

The story begins in the 1950s. It was during those years that I began to be burdened with concern for the future of the Koran. Toward the end of that decade I had the opportunity to attend, on a regular basis, some of the foremost “recitation” sessions (*maqāriʿ*) in Cairo and to listen to the chanting of some of the most accomplished Koran-readers of the time. As I listened, I could not but contemplate remorsefully the tremendous loss that the passing away of these readers, so skilled and so learned, yet not likely to be succeeded by readers of equal stature, would mean to the world of Islam. Whenever I learned of the death of a famous reader, I was deeply saddened, for I knew that the vocal treasures of the great readers were in many cases not passed on to successors, but were buried with them in their graves, forever lost. The art of chanting the Koran was, in short, in danger of extinction.

—Lābib al-Said, *The Recited Koran*

Not all texts are for reading. Of course, the word *text* itself contradicts this idea. Discourse from a textual standpoint is not so much expression as ciphering and concealing, that is, plotting and weaving, layering and folding, structuring and packing; and these are metaphors that call for reading in the strong modernist sense of analytical action. Texts impose tasks that it seems natural for us to characterize in the language of instrumental reason—of grasping and penetrating, getting on top of and breaking down, unpacking and laying bare. The text is an object defined by our ability to reduce and explain it, to command its processes and results, to weave and reweave it as we will. Whereas, by contrast, there was a time when it seemed natural to conceive the hermeneutical task as a quest romance, with the reader at risk in a world made up of impenetrable walls, secret caves, dense forests, mystic gardens, disembodied voices, whirlpools, labyrinths, mists, crypts, knots, veils, dreams, riddles, curses, and coats of many colors. The Qurʾān, for example, is “a sea without a shore.”¹ One cannot become the master of such a text.

In fact, it is not enough to speak of the Qur'ān as a text. Rather, it is the recitation (*qur'ān*) of a text that only God has seen, the *umm al-kitāb*, literally, "Mother of the Book."² God sent the Angel Gabriel (Jabra'il) to recite this heavenly book to Muhammad, who received it in bits and pieces over a period of more than twenty years (610–32), committing it to memory and perhaps recording some of it in writing, for although the Prophet (it is said) could not read or write he had an amanuensis named Zaid ibn Thābit. Muhammad recited in turn to his Companions, who also memorized the recitation and likewise had portions of it written down, but after the Prophet's death many of the Companions were slain in battle and there was a real possibility that the Qur'ān would be lost. So Zaid ibn Thābit was ordered by Muhammad's successor, Abū Bakr, to gather together the various surviving fragments of memory and text and to produce a compilation. ("I wrote it," Zaid says, "on page-size pieces of hide, small pieces of scapula and palm leaves.")³ But there were other compilations in circulation as well, and discrepancies among them led to uncertainty as to what counted as the true Qur'ān. Accordingly, Abū Bakr's successor, the Caliph 'Uthman, instructed Zaid to compare the different versions with the Abū Bakr collection and to produce from all available materials an official text, the so-called "Uthmānic Recension." 'Uthmān then ordered all unofficial copies destroyed.

As a consonantal text, however, the 'Uthmānic Qur'ān left open the question of how it was to be vocalized; in fact, because not all consonants could be distinguished from one another, different traditions of reading developed—where, crucially, reading means *qirā'a*, or recitation. In 322 A.H. (932 C.E.) Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid reduced the various systems of vocalization to an official seven, one each from Medina, Mecca, Damascus, and Basra, and three from Kūfa. Two versions of these seven were handed down, and there are other variations allowed as well, but basically there remain seven authorized modes of recitation, in keeping with the idea that God sent down the Qur'ān in seven dialects of Arabic. These traditions of *qirā'at*, preserved in formal schools that trace their lineage back to the second and third centuries A.H., are more authoritative than any text for determining the official version of the Qur'ān.⁴ Thus when the standard or authorized version of the Qur'ānic text was produced in Egypt in 1923–24, it was based, against all rules of bibliographical method, on the "science of recitations" (*ilm al-qirā'at*) rather than on reigning manuscript traditions. Moreover, the text itself does not determine how it is to be vocalized, that is, its points and diacritical marks are not themselves canonical, which is why, when committing the Qur'ān to memory, one must memorize not the written text but one or more of the authoritative recitations. In addition,

Qur'ānic recitation is governed by a discipline known as *Tajwīd*, or rules for the articulation of sounds, including nasality, breathing, pauses, beginnings and endings, duration of syllables, and so on. And there are further disciplines still, depending on whether one's recitation is melodic or chanted.⁵

To speak strictly, the *qirā'at* constitute the mode of existence of the Qur'ān; as a text the Qur'ān exists only within quotation marks. The Qur'ān cannot be fixed as a text, even though the texts (*muṣḥafs*: roughly, written versions or copies) are fixed and remarkably consistent with one another. The hermeneutical consequences of this fundamental orality are many and complex. For example, the translation of the Qur'ān is not so much forbidden as it is materially or, say, ontologically impossible. Arabic is not only a literary language but a living vernacular from which the Qur'ān cannot be extracted. In a similar way, Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*, *ta'wīl*) is quintessentially an exegesis of the ear, since the eye alone cannot know what it is reading. This does not mean that the Qur'ān is not for study and that one should not search the text and meditate upon its smallest detail; but each detail is accessible only through listening. The question of what a critical reading of the Qur'ān might look like is therefore hard to formulate. A critical reading presupposes interrogation rather than listening; that is, in a critical reading one reflects oneself out of the space of the text and places it in a space of one's own, before one's gaze, under one's scrutiny—makes it, literally, a suspect. But one cannot, strictly speaking, hold the Qur'ān in one's hands (away from oneself) in this way; rather, as a recitation the Qur'ān surrounds us with itself, fills the space we inhabit, takes it over and ourselves in the bargain. The whole movement of reading as an appropriation or internalizing of a text is reversed. Here there is no grasping and unpacking and laying the text bare. On the contrary, reading is participation. To understand the Qur'ān is to disappear into it.

One can begin to get a sense of what this means from Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics, which he developed in the eighth book of his *Ihyā' 'ulūm ad-dīn* ("The Revival of the Religious Sciences").⁶ Al-Ghazālī (d. 505 A.H. / 1111 C.E.) was an Islamic legal scholar and theologian who is perhaps best known in the West for having mastered Greek philosophy expressly to refute it, which he did in a famous text, the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, or *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.⁷ Al-Ghazālī's life is the classic tale of the wise man who experiences the groundlessness of school-knowledge and abandons an illustrious career as a teacher for a life of solitude, meditation, and pilgrimage. In his autobiographical *al-Munqidh min aḍalāl* ("Error and Deliverance"), al-Ghazālī gives an account of his spiritual crisis and journey from theology, philosophy, and authorized religious

instruction (*taʿlīm*) to the “mystic way [*tarīqa*]” of Sufism, where the goal is a pure, unmediated relationship with God, in which one enters into the experience of God’s absolute self-identity (the so-called Doctrine of Unification, or *tawhīd*).⁸

The centerpiece of *al-Munqidmin aḍalāl*, however, is an account of prophecy that characterizes the prophetic calling as a life of the Good Physician who cures the diseases of the mind and spirit. Like one of Plato’s visionaries, al-Ghazālī saw that his obligation was not to repudiate the world but to return to it and restore it to health; specifically, this meant a return to academic life and an attempt to renew philosophy and religion by linking them prophetically or mystically to “a sphere beyond reason.”⁹ Basic to the Şūfī way is the idea that knowledge is empty unless it is connected internally with what is known. Reason always means knowledge at a distance, across the mediation of language and concepts; but wisdom presupposes something like the intimacy of becoming what one knows. “What a difference there is,” al-Ghazālī writes in his autobiography, “between *knowing* the definition of health and satiety, together with their causes and presuppositions, and *being* healthy and satisfied!” (p. 55). Only the mystics can raise knowledge to the level of *gnosis* (*maʿrifa*), in which one experiences what one knows with all the intimacy of being, and this means above all the unmediated experience of God, where one no longer retains any sense of one’s self (a condition of self-annihilation or self-abandonment known as *fanāʾ*) but is absorbed completely into God’s being (*baqāʾ*).¹⁰ But al-Ghazālī’s idea was that this experience is meant not to replace philosophy and religion but to fulfill them, to provide their foundation and purpose. And the same is true for hermeneutics, where the point is not simply to understand the Qurʾān in the usual exegetical style but to achieve a gnostic experience of it.

The basic structure of al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutics derives from his intellectual journey away from received philosophy and authorized teaching toward the condition of seeing with one’s own eyes, that is, toward the primacy of mystical experience as against the authority of established exegesis. Nothing is more reprehensible to al-Ghazālī than the blind following (*taqlīd*) of what others have taught. At the same time, however, mysticism is not subjectivism or antinomianism, that is, it is not simply the substitution of one’s own exegesis for what is established and authoritative; rather, it is an encounter with the text that is unmediated by any construction of meaning, whether traditional or otherwise. In the mystical event, there is no longer any subject separated from its object; there is no self left to assert against tradition. This last point is an important one, because al-Ghazālī’s purpose is to square his hermeneutics with what appears to be the Qurʾān’s

prohibition against overinterpretation and readings that turn the text against itself. The Qurʾān is unique among sacred texts for the way it repeatedly insists on its vernacular clarity and expressly condemns those who concern themselves with what is esoteric and obscure.¹¹ It is a text for the many rather than for the few. A long-standing tradition distinguishes, for example, between two sorts of exegesis: *tafsīr biʿl-raʾy*, or interpretation by the use of reason or according to personal opinion, and *tafsīr biʿl-maʿthūr*, interpretation according to what has been handed down in *ḥadīth*, or collections of material concerning Muhammad, which include sayings, anecdotes, and narratives about his life (especially concerning episodes of revelation), the Prophet's own explanations of words and verses, reflections and comments by his Companions, and so on. This material was produced during the first two centuries or so after the Prophet's death and handed down through a series of *isnāds*, or transmitters.¹² Essentially the *ḥadīth* constitute a vast library of contexts—the foreground or forestructure—within which the understanding and interpretation of the Qurʾān is to take place. Interpretation that falls outside this framework is liable to the charge of “innovation” (*biʿl-raʾy*).

Al-Ghazālī wants not so much to introduce innovations as to reformulate the concept of *tafsīr biʿl-raʾy* in order to locate hermeneutics explicitly at the level of experience rather than at the level of formal exegesis or in the archive of received interpretation. In his *Jawāhir al-Qurʾān*, for example, al-Ghazālī distinguishes between two Qurʾānic disciplines, the sciences of the shell and the sciences of the pith. The first includes grammar, philology, the science of recitations (*ʿilm al-quirāʾat*), as well as the so-called “science of outward exegesis,” or knowing what the words of the text mean, and the “science of Traditions,” or knowledge of the commentaries (*ḥadīth*) handed down from the earliest centuries. The sciences of the pith are of two sorts: the lower sciences of theology and law, and the science of *gnosis* (*ʿilm al-maʿrifa*), or knowledge of God and of the last day and the world to come.¹³ The scholar mulling over parchment and ciphers in the privacy of a library is occupied with the shell of the Qurʾān. The theologian and the legal scholar meanwhile are concerned with what the text says in the context of questions concerning conduct and belief. But *gnosis* is an event. It is not a product of reading, that is, its aim is not to know what the text means but to experience what it is—namely, God's own speech.¹⁴ The eighth book of al-Ghazālī's *Ilḥāʾ ʿulūm ad-dīn* is to all appearances entirely traditional.¹⁵ In strict pedagogical style it sets down ten external and ten internal rules (or “mental tasks”) for Qurʾānic recitation. The external rules concern the disposition of the body during recitation. For instance, the reader of the Qurʾān should be in a state of ritual purity, should practice

politeness and quietness, and whether standing or sitting should be facing the *qibla* (in the direction of Mecca) with the head downcast. One should neither sit cross-legged nor lean against anything; nor should one sit in a manner of self-importance but, instead, as if in the presence of one's teacher. Better to stand in a mosque, moreover, than to recline on one's side in a bed. Other rules concern how much of the Qur'ān to read (whether to read it once a day or to spread the reading over a week or a month) and how one's readings should be divided. Rule four is scribal: letters should be clear and distinct, points and diacritical marks may be in color. There is some question, however, as to whether the written text should be divided into sections. Some scholars, al-Ghazālī says, are against "the opening of this door, fearing that it would lead to the creation of superfluous things [in the Qur'ān]. They wanted to close this door completely, and to encourage the protection of the Qur'ān from any change that may penetrate into it. Since the opening of this door has not in practice led to any forbidden thing, and since it has been established by the Islamic community that it is something by which added acquaintance [with the Qur'ān] may be achieved, there is no sin in it" (pp. 39–40). To which al-Ghazālī adds: "The fact that it is a new thing introduced in Islam [*muhdath*] does not mean that it should be forbidden, for many a newly introduced thing is good" (p. 40).

The fifth rule says that one should read slowly and distinctly in order to be able to reflect as one reads. But reflection does not imply cool detachment, as we learn at once: "The sixth rule is for weeping." In Islamic tradition grief is something like a hermeneutical emotion. "The Messenger of God (may God bless him and greet him!) commanded, 'Recite the Qur'ān and weep. If you do not weep naturally, then force yourself to weep'" (p. 43). With weeping goes prostration (rule seven) and supplication (rule eight). According to the ninth rule, the Qur'ān is to be read aloud. "There is no doubt," al-Ghazālī says, "that it is necessary to read the Qur'ān loud enough so that the reader can hear it himself because reading means distinguishing clearly between sounds; thus sound is necessary, and the smallest degree of it is that which he can hear himself" (p. 49). Silent reading is not forbidden and is even admirable so long as it is without ostentation, for one should never disturb another with one's reading, but reading aloud awakens the mind of the reader and drives away distractions. In Western (or, more accurately, Latin) tradition silent reading implies a private, solitary relationship with the text, but for al-Ghazālī it is in reading aloud that one enters into an exclusive relationship with the Qur'ān. Interestingly, al-Ghazālī says that "reading the entire Qur'ān once from the *muṣḥaf* [copy or text] is equal to reading it in its entirety seven times from memory, because looking at a *muṣḥaf* is also an act of devotion to God" (pp. 52–53). But the Qur'ān

is not therefore a textual object. It is only accessible through the mediation of the voice, not through the eye. Hence the tenth rule, which is “to read the Qur’ān beautifully and in a slow and distinct manner, by controlling the voice though not with that excessive stretch which changes the prose order [*naẓm*]” (p. 53).

But in another sense, it is misleading to speak of the voice as mediation, because the whole orientation of al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutics is to overcome mediation so that nothing stands between the reciter and God. The internal rules or mental tasks to be performed during recitation make this explicit. When we begin to read, for example, we must “magnify” the Qur’ān by meditating on parables and figures that emphasize the transcendence and power of divine speech. “At the start of Qur’ān recitation the reciter should bring to his mind magnification of the One Who Speaks, and should realize that what he is reading is not the speech of a human being, and that in the recitation of the speech of God (great and mighty is He!) there is an extreme danger, because God (exalted is He!) said, ‘Only those who are clean can touch it [Sura 56:79]’” (p. 60). And as we magnify the Qur’ān, so we must diminish ourselves. “The third mental task is to pay attention and abandon the inner utterances of the soul” (p. 61). Here the process of self-abnegation that is crucial to al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutics becomes explicit. One must empty oneself of one’s own interior monologue so that one can be completely absorbed into the language of the Qur’ān. The speech of God is transcendent, powerful, and dangerous, but our relations with him are meant to be warm and intimate. And so the very letters of the Qur’ān are like openings onto paradise:

It is said that in the Qur’ān are to be found fields, gardens, closets, brides, brocades, meadows, and khans. All *mīms* are the fields of the Qur’ān; all *rā’s* are the gardens; all *ḥā’s* are its closets; all suras starting with the glorification of God are its brides, all suras starting with the letters *ḥā mīm* are its brocades, all the suras in which laws, stories, etc. are expounded are its meadows, and all the other parts of it are its khans. When the Qur’ān reader enters into the fields of the Qur’ān, plucks different types of fruits from its gardens, enters into its closets, views the brides, wears the brocades, is relieved of cares, and dwells in the khans, then all these absorb him wholly and keep him from things other than these; consequently his mind cannot be inattentive, nor can his thought be separate. (p. 62)

But it is not enough merely to pay attention. Self-abnegation is not passivity. “The purpose of reading the Qur’ān is to ponder over it” (p. 62)—not to elucidate the text but to understand those things on which it sheds

its light. Like all sacred texts, the Qur'ān is to be read as a book of teachings—"One who wants to acquire the knowledge of the ancients and moderns should deeply study the Qur'ān" (p. 66)—but it is very far from being the dark text of esoteric wisdom. Rather, it is a light that illuminates all the works of God, and the task of hermeneutics is to stand within this light in order to serve as its reflection. Or, again, one must recite the Qur'ān thoughtfully, in a philosophical spirit of reflection, but one need not be a philosopher. "To fathom it is not the coveted thing in this respect" (p. 69), but simply to understand what is said according to one's capacities ("It is lawful for everyone to elicit meaning from the Qur'ān commensurate with his understanding and the limit of his intelligence" [p. 92]). God sent down a lucid and Arabic Qur'ān; one does not need to add one's own brilliance to it. One simply needs not to get in the way.

Those who conceal the clear signs and the guidance
that We have sent down, after We have shown them
clearly in the book—they shall be cursed by God.
(2.150)

Just so, the text is not dark, but our minds are—although this darkness is not an absence of wit or learning. On the contrary, there are, al-Ghazālī says, four veils that obstruct our understanding, and these have nothing to do with how bright or dull we are. The first veil is a kind of aestheticism in which one makes a fetish of pronunciation (p. 69). The second is dogmatic adherence to a school, where one simply accepts what one is taught "without arriving at it by spiritual insight and mystical vision" (p. 70). The third veil, al-Ghazālī says, is sin, which is like "dirt accumulating on a mirror" (p. 71).¹⁶ The fourth is nothing less than adherence to the hallowed distinction between *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thur* and *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*. "The fourth veil is present," al-Ghazālī says, "when a man has read the outward exegesis of the Qur'ān and has formed the belief that Qur'ānic sentences have only those meanings which have come down by tradition from Ibn 'Abbas, Mujāhid, and other exegetes, that meanings going beyond them are interpretations of the Qur'ān by personal opinion (*tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*), and that 'he who has explained the Qur'ān by personal opinion has taken his place in Hell'" (p. 72).

There are two ways of transcending this distinction. The first is practical and affective. The seventh mental task "is to render the Qur'ān specific" (p. 72), that is, it is the application of the Qur'ān to one's own situation. The Qur'ān is a legal text and a work of moral authority; it is a binding text, and this is so not in the aggregate or in the abstract; rather, the Qur'ān

speaks to me alone in the particularity of my condition. I am everywhere internal to the embrace of its utterances, and this is so not only morally and legally but also emotionally and, one might even say, ontologically. “The eighth mental task,” al-Ghazālī says, “is to feel the Qur’ān. This means that the mind of the Qur’ān-reader will be affected by different feelings according to the different verses recited. Thus in accordance with what his mind understands, he will be in a state of grief, fear, hope, and so on” (p. 75). So the Qur’ān-reader is never “a mere narrator” (p. 76), that is, never simply an agent of recitation but, one might say, the point of it, the place where the Qur’ān brings itself most forcefully and concretely to bear upon human existence. Hence al-Ghazālī speaks of the reader as being “included in the verse” (p. 77)—internal to the text, consumed by it, not working on it at a distance but, on the contrary, worked on and actualized by it, as if one could be the work of the Qur’ān, its creation, a being brought fully to being in the way of action and feeling.

The second way of transcending the distinction between traditional and personal exegesis is explicitly mystical. Here it is no longer adequate to speak of exegesis. Rather, for al-Ghazālī the whole purpose of the recitation of the Qur’ān is to go beyond interpretation to the experience of God’s speech itself:

The grades of Qur’ān-reading are three in number. The lowest grade is when a man supposes that he is reading the Qur’ān to God (great and mighty is He!), standing in front of Him, and He is looking at him and listening to what he is reading. In this case his mental condition is one of begging, praising and entreating Him and supplicating Him.

The second grade is when a man views with his mind that God (great and mighty is He!) is seeing him, addressing him with his kindnesses, and secretly conversing with him with his gifts and beneficence. So his station is one of modesty, magnification, listening and understanding.

The third grade is when a man is seeing the Speaker in the Speech and His attributes in its sentences. He does not think of himself, nor [of] his Qur’ān-reading, nor [of] the relation of divine gifts to him as the one upon whom they are bestowed; rather he confines his care to the Speaker, and concentrates all his thought on Him as if he were engrossed in the vision of the Speaker, being divested of thought of anything other than Him. This is the grade of those drawn near to God [*al-muqarrabūn*], while the grades preceding it constitute the grades of people on the right [*aṣḥāb al-yamīn*]; all grades other than these form the grades of inattentive people [*al-ghāfilūn*]. (pp. 80–81)

Supplication, conversation, vision—or perhaps not quite vision, or not yet:

at the third grade one concentrates one's thought on God *as if* engrossed in a vision, but one is still in a reflective condition in which one's relationship with God is mediated by a meditative rehearsal of his speech and his attributes. What remains is the event of self-annihilation in which one will be taken up entirely into God's self-identity, thus to see what God sees, know what He knows.

Hence the "tenth mental task consists in the Qur'ān-reader's getting rid of any sense of his ability and power" (p. 82), or in other words the attainment of *fanā'*, in which one transcends subjectivity or the experience of one's separate existence. "Whenever a man sees himself with the eye of satisfaction," al-Ghazālī says, "he becomes veiled from God by himself. When, however, he crosses the limit of looking at himself and does not see in his Qur'ān-reading anything except God (exalted is He!), then the secret of the invisible world is revealed to him directly" (p. 83).

It is perhaps important to notice that al-Ghazālī speaks not of seeing God face-to-face but only of hearing his speech and experiencing "mystical intuitions" that are coherent with what God's speech happens to be about in this or that verse of the Qur'ān:

These mystical intuitions can only occur after one gets rid of one's self and does not look at one's self with a sense of satisfaction and purification, nor at one's passion. Then these intuitions become specific in accordance with the mental state of the man receiving them. Thus when he recites verses on hope, and his mental state is dominated by a good omen from them, the image of paradise comes to him through mystical intuition . . . and he views it as if he sees with his eyes. But if fear dominates him [as a result of reading verses on punishment], then Hell is shown to him through intuition so that he sees its different types of punishment. This is because the speech of God (great and mighty is He!) includes those verses which are kind and witty as well as those which are violent and forceful, and those which inspire hope as well as those which are frightening. And this is in accordance with God's attributes, since among His attributes are mercy and kindness as well as revenge and violence. Then, in accordance with the Qur'ān-reader's view of Qur'ānic sentences and of divine attributes, his mind alternates in different mental states, and, according to each of these mental states, the mind is prepared for a mystical intuition appropriate to it and approaching it. (pp. 84–85)

This passage helps to clarify al-Ghazālī's distinction between outward and inner exegesis. This distinction does not derive from the usual doctrine of hidden meanings. Rather, in external exegesis one's understanding of the

text is mediated by words and meanings, both of the text of the Qur'ān and of what has been handed down in tradition, whereas inward exegesis means that one *sees* (quite literally) what the text says. To put it another way: to the eye cleansed of whatever might darken it, God's speech *is* what it is about, so that one does not just understand what is said but sees it, knows it, so to speak, by experience. From which it would follow that understanding the Qur'ān becomes a condition for understanding God's creation.

There remains, of course, the question of what sort of exposition someone would give of a verse of the Qur'ān *after* having had a gnostic encounter in which what the Qur'ān is about is experienced firsthand, as if seen with one's own (or God's own) eyes. Perhaps the answer to this lies in the idea that one knows the meaning of something (grief, love, friendship, fatherhood) only after having lived through it, and that what al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics gives us is an itinerary for living through the Qur'ān and, therefore, being in a position to say what it means. Simply to borrow interpretations from the archive handed down in tradition is not enough, no matter how authoritative these interpretations are in themselves or in consequence of their origin and transmission. One has to have lived through an experience of the Qur'ān in order to be able to say what these interpretations amount to or what they might be getting at. "Energy and awakening on your own account," al-Ghazālī says, "is greater than the joy achieved by awakening caused by others."¹⁷

It is possible, therefore, to think of mystical hermeneutics as a kind of appropriation, not of the sacred text but of the archive of interpretation that surrounds it. One's understanding of the text is not mediated by tradition; rather, one's understanding of tradition is mediated by one's experience of the text. Mystical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of experience—only we should understand that experience here must be taken, if at all possible, in a nonsubjectivist sense; experience is not an event that sets the individual subject up as an institution of its own the way the Cartesian *ego cogito* supersedes whatever has preceded it and underwrites whatever follows. Quite the contrary, experience as al-Ghazālī conceives it subsumes the subject, who can no longer be thought of as a self-possessed, self-contained agent. Indeed, the very idea of mysticism is incompatible with a modern theory of the subject. Having said this, however, it remains the case that what this experience wins for the individual is something like a free interpretive space or, more accurately, a region of meditation, an open place of study, where one is able to abide with the text in what amounts to a condition of personal intimacy. So we should take it that the purpose, or effect, of hermeneutical experience is not to produce new interpretations

that would replace tradition—this would be to impose a Cartesian model on al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics. Rather, the point is simply to open up this place of intimacy, this intimate dwelling place with the Qur'ān. We have already seen this sort of hermeneutical intimacy both in the case of Philo's hermeneutics and in midrash. Hermeneutics in these instances is not a *technē* of interpretation but a *praxis*, a form of life. Its task is not the unveiling of the meaning of the text—"As for the full unveiling of all the secret meanings," al-Ghazālī says, "there is no coveted object in it" (p. 103)—but meditation throughout one's life upon what the text discloses.

A comparison between al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics and Kabbalist hermeneutics of Abraham Abulafia (1240–91 C.E.) might be instructive here, in spite of the enormous differences between them, not the least of which is the difference between Qur'ān and Torah as texts, where the one exists only in (or as) recitation, while the other is constituted entirely in (or as) its letters and diacritical forms. In Kabbalah, the inscriptions of Torah have a meaning and purpose of their own quite apart from their grammatical function within the Bible as a book of narratives and laws, so that whereas the Qur'ānist will recite the Qur'ān as it is handed down liturgically in tradition, Kabbalists (of a certain sort) will recite separately the individual letters of the text on the principle that each letter by itself and in combination with others is a name of God.¹⁸ For Abulafia, says Moshe Idel, "the 'highest' hermeneutic method . . . consists of atomizing or monadizing the biblical texts," that is, breaking the text down into its letters and then recombining them according to various permutations. The point of this practice seems analogous to al-Ghazālī's third mental task, which is to empty one's mind of human language so as to provide a pure interior space for the recitation of the Qur'ān. As Idel says, for Kabbalists like Abulafia, "language is a powerful instrument for understanding natural reality, and even the spiritual world is adequately projected onto the structure of linguistic material. When a man strives for an ultimate mystical experience, however, he must break the structured language, as he needs to efface the forms inscribed in his mind in order to make room there for higher entities to dwell."¹⁹ Moreover, the letters themselves must undergo a process of purification from their material form by being first recited on the tongue and then transferred to the heart or memorized. Once internalized, the letters are then combined and recombined, sometimes randomly, sometimes systematically—not, however, to produce a new text, nor even to produce new or unprecedented interpretations of the Torah. Rather, like al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics, Kabbalistic hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of experience rather than of exegesis. Idel calls it "an experiential study of Torah": "For the Kabbalist, the under-

standing of the inner sense of the text or of the tradition is more than simply the comprehension of some additional details; it implies a radical change in the perception of the Torah, as well as of the personality and status of the Kabbalist himself. No longer an outsider, he becomes the lord of the palace-*heikhal*—a word alluding to the location of the Toral Scroll in the synagogue. He actualizes his uniqueness by leaving the surrounding ignoramuses in order to become one of the *perfecti*—an overwhelming experience, which goes beyond the passive contemplation of the symbolic sense of the text. More than an interiorization of specific contents, this study entails the establishment of a close relationship [with the Torah or, what amounts to the same thing, with God].”²⁰

Al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutics, however, is clearly not esoteric in the Kabbalistic sense but remains within the horizon defined by the public, liturgical character of the recited Qur’ān. There is no internalization and reinscription of the Qur’ānic text—on the contrary, the text internalizes the one who recites it, so to speak. Moreover, for al-Ghazālī the mystical experience of the text is not an event that is to be set apart from the rest of life. There is no withdrawal into a community of *perfecti*. Rather, as al-Ghazālī’s own life indicates, the hermeneutical task entails a return from the experience of text to the social world of argument and teaching, as if to bring even the most remote periphery of the secular world within the experience of divine intimacy. This exoteric dimension of al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutics is perhaps unique in antiquity but is not surprising, because, after all, the distinction between the esoteric and exoteric is essentially a philosopher’s distinction and therefore part of what al-Ghazālī would be determined to obviate or refute. We’ll see a similar exoteric turn in the next chapter.

with respect to the community as a whole (pp. 625–28). We shall see below that we can read this midrash as an appeal to maintain this social and political integrity despite the internal conflicts that threaten to disrupt it. See also Gedalia Alon, *Jews, Judaism, and The Classical World: Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple and Talmud* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), pp. 314–33, for an account of the political antagonism between the Patriarch and the Sages during the early history of rabbinic Judaism.

10. See James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature*, pp. 77–104; reprinted in *Prooftexts*, 3 (1983), 141–55. Jacob Neusner aims to dispute a verse-centered view of midrash in the studies cited above (n. 6), which seek to recover the unifying logic underlying such “documents” as the *Leviticus Rabbah*, a midrashic compilation; but Neusner’s argument is not very clear, and as developed in his *Midrash as Literature* it seems misdirected, or at least at cross-purposes with Kugel’s account, which seems to me far from controversial. Kugel is surely correct in suggesting that the verse-centered character of midrashic interpretation reflects the economy of a culture whose mnemonics are (however graphic) still oral rather than textual. The text in a scribal culture is still housed in the oral-aural library of memory. See “Two Introductions,” p. 94. David Stern seems to me to penetrate to the heart of the matter when he locates midrash in the extraordinary intimacy that exists between God and exegete. The language of exegesis, he says, is a “language of havivut,” of intimacy and familiarity; it is not the language of the prophetic sublime or of voices thundering from a great distance. So playful attention to detail is not pedantry or low seriousness but represents a new form of religious language. See Stern, “Midrash and the Language of Exegesis,” *Midrash and Literature*, pp. 105–24.
11. The Talmud speaks of “the warfare of the Torah,” which only means that fierce, free-wheeling argument is the medium of Torah study. See *Hagigah*, 14a.
12. Hence the threat of “two Torahs.” See Urbach, *The Sages*, vol. 1, p. 618. But in practice Torah is plural, as for example between Babylonian and Palestinian traditions, but also throughout the Diaspora, where halakhic decisions must be able to address diverse cultural conditions.
13. See Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 618–20, on the rule of *lo’titgodedu*.
14. *Tanna de Be Eliyyahu*, ed. M. Friedmann (Vienna, 1902), p. 148; quoted in *The Rabbinic Anthology*, ed. C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe (New York: Schocken, 1974), p. 132.
15. See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 3–36.
16. See “The Concept of a Person,” in *Philosophical Papers, I: Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 97–114.

Chapter 6: *Şūfiyya*

1. *The Jewels of the Qurʾān: Al-Ghazālī’s Theory*, trans. Muhammad Abul Quasem (London: Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 46. This is a translation of al-Ghazālī’s *Kitāb Jawāhir al-Qurʾān*.

2. See Sūra 43.1–4:

By the Clear Book,
 behold, We have made it an Arabic Koran;
 haply you will understand;
 and behold, it is in the *umm al-kitāb*, with Us;
 sublime indeed, wise.

The Koran Interpreted, trans. Arthur J. Arberry (London: George Allen & Unwin, New York: Macmillan, 1955), vol. 2, p. 199. There seems to have been a clear effort to distinguish the Qurʾān from the Torah and the Gospels precisely on the basis of its special character as recitation. Sūra 6.7 says:

Had We sent down on thee a Book on parchment
 and so they [could touch] it with their hands, yet
 the unbelievers would have said, "This is naught
 but manifest sorcery."

As if a written text handed down from heaven (think of Ezekial eating the scroll given to him by God) were inherently implausible.

3. Zaid's account of the early history of the Qurʾānic text is preserved, among other places, in al-Ṭabari's *Commentary on the Qurʾān*, trans. J. Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 24–27. Evidence for or against Zaid's account is thin. John Wansborough thinks the Qurʾānic text developed into its present form over a period of at least two centuries. See *Qurʾānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 43–52. John Burton meanwhile thinks that a text was already pretty much in place in Muhammad's time. See *The Collection of the Qurʾān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 117–89.
4. Labīb al-Saīd identifies ten traditions of recitation, divided into two main categories: *mutawātir* and *mashhūr*, that is, those that have been transmitted "by independent 'chains' (*asānīd*) of authorities on a scale sufficiently wide as to rule out the possibility of error," and those in which "the possibility of error is extremely remote," even though they are "not so widely transmitted." See *The Recited Koran: A History of the First Recorded Version*, trans. Bernard Weiss, M. A. Rauf, and Morroe Berger (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1975), pp. 53–54. On the relation of text and recitation, see esp. Frederick M. Denny, "Exegesis and Recitation: Their Development as Classical Forms of Qurʾānic Piety," in *Transitions and Transformations in the History of Religions: Essays in Honor of Joseph M. Kitagawa*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Theodore M. Ludwig (Leiden: Brill, 1980), pp. 91–123; and also Denny's more recent "Qurʾān Recitation: A Tradition of Oral Performance and Transmission," *Oral Tradition*, 4, nos. 1–2 (1989), 5–26. See also William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 79–115.

5. See Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qurʾān* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), pp. 14–31.
6. Cairo: Lajnat Nashr al-Thaqafah al-Islamiyyah, 1357–58 (Islamic calendar), 1937–38.
7. Trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1958).
8. Ed. Jamil Saliba and Kamil ʿAyyad, 5th ed. (Damascus, 1956). *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953). See Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhi (d. 385 / 995), *The Doctrine of the Ṣūfīs* [*Kitāb al-Taʾarruf li-madhhab ahl al-tasawwuf*], trans. A. J. Arberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), pp. 135–37 (on *tawhīd*); and R. S. Bhatnagar, *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought* (London: East West Publications, 1984), pp. 142–43.
9. See *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, pp. 74–75: “I believed that it was permissible for me in the sight of God to continue in retirement on the ground of my inability to demonstrate the truth by argument. But God most high determined Himself to stir up the impulse of the sovereign of the time, though not by any external means; the latter gave me strict orders to hasten to Naysabur (Nishapur) to tackle the problem of this lukewarmness in religious matters. So strict was the injunction that, had I persisted in disobeying it, I should at length have been cut off. I came to realize, too, that the grounds which had made retirement permissible had lost their force. ‘It is not right that your motive to clinging to retirement should be laziness and love of ease, the quest for spiritual power and preservation from worldly contamination. It was not because of the difficulty of restoring men to health that you gave yourself this permission.’”
10. But God is never an object of knowledge, that is, there is no such thing as seeing him face-to-face. See Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazālī’s Unique Unknowable God* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), pp. 23–36, 68–72.
11. Indeed, from a hermeneutical standpoint the Qurʾān is a remarkably sophisticated text. Sūra 3.5–7, for example, distinguishes between two sorts of verses, the plain (*muḥkam*) and the obscure or ambiguous (*mutashābih*). Those *that* are plain are of the essence of the *umm al-kitāb*, whereas only God knows the interpretation of what is ambiguous or mysterious (like the letters that begin certain sūras or chapters). The point that the Qurʾān urges is simply the hermeneutical commonplace that what is obscure should always be interpreted in light of what is plain. What one knows to be the case should always be used to illuminate what is doubtful. Those who do not follow this principle are always to be held in suspicion as innovators or dissenters.
12. In the third century (A.H.) al-Ṭabarī produced a vast commentary on the Qurʾān, the *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, that assembles this great store of traditional exegetical material. See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Qurānic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn ʿAṭhār,” and R. Marston Speight, “The Function of *ḥadīth* as Commentary on the Qurʾān, as Seen in the Six Authoritative Collections,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 46–62, 63–81, respectively.

13. See *The Jewels of the Qur'an*, pp. 33–44.
14. See Paul Nwyia, "L'expérience comme principe herméneutique," in *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique: Nouvel essai sur le lexique technique des mystiques musulmanes* (Beyrouth: Dar El-Machreq, 1970), pp. 109–207. See also Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl At-Tustari (d. 283 / 896)* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), pp. 135–36.
15. The eighth book has been translated by Muhammad Abul Quasem as *The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazali's Theory* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1982). References below are to this translation.
16. See *The Jewels of the Qur'an*, pp. 26–27: "The truth is that the seeker and the Sought are comparable to a picture present in a mirror: The picture is not revealed in it because of rust on its surface; when, however, you polish the mirror the picture is revealed in it, neither by the movement of the picture towards it nor by its movement towards the picture, but by the removal of the veil. God (may He be exalted!) is revealed by His essence and is not concealed, for concealment of light is impossible, and by light everything which is concealed becomes obvious, and God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The concealment of light from the pupil of the eye is only caused by one of two matters—either by turbidness in the pupil of the eye, or by weakness in it since it is unable to tolerate the great dazzling light just as the eyes of bats are unable to tolerate the light of the sun. Nothing, then, is incumbent upon you except to cleanse turbidness from the eye of the soul and to strengthen the pupil. In that case God will be in the soul as the picture is in the mirror, so that when He suddenly reveals Himself in the mirror of the Soul, you hasten to say that He is inside the soul and that the human nature [*nāsūt*] has put on the divine nature [*lāhūt*], until God strengthens you with the firm word so that you realize that the picture is not [really] inside the mirror, but [only] reflected in it."
17. *Jewels of the Qur'an*, p. 81.
18. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken, 1974), pp. 168–72, 180–82, and Perle Epstein, *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), pp. 73–103 (on *tzeruf*, or "The Path of Letters").
19. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 235–36.
20. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 229. Idel gives a detailed account of Abulafia's "path of letters" in *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. Jonathan Chapman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 13–52. See pp. 24–25, on breathing the letters: "One must take each one of the letters [of the Tetragrammaton] and wave it with the movements of his long breath so that one does not breathe between two letters, but rather one long breath, for however long he can stand it, and afterwards rest for the length of one breath. He shall do the same with each and every letter, until there will be two breaths in each letter: one for pausing when he enunciates the vowel of each letter, and one for resting between each letter. It is known to all that every single breath of one's nostrils is composed of taking in of air from the outside, that is, *mi-ba''r le-ga''w* [from

outside to inside], whose secrets allude to the attribute of *Gevurah* and its nature, by which a man is known as *gibbor* [mighty]—that is, the word *ga''w ba''r* [a rearrangement of the consonants of the word *gibbor*]—for his strength by which he conquers his Urge. As the secret of *abg yt zqr' stn* with *ygl pza šqw zyt*, composed of the emission of breath from within to outside, and this second composition is from *g''w* to *b''r*.

Chapter 7. *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*

1. See Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1952), pp. 46–66; and Smalley, “The Study of the Bible in the Medieval Schools,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Fathers to the Reformation*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), vol. 2, p. 205.
2. See Jean Leclerc, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), pp. 23–26. Brian Stock gives a good account of the primacy of experience in Bernard’s commentaries in *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 403–54.
3. See Edward L. Greenstein, “Medieval Bible Commentaries,” in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit, 1984), pp. 213–59.
4. Quoted by M. F. Miles, “Theodore of Mopsuestia as Representative of the Antichene School,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), vol. 1, p. 507. See Dimitri Z. Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Bible: A Study of His Old Testament Exegesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), esp. pp. 110–16.
5. See Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, esp. pp. 281–308; and Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), esp. pp. 61–148. On the difference between scholastic and monastic commentary, see Leclerc, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, p. 91.
6. “New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther,” *Theology Today*, 21 (1964), 38–39.
7. *Summa Theologica*, 1a.1.10. *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), vol. 1, p. 17.
8. For a more detailed account of Augustine’s hermeneutics, see Bruns, “The Problem of Figuration in Antiquity,” in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, pp. 156–62.
9. *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 38. Hereafter cited in the text as CD.
10. The sense in which this is so is spelled out in Augustine’s essay on “The Spirit and the Letter,” in which St. Paul’s famous lines (“The letter killeth,” etc.) are taken to refer to the nature of our standing with respect to the text rather than

Hermeneutics

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Chapter 3 of the present work appeared in a slightly different version in *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 3 (March 1984), 462–80. © 1984 by the University of Chicago.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bruns, Gerald L.

Hermeneutics ancient and modern / Gerald L. Bruns.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-300-05450-5 (cloth)

0-300-06303-2 (pbk.)

1. Hermeneutics—History. I. Title.

BD241.B78 1992

121'.68—dc20 92-14839 CIP

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States by Lightning Source.