributed, with uncertainty, to the eleventh-century Persian sufi Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1074). This text affirms the widely held notion that, through *dhikr*, the practitioner may undergo *fanāʾ* as an essential stage along the way to achieving mystical union. Qushayrī’s account presents us with the image of a practitioner in the throes of an acute experience in which “there is no part of his flesh and bones in which he does not feel a movement and a convulsion.”³ Such movements and convulsions increase “until they are transformed into voices and words so that the person hears voices in all his limbs and bodily parts.”⁴

Qushayrī’s text also teaches the practitioner the ways to tell the difference, as Ahmet Karamustafa explains, “between ‘thoughts’ (*khawātir*) that came from God and those that originated from Satan during recollection.”⁵ One of these ways is to test the content of the thoughts against the tenets of the religion. But when Iblīs (Satan), in his trickery, sends thoughts that are consistent with sanctioned theological and ethical commitments, one can sometimes tell because, as Qushayrī writes, an unpleasantness accompanies the thoughts “like food which has no salt in it.”⁶

What can we gather about the coming to appear of the body as described in Qushayrī’s account of the ecstasies of *dhikr*? Qushayrī’s text suggests that the experience entails an amplification of feelings and sensations such that the many parts and limbs of the body speak while the practitioner listens. The body has become an active source of mystical sense-making while the practitioner himself is passive. The practitioner’s passivity is further affirmed by the ambiguity of the *khawātir*—an ambiguity

that cannot be completely assuaged through taking refuge in the explicit tenets of the religion. On the contrary, the body itself, beyond or independent of the intentionality of the practitioner, provides the clues as to whether the *khawātir*'s source is divine or demonic (the taste in the mouth of food without salt). The body knows something that the practitioner can only learn by attending to the embodied quality of the mystical experience, and this non-conceptual knowledge provided by the body takes precedence over the practitioner's knowledge of relevant theology. At stake is the source of the thoughts rather than the thoughts themselves, in other words, and this source is unknown to the practitioner, but known in a specifically bodily way by the practitioner's body.

In the thought of Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896), as transmitted by Abū Nu'aim al-Isfahānī (d. 1038), we find an analogy between the nutrition required for the body and the sustenance required for the spiritual self with regard to *dhikr* when Tustarī states that "the daily diet is the constant commemoration of God (*al-dhikr al-dā'im*)."⁷ In his commentary on the Qur'an, Tustarī makes a similar connection in the distinction he draws between two kinds of sustenance—*dhikr* on the one hand and food and drink on the other—the former of which he associates with the angels. Tustarī writes:

[T]he provision which is remembrance (*dhikr*) is for the spiritual self (*nafs al-rūh*), the intellect (*'aql*) and the heart (*qalb*) like the livelihood of the angels. Their life is by virtue of the commemoration of God (*dhikr*). When it is kept away from them they die.⁸

Just as the human body needs food and drink in order to survive, the angels need *dhikr*. And for the human being as a spiritual being, the "daily diet" also includes *dhikr*. If food is for the sake of the body and *dhikr* is for the sake of our *nafs al-rūh*, our *'aql*, and our *qalb*, then it looks as though the body is not that part of ourselves engaged by the ecstasies of *dhikr*. To the contrary, the body appears in this regard as the site of the material in contrast to the spiritual.

Nevertheless, further engagement with Tustarī's thought reveals that his account of the ecstasies of *dhikr* complicates whatever conclusions we might otherwise draw about the status of the body. As quoted by Tustarī's student Muhammad ibn Sālim (d. 909), and within the context of a discussion of the ninety-nine names of God, Tustarī states that "the real is a raging fire. There is no way there. There is no choice but to plunge into it."⁹ To say that "there is no way there" is to say that the practices engaged in, in order to bring about mystical ecstasy, are fundamentally insufficient to their purpose. In this regard, the body is the site of intentional activity inextricably intertwined with profound passivity. Karamustafa, in his discussion of Tustarī's ideas about *dhikr*, writes: "it became clear to the recollector that the true agent of recollection was not the believer engaged in recollection but God Himself, who commemorated Himself in the heart of the believer."¹⁰ The passivity of the practitioner is thus central to Tustarī's understanding of *dhikr*, and this implies a coming to appear of the body according to the simultaneity of both embodied activity and passive embodied undergoing.

The notion that achieving unity with the divine is beyond the reach of human intentionality is a common theme within the history of sufism, and is often a locus for

the emergence of images of the body and of embodiment that differ from classical sufi theology. We find it, for example, in the thought of one of the earliest canonical mystics: Bāyazīd al-Bastāmī (d. 874), also known as Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī. In a discussion that specifically references practices of *dhikr*, Bistāmī states the following:

I erred in the beginning in four things. I thought that I was remembering him, recognizing him, loving him, and seeking him. Finally I realized that his remembrance preceded my remembrance; his act of recognition preceded my act of recognition; his love was older than my love; he sought me first so that I could then seek him.¹¹

Bistāmī is quoted in the twelfth-century *Commentary on Ecstatic Expressions (Sharh-i Shathiyāt)* of the Persian sufi Rūzbihān Baqlī.¹² According to Rūzbihān's text, Bistāmī states that it was only after he gave up formal practice of *dhikr* that he achieved mystical union.¹³

Bistāmī's account is consistent with the distinction made within Islamic mysticism more generally between the stations and the states of sufi practice (*maqāmāt* and *ahwāl*, respectively), according to which the stations are arranged in order and are a part of sufi discipline while the states are gifts of God. The practitioner can engage in actions laid out as the stages, but reception of the states is not necessarily the outcome. In the manuals of sufi practice that emerged in the tenth and eleventh centuries, as Carl Ernst explains, "there were whole ranges of spiritual states that were far beyond the control of the individual"; these are then reflected in the existence of an elaborate terminology for the many dimensions of such states.¹⁴ The rigors of sufi practice work in tandem with these unmasterable embodied events in order to produce the experience and the meaning of mystical ecstasy. In this regard, the practitioner's body appears once again as engaged embodied activity together with unpredictable and uncontrolled rapture.

We find further examples of the embodied passivity of the practitioner in relationship to the states within anecdotal stories in which the states are sometimes undergone even by non-sufis. A famous example is of a Luri tribesman, as relayed by the Persian sufi Najīb al-Dīn Buzghush of the thirteenth century (d. 1280). Buzghush cites the speech of the tribesman as follows:

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.¹⁵

The key to the theological significance of this anecdote is to be found in the emphasis it places on what makes the protagonist an unlikely candidate for receiving the states. His complete disinterest in sufism prior to the moment of revelation suggests that he is not likely to have wanted to fake undergoing a spiritual experience. He is, as it were, devoid of sufi preconceptions and sufi ambitions, and this helps substantiate that the source of the event was divine. His experience of the states is further

attested to by the miracle of falling under the horses' hooves and yet remaining uninjured. Most importantly, what we have here is an image of dramatic bodily passivity taking precedence over details about the divine unity as it was revealed in this event of undergoing. What makes this event legitimate, in other words, is not what the person is able to say about what he saw, but the image of his embodied experience of undergoing and hence of the bodily effects of his mystical experience.

In these descriptions and discussions of *dhikr* and in sufi practice more generally, a temporal separation thus occurs between the invitation of the desired embodied event and the event itself. An abyss opens between the embodied state being sought and the embodied intentional activity that seeks to bring it about, and this abyss is essential to the way in which the body comes to appear within these canonical accounts of sufi practice. One can prepare the ground, and one can engage in practices that strive toward certain states through disciplined repetition, but one is nevertheless passively in attendance in relation to events of undergoing that are forever outside the reach of human intention.

Part 2. The Inflamed Speaking of the Shathiyāt

Mobilizing in a meaningful way the incalculability of ecstatic experience has been critical with regard to the *shathiyāt*, or ecstatic utterances, whose status has been an issue with regard to the defense of sufism from the beginning. In the historical debates concerning the *shathiyāt*, justification often depends upon proof of 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 the value of the ecstatic utterances are radically called into question.

The structure of such justification is as follows. The *shathiyāt* are statements made when the speaker is in the throes of ecstasy, and as a result 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 controversial *shathiyāt*—Bistāmī's "Glory be to me" and Hallāj's "I am the truth." The acceptability of these statements depends upon whether God is speaking through a human vessel. For this to be the case, the self of the speaker must have been annihilated (*fanā'*) as a part of the event of ecstasy. And this means that there is a presumed scene of embodied undergoing that undergirds the authority of this form of religious discourse.

These legitimating associations are indicative of a much wider effort within Islamic mysticism concerning *fanā'*. From the earliest period of Islamic mysticism, many sufis thought that attachment to the self was the greatest obstacle to achieving intimacy with the divine. We find this, for example, in early sufism's great synthesizer, Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 910), for whom *fanā'* was crucial for attaining a condition that would allow one adequately to affirm the unity of God, or *tawhīd*.¹⁶ In *The Affirmation of Unity*, Junayd writes, "Know that you are veiled from yourself by yourself," and "the unity of the affirmer of unity abides through the abiding of the one who is one, even as the affirmer of unity passes away."¹⁷ For Junayd, the uni-

ty of God belies any substantiality that we would normally attribute to our individual existence, and undergoing *fanā'* is an appropriate expression of such ontological insubstantiality.¹⁸

The connection between the embodied experience of *fanā'* and the theological position of *tawhīd* is taken over and further developed in the twelfth-century mystical notion of *wahdat al-wujūd*, the “oneness of being,” as it becomes associated with the school of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240). That said, the radical implications of *fanā'* are already apparent in the thought of Bistāmī. The tenth-century sufi Abū Nasr al-Sarrāj transmits to us what is taken to be a report of Bistāmī speaking to God about *fanā'*.¹⁹ Bistāmī states that he said “Adorn me with your unity, clothe me with your subjectivity, and take me up to your oneness, until when your creation sees me they say ‘We have seen you’ and you will be *that*, and I will not be there.”²⁰ Later in this same text, Bistāmī is quoted as describing the event of *fanā'* as follows:

Then passing away (*fanā'*) vanishes from passing away and is lost in its passing away. . . . This is the reality of the nonexistence (*faqd*) of everything and the nonexistence of the self after that, and the nonexistence of nonexistence in nonexistence, and the becoming dust in obliteration, and the disappearance from disappearance. This is something that has no duration nor any ascertainable moment.²¹

Bistāmī’s rendering of *fanā'* involves several discrete moments. In addition to the annihilation of the self, there is also the annihilation of the annihilation, and hence the annihilation of the awareness of having been annihilated. This is followed by an experience of the annihilation of all reality, and then by the annihilation of even the temporal space of the event of annihilation. What we see, therefore, is an interrelated vision of experience and of reality through which ever more fundamental ontological and epistemological layers are peeled away in the process of *fanā'*. Where might we situate the body in all this, if not as the site and of the collapse of these multiple layers: the loss of self and of the sense of self, the loss of the world and of the sense of the world, and the lost of time and of the sense of time? The practitioner’s embodied undergoing of *fanā'* would be the occasion of the revelation of ontological insubstantiality—both our own and the world’s—as disclosed through these progressive stages.

To understand the *shathiyāt* as a unique genre is to recognize that they constitute a form of discourse (and sometimes non-discursive action) made legitimate through reference to the presumed scene of ecstasy that includes *fanā'* and that we initially approached through our discussion of the practices of *dhikr*. The case of Bistāmī’s most famous *shathiyāt* makes this apparent: as one of the first sufis to be associated with the idea of a mystic lover drunk with love,²² Bistāmī is notorious for several *shathiyāt*, including, “Glory be to Me! How great is My majesty!” (*subhānī! mā a’za-ma sha’nī!*) and “I am He” (*anā huwa*).²³ The second example provides the interpretive key for the first: “I am He,” hence *fanā'*, has been achieved, and so “Glory be to Me” is a statement from God with Bistāmī’s voice serving as the instrument. Essential to the justification of Bistāmī’s *shathiyāt* is thus that they were spoken while Bistāmī was undergoing an experience of the extinction of his awareness of self. Without the

presumption of this embodied event, Bistāmī's *shathiyāt* can be construed as heretical statements of self-deification. The associated scene of ecstatic undergoing is thus integral to the religious significance of Bistāmī's speech.

The embodied passivity that is essential to the *shathiyāt* becomes the anchor for the way in which the body of mystical ecstasy is likewise constituted through sufism's rich literary patrimony. We find this, for example, when Sarrāj defends Bistāmī's *shathiyāt* through making explicit reference to the love story of Majnūn and Layla. Majnūn—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 Majnūn-Layla story that Sarrāj uses in his defense of Bistāmī's *shathiyāt*. Sarrāj writes:

When the secret of the heart of the ecstatic (*wājid*) is overcome by the remembrance of the one in whom he has found rapture (*wajada bihi*), he depicts all his conditions with the attributes of his beloved. In this way Majnūn of the Banī 'Amir 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."²⁴

Majnūn's retreat into the wilderness and into the company of beasts is a testament to the profundity of his loss of self.²⁵ For this literary tradition, such loss is evidence of the suffering of a sincere lover and of an overwhelming and all-consuming love. Majnūn's final transformation—the collapse of his independent identity—is here taken over by Sarrāj in his descriptions of the nature of mystical union. Sarrāj's defense of Bistāmī's *shathiyāt* is that they were uttered under the force of a Majnūn-like love.

We find similar literary and religious complexity with regard to the *shathiyāt* of Husayn Ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj (d. 922), whose most controversial *shath* is "*anā al-Haqq*" or "I am the Truth." A defense of Hallāj's *shathiyāt* is given by twelfth-century Persian sufi and hagiographer Farīd al-Dīn Muhammad Ibn Ibrāhīm, known as 'Attar (d. 1220)—a defense that makes explicit reference to the image of the burning bush that spoke to Moses (Qur'an 28:30). Although the voice of God comes to Moses through the burning bush, Moses does not therefore conclude that the burning bush is itself speaking.²⁶ In the same way, when Hallāj says "I am the Truth," it is not Hallāj that is speaking, but God speaking through Hallāj. The Qur'anic image is thereby refigured so that it becomes an image of *fanā'*, and in this way is used to support the legitimacy of Hallāj's *shathiyāt*.²⁷

The religious and literary endowment in Hallāj is apparent as well in his *TāSīn*. In the dialogue that Hallāj constructs between Muhammad and Iblis, Iblis interprets his banishment through the Arabic and Persian literary figure of the sincere lover, and joins this figure with that of the mystical lover in spiritual unity with the divine. In his answer to Muhammad, Iblis states, "Even if I am abandoned, / abandonment will be my companion. / How can it be abandonment / while love is one?"²⁸ Iblis' banishment, brought about by his refusal to bow down before anyone but God, is refigured through the image of the lover who suffers anything so as not to betray the beloved—a rendering that is consistent with the suffering and the exile of such famous lovers as

Majnūn.²⁹ Hallāj's Iblis then extends the implications of his love with reference to divine oneness by further announcing that his banishment is only apparent. Iblis, lover of the beloved God, is one with God like a mystic in the throes of *fanā'*, and he appears as banished only to those who are unable to recognize love as a state in which abandonment no longer has a place.

Hence, as we saw with Bistāmī, so also with Hallāj; there is a certain formulation of the nature of embodiment at the heart of the traditional defenses given for the *shathiyāt*. The rhetorical linchpin is the enigmatic occurrence of an embodied event that is determined as in excess of human intentionality and understanding. All the religious, literary, and cultural resonance of Bistāmī's and Hallāj's *shathiyāt* is situated in history here—in these images of the drama of mystical ecstasy. The spoken *shathiyāt*, as productive of a unique genre of religious literature, often resonate with the literary context in which sufism is embedded and to which sufism contributes. At the same time, and in related ways, this genre brings with it reference to a scene of embodied undergoing, and hence to a particular image of the body.

Conclusion

There are at least two ways to ask the question of the body in relation to any religious, literary, or philosophical tradition. The first is with regard to the historically developing and potentially conflicting things that the tradition says about the body. The second, and the one principally at issue here, is with regard to how a certain vision of the body comes to appear within images and accounts of religious practice. In pursuit of the latter, we have found that some of the most important medieval references to *dhikr* and to the *shathiyāt* make bodily existence present as the site of the coincidence between inscrutability and literary significance on the one hand and between activity and passivity on the other. Such images of the body differ from and complicate the images that we found, for example, in certain aspects of Tustarī's thought and that rely upon the opposition between the spiritual and the bodily.

Hence, there is a relationship to a scene of embodied undergoing at the heart of sufi mystical practice. It is a scene that confirms a certain heterogeneity at the heart of the practitioner's existence, and which I have called "the body" because it is produced as bodily. This bodily otherness takes shape in the modes of embodied passivity and embodied opacity, and is essential to the claim that the practitioner has approached unity with the divine without usurping the place of divinity. It is this version of the body that makes evident something in excess of the practitioner's intentions and control within the event of mystical ecstasy. This image of the body thus serves as one of the primary ways in which mystical ecstasy is held rigorously apart from the heresy of self-deification.

The image of the body of mystical ecstasy can be further developed through resonance with religious and secular literatures as these come to bear upon how the ecstatic body is represented, legitimated, and defended. In this regard, the enigmatic body of religious practice can be found to be replete with historically determinate significance and with a wide range of religious and secular imagery and meaning.

What I have tried to show through this analysis of *dhikr* and of some of the most famous *shathiyāt* is that they share a fundamental relationship to a scene of embodied mystical ecstasy that determines the body in a very particular way. These visions of the experience of ecstasy represent a distinctive coming to appear of the body, in which the body is ungraspable and unmasterable, and yet also the occasion for religious and literary images and ideas to find new life and to take flight. As such, the body as it comes to appear in the textual rendering of these practices and events is crucial to the legitimacy of mystical experience, and forms a fundamental point of reference for the trans-generational, multicultural, and trans-geographical endeavor that is Islamic mysticism.

Notes

- 1 – From early on in the history of Islamic mysticism we find a focus on ecstatic events. Historian Michael Dols writes: “At the center of sufism was implanted the expectation of a personal mystical experience, and its achievement became a clear sign of being a *walī*. . . .” Dols attributes this in part to the influence of Hallāj. See Dols, *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society*, p. 383.
- 2 – See de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, p. 69.
- 3 – Qushayrī, “*Tartīb al-Sulūk*,” p. 126.
- 4 – Ibid.
- 5 – Karamustafa, *Sufism*, p. 119.
- 6 – Qushayrī, *Tartīb al-Sulūk*, p. 128.
- 7 – Abū Nu‘aim al-Isfahānī, *Hilyat al-Awliyā’*, X, 208; quoted in Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*, p. 204.
- 8 – Tustarī, *Kitāb Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, 77; quoted in Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*, p. 204.
- 9 – Excerpted and translated into English in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 95.
- 10 – Karamustafa, *Sufism*, p. 41.
- 11 – The quote comes to us through the tenth-century treatise by Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī (d. 1021), *Tabaqāt al-Awliyā’* (Ranks of the Friends of God), translated in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 238.
- 12 – Rūzbihān al-Baqlī al-Shīrazī (d. 1209).
- 13 – As Bistāmī states, “For thirty years I was hidden from God. My absence from Him is my recollection (*dhikr*) of Him. When I refrained (from *dhikr*), I saw Him in every state, to such a degree that it was as if I were He” (Baqlī, *Sharh-i Shathiyāt*, 65 Shathiyāt 23, n. 22; quoted in Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, p. 26).

- 14 – Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, p. 115.
- 15 – ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Nafahāt al-Uns* (Breezes of intimacy), quoting Najīb al-Dīn Buzghush (d. 1280); quoted in Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, p. 116.
- 16 – As Karamustafa explains, “Junayd thought that when the human individual approached God with his customary sense of being a self-contained, separate entity, it proved impossible for him to affirm God’s unity since his own self-consciousness imprisoned him in himself. The only solution was for him to ‘pass away from his sense of self’, *fanā’*, and thus to arrive at God’s presence denuded of his own individuality. Only when all awareness of self disappeared through a total annihilation of self-consciousness was it possible to talk of ‘affirmation of God’s unity’ or *tawhīd*” (Karamustafa, *Sufism*, p. 16).
- 17 – Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 255.
- 18 – Following Carl Ernst’s book-length discussion of the *shathiyāt* in *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, it is significant that Junayd incorporates the striving for *fanā’* in his understanding of sufism, given that he promoted a sufism of “sobriety” (*sahw*), as opposed to what he saw as Bistāmī’s sufism of drunkenness (*sukr*). It is also significant that Junayd collected several of Bistāmī’s *shathiyāt*, and that several *shathiyāt* are attributed to Junayd himself. See Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, p. 11.
- 19 – Abū Nasr al-Sarrāj (d. 988).
- 20 – Chapter 124 of Sarraj’s *Kitāb al-Luma’*, translated in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 218.
- 21 – Sarraj, *Kitāb al-Luma’*, in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 223.
- 22 – Bistāmī is one of the first mystics to introduce the word ‘*ishq* in place of *hubb* to describe the love of the sufi toward God—a substitution that remains highly controversial because of the erotic overtones of ‘*ishq*. Prior to Bistāmī’s usage, we have attestation as early as the eighth century in the work of ‘Abd al-Wāhid ibn Zayd (d. 793) of the school of Basra. See Ernst, “The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism,” p. 438; Massignon, *Opera Minora*, Tome II, *Hallaj*, pp. 246–247; and Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs*, pp. 86–87. Scholars had previously attributed the introduction of the word to Abū al-Hassan al-Nūrī (d. 907). See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 137. For further discussion, see Lumbard, “From *Hubb* to ‘*Ishq*,” pp. 345–385.
- 23 – Karamustafa, *Sufism*, p. 4.
- 24 – Chapter 125 of Sarraj’s *Kitāb al-Luma’*, in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 69.
- 25 – This is consistent, for example, with the version we find in ‘Abd Allah Hātifi (d. 1521). However, Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab’s penetrating analysis of the twelfth-century rendering by the Persianate poet Nizāmī (d. 1209) provides

compelling evidence for a contrary position. According to Seyed-Gohrab, the image of Majnūn surrounded by beasts supports the view that Nizāmī's Majnūn is a king "without throne and crown" (referencing the story of Kay Khusrau), and hence that Majnūn is of kingly character despite his self-imposed exile. Majnūn is not insane, therefore, but rather spiritually advanced, and the animals know it. He has turned against human society out of the nobility of his soul. See Seyed-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*, pp. 115–125.

- 26 – As Ernst explains, "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 Hallāj said, 'I am the Truth,' it was really God who spoke, since Hallāj was not really there" (Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, p. 117).
- 27 – Hallāj's *shathiyāt* were eventually used as evidence against him and as justification for his public execution. The circumstances of his death are then reinterpreted within the tradition as integral to what it means to unhinge the self as a result of one's love for the divine. Herbert Mason writes, "Hallāj 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, "Hallāj and the Baghdad School of Sufism," p. 67). The political climate surrounding Hallāj may also have made his *shathiyāt* valuable as justification for what must then be regarded as a political execution.
- 28 – Hallāj, *TāSīn of Before-Time and Ambiguity in the Understanding of Understanding Concerning the Validity of Proclamations with Inversion of Meanings*, translated in Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 275.
- 29 – Sells writes in this regard, "what seems to be Iblis's most arrogant claim of intimacy and even union with the deity is at the same time his lover's claim of total servitude to the beloved, a paradox found in the poetic tradition but heightened by Iblis's mixing of the poetic tradition with the theology of fate and free will and with Sufi meditations on mystical union" (Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 366).

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