

MANṢŪR AL-ḤALLĀJ AND THE POETRY OF ECSTASY

I

Throughout the ages, poets and mystics of all nations have perhaps had one fundamental problem in common and that is, how to express the inexpressable; how to speak the unspeakable.¹ Language is a double-edged sword. It creates and it negates; it fulfils and it annuls. A most powerful tool and yet, in times of intense spiritual or emotional crisis, an even more powerful obstacle, rendering the speaking, feeling subject either dumb or "insane" or in some hallucinatory limbo between the two. If we define the poet—mystic or not—as the speaking subject par excellence then this is his or her peculiar burden. Post-Romantic European poets have often contended with language—that powerful, dear enemy—and lost; poets as far apart as Gerard de Nerval, Georg Trakl and Paul Celan struggled to speak the unspeakable, to write the unwritable and finally withdrew into the Silence, madness and suicide being the consequences. And after all, what is madness (to make use of a metaphor) but the inability to use language, to speak rationally?

For the great mystics, this crisis of language is defined not as crisis but as ecstasy; a possession by the Divine which renders the subject (the mystic) *speechless* through total communion or union—which requires a total erasure of identity, of self. Moreover, the agent of this ecstasy is the Beloved (love being the principle of union). It is a possession, an ecstasy that is totally desired above all else and yet the immediate consequences are the same: the plunge into the innermost self, loss of speech—loss of desire to speak (which is Transgression, as we shall see later)—madness perhaps (or what shall be interpreted as madness) and even violence. And here, the chilling image of Bacchus' frenzied Maenads ripping their victims to shreds with their bare hands readily comes to mind.

Sufism has consistently produced a tremendous body of systematic mystical writings—poetry and poetic aphorism being significant among these. How have the great Ṣūfī poets managed to deal with this fundamental paradox of language versus silence? How have they attempted to speak the unspeakable? I would like to examine this question, particularly with regard to the poetry and "poetic utterances" of the great tenth century mystic-martyr-saint Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, in light of the formula-

¹ I would like to qualify somewhat this initial statement by saying that with regard to non-mystical poets, this problem arose, most specifically, with the rise of the Romantic consciousness and its subsequent developments.

tions of two of the most brilliant modern thinkers of the west, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Kierkegaard is the philosopher of Faith. Faith, as defined by Kierkegaard in the *Postscript*, is a kind of total, existential resting of the individual in God through a deliberate movement towards the absurd (i.e. the non-rational, the non-linguistic) and those who actually attain it are few and far between. Though Kierkegaard's concept of Faith is not mystical *per se*, it aligns itself with the practical "methodology" of mysticism in that it posits the individual as the sole means of establishing the highest, most authentic relation with the Divine, in love. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard discusses the Old Testament story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac from the point of view of the paradox of Faith.² Abraham was the Father of Faith in that he absolutely gave up Isaac to God (through a movement of infinite resignation) and yet had absolute faith (by virtue of the absurd) that God would not require this sacrifice of him. This is the paradox of Faith and this is why Kierkegaard establishes Abraham as the greatest of the "Knights of Faith".

Kierkegaard makes an essential distinction in this essay between the ethical or the universal and the realm of the Knight of Faith: "The whole existence of the human race rounds itself off as a perfect self-contained sphere, and then the ethical is that which limits and fills at one and the same time".³ Thus, the ethical is the universal. It is the realm of rational thought and action, of morality, of art (Greek Tragedy in particular),⁴ of communication. It is essentially a realm circumscribed and described by language and insofar as he lives within it, the individual's relationship to the Divine is mediated by it. The Knight of Faith, however, is in an absolute relationship, as individual, to the Absolute, to God, for "Faith is namely this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal".⁵ He is outside the universal, existing within himself and in God simultaneously (which is the movement of Faith). He cannot speak ("As soon as I speak, I express the universal and if I do so, no one can understand me",⁶) and therefore, he cannot be understood:

Speak he cannot; he speaks no human language. And even if he understood all the languages of the world, even if those he loved also understood

² He does this independently of Abraham's validation or "canonization" by orthodox religious tradition. He rethinks the story in order to inspire in the reader the element of "Fear and Trembling" that is lost over the centuries.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 68.

⁴ Throughout the essay, Kierkegaard develops his dialectic by opposing the Knight of Faith to the Tragic Hero (i.e. Abraham vs. Agamemnon).

⁵ *Fear and Trembling*, p. 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

them, he still could not speak—he speaks in a divine language, he speaks in tongues.⁷

Moreover, when Abraham is called upon by God to sacrifice his son and he immediately sets about doing it, the universal considers him either mad or a murderer. In sacrificing Isaac (for although he does not actually sacrifice him, he has made the essential movement of infinite resignation which amounts to the same) Abraham suspends the ethical altogether. He not only exists outside it but he *sins* against it. Because his act (murder) cannot be spoken or understood, it is defined as Transgression:

The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed. The single individual qualified as immediate, sensate, psychical, is the hidden. Thus his ethical task is to work himself out of his hiddenness and to become disclosed in the universal. Everytime he desires to remain in the hidden, he trespasses and is immersed in spiritual trial from which he can emerge only by disclosing himself.⁸

But this is exactly what Abraham cannot do. Unlike Agamemnon, whose sacrifice of Iphigenia is demanded by the ethical and mediated by language (he speaks: he is reconciled to the universal) Abraham is condemned as madman or murderer or both. He is incomprehensible. He is the Transgressor, only to be reconciled through a visible miracle (which is the Word of the Divine translated into the universal).

Thus we see that for Kierkegaard, it is simply impossible to speak Faith or to describe it (“Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal for thereby it is cancelled”⁹). However, it is indirectly approachable intellectually and linguistically through a stylistic approximation of its movements. Kierkegaard does this constantly in his writings. Paradox, interplay of opposite categories, negative statements and a circular kind of dialectic that funnels in towards the center and yet never quite reaches it, are the main stylistic features of his work. What is not said is as much to be reckoned with as what is said. Thus the little cracks of silence between the wall of words acquire total meaning and the state of Faith is somehow approximated in language.

In what is perhaps his best known work, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, we recognize in some of Nietzsche’s theories regarding art and ecstatic expression a marked tendency towards mystical formulations such as the opposition of the Divine Oneness of Being (a central tenet of Ṣūfī theosophy) and the universal principle of individuation. Though both his theories and his methodology are radically different from

⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

⁹ Ibid., p. 71.

Kierkegaard's, the conclusions which can be drawn from them are in certain respects quite similar.

It is in this work that Nietzsche makes his famous distinction between Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo is "... the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*, through whose gestures and eyes all the joy and wisdom of 'illusion', together with its beauty, speak to us".¹⁰ He is the symbol of "man wrapped in the veil of maya"¹¹ which separates and shields him from the terrifying primordial Oneness of Being. Apollo is the god of light, of synthetic knowledge, of order and beauty. Thus Nietzsche makes the Apollonian the realm of the human consciousness in its individuality; the realm of the plastic arts and poetry; the realm of the ethical and of language. On the other hand Dionysus is the god of the mysteries of Being, of intoxication and ecstasy. In the Dionysian, it is "... as if the veil of maya had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity".¹² The Dionysian ecstasy, which is for Nietzsche the most fundamental form of communion with the Divine, is a negation of the individual (contrary to the Kierkegaardian formulation) and an affirmation of the Oneness of Being. In the throes of this ecstasy, the individual no longer experiences himself as individual. He ceases to be an artist and becomes a work of art.¹³ A total loss of identity is the result of divine intoxication and the prerequisite of Dionysian expression or utterance. In the Nietzschean formulation, this expression finds its supreme medium in music, which is non-imagistic. Moreover, from the viewpoint of the Apollonian, the Dionysian ecstasy is defined as fundamentally transgressive in its chaotic excess, in its erasure of identity and destruction of the principle of individuation (which gives birth to order, language and culture). It is not only outside the universal, the ethical; it actively negates it. Historically speaking, the cult of Dionysus was considered by the Greeks to be a serious threat to their Apollonian culture, for the individual is the building block of society and once he willingly ceases to be so, he transgresses. Euripedes' Dionysus is an imperious, terrifying god and his followers abandon their societal identities in order to follow him, wreaking havoc and destruction wherever they go.

Thus we have here two models of the essential relationship with the Divine. The one, existential, by virtue of the individual as individual in the highest relationship to God, unmediated by language, is defined as crisis. The other, mystical, by virtue of the individual throwing off the

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 36.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 35.

¹² Ibid., p. 37.

¹³ Ibid., p. 37.

fetters of his individuality and losing himself in God, unmediated by language, is defined as ecstasy. Both partake of madness, both are defined as transgression and both are consigned to the land of Silence (i.e. non-speech).

II

The central doctrine of Sufism is *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the “oneness of being”. This derived directly from the *shahāda*, which is understood not only as “there is no god but God” but also as “there is no reality except Reality”.¹⁴

Before entering upon a discussion of the various modes of expression in Ṣūfī poetry, it is first necessary to examine this fundamental concept of the “oneness of being” and to distinguish between the two most advanced states of the Ṣūfī path that lead directly to its realization.

Unlike the Nietzschean formulation of the oneness of being—a kind of extreme pantheism—Sufism posits God as the source of all being. Therefore, all being is united in him:

... God is the One Real Being which underlies all phenomena ... if nothing except God exists, then the whole universe, including man, is essentially one with God, whether it is regarded as an emanation which proceeds from him, without impairing his unity, like sunbeams from the sun, or whether it is conceived as a mirror in which the divine attributes are reflected.¹⁵

The final two stages on the Ṣūfī path of union with God are those of the gnostic (‘*ārīf*) who, through an act of divine grace, is permitted to contemplate God’s attributes with his heart and the gnostic who achieves the supreme state of annihilation in the divine essence which is commonly termed *fanā’ fī baqā’* and which al-Niffarī calls *al-waqfah*.¹⁶ This state is only granted to the elect, the saints of Sufism. In his book, *Mystics of Islam*, Nicholson quotes a passage from “the oldest Persian treatise on Sufism, the *Kashf al-Mahjūb* of Hujwīrī” in which he further separates the stage of the ‘*ārīf* into two hierarchical states:

¹⁴ William Stoddart, *Sufism*, p. 43.

¹⁵ R. A. Nicholson, *Mystics of Islam*, p. 80.

¹⁶ Arberry translates *al-waqfah* as “the station of Staying”, *al-wuqūf* as “the state of Staying” and *al-wāqif* as “the Stayer”: “... as the mystic in his journey is transferred from one station in which he has experienced confirmation and presence, to another station for the same purpose, he pauses (*yaqif*) between the two stations, and during this pause (*waqfah*) emerges from the condition of the two stations, learning in this pause the practices (*adab*) proper to the station to which he is being transferred. When this has been duly made clear to him, he enters into the condition of the station to which he has been transferred”. A. J. Arberry, Introduction to *Mawāqif and Mukhāṭabāt of Niffarī*, p. 8.

There are really two kinds of contemplation. The former is the result of perfect faith, the latter of rapturous love, for in the rapture of love, a man attains to such a degree that his whole being is absorbed in the thought of his Beloved and he sees nothing else. Muḥammad ibn Wāṣil said: "I never saw anything without seeing God therein" i.e. through perfect faith. Shiblī said: "I never saw anything except God", i.e. in the rapture of love and the fervor of contemplation.¹⁷

Though the latter is obviously superior to the former in terms of the Ṣūfī hierarchy, both these stages can be aligned with the Kierkegaardian mode of worship in that both posit the "I", the individual, in an absolute, essential relation to the Divine. Though he actively contemplates the revelation of divine unity, the *ʿārīf* does not relinquish the "I" of his individuality. His identity still functions as the basis of his contemplation. It has not yet been subsumed and extinguished in the supreme Reality of the divine essence. There is a subject who speaks the "I" and posits an object, the Beloved. The case is entirely different with the *wāqīf* however; In this stage, the "I" ceases to exist and all that remains is God. A total identification with the divine essence is brought about. And, of course, logically speaking, where there is no "I" there can be no speech for speech is ultimately the expression of the subject. In grammatical terms, where there is no subject there can be no verb and no object. The sentence (the basic unit of human speech) is nullified and ceases to have any validity as such. The *wāqīf* "... does not pray. Prayer is from man to God, but in *waqfāt* there is nothing but God".¹⁸ The state of *wuqūf* can thus be understood in terms of the Dionysian category of worship. Indeed, if we were to extend the metaphor of the Nietzschean duality still further, we would include the *maqām* of the *ʿārīf* or gnostic in the category of the Apollonian for when the individual posits himself as such in relation to God, he can still speak of God (though in veiled or symbolic terms). He still exists in the realm of light, of language and of art. And so we can interpret these lines by al-Niffarī as expressive of the Nietzschean duality:¹⁹

وقال لى الوقفة وراء ما يقال، والمعرفة متبى ما يقال.
وقال لى الوقفة نار الكون والمعرفة نور الكون.¹⁹

And He said unto me:

—The *waqfah* is behind speech and gnosis ends in speech.

—The *waqfah* is the fire of the universe and gnosis is the light of the universe.

¹⁷ Nicholson, p. 55.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁹ Quotations of al-Niffarī are taken from "Mawqif al-Waqfah" in Arberry's edition of *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*.

In light of these thoughts, I would like to distinguish between two types of Ṣūfī poetry. The allegorical and the ecstatic. The allegorical is that category in which the poet appropriates a conventional secular form and imbues it with mystical symbolism without altering any of its recognizable features. Nicholson calls this “the symbolic style” and according to him, it serves a double function:

It has been said that the Sufis invented this figurative style as a mask for mysteries which they desired to keep secret. That desire was natural in those who proudly claimed to possess an esoteric doctrine known only to themselves; moreover, a plain statement of what they believed might have endangered their liberties, if not their lives. But apart from any such motives, the Sufis adopt the symbolic style because there is no other way of interpreting mystical experience. So little does knowledge of the infinite revealed in ecstatic vision need an artificial disguise that it cannot be communicated at all except through types and emblems drawn from the sensible world, which, imperfect as they are, may suggest and shadow forth a deeper meaning than appears on the surface.²⁰

The allegorical style is, in the Kierkegaardian sense, a mediation of the gnostic’s singular experience in the universal, which is expressed as conventional poetic language. From a historical perspective, this may have served to somehow reconcile or root the radical Ṣūfī theosophy in a more orthodox tradition (for it appears to be mainly the later poets of Sufism that wrote in this style). Since desire and intoxication are the two dominant features of the gnostic’s experience of the Divine, then love poetry and wine poetry are the perfect vehicles for mystical symbolism. The two most famous allegorical poets are of course, Ibn al-ʿArabī and ʿUmar ibn al-Fāriḍ.

لَعِينَ بِي عِنْدَ لَتَمِ الرُّكْنِ وَالْحَجَرِ إِلَّا بِرِيحِهِمْ مِنْ طَيِّبِ الْأَثَرِ إِلَّا ذَكَرْتُهُمْ فَسِيرْتُ فِي الْقَمَرِ فَاللَّيْلُ عِنْدِي مِثْلُ الشَّمْسِ فِي الْبَكْرِ حَسَنَاءُ، لَيْسَ لَهَا أَحْتٌ مِنَ الْبَشَرِ مِثْلُ الْغَزَالَةِ إِشْرَاقًا بِلا غَبَرِ شَمْسٌ وَلَيْلٌ مَعًا مِنْ أَعْجَبِ الصُّورِ وَنَحْنُ فِي الظَّهِيرِ فِي لَيْلٍ مِنَ الشَّعْرِ	نَفْسِي الْفِدَاءُ لِبَيْضِ حُرْدٍ غُرْبِ مَا تَسْتَدِلُّ إِذَا مَا تَهَتْ تَخْلَفُهُمْ وَلَا دَجًا بِي لَيْلٍ مَا بِهِ قَمَرٌ وَإِنَّمَا حِينَ أَمْسَى فِي رِكَابِهِمْ غَاظَلْتُ مِنْ غَزَلِي مِنْهُمْ وَاجِدَةً إِنْ أَسْفَرْتُ عَنْ مُحَيَّاها أَرْتِكَ سَنًا لِلشَّمْسِ غُرْتُهَا، لِلَّيْلِ طُرْتُهَا، فَنَحْنُ بِاللَّيْلِ فِي ضَوْءِ النَّهَارِ بَهَا،
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1. My soul be the ransom of fair-complexioned and coy virgins who played with me as I was kissing the Pillar and the Stone!
2. When thou art lost in pursuit of them, thou wilt find no guide but in their scent, the sweetest of traces.

²⁰ Nicholson, p. 103.

3. No moonless night darkened o'er me but I remembered them and journeyed in moonlight.
4. Only when I walk in their company of riders does the night seem to me like the sun in the morning.
5. My love urged me to dalliance with one of them, a beauty who hath no sister in humankind.
6. If she unveils her mouth, she will show to thee what sparkles like the sun in unchanging radiance.
7. The whiteness of her forehead is the sun's, the blackness of the hair on her brow is the night's: most wondrous of forms is she—a sun and a night together!
8. Through her we are in daylight during the night and in a night of hair at noon.

This poem is taken at random from the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* of Ibn al-ʿArabī. On the surface, it is a love poem in the tradition of the pre-Islamic erotic prelude but esoterically—or so the author's commentary tells us—it is the gnostic's celebration of the Divine attributes as defined by Ṣūfī doctrine. Indeed, there is a whole set of doctrinal Ṣūfī terminology that is superimposed on the exoteric meaning of the poem which in turn becomes a conventionalized system of reference. Moreover, this poetry is the very type of the state of *maʿrifah* (gnosis) for, as in conventional love poetry, the lover and beloved are static archetypes with the gulf of desire separating them (i.e. subject-verb-object), so it is with the gnostic lovingly contemplating the Divine attributes. The bridge of desire has not been crossed and annihilated in union: therefore rational speech is still possible in the form of conventional poetic expression.

Al-Niffarī's *Kitāb al-Mawāqif* or Book of Stations is a work of aphoristic utterances divided into titled sections (*mawqif*, pl. *mawāqif*) that attempt to describe the moment of "staying" (*waqfah*) and the condition of "the Stayer" (*al-wāqif*) in cryptic prose that is full of paradox, negative statements and sentence reversals, thereby approximating stylistically (in the Kierkegaardian sense) the mysterious and impenetrable state of mystical union. Here are a few statements from "*Mawqif al-Waqfah*" (or "The Station of Staying") regarding the distinction between the gnostic (*ʿārif*) and the "stayer" (*wāqif*):

وقال لى كل واقف عارف، وما كل عارف واقف.
 وقال لى الواقفون أهلى، والعارفون أهل معرفتى.
 وقال لى معرفة لا وقفة فيها فرجوعها الى جهل.
 وقال لى احترق العلم فى المعرفة واحترقت المعرفة فى الوقفة.
 وقال لى اذا عرفت الوقفة لم تقبلك المعرفة، ولم يتألف بك الحدثنان.
 وقال لى حكومة الواقف صمته وحكومة العارف نطقه.
 وقال لى العارف ذو قلب والواقف ذو رب.

- Every stayer is a gnostic: not every gnostic is a stayer.
- The stayers are my people: the gnostics are the people of my gnosis.
- Gnosis in which is no staying returns to ignorance.
- Knowledge is consumed in gnosis, and gnosis is consumed in staying.
- When thou knowest staying, gnosis will not accept thee, and temporality will not be familiar with thee.
- The authority of the stayer is his silence; the authority of the gnostic is his speech; the authority of the knower is his knowledge.
- The gnostic possesses a heart, the stayer possesses godliness.

The *wāqif* is god-like because there is nothing in the *waqfah* but God. The *wāqif* ceases to exist as an individual and is transformed by the divine essence into divine essence:

وقال لى ليس فى الوقفة ثبت ولا محو ولا قول ولا فعل ولا علم ولا جهل.
وقال لى إن دعوتنى فى الوقفة خرجت من الوقفة، وإن وقفت فى الوقفة
خرجت من الوقفة.
وقال لى ليس فى الوقفة واقف وإلا فلا وقفة.

- In staying there is neither establishment, nor annihilation, nor speech, nor act, nor knowledge, nor ignorance.²¹
- If thou callest upon Me in staying, thou departest from staying: and if thou stayest in staying, thou goes forth from staying.
- In staying there is no stayer, else it is not staying ...

The last two particularly cryptic statements refer to the annihilation of the intentionality of individuality in the *waqfah*. The actions, intentions, desires of the gnostic must be utterly relinquished before total union can be attained. This brings us to the figure of the tenth century sainted martyr, Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, and the category of ecstatic poetry.

III

Massignon relates the curious story of how while pregnant with him, al-Ḥallāj's mother vowed to offer him up to the service of God and the *fuqarā'* before he should reach the age of seven. Though this is most probably a legend and nothing more, al-Ḥallāj did in fact find his religious vocation at an unusually early age. The first sixteen years of his life were spent in the Arab colonies Bayḍa and Wāṣit where he learned the Qur'ān and its Hanbalite interpretation by heart as well as several *ḥadīths*, the fundamentals of Arabic grammar and the art of Qur'ānic recitation. In 260 he departed for Tusṭār to study with the ascetic master Sahl Tusṭārī, "an ascetic of intense faith and a vigorous dialectician, determined to

²¹ Stylistically, this series of negatives functions as an absolute negative, i.e. there is nothing in the *waqfah* (but God).

harmonize mystical experiences with a systematic account of Sunni orthodoxy'.²² Sahl was the first to have written a mystical *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān. In 262 al-Ḥallāj departed suddenly for Baṣra where he took up residence with one 'Amr Makkī who initiated him into Sufism (although Massignon implies that he was more of an illegitimate businessman and a mediocre *muḥaddith* than a true Ṣūfī). Al-Ḥallāj soon broke with him (for various personal or political motives) but not before he had been introduced to the great Iraqi Ṣūfī, Junayd ibn Muḥammad, who was more a theoretician of ecstasy than an ecstatic. He admired al-Ḥallāj a great deal and carried on a lengthy correspondence with him but eventually found his ideas and the intensity of his inspiration too extreme, too passionate and in a sense, too subversive. According to legend, during their first interview, Junayd predicted al-Ḥallāj's imminent martyrdom and it was to Junayd that al-Ḥallāj was to utter his immortal sentence, *Anā al-Ḥaqq*, which was ultimately the cause of their break. All in all, these were the three most influential men in al-Ḥallāj's early career.

During this early Basran period, al-Ḥallāj was leading a profoundly mortified life, one of an already advanced asceticism. But he was by no means a recluse. He mingled freely with the cream of the Basran social and intellectual elite and spoke frequently in mosques and at private gatherings. However, Massignon notes that he addressed himself primarily to the working classes in language that was more often than not direct, eloquent and inspired by the thrilling, unmediated divine passion which the average man or woman could easily respond to emotionally if not understand. Indeed, it was members of this class of people who were his most faithful listeners and disciples wherever he travelled. This situation was viewed as potentially explosive both from a political and a theological point of view and this was the very reason why even before his actual martyrdom he was periodically accused of being either a heretic or a false prophet.

Al-Ḥallāj's ultimate sin against both the orthodox community and the Ṣūfī brotherhoods was that he systematically dared to speak what must not be spoken. Having reached the last stage of the mystical path—that of final union with the Divine Essence—he was not content with silence but sought to express this ultimate mystery in the impassioned, transgressive language that Islam has never forgotten.

In his own *Riwāyāt*, in which undoubtedly the themes of his public discourses are preserved for us, al-Ḥallāj, prior to his third pilgrimage, presents devotional rules to guide the soul towards divine sanctity. He presents them in the form of *Ḥadīth*, whose *isnād* are not a series of (profes-

²² Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Ḥallāj*, vol. I p. 69.

sional traditionist) transmitters authenticating counsels emanating from the Prophet; they are signs of divine grace, quite different frameworks in which his recollected thought has seen these inspired counsels come into view—destined to establish, in a hierarchical system, and to spiritualize, without modifying them, the duties of Qur’ānic legal obligations. Finally ... his ecstatic utterances express the state of essential union, which he explicitly contrasts with the role of prophet, whom he relegates to the second position.²³

Because al-Ḥallāj dared to speak this divine grace of private revelation and to apply it in practical discourse, ‘Amr Makkī, his former master, denounced him as having become a heretic and a false prophet, composer of a new Qur’ān, an accusation that was later taken up by the Iraqi imams who saw al-Ḥallāj as a flagrant usurper of the divinely appointed office of the Imām. Similarly, his most scandalous utterance, *Anā al-Ḥaqq*, is spoken in total disregard of Muslim canonical law and the Ṣūfī vow of silence. In the Ḥallājian formulation, once union with the Divine is achieved the individual soul is annihilated and only the Divine Essence remains but this must not be revealed in direct speech at any cost for it violates the principle of the *shahādah* and is interpreted by the orthodox community (as well as the more orthodox Ṣūfī community) as a blasphemous personal deification and a mockery of the Ṣūfī path. But such was al-Ḥallāj’s love for God that he must speak the unspeakable (which is God speaking in him and through him) even if he was to be condemned as a madman or a criminal or both. In this sense, al-Ḥallāj’s utterance is a purely Dionysian one and simply cannot be properly understood in terms of human language but must be consigned (by the universal) to the realm of madness and transgression.

Shortly after this incident, al-Ḥallāj broke permanently with Junayd when the latter had rebuffed his efforts to be reconciled. This is an account of the final interview by Hujwīrī as quoted in Massignon’s *Passion*:

I have read in the *Hikāyāt* (of Khuldī) that when Ḥusayn b. Manšūr, in a state of trance (*ghalaba*), broke with ‘Amr b. ‘Uthmān, and came over to Junayd, the latter said: “Why do you come?”—“To live in community (*ṣuhba*) with you as the master”.—“I do not live in community with madmen (*majānīn*); community life requires balance (*siḥḥa*), otherwise what happened to you with Sahl b. Tuṣṭārī and with ‘Amr occurs”.—“O master, sobriety (*saḥw*) and intoxication (*sukr*) are only the two human aspects of the mystic who remains separated from his Lord as long as these two aspects are not both annihilated”.—“O Ibn Manšūr, you are wrong in your definition of these states, sobriety and intoxication; the first means the state of normal equilibrium of the faithful before God; it is not a

²³ Ibid., p. 116.

qualification of the faithful that he may acquire through his own effort (*iktisāb*) as a creature; likewise the second, which signifies extremes of desire and love. O Ibn Manṣūr, I see in your language an indiscreet curiosity (*fuḍūl*) and some expressions that are useless.²⁴

Thus is al-Ḥallāj dismissed, once and for all, from the Ṣūfī community.

Two extensive apostolic journeys and three pilgrimages later, al-Ḥallāj finally settles down in Baghdad and begins the last and definitive period of his public preaching. He was "very changed", his son Ḥamd notes:

He acquired a piece of property, built himself a house on it, and began to preach to the inhabitants a doctrine that I only partly understood. The jurisconsult Muḥammad Ibn Dāwūd, together with several other *ʿulamāʾ*, denounced this preaching; and they cast aspersions on his attitude of mind ... and Ḥallāj was disowned by Shiblī and other masters in mysticism. Some said: he is a madman; still others said: no, he has the gift of miracles and his prayer is answered (by God). Tongues wagged about his case so much and so effectively that the Sultan had him put in prison.²⁵

This is the first of a series of long imprisonments which eventually ends in al-Ḥallāj's brutal execution. However, throughout his severe persecution by the authorities, al-Ḥallāj never once repented or compromised his beliefs. Indeed, it is during this last Baghdadian period that his preaching and his ideas become most radical. Al-Ḥallāj now claims for himself the voice of Divine authority. God now fills him, annihilates the "I" of his identity and speaks through him:

It is You who have assigned to this present witness (Ḥallāj) from Your divine essence, a certain ipseity, (*Huwi*), in order to speak of You in the first person; while relating Your traditions, (*Riwayāt*), ... And it is You who have taken my essence to serve You, as a symbol (among men), when, showing me in the last of my states, You have come to proclaim my Essence (You, my creator) through my (created) essence....²⁶

There is thus both a merging and confusing of identities in the mystic/poet's consciousness which is theoretically engulfed in the ultimate reality of the Divine Essence:

أَنَا مَنِ أَهْوَى وَمَنِ أَهْوَى أَنَا نَحْنُ رُوحَانِ حَلَّلْنَا بَدَنًا
فَإِذَا أَبْصَرْتَنِي أَبْصَرْتَهُ وَإِذَا أَبْصَرْتَهُ أَبْصَرْتَنَا

I am the One I love and the One I love is me
We are two souls infused in a (single) body
And to see me is to see Him
And to see Him is to see us.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 272.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 272. The parenthetical remarks are Massignon's.

Linguistically speaking, the “I” of this union, the Ḥallājīan identity, is a nonentity functioning only as a neutral grammatical element, a metaphor for the Divine Essence which engulfs the human essence and which is the One Reality behind the grammatical individuation. Al-Ḥallāj attempts to grasp this linguistic paradox more fully in his “*Tanzīh ‘an al-Na‘t wa-l-Waṣf*”:

My present statute (*ḥukm*) is that a veil separates me from my own “self”. This veil precedes vision (*kashf*) for me; for, when the moment of vision approaches, the qualifying attributes are annihilated. “I” am separated then from my self; “I” am the simple subject of the verb, no longer my self; my present “I” is no longer me. I am a metaphor (*tajāwuz*), not a generic kinship (*tajānus*), an apparition (*ẓuhūr*) not an infusion (*ḥulūl*) in a material receptacle (*ḥaykal juthmānī*). My survival is not a return to pre-eternity; it is a reality that is imperceptible to the senses and beyond the reach of analogies.²⁷

حاشای حاشای من إثباتِ اثْنینِ	أَهْ أَنَا أَمْ أَنْتَ؟ هَذَینِ إِلَهِینِ
کَلِّیْ عَلَی الْکَلِّ تَلِیْسٌ بِوَجْهِیْنِ	هَوِیَّةٌ لَّکَ فِی لَا یَتْنِیْ أَبَدًا
فَقَدْ تَبَّیْنِ ذَاتِی حِیْثُ لَا أِینَ	فَأَیْنَ ذَاتُکَ عَنِّی حِیْثُ کُنْتُ أَرِیْ
فِی نَاطِرِ الْقَلْبِ أَمْ فِی نَاطِرِ الْعِینِ	وَأَیْنَ وَجْهُکَ مَقْصُودٌ بِنَاطِرَتِیْ
فَارْفَعْ بِأَنْتَکَ أُنِّیْ مِنَ الْبَیْنِ	بَیْنِیْ وَبَیْنُکَ أُنِّیْ یُرَاجِعُنِیْ

Ah! I or You? These are two Gods.

Far be it for You, far be it for You to assert that there are two.

There is only Your One Ipseity in my nothingness, forever.

This is my all before All, deceptive, two-faced.

Where then is Your essence, apart from me, that I may see clearly....

But already my essence is made manifest to the point that there is no more space.

And where is Your Face, object of my doubled gaze

In the depths of the heart or in the depths of the eye?

Between me and You (there lingers) an “it is I” which torments me....

So lift with Your I this I from between us both.

It is this obsessive ecstatic celebration of the breakdown of identity in union with God—the tearing aside of the final veil of separation, the “I”—and its linguistic and poetic consequences that is the dominant and most fascinating feature in al-Ḥallāj’s poetry. Here is a true poetry of ecstasy that defies language and all its categories of individuation and separation; a poetry that desperately wrestles with language, tearing it away from the iron grip of Apollo and forcing it to approximate somehow the mysterious experience of supreme spiritual love-in-ecstasy that was hitherto voiceless. There is no distinction in this poetry between exoteric

²⁷ Ibid., vol. III, p. 45.

and esoteric meaning. The poet in the violent throes of his ecstasy hides nothing, reveals nothing. He invents a new diction that unites the hidden and the revealed (as the human and the Divine are united) in one poignantly simple voice (that of the Essence within and without the essence, to use a Ḥallājian formulation) that is both tremendously powerful and yet immeasurably vulnerable in its depth and the directness of its appeal.

لَيْتُكَ لَيْتُكَ يَا سَرَى وَنَحْوَانِي	لَيْتُكَ لَيْتُكَ يَا قَصْدِي وَمَعْنَانِي
ادعوك بل انت تدعوني اليك فهل	ناديتُ يَاكَ ام ناجيتُ إِنِّي
يا عين عين وجودي يا مدى هممي	يا منطقي وعباراتي واعيانِي
يا كل كلّي ويا سمعي ويا بصري	يا جملي وتباعضي واجزائي
يا كل كلّي وكلّ الكل ملتبس	وكلّ كلك ملبوس بمعنائي

Here am I, here am I, O my secret, O my trust!
 Here am I, here am I, O my hope, O my meaning!
 I call to You ... no, it is You who calls me to Yourself.
 How could I say "it is You"!—if You had not whispered to me "it is I"?
 O essence of the essence of my existence,—O aim of my intent,
 O You who make me speak, O You, my utterances,—You, my winks!
 O All of my all,—O my hearing and my sight,
 O my assembling, my composition and my parts!
 O All of my all,—the all of all things, equivocal enigma,
 It is the all of Your all that I obscure in wanting to express You!

God is here a three-fold characterization. He is each of the poet's essential parts, He is the sum total of these parts and He is the very essence of this totality; He is all. In effect, He is the poem itself, though as the poet suggests, inadequately expressed by it. The poet's "I" and "my" are thus not real linguistic denotations but direct emanations or manifestations (metaphors) of God's essence.

Indeed, in al-Ḥallāj's poetry, the grammar of ecstasy directly mirrors the ecstatic experience through a contortion or warping or subversion of normal syntactical and expressive patterns. The intention is to defamiliarize, to disassociate the essence of what is being said (sung) from its verbal and grammatical "crust", as Massignon calls it, by rendering the latter unfamiliar, garbled, somehow meaningless in the face of the highly pitched, musical emotion which the discernable essence, the intuited feeling of the tonality of the words inspires. Massignon calls this "... (the) secret savor, (the) central sap ... a grace, which comes from God".²⁸

²⁸ Ibid., vol. III, p. 341.

فَمَنْ اَنَا وَمَنْ هُوَ هُوَ	لَسْتُ اَنَا وَلَسْتُ هُوَ
و "لا انا" ما هو هو	لا "وانا" ما هو انا
ابصارنا به له	لو كان هو ما نظرت
انا وهو وهو وهو	ما في الوجود غيرنا
كمن له به له	فمن لنا بنا لنا
ليس في المرأة شيء غيرنا	"انا من اهوى ومن اهوى انا"
"نحن روحان حللنا بدنا"	قد سهى المنشد اذ انشده
كل من فرق فرقا بيننا	اثبت الشركة شركا واضحا
ان ذكرى ونداني يا انا	لا اناديه ولا اذكره

I am not I and I am not He; then who am I and who is He?
 Not "and I" for He is not I and not "not I" for He is not He
 If it is He at whom and by whom we gaze
 There is nothing in existence but us, I and He and He and He
 Thus whoever is for us, with us, of us is as he who is for Him, with Him,
 of Him

I am the One I desire and the One I desire is me
 There is nothing in the mirror except us two
 Distracted is the singer who sings "we are two souls infused in one body"
 And he who makes distinctions between us only proves his "shirk"
 [i.e. declares that there is more than One (God)]

I do not call upon *Him* and I do not remember *Him* for my calling and
 my remembrance are directed towards Myself.

As Massignon notes, the first five lines of this poem are virtually untranslatable and yet they are the most perfect expression of the Ḥallā-jian poetic ideal. To begin with, the mere physical notation of the words on the page are disorienting. The consecutive repetition of similar or identical particles is somehow mesmerizing and yet gives the visual impression of non-sensical formulations. On a semantic level, the complicated and rather garbled repetitions and reversals of the pronouns "I" and "He" render them virtually meaningless in and of themselves and expressive only of the ultimate mystery of the Divine "I". This distortive manipulation of language pushes the reader onto a higher non-rational, non-linguistic plane of consciousness (emotional? intuitive?) that induces a kind of existential dizziness²⁹ which in turn approximates the immediateness of the poet's experience of unitive ecstasy and forces the reader to understand and interpret it in terms of this ecstasy as opposed to "the words on the page". Massignon elaborates on this point thus:

Ḥallāj, having reached this point by a direct approach, urges the soul to pass beyond, straight to God. One then witnesses, thanks to a concerted warping of the sentence, a simplification and increasing elucidation of its

²⁹ It is interesting to note that Nietzsche (and later, Sartre) called this Dionysian intuition into "the essence of things" *Nausea*.

apparent object—correlatives of a thinning down, of a progressive transparency of the personality of its temporary subject. And at the utmost limit, reached in two or three decisive occurrences—liberating intermittencies—the transcendent and unique Object, the only Real, God, asserts Himself abruptly to the reader, as being directly conceivable, while simultaneously the human “I”, the normal subject of the sentence, slips away before a divine “I”.³⁰

It is a testimony to al-Ḥallāj's genius and brilliant inspiration that his poetry, as well as his beliefs and teachings, were misunderstood and severely criticized by his learned contemporaries and the generations that immediately succeeded them (al-Ma'arrī and al-Tanūkhī being the best known literary figures among these). His extraordinary use of language was too advanced for the conventions of his time—in fact, it was not until the advent of the European modernists, centuries later and in a far different place and clime, that language was deliberately used to break the very boundaries of its own foundation. In al-Ḥallāj's time, it only served to limn the infamous brand that labelled him a charlatan and a madman. As the ecstatic Dionysian revellers were perceived as a terrifying threat by the prevailing Apollonian culture, so was al-Ḥallāj, who had unequivocally penetrated into the mysteries of the Divine essence and attempted to draw these forth out of the land of Silence and into the temporal realm of human speech, perceived by his orthodox society as a deadly enemy to be reckoned with in the most extreme manner possible.

Later Persian and Hindu miniatures depicting al-Ḥallāj's execution portray a pale, thin, bleeding man nailed to a cross, his head hanging low, almost exactly in the manner of the martyred Christ. The sociological and archetypal implications of this association are significant. More important, however, are the actual details of the execution, the manner of his martyrdom. According to the standard account given by various onlookers, his son Hamd among them, al-Ḥallāj was flogged, his hands and feet cut off, he was hung on the gibbet overnight and eventually decapitated; his trunk was burned and the ashes scattered to the winds. It is almost as though his executioners felt that literal dismemberment would be the most symbolically appropriate punishment for this extraordinary man who dared to sing, to shout, loudly and clearly, of the bliss of total union with the One, the Whole—his God.

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³⁰ *Passion*, vol. III, p. 342.