

“HOLY FOOLISHNESS” AND “CRAZY WISDOM” AS TEACHING STYLES IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN SUFISM

Kate Zebiri

In this article I explore the phenomena of “holy foolishness” and “crazy wisdom” in the literature of three contemporary Sufi teachers who have lived and taught mainly in Western contexts. The teaching stories of Idries Shah and the autobiographical accounts of Reshad Feild and Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee serve as paradigms of a teaching style that embodies holy madness. This article seeks to explore lines of continuity and discontinuity within classical Sufi notions of holy foolishness, and also to evaluate the source material in the light of recent paradigms of crazy wisdom which have emerged more recently particularly in relation to “gurus” in new religious movements and the New Age. To this end, I begin by examining both the classical Sufi precedents for such teaching styles and more contemporary formulations of crazy wisdom, including the example of G. I. Gurdjieff (d. 1949) who was active in the first half of the twentieth century and influenced some of the Sufi teachers discussed here. I argue that Gurdjieff had a significant though not exclusive role in the introduction of such paradigms into contemporary Sufism.

In addition to tracing some of the divergent historical and literary influences on this teaching style and on the way in which it is described or reported, I also reflect on the functional aspects of these accounts. First I attempt to distinguish between stories (literature) and institutions (the personal roles and actual behavior of Sufi teachers and disciples), and second I reflect on the possible reception and impact of such literature. Mark Sedgwick and Dawn Llewellyn have drawn attention to some of the possible functions of this kind of literature. Sedgwick observes that people may read spiritual literature not just for edification (as part of their spiritual quest), but also for entertainment (Sedgwick, “Reception” 187, 192), while

Llewellyn argues that reading spiritual and religious literature can have the effect of “center[ing] participants as the meaning makers in their spiritual lives,” while being potentially life-changing (“Risky Readings”).¹

I use autobiographical narratives, aware that the testimony of individuals is “necessarily mediated by available cultural models of identity and the discourses in which they are expressed” (Eakin 4). Furthermore, with regard to questions of referentiality it is important to note that these narratives inevitably incorporate a fictional element, which is needed to bridge the gaps in human memory as well as to render the account readable. However, fiction in this context can be seen as “a tool for making memories come alive” (Gudmundsdottir 273). If read with due caution (for example, taking into account a tendency to idealize the teacher), these texts can provide a useful and detailed insider account of what is often an intense and catalytic relationship; this is of particular benefit given the difficulties of conducting field research in this area.²

The expansion of Sufism into Europe and North America that occurred during the twentieth century understandably brought about changes resulting from the adaptation to new non-Muslim contexts. These changes have included, for example, a greater emphasis on gender equality and more democratic, less authoritarian modes of organization (Westerlund; Hermansen, “What’s American”). Perhaps the most radical change, however, is the development and spread of “universal” Sufism, whereby Sufism is seen as a broader, timeless phenomenon, not confined to the Islamic context.³ According to this understanding, one can be a Sufi without necessarily being a Muslim (Geaves 6–8). Such a view is controversial and not accepted by most Muslims, including many with a Sufi affiliation. There is some contact and cooperation between Islamic and universal Sufis, however, particularly in North America, and some Islamic Sufi *shaykhs* have been known to accept initiates without requiring conversion to Islam.⁴ In recent decades universal Sufism has had a particular appeal in the Western context, perhaps because of a negative, politicized image of Islam in the media, and has played an important role in the spread of Sufism to the West, as seen by the success and popularity of Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927), founder of the Sufi Order in the West, and Idries Shah (1924–1996), one of the figures discussed below. In fact, all of the writers examined here are universal Sufis and to that extent may be controversial figures.⁵

It is generally agreed that socio-cultural changes in Western societies in recent decades have led to a devaluing of authority in general, and of religious/spiritual authority in particular. The “guru” figure, which had its heyday in the countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s, has largely fallen into disrepute, partly as a result of abuses (usually involving sex, drugs

or violence). As long as half a century ago, Weber observed that charismatic authority does not sit well with the modern processes of rationalization and bureaucratization (361–62); and the rise of “unmediated individualism,” as charted by Paul Heelas, has meant that even in New Age circles charismatic authority is largely rejected, with authority being instead vested in the self (21–22). While acknowledging the damage caused by abuses and scandals, Georg Feuerstein attributes the overwhelmingly negative image of gurus in the media and in the popular imagination to cultural factors such as the prevailing ethos of individualism, the enshrinement of personal freedom, and a general lack of appreciation or understanding of spiritual matters (253–56). In the conclusion, I consider whether this teaching style based on holy foolishness and crazy wisdom as reflected in the literature is countercultural in the sense of going against prevailing norms which privilege individualism over more authoritarian models.

Holy Foolishness in Classical Sufism

Historically, the type of the “wise fool” is not confined to Sufi sources but appears more generally in Muslim literatures, particularly in the folk stories and legends concerning Mulla Nasruddin and Jeha. Stories describing the antics of these two archetypal wise idiots combine humor with moral lessons and wisdom and are still in circulation in Muslim countries to the present day. In one such story, Nasruddin seeks an audience with the ruler, Tamerlane, in order to recite to him a poem of praise he has composed in his honor. He must pass by three successive gatekeepers of increasingly high status, and in each case must resort to bribing the gatekeeper by promising to give him a third of the expected recompense. When Tamerlane, well pleased with the poem, asks Nasruddin what he would like as a reward, the latter requests three hundred lashes, to be divided equally amongst the three gatekeepers.⁶

In Sufi literature there are many stories of holy fools who enjoy a freedom not granted to others, particularly in criticizing authority figures (not excluding God), by virtue of their special status as “Friends of God” (*awliyā*).⁷ In fact, the idea of the holy fool has antecedents in all three Abrahamic religions. Early holy fools in the Christian tradition include St. Simeon, who acted in a seemingly insane manner, for example tying a dead dog to his belt and dragging it with him, in order to avoid the sin of spiritual pride (Feuerstein 14).

While the historical tensions between Sufism and the religious establishment were somewhat attenuated by the efforts of prominent religious

scholars (notably al-Ghazali, d. 1111) who endeavoured to make Islamic mysticism acceptable to the mainstream, certain fringe elements of the Sufi tradition, such as those described in this section, were seen as deviant not just among the religious scholars of the mainstream but even among many Sufis. Extremes of asceticism, “intoxication” (i.e. with the love of God), and any departure from the requirements of the Shari’a were especially frowned upon. While this was particularly the case in the Abbasid period, even down to the modern era the Muslim cultural elites have been dismissive of socially nonconformist mystics, especially those who practiced renunciation, seeing them as “the riffraff of society” (Karamustafa 5–6). In Islamic religious history, one expression of holy madness is the *shatḥiyāt*, ecstatic utterances, whereby seemingly irrational, nonsensical, or even blasphemous declarations were made by persons in a God-intoxicated state. The execution of al-Hallaj in 922, ostensibly for uttering phrases such as “I am the truth” while in an intoxicated state, is perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of the hostility towards the phenomena under discussion here.⁸

Perhaps not unrelated to the *shatḥiyāt*, which highlight the limitations of language as a vehicle for expressing divine truths or spiritual experience, is the use of paradox by Sufi teachers, described by Schimmel as “a sort of *ko’an*... meant to shock the hearer, to kindle discussion, to perplex the logical faculties” (13). An example would be the ninth-century Persian Sufi Bayazid’s reported utterance on a number of occasions when visitors sought him out: “I myself am in search of Bayazid” (Schimmel 48). Paradox is a way of expressing that which cannot be conveyed in simple logical terms, and it is intended to facilitate transcendence of the rational mind or intellect. In fact, classical Sufis often expressed cynicism about the value of intellectually acquired knowledge, emphasizing its limitations and its inferiority to gnosis (*ma’rifā*)—knowledge based on direct experience of the divine.⁹ The Egyptian mystic Dhu’l-Nun al-Misri (d. 859) famously argued that “real gnosis is bewilderment.”¹⁰

Another manifestation of the holy fool in Islamic tradition was the *majdhūb* (“the attracted/enraptured one”), who was considered to be in the grip of a mystical vision or profound spiritual experience to the extent that he (for such it almost always was) might lose some of his senses or behave in ways contrary to the religious law (e.g. walking around naked). Behaviour which normally incurs punishment could however be overlooked by virtue of the *majdhūb*’s extraordinary state, and, like the “Friends of God” described above, he was often allowed special license, for example being excused from the normal acts of worship (Ernst, *Shambhala Guide* 116). Such a person could in theory become illuminated not through his own efforts, but instantly,

through the initiative of God.

The two strands of historical Sufism which provide the richest paradigms of holy foolishness, however, are the Malāmātī tradition and the wandering dervishes. The Malāmātī movement originated in the ninth century out of an emphasis on sincerity (*ikhhlās*) and as a reaction to other elements in Sufism such as extreme asceticism, which could become ostentatious (Sviri 155). The word “Malāmātī” is related to the Arabic word meaning “blame,” and this group was so called because of their indifference to, or even active cultivation of, the blame and condemnation of others. The Malāmātīs sought above all else to avoid the dangers of religious hypocrisy, and to that end eschewed all outward appearances of piety or religiosity, such as special forms of dress or supererogatory acts of worship performed in public; unlike some wandering or mendicant Sufis, they aspired to live a normal life and be part of society (Trimingham 265–66; Karamustafa 36). Drawing inspiration from the Qur’anic term “the self which commands to evil” (*al-nafs al-‘ammāra bi’l-sū*), they saw the “self” or “ego” (*al-nafs*) as an obstacle on the path of spiritual progression, and in need of taming. They therefore sought to avoid the enjoyment of doing good and to resist the desire for the approval of others or even for divine reward (Jong). The lower self described above was complemented by a higher self, namely “the blaming self” (*‘al-nafs al-lawwāma*); this represented a person’s conscience, which was alert to the psychological dangers inherent in the religious life. In later times some Malāmātī individuals (though not all actually applied the term to themselves) actively courted blame by publicly flouting religious norms. An example of this is to be found in a story told by the fifteenth-century Sufi poet Jami concerning a Malāmātī Sufi who entered a town and was greeted as a holy man by a throng of people. He then began to urinate publicly (something not permitted in Islamic law), whereupon the crowd dispersed in disgust (Schimmel 86).

If the seeking or non-avoidance of blame furnished the Malāmātīs with a nonconformist character, this was even truer of the wandering dervishes who became more numerous from the thirteenth century onwards. Ahmet Karamustafa has written at length on this phenomenon in his monograph *God’s Unruly Friends*, focusing particularly on the Qalandars, the Haydaris and the Abdals.¹¹ Such wandering holy men, to varying degrees at different times and places, practiced extreme asceticism (to the point of bodily mortification), celibacy, mendicancy, antinomianism, the adoption of eccentric forms of dress or outlandish appearance, and the use of intoxicants (Karamustafa 14–20).¹² Some of these wandering dervishes were lax in their religious observations, and some indulged in deliberately offensive behavior, much like some Malāmātīs (Yazici; Trimingham 268; Schimmel 87–88).

Contemporary Paradigms of Crazy Wisdom

The phenomenon of crazy wisdom has received rather scant attention in academic sources; rare examples of relevant studies are Georg Feuerstein's *Holy Madness: Spirituality, Crazy-Wise Teachers, and Enlightenment*, M. Conrad Hyers's *Zen and the Comic Spirit*, and Andrew Rawlinson's *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*. Typologies of crazy wisdom draw much inspiration from Hindu and Buddhist sources (exclusively the latter in Hyers's case). Feuerstein suggests a distinction between "holy fools" and "crazy-wise teachers" on the basis of their motivation, arguing that the former deliberately attract the derision and opprobrium of others in order to cultivate humility, while the latter are more interested in conveying spiritual lessons; while the former model is more characteristic of the monotheistic faiths with their dualist metaphysics, the latter approach, more common in Eastern religions including Buddhism and Hinduism, takes the "ego-personality" less seriously, and so has no need to seek out ridicule (338–40).

Feuerstein defines the crazy-wise adept as one who

typically instructs others in ways that are designed to startle or shock the conventional mind....The crazy-wise teachers are eccentrics who use their eccentricity to communicate an alternative vision to the one that governs ordinary life. They are masters of inversion, proficient breakers of taboos, lovers of surprise, contradiction, and ambiguity. (1)

The aim of the teacher is to induce a spiritual crisis in the disciple: "If the teacher is genuine, he or she will do absolutely nothing to remove the disciple's deep-seated aggravation about life. Indeed, the adept will...do his or her best to fan the pupil's fire of frustration"; in this way seekers will be obliged to "meet themselves face on." Furthermore, "the teacher will find any number of ways to pull off the disciple's many masks. In a sense, he or she must be crazier than the disciples and shift shape more than they" (198). According to Claxton, the teacher must be a "demolition expert, setting strategically placed charges to blow up the established super-structure of the ego"; this requires much skill, as it has to be done "in the right sequence and at the right speed, using whatever the 'patient' brings as his raw material for the work of the moment" (98).

Crazy-wise teaching often involves an element of humour, and the teacher in this tradition may be compared to the figure of the clown, jester or trickster. As Hyers has shown, this style of teaching is probably more characteristic of Zen than any other contemporary religious tradition. His description highlights not just the comic quality but also the theatricality

of this teaching mode, despite the “acutely authoritarian” setting:

Through riddles and enigmas, through nonsense and insults, through scowling and laughter, ejaculation and silence, as well as through slapping, kicking and striking, the point is made in...a most eccentric manner...But, as in all profound comedy, one soon discovers that the object of laughter is really oneself in the larger predicament and folly of man. (42)

The clown figure represents a spirit of freedom, and may be seen as being beyond good and evil (44). With an element of “divine inspiration in [his] apparent madness,” the “fool” has been accepted in many cultures as “being possessed of a spirit, a vehicle for the inbreaking of some supranatural order, attested by his transcendence of ordinary canons of reason and behaviour” (45). As Feuerstein observes, bringing to bear a level of playfulness and rendering life a kind of “game” can highlight “the illusory nature of the social arrangement and cultural forms in which [one] is obliged to participate...the mature adult no longer completely believes the magic spell under which the rest of humanity seems to labor” (362).¹³

Certain elements of the *shaykh*-disciple relationship as described in classical Sufi manuals echo some of the elements of crazy wisdom and holy foolishness described above. The Shaykh was expected to tailor his teaching according to the needs of his pupil, and he was able to do this by virtue of his special powers of discernment (*firāsa*) and understanding of the disciple’s psyche. The disciple for his part (for he was almost invariably male) was supposed to show unconditional obedience to the master to the extent of being “like a corpse in the hands of its washer”; this included not arguing with or contradicting the teacher, or seeking any explanation for his instructions, no matter how unusual they might seem. The relationship could be very intense, as even the disciple’s inner life, including his feelings, thoughts, and dreams, could be subjected to the scrutiny of his Shaykh. While the bond between master and pupil could entail love and tenderness, at the same time it was expected that the latter should at times feel fear or awe in the presence of his Shaykh.¹⁴

According to Rawlinson’s suggested typology of spiritual teachers, which draws on two pairs of polar opposites, hot/cool and structured/unstructured, the intensive Shaykh-disciple relationship in Sufism (“intensive” as opposed to some more “casual” models where the Shaykh has thousands of followers and so does not know them individually) would be regarded as hot and structured. “Hot” is explained by Rawlinson with reference to Otto’s concept of the numinous, which assumes a model of transcendence, where there is something which is “powerful and breath-taking, and...associated with revelation and grace” (98); this often involves a process of “transmis-

sion" from teacher to disciple (133). "Structured" means that there is an inherent order in the universe and in the human being: "There is something to be discovered and there is a way of discovering it" (98). "Hot structured" teachers include, for example, the Buddhist masters Naropa and Marpa, who show a disregard for convention and who break social taboos (perhaps even appearing to be mad). These teachers may be highly individualistic (134) and tend to be unpredictable in their behavior (128); there may be an element of "shape changing," and such teachers do not feel the need to be consistent (136).

G. I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949) in many ways epitomizes the type of the crazy-wise teacher. A highly controversial figure who is seen by some as little more than a charlatan, Gurdjieff's admirers insist that he was a compassionate and enlightened teacher who cannot be judged by conventional standards since his main aim in life was to "shock" people into awakening and to help them attain higher levels of consciousness. His habit of obfuscation makes it difficult to summarize his ideas or to assess the relative importance of Sufism in his teachings, though it is certain that he had some contact with Sufi organizations in Turkey, where he spent a number of years of his early life. The "Sarmoung" Sufi Order of Central Asia from which he claimed to have received his initial esoteric training and to have learned the spiritual exercises which he taught was almost certainly fictional (Sedgwick, "European Neo-Sufi" 208–9). His debt to Sufism is clear, however, in various elements of his teaching and practice: his references to teaching stories featuring the aforementioned Mulla Nasruddin of traditional Arab/Islamic folklore (Waldberg 2–3, 10–11); his use of a *dhikr*-type ritual (albeit with Christian words) (Sedgwick, "European Neo-Sufi" 211);¹⁵ the "sacred dances" he taught which were inspired by the Mevleviyya whirling (and possibly other groups) (Bennett 223); and his insistence on the need for a spiritual guide (Sedgwick, "European Neo-Sufi" 210; Ouspensky 240, 348). J. G. Bennett (1897–1974), a follower of Gurdjieff who was already a Sufi when he came under the latter's influence, further adduces the use of the group as a teaching tool, and the transmission of *baraka* (blessing, or spiritual energy) via *ṣuḥba* (the *shaykh* and disciple keeping company together) as confirmation of Gurdjieff's Sufi foundations (218–19), on which he and his particular Gurdjieff group (following Gurdjieff's death) placed much emphasis. Sedgwick points out that down to the present there are some individuals, such as Shems Friedlander, who manage to combine a Sufi (in Friedlander's case, Islamic Sufi) affiliation with Gurdjieffian inspiration ("European Neo-Sufi" 210). It must be said, however, that many elements of Gurdjieff's teaching and practice do not particularly resonate with Sufism and even appear to be antithetical to it.¹⁶

Gurdjieff was a charismatic figure. According to Bennett, “everyone who met Gurdjieff reported a sense of mastery, a power which acted on them” (219). He was also an extremely demanding teacher who believed that difficulties and obstacles were essential for both teacher and pupil; accordingly, he saw it as part of the teacher’s role to cause “friction,” which would help to awaken the pupil and allow the possibility of change (Rawlinson 289; Wellbeloved 82). Bennett provides a graphic description of Gurdjieff’s formidable “rages” which by all accounts were a not infrequent occurrence: “His entire body would shake, his face grow purple and a stream of vituperation would pour out” (217). Having apparently taken an oath in 1928 to “remove from my eyesight all those who...make my life too comfortable” (Gurdjieff 45), Gurdjieff made a point of driving away those who were closest and most important to him after a certain (often fairly brief) period; those so treated included Ouspensky, whose *In Search of the Miraculous* is widely regarded as the definitive exposition of Gurdjieff’s teachings (Bennett 234–37).¹⁷

There are many first-hand accounts of Gurdjieff’s dealings with his pupils and the various methods he used in order to help them break their habitual patterns which were considered to be wasteful of valuable energy. His teaching style was characterized by spontaneity and experimentation. He would often set tests for his pupils, which might for example consist in treating them unfairly in order to elicit a reaction which would reveal their true nature (Ouspensky 228–29). He frequently used humor to wrongfoot people; according to Taylor, “everything he said could be taken as a joke, an absurdity or a profound observation in disguise” (qtd. in Wellbeloved 96).¹⁸ Humor also helped to “get rid of much ill-founded reticence” (Waldberg 9), and served (together with his habit of contradicting himself and of showing himself in a poor light) to counteract the tendency of some of his followers to idolize him (11; Wellbeloved 191–92). Gurdjieff emphasized the need for role-play as a way of breaking out of one’s habitual, mechanical roles (Rawlinson 283), and he himself was by many accounts almost constantly playing a role. Peters, for example, gives a vivid first-hand description of Gurdjieff’s ability to switch in an instant from extreme anger with one person to pleasant good humor with another, only to resume the “tirade” vis-a-vis the unfortunate first person almost without missing a beat (31).¹⁹

In the following sections, Gurdjieff’s direct and indirect influence on contemporary universal Sufism, particularly in terms of teaching styles, will become apparent. To attempt an estimate of its full extent, however, wider and more in depth research among contemporary practitioners of universal Sufism would be required.

The Teaching Stories of Idries Shah (1924–1996)

As the author of over twenty books on Sufism, which have sold perhaps fifteen million copies in total (Sedgwick, “Reception” 187), Idries Shah has probably done more than anyone to make Sufism accessible to a Western audience, and was successful in appealing to influential writers and thinkers, including Doris Lessing, Robert Graves, and Ted Hughes. Born in India to an Indian father and a Scottish mother, Shah travelled widely in both the East and West, but in fact was educated in and spent much of his life in England. A member of more than one “gentleman’s club” in London, he was at ease among artists, writers and intellectuals.²⁰ As happens with many controversial figures, a certain mystique grew up around Shah, described by Rawlinson as “the Shah myth,” which is bolstered by the “Shah-school writings” (Rawlinson 526–27). While not involved in any formal *shaykh*-disciple relationship himself, he is reported to have recommended that those who desired to have a guru should seek one out (Geaves 167).

Shah’s writings emphasized Sufism as a path of individual self-development, and he felt that those seriously intending to pursue the Sufi way needed psychological preparation, which he saw himself as able to provide. He became interested in Gurdjieff’s teachings, especially after coming into contact with Bennett in the early 1960s (the latter saw Shah as a representative of the “Invisible Hierarchy” or “The Inner Circle of Humanity”) (Wilson 182). Although claiming an affiliation to the Naqshbandi tradition (which had close links with the Malāmātīs at certain points in its history), and apparently commissioned by his teacher (allegedly from an esoteric school in Afghanistan) to spread the teachings in the West, to all intents and purposes Shah acted as an independent teacher with no strong connection to organized Sufism.²¹ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that he resonated most strongly with those more individualistic strands of classical Sufism such as the Malāmātīs and, to a lesser extent, the Qalandars. Indeed, Shah’s emphasis on “the self which commands to evil” (dubbed “the commanding self,” for short) and “the blaming self” resonates strongly with the Malāmātī tradition. In many of his books, Shah adapted, translated and popularized classical Sufi teaching stories as well as the folkloric stories concerning Mulla Nasruddin. Although he drew on classical Sufi teachings, Shah insisted that these materials needed to be adapted to contemporary conditions, and also to a specifically Western audience, so there is undoubtedly an element of originality in his collections of stories and anecdotes (*Commanding Self* 3–4, 6).²²

As in the Malāmātī tradition, religious hypocrisy is a prominent theme in Shah’s stories. A classic example is the story of “The Saint and the Sinner,”

in which a dervish attempts to cure a man of his gambling habit by placing a stone to mark each “sin” (i.e. each occasion the man gambles) outside the man’s house as “a visible reminder of evil.” While the dervish indulges in feelings of anger at the gambler and pleasure at his own role in monitoring the latter’s “sin,” the gambler himself feels guilty and assumes the dervish will go to heaven, unlike himself. When both are killed in a natural disaster, the gambler is taken to heaven while the dervish is condemned to hell for his indulgence in feelings of superiority over so many years (*Wisdom* 91–92). Other stories with a strong Malāmatī flavor emphasize that it is foolish, even dangerous, to judge by appearances (*Seeker* 73–74); that acts of worship which are not performed in the right spirit are useless (*Tales* 180); that generous acts should be done in secret (*The Way* 188–89); and that “real good is only that which is done without expectation of reward or fear of punishment if neglected” (*Seeker* 81).

In numerous tales, dervishes, Sufi masters or other individuals act in a seemingly foolish or crazy manner, with varying motives. In the following story, acting crazy is enjoined on a seeker as an antidote to spiritual pride:

One day a man approached Bayazid...saying that he had fasted and prayed and so on for thirty years and not found the joy which Bayazid described. Bayazid told him that he might continue for three hundred years and still not find it.

“How is that?” asked the would-be illuminate.

“Because your vanity is a barrier to you.”

“Tell me the remedy.”

“The remedy is one which you cannot take.”

“Tell me, nevertheless.”

Bayazid said: “You must go to the barber and have your (respectable) beard shaved. Remove all your clothes and put a girdle around yourself. Fill a nosebag with walnuts and suspend it from your neck. Go to the market-place and call out: “A walnut will I give to any boy who will strike me on the back of the neck.” Then continue on to the justices’ session so that they may see you.”

“But I cannot do that; please tell me something else that would do as well.”

“This is the first move, and the only one,” said Bayazid, “but I had already told you that you would not do it; so you cannot be cured.” (*Tales* 180)

In another story, the motive for the seemingly nonsensical behavior is to hold up a mirror to onlookers. “Bahaudin” (the prominent Naqshbandi teacher Baha’ al-Din al-Naqshbandi) meets a wandering Qalandar, and the former makes a show of asking the latter many questions which, to the increasing dismay of his own disciples, receive bizarre replies. For example, “From where do you come?” is met with “I have no idea,” and “What is Right?” elicits “Whatever is good for me.” The group eventually becomes angry and drives the Qalandar away, but Bahaudin rebukes them: “Fools!... This man

is acting the part of humanity. While you were despising him, he was deliberately demonstrating heedlessness as each of you does, all unaware, every day of your lives" (*Wisdom* 21–22). Another possible reason for eccentric behavior becomes apparent when some people ask a "Dervish master" why he makes himself look "ridiculous," thus causing "grief to [his] friends and joy to [his] opponents." The Dervish replies: "I look foolish to the people whom I wish to discourage" (*Dermis Probe* 57).

Some stories specifically address the relationship between the master and the disciple, and the lengths to which the teacher may go for the benefit of his charge. In one of these, Afzal of Iskandariya is asked which qualities in his former *shaykh*, Alim Azimi, were most influential on his own development. His reply describes the most beneficial characteristics thus:

"Hazrat Alim Azimi made me irritated, which caused me to examine my irritation, to trace its source. Alim Azimi made me angry, so that I could feel and transform my anger. Alim Azimi allowed himself to be attacked, so that people could see the bestiality of his attackers and not join with them." (*Dermis Probe* 21)

In another anecdote, the master sets two would-be disciples an impossible task: to make a camel climb a wall by leading it by its rein. While one disciple declines on the grounds that the teacher would want him to use his intelligence to deduce that the requested action is not viable, the other makes the (doomed) attempt. Only the latter disciple is accepted, on the grounds that obedience is no less important than intelligence and a good deal rarer, most people preferring to use their own common sense than to obey (*Seeker* 71–72). According to Shah, even dissimulation may be required in order that people might be taught; he illustrates this with reference to the need for Sufis to take on the customs of the country they visit, even if it be a habit of going naked—in which case they must avoid revealing their true opinion that wearing clothes is preferable to nakedness (*The Way* 135). Other stories highlight the need to instruct different followers in different ways, according to their own stage of development (*Dermis Probe* 24–25; *Commanding Self* 118), and the tendency for disciples (or indeed people in general) to misconstrue the actions of the master/teacher, finding fault with actions which do in fact have constructive purposes (*Seeker* 61–62, *Dermis Probe* 24–25).

Shah shared the classical Sufi reservations about the intellect and scholasticism, emphasizing that genuine spiritual knowledge could be acquired only through experience. The limitations of the intellect are illustrated in different ways in his stories, for example (as in classical Sufism) by the use of paradox. One story invokes the "liar's paradox": Nasruddin, in answer to the question "What is truth?" replies, "Something which I have never, at any time, spoken—nor shall I" (*Pleasantries* 208). In another tale Nasruddin

confounds a group of philosophers who ask him complex questions such as “How many stars are there in the sky?” to which the reply is: “Exactly the same number as there are hairs in the coat of my donkey. Anyone who disbelieves this is at liberty to count both” (77).

Reflecting on the functional aspects of Shah’s stories, it is clear that he used humor for didactic purposes; in this case, it is difficult to separate spiritual literature as entertainment from spiritual literature for purposes of edification. Shah himself regarded these stories as potentially therapeutic if not transformative, and used them in his study circles as a basis for discussion and teaching (Hermansen 31–32). There is also some evidence that Shah’s own teaching style sometimes drew on paradigms of crazy wisdom and holy foolishness.²³ It is noteworthy, however, that he generally taught groups rather than individuals, and did not take on “disciples” in a formal sense. Notwithstanding Shah’s alleged approval of “gurus,” it is clear that the stories function as a substitute for a crazy-wise teacher rather than as a model to be followed by other teachers. No doubt teaching stories in classical Sufism sometimes functioned in a similar way, namely to convey teachings to the uninitiated who were unlikely to become disciples.

Reshad Feild and Bulent Rauf/ “Hamid”

Reshad Feild (b. 1934) is an Englishman of aristocratic background, educated in Eton (Rawlinson 263). He portrays his relationship with his teacher “Hamid” in his autobiographical book *The Last Barrier: A Sufi Journey* (first published 1976), which has been described as a “New Age classic” (Wilson 199).²⁴ In real life, “Hamid” was Bulent Rauf (1911–87), a Turkish Muslim spiritual teacher with connections to the Mevlevi Order.²⁵ Contrary to the impression given in the book (where Feild casts himself as something of a neophyte), prior to meeting Rauf, Feild had already studied under many teachers (including Pir Vilayat Khan, then head of the Sufi Order) and in various esoteric traditions, including the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky tradition (Taji-Farouki 24–25). Feild portrays his relationship with Rauf as one of master and disciple, despite the fact that Rauf never claimed to be a *shaykh* in any order, and did not even promote himself as a “teacher” (Taji-Farouki 81–82). These tensions between Feild’s text and certain pieces of external evidence create an element of confusion which is quite Gurdjieffian in itself.²⁶

In *The Last Barrier* Hamid appears as someone whose behavior is somewhat unpredictable if not inconsistent, and who makes free use of “disorientingly affecting caprice,” as it has been aptly described (Wilson 199). Throughout their acquaintance, Hamid remains something of an enigma to Reshad, a

fact which the latter finds “disturbing” (85). Just half an hour after delivering an unusually angry reprimand, Hamid calls for him and welcomes him “as though nothing had happened,” and asks him a question (“What have you learned?”) which takes him aback. Feild as narrator comments: “He had done this often before, and each time I fell into the trap. He would allow me to have some concept of what was going to happen next, and just when I felt at ease with the situation he would come up with a statement or an action that destroyed any continuity of understanding” (57). As Hamid remarks on a separate occasion (echoing Dhu’l-Nun al-Misri’s remark cited earlier): “Divine guidance...is to bring a man to the point of perplexity” (66).

Feild’s visceral descriptions of Hamid’s physicality, particularly bodily functions such as belching, snoring, and roaring with laughter, sometimes lend a farcical or clown-like air to the proceedings, echoing Hyers’ description of Zen teaching styles. The rather comic, contrapuntal effect of this is clear from the following passage where the description in question follows a severe scolding from Hamid which ends with the following words: “Now before you go to sleep pray to be forgiven for your arrogance and carelessness. Otherwise our journey is at an end.” Feild continues: “With that he rolled over and was soon snoring, the whole bed shaking to the vibration” (84). Other descriptions highlight Hamid’s playfulness, for example, that of his response when he learns that Reshad has never drunk raki (a strong alcoholic drink): “‘Then you have a surprise waiting for you.’ His eyes twinkled and he did a little dance on the carpet, turning round and round with his arms outstretched, his hands and fingers moving and swaying like an Indian temple dancer’s” (63).

Like Gurdjieff, Hamid appears to be something of a showman. Feild recounts a dramatic healing scene involving an egg, in which Hamid appears almost as a magician:

Hamid took two steps forward, raised his hand containing the egg, and brought it down with great force onto [the man’s] forehead, the egg bursting just above his eyebrows. It seemed literally to explode. The yolk and the white bounced off his nose and landed in a dirty yellow heap on his lap. (11)

Much later, he confides to Feild that the egg was not strictly necessary, but designed to impress both Feild, who was present at the time, and the sufferer, adding enigmatically: “Remember—I know what attracts them” (171). Also like Gurdjieff, Hamid is not averse to engaging in a bit of role-play in order to achieve the desired effect. On one occasion when Reshad is driving Hamid, the latter, in a “very jovial” mood, orders Reshad to stop the car outside a small cafe where a group of people are sitting. He then

“pretend[s] to be very angry” with them, later explaining to Reshad, “I told them that they were ignorant fools because they were totally unaware that they were surrounded by a rare herb which kills the parasites that infect everyone here” (78). The scene continues as three of the men catch them up later on a motorbike, bringing some herbs which turn out to be the wrong plant. Hamid, who had just been laughing about the incident with Reshad, “shouted at them once more, banging his hand on the car several times for emphasis. They all looked very ashamed, climbed back on the motorcycle, and drove off” (78).

Hamid appears to be almost cruel at times. He is described on different occasions (invariably when displeased with Reshad) as “stern,” “cold,” “angry,” and “harsh” (e.g. 46, 126, 156). At certain points in the narrative Hamid does not hesitate to insult Reshad, calling him “stubborn and lazy” (57), a “stupid idiot” (95), or even “thick and stupid,” this last when he fails a particular test which was set for him (127–28). On one occasion, Hamid awakes to find Reshad in his room, poring over his papers. His face “contorted in anger,” Hamid unleashes a tirade during which Feild reports that he “felt physically ill with fright and shame” (56). As the scene draws to a close, Hamid’s words are austere authoritarian:

“From now on you will not enter my room without first obtaining permission, and you will not ask questions unless you are invited. If you are careful, and if you act properly, then we can continue together. If not, I will find someone else. You are not important, you know. You may be a useful vehicle, but you can be replaced very easily. Is that understood?” (56–57)

On another occasion, Hamid appears to manipulate Reshad, encouraging him to drink raki by repeatedly filling his glass, then expressing his disgust at the resulting undignified drunken behavior (64–66). The disgust is all the more shocking, both for the reader and for Reshad, because it so closely follows the good-humored playful dance described above. Reflecting later on why his teacher was “so harsh” with him, Feild concludes: “I obviously needed that kind of discipline and experience to help me face life as it actually is and not as I wanted it to be” (*Last Barrier: A Journey x–xi*).²⁷

In his later writings, particularly in *Going Home*, a collection of autobiographical anecdotes published in 1996, Feild portrays *himself* as something of a crazy-wise teacher (perhaps more crazy than wise, as it is often unclear what lesson is intended to be drawn, if any). For example, he describes how he went through a phase of wearing designer Pierre Cardin robes for about two years, so that “everyone thought he was crazy” (112).²⁸ He seems to delight in telling stories which cast him as a roguish adventurer,²⁹ and his account is full of bizarre phenomena and larger-than-life, eccentric

characters.³⁰ Sometimes there are dark/occult, distasteful, or even sordid undercurrents which lend his stories an unsettling quality.³¹

Several contrasts with Shah emerge from this reading of Feild's autobiographical writings. As an erstwhile trained Gurdjieffian, Feild seems to have gone further than Shah in seeking to develop his own self-consciously crazy-wise teaching style which in all probability was not confined to his writings.³² One might say that the "Feild myth" (such as it is) is directly promoted by his autobiographical writings, whereas the better known "Shah myth" is fed by a more complex web of texts, narratives, events and personalities. Feild's choice of the autobiographical genre offers further points of contrast. The reader is invited to believe that the events being recounted really did happen; these events, and the relationship with the teacher as described in the narrative, represent an embodied spirituality which provides a potential model for the spiritual seeker. Nevertheless, it could be argued that in autobiography as in the teaching story, both teacher and disciple are embedded in the narrative; the author subtly transcends both, speaking from a subjectivity which is older and wiser than that of the disciple, who effectively becomes a character in a story. Thus in the description of Hamid's snoring, it is Feild the author who is deploying humor and pulling the strings, and the agency of the teacher is overshadowed by that of the author, who thus paradoxically becomes the teacher. In that sense, autobiography may be no less a vehicle for the author's ideas than is the teaching story.

Vaughan-Lee and Irina Tweedie

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (b. 1953), like Feild, is an Englishman from a privileged background who had a boarding school education. He describes his relationship with the Russian-born Irina Tweedie (1907–99) in *The Face before I was Born: A Spiritual Autobiography* (1998). Vaughan-Lee writes some two or three decades later than Feild and Shah, but the chronological divide is mitigated by the fact that the events recounted mostly took place much earlier than the time of writing. Vaughan-Lee first met Tweedie in the early 1970s (not long after Feild met Rauf) when, at the age of nineteen, he joined her meditation group and remained her pupil for some twenty years. Several years into their acquaintance, he found himself in a position to offer her accommodation on the lower floor of the house in which he lived, and from that point on he and his wife became more involved in her everyday affairs, acting as her assistants (145).³³ Tweedie herself had studied in India under a Hindu Sufi *shaykh*, Radha Mohen Lal (known as "Bhai Sahib") in the early 1960s. To be "Hindu" and "Sufi" is an unusual combination, made possible

only by the syncretistic context of religious life in India. Hindu concepts and terminology (especially for types of meditation, religious experience and altered states) occur in both Tweedie's autobiography, *Daughter of Fire*, and that of Vaughan-Lee (who by his own account was tremendously influenced by his teacher's self-narrative) (231). Although Bhai Sahib died in 1966, both Tweedie and Vaughan-Lee regard him as their *shaykh* (Vaughan-Lee referring to Tweedie as his "teacher"), who continues to provide them with inner guidance on the spiritual plane, a phenomenon which is recognized in the Sufi tradition.³⁴ Vaughan-Lee moved to California in the early 1990s, where he founded the Golden Sufi Center.³⁵

"Mrs. Tweedie" (as she prefers to be known by her disciples, in order to preserve an element of distance and formality) is no less colorful a character than Feild's "Hamid." An elderly and eccentric Russian aristocrat of Cossack descent (to which Vaughan-Lee attributes her "fiery temperament") (145), Mrs. Tweedie is nothing if not unpredictable. Despite presiding over a meditation circle which meets several times a week, she has a habit of disappearing without notice for indefinite periods—sometimes weeks or months on end (29, 122, 202). On one such occasion, she departs in a state of displeasure with Vaughan-Lee for having got into financial difficulties ("Mrs. Tweedie said that she could not live in a house with the aura of money worries"), leaving a dramatically-worded note: "If I am not back in three months consider me dead" (122). No doubt as intended, this has a profound effect on Vaughan-Lee, teaching him "a bitter and painful lesson" and wiping out any sense of inflation he may have had as a result of sharing his house with the teacher. At other times she leaves because the group is becoming "too attached" to her (202). These unplanned absences cause varying reactions in those who travel to see her: "For many people this could be quite a shock, particularly if they had travelled from abroad to be with her. Some became angry or resentful, felt betrayed and let down. Others held the experience within their connection to the path, and realized the inner freedom that was offered." If on the other hand an individual (as opposed to the group as a whole) forms an undue attachment to her (i.e. one which is impeding their spiritual progress), she expels them from the group for an appropriate length of time which may be as long as a year (202).

Mrs. Tweedie's seeming contradictions could sometimes be explained by that fact that, like the traditional Sufi *shaykh*, she tailored her guidance to the individual: "To some people Mrs. Tweedie was kind, to others hard. She would respond to the deepest need of the person" (210). However, when Vaughan-Lee becomes something of a personal assistant to Mrs. Tweedie, he gets to know her human, fallible side: "Mrs. Tweedie was full of inconsistencies...not everything she said or did was a teaching. She could

be irritated or angry like anyone else—sometimes it held a deeper meaning and many times it did not.” From this, too, Vaughan-Lee is able to draw a spiritual lesson, gaining “a great sense of freedom—the freedom of knowing that only He [i.e. God] is perfect” (146).

Mrs. Tweedie has a way of deliberately orchestrating situations in such a way as to provide a particular lesson for the individual concerned: “She allowed situations to occur and develop to help us see both our darkness and our light” (214). On one occasion, three years after naming Vaughan-Lee as her successor (though as yet only privately), she instigates “a drama that was both humiliating and liberating.” When an American woman turns up wanting to work with Mrs. Tweedie, apparently having suffered at the hands of a cruel husband, Vaughan-Lee’s chivalrous instincts are awakened. Mrs. Tweedie suggests that he teach her the *dhikr*, and so he acquires his first disciple, feeling “flattered and encouraged” (214). However, before long it becomes apparent that the woman is a “corruptive influence” in the group, attempting to seduce a married man, among other things, and then suddenly disappearing rather than staying to face Mrs. Tweedie’s inevitable admonition. Vaughan-Lee leaves the reader in no doubt about Mrs. Tweedie’s role in all this:

Mrs. Tweedie had seen through her from the very beginning...and also noticed my weakness. For a few months after she stopped coming Mrs. Tweedie would mention her name in different contexts and watch my reactions. Time and again I would inwardly wince, feeling humiliation and stupidity. When I finally no longer reacted, Mrs. Tweedie stopped mentioning her. I had been freed of any desire to have a disciple or to be a teacher. (215–16)

Like “Hamid,” Mrs. Tweedie can at times be harsh, even cruel: “I know that when Mrs. Tweedie wants to make something hurt she does not hold back; anger and invective are powerfully combined” (288). Vaughan-Lee has a distressing experience of her ruthless and apparently irrational side after he moves to the United States in the early 1990s. She dramatically rejects him and he undergoes a painful and seemingly final separation from her after a sequence of events in which she appears to behave most unreasonably, leveling unjust accusations against him and even lying, to the point where he finds himself forced to accept that “black [is] white” (288–91). The resulting confusion and bewilderment has the effect of casting Vaughan-Lee into a place which is “beyond the duality implicit in any relationship” (292), and also of “demolishing” the outer teacher and establishing the inner teacher—namely his connection to Bhai Sahib. Although his attachment to Mrs. Tweedie has been “most cruelly broken,” he feels that she herself has brought this about deliberately, if not entirely consciously, for the sake of

his own spiritual progression, playing “a masterly part” in the process (293).³⁶

If Mrs. Tweedie’s behaviour is more in the mold of crazy wisdom than holy madness, the latter is more characteristic of Vaughan-Lee, particularly during one period of his spiritual development when he has a breakdown and for a time loses his ability to function normally in the world. This begins with a two-week period in which he instinctively feels the need to remain alone while undergoing an intensely painful inner process of purification, which he later realizes was overseen and guided by his *shaykh*, Bhai Sahib. At the end of this process he goes to visit his father, not realizing that he is in “an altered state of consciousness” (63):

I don’t remember the details of my actions, except that at one point I began taking off my clothes. At the time I knew I was shocking and deeply disturbing him, but I could not stop my words or actions which I knew to be crazy...Something had come to life within me, but...the need was not to shock my father or family, but to create a container of craziness to allow deeper purification and changes to take place...I was conscious of my craziness, and bewildered by the whole experience. But I had an inner hint to say nothing, to offer no reason. (64–65)

The psychic drama continues after Vaughan-Lee is taken to a psychiatrist and then spends a couple of weeks in a nursing home which allows him a space in which “to step outside the confines of ordinary consciousness” (69). This is followed by a period of several months in which he finds himself increasingly in a state of “bliss.” He takes a year off college and goes home in order to be cared for by his mother, finding that the experience has “broken many barriers between the conscious and unconscious. Patterns of social conditioning, my middle-class English upbringing, now had little influence” (72). His lifestyle during this period is semi-hermitic, most days being spent in his room:

I found myself instinctively fasting, eating as little as I could. I walked about in the middle of winter wearing only a thin shirt and never felt the cold or became ill. I would also spend many nights awake in prayer and meditation, finding that in the morning I was not tired...I did not discuss my experiences or explain my state to anyone. I was not altogether present in the world of time and outer events. (72)

This description is clearly reminiscent of the ascetic wanderers of former times.

Some of the points mentioned above in relation to Feild apply equally to Vaughan-Lee, in particular those relating to the genre of autobiography. Vaughan-Lee’s work, which like his other works is published by his own organization (The Golden Sufi Center), has circulated less widely than that of Shah or Feild, but he has authored a number of works which are fairly

well known in New Age circles.³⁷ While Feild's autobiography reads like an adventure story, Vaughan-Lee's, as may be gleaned from the foregoing description, dwells more on the inner journey than the outer action, devoting much space to the author's psychological processes and not shying away from describing the suffering that the journey sometimes entails. *The Face before I was Born* seems to be aimed at the serious seeker rather than the dilettante; its author demands more of his reader than do Feild (whose autobiography could be described as a "good read") and Shah (whose stories are undoubtedly entertaining). While it is conceivable that Feild set out to write a bestseller, one does not gain this impression with Vaughan-Lee (in this respect his autobiography could be compared to Mrs. Tweedie's memoir, which at over 800 pages is not for the fainthearted). The book is well-written, and presumably Vaughan-Lee could have sought out a commercial publisher had he so desired; it probably has a narrower appeal than Feild's work for reasons just mentioned, and this, together with the absence of a commercial publisher, could help to account for the disparity in sales.³⁸ It is clear that Vaughan-Lee sees the teacher as essential for the earnest spiritual seeker, and he frequently reflects on the teacher's indispensable role (e.g. 36–37, 50, 205–207, 274). On this point he seems more insistent than either Feild or Shah. One of the underlying intentions of the book, then, seems to be to inspire and support others in their spiritual journey generally and, in particular, to encourage them to seek out an appropriate teacher. It is evident from the foregoing points that the balance between entertainment and spiritual edification is weighted heavily towards the latter in Vaughan-Lee's work.

Conclusions

The intense relationships between charismatic teacher and disciple portrayed in the sources explored here appear to contrast strongly with contemporary individualistic New Age attitudes to religious and spiritual authority. The two autobiographies provide evidence that such authoritarian relationships do still exist even if they are increasingly rare and only appear in certain contexts (e.g. with Indian gurus, Zen masters, and Sufi *shaykhs*). To what extent the autobiographical accounts coincide with the actual practice of the teacher being depicted cannot be fully known, but there is undoubtedly some degree of correspondence between art and life in each instance. Be that as it may, all of these texts, including those by Shah, draw on and contribute to a continuing fascination with certain colorful and creative teaching methods, and, as in Zen and classical Sufism, the stories take on a

life of their own and work their magic in the psyche of the receptive reader or listener.

As indicated above, these depictions of somewhat authoritarian crazy-wise teachers would seem at first sight to go against Western societies' prevailing ethos of individualism. However, there are several considerations which counter such a view. First, as regards the literature under examination and its functionality, it is being written, disseminated and read in a context which is very different from that of classical Sufism. In today's globalized world, the individual can obtain these books (which are objects of consumption) literally at the touch of a button; while readers of this kind of literature may gain some spiritual insights through their reading, this process is hardly comparable to the long years of arduous discipleship which classical Sufis underwent for the sake of their own spiritual progression; to buy and read a book (and an entertaining one at that) requires a minimal level of commitment by comparison. Notwithstanding the possible didactic use of humor, the redeployment of such stories as entertainment in the context of a mass audience (even if reading is largely a solitary pursuit) could be viewed as part of a process of desacralization. Second, at the level of the actual roles of the disciples and teachers themselves (whether as subjects or objects of the narratives in question), Feild's period of "discipleship" was relatively brief—being of only a few weeks' duration; despite his erstwhile involvement with the Sufi Order (and, after his acquaintance with Rauf, the Mevleviyya), like Shah he is not formally affiliated with any recognized Sufi order (nor does his teacher claim to be a Sufi *shaykh*) and, after his involvement with Rauf came to an end, did not himself teach in that kind of setting. In fact, Feild is nothing if not an individualist, and seems to have been something of a "loose cannon" at times.³⁹ As for Vaughan-Lee, his apprenticeship was of much longer duration, and he and his teacher affiliate themselves with the Naqshbandi Order (though as universal Sufis they would not be recognized as authorities by Islamic Naqshbandis). His book depicts a long-term and highly committed relationship between seeker and teacher/spiritual guide, and explicitly argues in favor of such relationships. Vaughan-Lee himself though, unlike his teacher, does not seem to fit the type of a crazy-wise teacher, and with his calm, rational expository style of communication (as seen in his online talks, for example) would probably be considered as "cool" rather than "hot" in Rawlinson's typology.⁴⁰ This may be partly a matter of personal style, but is probably also related to a changing world: as a global organization which participates in a multiplicity of networks, the Golden Sufi Center is hardly comparable to Mrs. Tweedie's informal but tightly-knit meditation group. Third, there are ways of construing the teacher-disciple relationship which emphasize the responsibility of the disciple in choosing an

appropriate teacher and exercising his or her discrimination in an ongoing manner, in choosing to continue (or not, as the case may be) to work with that teacher. Mariana Caplan speaks of “conscious discipleship” in a way which strongly contrasts with the popular view of disciples as the vulnerable prey of unscrupulous teachers (18). According to Caplan’s model, authority is always provisional and the individual’s surrender is for a greater aim which will ultimately facilitate his or her maturation and individuation.⁴¹ Finally, the mere writing of an autobiography is a highly individualist act, being part of a project to define oneself and chart its development.⁴² Although he did not write an autobiography, Shah for his part took a keen interest in self-development, which his stories aimed to promote. His iconoclastic style and his critical approach to religious authority, among other things, reflect the fact that he too is an individualist.

The usefulness of autobiography as a partial substitute for fieldwork (notwithstanding certain literary caveats), is illustrated by the fact that these works portray an embodied spirituality, that is to say, one that is embodied in the disciple’s relationship with the teacher as well as in particular acts and choices which are attributed to the subject along the way. For the same reason, such works may be more appealing to the general reader and less dry than other works on spirituality. One way of exploring the impact that these works may have on their readers is to look at customer feedback on popular internet bookselling sites. Amazon’s customer feedback (on both British and American sites) on the works reviewed here reveals that a large majority are reading them in the context of a general interest in spirituality.⁴³ Three (out of a total of twelve) reviewers were so impressed with *The Last Barrier* that they read it more than once, sometimes at different stages of their lives; several felt that it had had a profound impact on them, and most used words such as “inspirational” or “transformative.” This would seem to confirm Dawn Llewellyn’s findings on the potential for spiritual and religious literature to influence the reader in life-changing ways. While such comments indicate that the literature is being read as more than just entertainment, none of the reviewers seem to have been inspired to seek out a similarly intensive relationship with a teacher. Feedback on Vaughan-Lee’s work is too small in quantity to judge whether his book might have a different impact. As for Shah, looking at feedback on his teaching stories in particular, there is some reference to their entertainment value, but generally more emphasis is placed on their potential to broaden the mind and deepen the understanding; interestingly, this feedback is rather different in tone from Feild’s, being more detached and academic and less personal (usually being expressed in the third rather than first person), no doubt reflecting the different styles, not to mention genres, of the works in question.

Regarding the phenomenological aspects of the crazy-wise teaching style, there seem to be certain elements which are common to all of the texts, such as an awareness of the limitations of the mind, the intense personal relationship between pupil and teacher, in which the latter has an acute awareness of what is needed in any given situation, and the setting of the boundaries of the relationship in such a way that there is an element of mystery and unpredictability surrounding the teacher, with the disciple often not being privy to the reasons for the teacher's actions. All of these elements could be said to be common to both classical Sufi models of the teaching relationship and contemporary crazy-wise typologies. As regards aspects which are more characteristic of traditional Sufism, the Malāmātī tradition is clearly prominent in Shah, while the *shaṭḥiyāt/majdhūb* pattern, with an element of asceticism, appears in Vaughan-Lee's own reported experience. As for Feild, his discourse and the teaching styles of both himself and "Hamid" are rather less dependent on classical Sufi forms than the others, though the narrative of *The Last Barrier* does refer to some of the general features and teachings of traditional Sufism.

The story about Mulla Nasruddin and Tamerlane recounted earlier, as well as those adapted and popularized by Shah, illustrates the fact that precedents for crazy-wise teaching exist not just within classical Sufism but also in the popular cultures of Muslim peoples. In this story, Nasruddin is instrumental in causing people to suffer the consequences of their own moral failings (in this case greed), and appears to orchestrate the situation to this end right from the start when he promises the first doorkeeper a third share, presumably anticipating the reactions of the other two.

The significance of Gurdjieff lies in his (albeit contested) connection with Sufism, and the fact that he is an archetypal crazy-wise teacher with a unique appeal to Western spiritual seekers with no affiliation to a mainstream religious tradition. Sedgwick observes that the bestselling Sufi authors writing and publishing in the Western context (including Shah and Feild) are in fact from the Gurdjieff tradition ("Reception" 187). With reference to contemporary notions of crazy wisdom, we see the Gurdjieffian elements such as harshness, abrupt mood changes, humor, role-play, and shock-tactics most clearly reflected in Feild's text, but also to a lesser extent in Vaughan-Lee's memoir. Seemingly Gurdjieffian elements cannot always be assumed to be directly inspired by Gurdjieff, however. For example, the manner of Mrs. Tweedie's breaking with Vaughan-Lee appears to represent a typically Gurdjieffian deliberate driving away of the pupil, but this does not mean that either Vaughan-Lee or Tweedie were in fact inspired by Gurdjieff (indeed, Tweedie's own teacher, an Indian guru, drove her away in a very similar manner) (Bancroft 133). It therefore seems more likely that they were

influenced, through the connection with Bhai Sahib (and in Vaughan-Lee's case through Tweedie's own autobiographical writings about her spiritual journey, set in the Indian context), by Indian models of spiritual authority.⁴⁴ As previously noted, these models also inform contemporary writers on crazy wisdom such as Feuerstein and Rawlinson. Several aspects of Hyers' Buddhist-inspired model were also relevant to these accounts. Taken together, these various interpenetrating influences reveal an element of hybridization, as might be expected in an increasingly globalized world.

Regarding Feuerstein's distinction between "holy foolishness" and "crazy wisdom," the unusual behavior described in these sources is not confined to the quest for humility but also aims to convey spiritual lessons, and this suggests that the distinction is far from clear-cut.⁴⁵ Indeed, a story contained in the Qur'an itself (18:65–83) seems to exemplify crazy wisdom rather than the holy foolishness said to predominate in the monotheistic faiths. In this story Moses accompanies a spiritual guide, identified in Islamic tradition as al-Khidr, on a journey. Despite promising to ask no questions, he cannot restrain himself from seeking explanations when the guide performs a number of seemingly inexplicable actions, including killing an apparently harmless young man. Elements of this story which resonate with aspects of crazy wisdom include al-Khidr's authoritarianism, his seemingly nonsensical or even immoral actions, and his refusal to explain them (at least until the appropriate time). This story has been a source of spiritual inspiration for Muslims through the ages, and has been a formative influence on the *shaykh*-disciple relationship in Sufism from the 11th century onwards, being cited down to the present day in manuals of Sufism as the key scriptural text to justify the doctrine of unconditional obedience of the disciple towards the master. It is interesting to note that while mainstream religious scholars disapproved of antinomian tendencies in practice, as discussed earlier, they nevertheless took this story at face value as part of the divine wisdom imparted in the Qur'an.⁴⁶

To conclude, elements of crazy wisdom or holy foolishness in these texts seem to derive (directly or indirectly) from various sources, including classical Sufism, Indian guru traditions, Zen Buddhism, and the Gurdjieff legacy. It is not always easy to disentangle these, for, as has been observed, there is some overlap between traditional ideas of holy foolishness and contemporary notions of crazy wisdom. Accounts of crazy-wise teaching continue to exercise some fascination among a certain spiritually-oriented readership. In practice, however, its more extreme manifestations are too antithetical to mainstream Islamic/Sufi norms to have gained a wide currency, and it seems destined to inform the methods of only a few.

NOTES

1. This argument is implicit in her contributions to her co-edited volume *Reading Spiritualities*, but is made more directly in her article "Safe and Risky Reading."

2. These difficulties arise from the fact that disciples are often unwilling to talk about their relationship with their *shaykh* for various reasons, which may include the perceived sacrosanctity of this relationship and the fear of incurring the latter's displeasure. See Nanda and Talib 127–28 on the unique nature of this relationship and the perceived dangers of speaking of it to the uninitiated.

3. There are some precedents for this phenomenon in the history of Sufism. Rumi's poetry, for example, famously transcends the various religions and speaks from a universal stance, while a minority of Sufis have felt able to dispense with the Shari'a, seeing it as necessary for the masses rather than the spiritual elite.

4. This was true for example of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1968) in America.

5. There are one or two autobiographies by Muslim Sufis in which the teacher appears to employ elements of crazy-wise teaching, notably those by Muhyiddin Shakoor and Maryam Kabeer Faye (see bibliography). I have chosen not to include these in this article as, in terms of the phenomenological aspects of this teaching style, they add little if anything to the other sources covered here; perhaps not surprisingly, the greater "Islamic" input lends an element of sobriety, particularly in Shakoor's account. They are of some interest, however, insofar as they exemplify a more "Islamic" version of a crazy-wise teacher.

6. This story was taken from an Uzbek collection, but appears in slightly different versions in different collections (Stein 9–10).

7. Hellmut Ritter has made a special study of this phenomenon, particularly (but not exclusively) in relation to the poetry of al-'Attar: see Ritter "Muslim Mystics" and *Ocean of the Soul*, esp. ch. 10: "Strife with God: The Fool." Another prototype of the wise fools can be found in Ibn Arabi's writings on the *bahālī* (al-'uqalā al-majānīn) (Ibn Arabi 374–78; Bearman et al).

8. Apart from al-Hallaj, Bayazid (Abu Yazid al-Bistami, d. 874) was perhaps the best known utterer of *shathiyāt*; among other utterances, he is said to have exclaimed, "Glory be to Me, how great is My Majesty," and "You will not see anything like me in heaven and earth." For a detailed study of this phenomenon, see Ernst *Words of Ecstasy*.

9. There is some support for this attitude in the Islamic sources, for example in the well-known saying of the Prophet: "I take refuge in Thee from knowledge that availeth nothing"; the Qur'an itself lampoons religious scholars (from the Jewish tradition, in this instance) as being "like donkeys laden with books" (62:5, my translation).

10. Schimmel 6, citing Maulānā 'Abdurrahmān Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-uns*, ed. M. Tauhīdīpūr (Tehran, 1957), 34.

11. Interestingly, these groups tended to appear in the non-Arab lands of Islamdom, notably in Iran, Turkey and India (Karamustafa 99).

12. Though this phenomenon has been largely dismissed by both Islamic elites throughout history and Western scholars in the modern age as a deviant form of popular religion arising from pre-Islamic practices, Karamustafa argues that this type of renunciatory piety emerged very much from within Sufism "as a synthesis of two of its most powerful subcurrents: asceticism and anarchist individualism" (25).

13. Clearly, this model of spiritual authority is potentially open to abuse, as almost any type of behavior which causes discomfort or suffering can be justified as being a test or as being necessary for the disciple's growth. As Feuerstein observes, "charisma and psychopa-

thology are not mutually exclusive" (89). Actual abuses which have been reported sometimes involve the use of drugs and alcohol, sexual relations between guru and followers, and even on occasion multiple deaths, as in the case of Jim Jones and David Koresh. Janwillem van de Wetering, who spent two years in a Japanese Zen monastery, tells an allegedly true story of a Zen monk who hit his obdurate pupil with a stick so hard that he killed him; the police refused to prosecute, considering this to be a special relationship, outside the confines of the law (135).

14. On these points and on the *shaykh*-disciple relationship generally, see Malamud.

15. The word *dhikr* literally means "remembrance" (i.e. of God); in practice it consists of reciting or chanting certain words or phrases (often from the Qur'an) or names of God, either individually or in a group. The repetitive and rhythmic chanting may lead to an altered state of consciousness, especially in the group setting.

16. A case in point would be his many sexual engagements with female disciples; Bennett comments that at times he led "an almost ascetic life" while at other times "his sex life seemed to go wild," adding that the latter periods were more frequent than the former (231–32).

17. Bennett himself was among those driven away without quite understanding how or why, though unlike many, he was able to return to Gurdjieff after an absence of 25 years, for the last two years of the latter's life.

18. Wellbeloved adds that Gurdjieff's use of humor was "not always kind" (96).

19. Similarly, Bennett says of Gurdjieff's frequent "rages," "It cannot be said that the anger was uncontrollable, for Gurdjieff could turn it off in a moment—but it was unquestionably real" (217).

20. For further biographical details, see *The Independent's* obituary for Shah, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-idries-shah-1354309.html>.

21. According to some accounts, this school was the same one at which Gurdjieff himself had studied; see Wilson 182 and Rawlinson 525. On the links between the Malāmatīs and the Naqshbandīs, see Jong.

22. Sedgwick goes so far as to say that "Shah reinterpreted his sources into a form of general spiritual wisdom that resembled Gurdjieff more than anything found in the Muslim world" ("Reception" 186).

23. For example, in speaking of his own teaching style Shah explains the rationale for "shock teaching," including *shathiyat* (*Learning* 266–67); the need for rudeness at times, or the need to be "cruel to be kind" (*Commanding Self* 113–14); and the reasons for his own occasional perverse answers to questions, stating that he is not in the business of "providing reassurance for people" (*Commanding Self* 114–15).

24. The book has been reprinted several times, and a 25th anniversary edition came out in 2002. Unless indicated otherwise, in-text page citations in this section refer to the first edition, which has a different subtitle to the second (see bibliography).

25. For further information on Bulent Rauf, see Taji-Farouki, esp. chapter 4.

26. For further examples of doubts or questions which have been raised regarding the referentiality of Feild's text see Rawlinson 265, Wilson 199, and Taji-Farouki 260–261, n. 14.

27. In real life Feild had a difficult parting of ways with Rauf and felt somewhat rejected by him when, in the early 1970s, their association came to an end for a number of reasons (see on this Taji-Farouki 34). His retrospective understanding of the conflict and separation they had gone through was that it was probably necessary: "This happens so often in teacher-pupil relationships, almost as though by some design, to prevent the pupil from identifying too much with the person who has been his guide on the Road" (*Going Home* 178).

28. All page citations in this paragraph and accompanying notes refer to *Going Home*. Feild also recounts some of his adventures with his friend E. J. Gold, another Gurdjieffian with a

connection to Sufism, albeit rather more tenuous than Feild's. In his narrative Feild portrays, and is openly admiring of, Gold's own often outrageous crazy-wise teaching style—see 8–12.

29. Feild recounts, for example, experiences of being caught speeding (59), of being threatened with legal action when pulling out of a lecture series, albeit with some reason (108), and of escaping from an apparently dangerous situation where a man thinks that Feild is carrying on with his (the man's) ex-wife (51).

30. For example, Feild relates that he owned a parrot which was partial to Rumi; when he gave the parrot to a friend, "the parrot loved it when he read Rumi but screeched when he read another 13th Century mystic" (87). One of his larger-than-life characters, "Black Jack" in Wyoming, helps to fix his car and at one point takes out a gun and shoots at some horses for no apparent reason (64).

31. An example would be Feild's depiction of "the Black Christ," a spiritual teacher who lives "in a grotty back street," with "evil-smelling pots bubbling on the stove," who sits on a bed with dirty sheets watching television in-between healing sessions. Feild sees him with a prostitute: he "turns away from the tv and shakes her, and shouts out 'red medicine'" (this being one of the concoctions contained in the "evil-smelling pots") (117–21).

32. Taji-Farouki (34) describes his flamboyant and charismatic teaching style, which contrasted with Rauf's rather more restrained and methodical approach (this being one of the reasons for the conflict between them).

33. Unless indicated otherwise, in-text page citations in this section refer to *The Face before I Was Born*.

34. It was acknowledged in the classical literature that on rare occasions an individual might be initiated and/or guided by a *shaykh* who was in fact deceased, through his continuing living, albeit not bodily, presence in the world; a few claimed to have been initiated by the Islamic legendary figure al-Khidr (a contemporary of Moses) or even the Prophet Muhammad himself. Wayfarers such as these were known as "Uwaysi" Sufis after Uways al-Qarani, a contemporary of the Prophet, who is said to have obtained knowledge directly from the latter without ever meeting him.

35. The Center's website (www.goldensufi.org) gives an indication of the scope of Vaughan-Lee's ongoing activities.

36. The rift between Tweedie and Vaughan-Lee was not final; he reports that when he visited her a few years later (in 1995) she encouraged him to write about his experiences, thus being instrumental in the publication of his autobiography (xiii).

37. These include *Sufism: The Transformation of the Heart* (1995) and *Catching the Thread: Sufism, Dreamwork and Jungian Psychology* (1998). Vaughan-Lee has recently appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Network* (see <http://www.oprah.com/own-supersoulsunday/blogs/What-is-Sufism>), an indication that he may be seeking a higher profile.

38. It could also be that the strongly Jungian flavor of Vaughan-Lee's autobiography and other writings deters those who are interested in the more Islam-related aspects of spirituality.

39. See, e.g., Taji-Farouki's description (33–34) of his conduct at the spiritual training centre at Swyre Farm in Gloucestershire during his period of collaboration with Rauf.

40. Many of his talks are available on the Golden Sufi Center website.

41. Given the ultimate Sufi aim of *fanā*, annihilation in God, the aim of individuation may seem paradoxical; self-knowledge has always been an important part of the Sufi path, however, epitomised in the Prophetic saying: "He who knows himself, knows his Lord." Individuation could therefore be seen as a prerequisite to *fanā*.

42. By way of contrast, some researchers specializing in Islamic studies have noticed a reluctance on the part of self-consciously religious Muslims to talk about their own personal history or characteristics, seeing such things as trivial in comparison to, or even detracting

from, the universal truth(s) of Islam (see, e.g., Van Nieuwkerk 110). Such an attitude clearly reflects a less individualist model of religion/spirituality.

43. Following the link to “see all my reviews,” where available, often confirmed a generalized spiritual interest.

44. The same could be said of Maryam Kabeer Faye, whose *shaykh* (Bawa Muhaiyadeen), described in her autobiography, comes from a Hindu-Muslim syncretistic background in Sri Lanka, while Faye herself is an erstwhile follower of Neem Karoli Baba. Her portrayal of Bawa incorporates some elements of the Indian “guru,” but also seeks to situate itself in the broader Islamic/Sufi tradition.

45. Incidentally, this also applies to the more “Islamic” autobiographical narratives of Shakoor and Faye.

46. For further information on this story and its interpretation in Islamic tradition, see Wensinck.

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