

## **The Violence of Literary Media(tion): Refracting Sufi Thought through American Criticism**

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**I**

The extent of the reception of Sufi poetry and thought for the past few decades in North America has been phenomenal. The nature of this reception, however, needs some evaluation. Charting in detail, for instance, the proliferating images of Rumi in the American print and digital media since the early 1980's, Franklin D. Lewis, the American biographer of Rumi, observes: "I watched with delight as Rumi won a growing following in North America. I watch now (in 2000) with concern as pop culture dilutes and distorts his message, with a foreboding sense that the modern secular culture will inevitably reduce the sacral into the banal through its relentless commercialism and consumerism."

The paper seeks to extend Lewis' concern at the reduction of "the sacral into the banal" from a more popular mass media domain to a rather more academized "literary mediation" in America, perhaps somewhat delimited in its scope of dissemination than the mass media representations, nevertheless no less commercial and consumerist in its intent and spirit. Reviewing in some detail Ebrahim Moosa's *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (2005), hailed in 2005 as a *New Statesman* Book of the Year and *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title, and in 2006 as the Best First Book in the History of Religion by the American Academy of Religion, the paper argues out the violence inherent in any forced application on Sufi thought of critical categories the philosophical rigour of whose mediation seems to be diametrically opposed to the aversion Sufis themselves have shown towards philosophy. Such violence, in a Derridian sense of "a forced entry ...

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possible only at the moment when the space (to be violated) is shaped and re-oriented by the glance of the foreigner”, inevitably instead of reflecting, *refracts*, that is, bends the actual image through the only and rigorously philosophical angle it affords for one discourse (Sufi thought) to enter the other (criticism).

The paper also draws attention to the fact that behind such violent attempts at identifying Sufi thought through a characteristic American “literary mediation”, lies the question of the identity of its exponents themselves. Most of these exponents are immigrants, like Moosa himself, who much in similar way in which Edward Said (a Palestinian-American) in *Culture and Imperialism* critically locates himself in a “threshold” position, tries to fit in even Ghazali into his own hyphenated subjectivity, in the *dihlizian* space, a central metaphor for Moosa in the book.

What makes such attempts at concentricizing *tasawwuf* and western criticism more ironic is that they even defy the implications and necessities of being in the threshold position. In some of the most representative postmodern thinkers like Heidegger and Derrida, whose thought has played an undeniable role in shaping the contemporary American thought we find that the recognition of being in the threshold results for them in a strict avoidance from talking about certain issues, the most conspicuous among them being the non-Christian onto-theology. The metaphor of *dihliz*, that more or less sums up both the postmodern and the contemporary American intellectual and social position, in writers like Moosa has been reconceived in such a way as to allow them to mediate in their own violent ways between the heterogeneous discourses of theology and philosophy.

Let us first take up the question why Derrida avoids speaking about *tasawwuf*. Let us quote the passage where this avoidance occurs:

I thus decided not to speak of negativity or of apophatic movement in, for example, the Jewish or Islamic traditions. To leave this immense place empty, and above all that which can connect such a name of God with the name of the place, to remain thus on the threshold—was this not the most consistent possible

apophasis? Concerning that about which one can not speak, isn't it best to remain silent?<sup>1</sup>

The key word here for us is the *threshold*.

Before coming to the question of *why*, let us discuss *how* Derrida avoids speaking about *tasawwuf*. 'The "how"', Derrida himself says in the same essay, 'always conceals a "why" ...'<sup>2</sup> The determination of this 'how' will depend upon what Edward Said calls the 'analysis of the text's surface, its exteriority ... The things to look for are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances ...'<sup>3</sup>

More importantly for us, this *strategic formation*, as Said calls it, is inextricably linked to what Said terms as the *strategic location*, that is,

... the author's position in a text with regard to the oriental material he writes about ... how to get hold of it, how to approach it, how not to be defeated or overwhelmed by its sublimity, its scope, its awful dimensions. Every one who writes about the orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the orient; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text—all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf.<sup>4</sup>

This is why in Derrida's above passage the key word for us is the *threshold*, his location vis-à-vis *tasawwuf* that allows him *not to speak* (or thus to speak actually in an 'apophatic' way) about it.

I have brought here Said's testimony as to the significance of analyzing the 'how', or the 'exteriority' of the text, probably because it may count rather relevant, impressive for us, the ones on the threshold, the intellectuals who would want to keep discourse strictly within the *dihlizian* precincts, who would want to see argument only as a rational argument, who would want to see criticism always to be understood as an intellectual/ rational enterprise in a western sense of the terms,

reserving the argument always for ‘the cleverness of intellect’, which for Rumi is ‘all’ that ‘belongs to the *dihliz*, the *threshold*, the vestibule’.

In the western critical tradition there have been, broadly speaking, basically two attitudes, two responses, towards the realization of being on the threshold: the Romantic, in Derrida’s words, ‘the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side’, and on the other hand ‘the Nietzschean joyous affirmation’.<sup>5</sup> Both these attitudes, indeed, affirm that there *is* no position available but the threshold, one could always be and remain on the threshold and that is it. The Romantic feels bad about all this. The Nietzschean postmodernists celebrate it. I have already acknowledged in the paper my own peripheral, threshold, border-line, in-between location and also that of my target addressees. But there I mentioned, and here repeat again with emphasis the non-neutrality of this position. I, and I am sure my addressees also, would neither like to be associated with the Romantics nor with the postmodernists. We neither lament nor celebrate this threshold. We only acknowledge it with a hope of faith, always looking towards this *inside*, believing that every intellectual positioning is nevertheless imbued with a certain affiliation with the *inside* and the *outside*.

That is why only Said’s testimony as to the significance of ‘exteriority’ would not suffice. For Said himself seems not only to acknowledge but to celebrate his own threshold location. His analysis of the ‘exteriority’ of the text would remain only till the exterior not simply because of his inability to go to the *interior* through the *exterior*, to relate the *zahir* to the *batin*, but because he seems to suggest that this limitation to exteriority is the only available investigation. Therefore he is concerned neither with ‘the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original’: ‘Another reason for insisting upon exteriority is that I believe it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not ‘truth’ but representations ... In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presentation, or a representation’.<sup>6</sup> In his later 1994 book *Culture and Imperialism* he celebrates his occupying this threshold space more forthrightly:

Although I feel at home in them (Britain, France and the U.S.), I have remained, as a native from the Arab and the Muslim world, someone who also belongs to the other side. This has enabled me in a sense to live on both sides, and try to mediate between them.

...

I grew up as an Arab with a Western education. Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I belong to both worlds, without being completely *of* either one or the other.

...

...I have availed myself the Utopian space still provided by the university, which I believe must remain a place where such vital issues are investigated, discussed, reflected on. For it to become a site where social and political issues are actually either imposed or resolved would be to remove the university's function and turn it into an adjunct to whatever political party is in power.<sup>7</sup>

Thus along with the status of being an immigrant, the university becomes for Said one of the visible loci which the threshold location can designate, the place of intellectual investigation where one might come across professors who would feel free to say anything about *tasawwuf* that their intellectual whims may allow, without having ever stepped into a *khanqah* or availing the company of the *insiders* properly.

This failure to relate exteriority to interiority, or vice versa, is significant and calls for a comment. Let's understand it this way. The distance between the belly (*batn*) and the back (*zahr*) grows as the belly gets more and more inflated, while the back (*zahr*) retains its place. The cattle in this matter far surpass human beings, that is to say that the distance between the back and the belly of a cow, for instance, is supposed to be much greater than that of a man. But in case human consumption becomes like that of cattle, as the Qur'an tells us about the non-believers ['those who reject God will enjoy and eat as cattle eat' (47: 12)], it will become naturally for human beings more and more difficult to relate the *zahr* with the *batn*. Especially in the case of an

insatiable appetite for intellectual hair-splitting, the *batin* can hardly keep any hold of the *zahir*.

Such cattle-like consumption of ‘fodder for thought’ results in insurmountable barriers, impenetrable veils between *zahir* and *batin*, the exteriority and interiority. If one agrees with Nietzsche, then the history of philosophical thought from which the orientalist and neo-orientalist discourses descend alike, could be seen as a ‘thirst for knowledge’ that is related to the ‘lust of appropriation and conquest’.<sup>8</sup> This lust, as Rumi sees it, results in creating ‘a hundred veils’ between eyes, the organ of sensory perception hence related to *zahir*, and the heart, the organ of inner vision hence related to *batin*: ‘When self-interest appears, virtue becomes hidden/ a hundred veils rise from the heart to the eye’.<sup>9</sup>

Hence a threshold testimony to the significance of exteriority would not do. Let us have guidance from the *inside*, from the One Who is both *Zahir* and *Batin*: ‘Surely thou wilt know them (those with a diseased heart)’, the Qur’an tells us, ‘by the tone of their speech’ (*Lahn al-qaul*) (47: 30). The exteriority of tone, the *lahn*, here diagnoses the rancour *within* the diseased hearts, the *zahir* pointing to the *batin*. Rumi, whom we consider as an insider to *tasawwuf*, echoes this Qur’anic indication of *lahn* as a means of recognition between the angelic inspiration (*ilham*) and the devilish suggestions (*waswasah*). The angels tell the man: ‘Now (when the curtain over the Unseen is raised from before thee), look on us and them (the devils) in clear view, and recognize (each party) by voice and speech (*Lahn-o-bayan*)’.<sup>10</sup>

So one must not miss Derrida’s tongue-in-cheek irony, a characteristic feature of the way of speech the Qur’an associates with a group of Jews, ‘the distortion by twist of the tongue’ (*yalwuna alsinatahum, layyan bi alsinatihim*, 3: 78, 4: 46). One must not also miss the setting, narrative devices and, of course, the figures of speech, among which, as I indicated earlier, the figure of the *threshold* is the key for us.

Derrida passage quoted in the beginning of this section is set in Derrida’s original essay ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, at the beginning of the third and final part of the essay. The essay as a whole is supposed to be Derrida’s deconstructive take on what is called in

philosophical language the Greek and Christian ‘negative theology’ (mysticism). Negative theology, as Derrida defines it, ‘consists of considering that every predicative language is inadequate to the essence. In truth to the hyperessentiality (the being beyond Being) of God; consequently, only a negative [“apophatic”] attribution can claim to approach God, and to prepare us for a silent intuition of God’ (4). Derrida ‘deconstructs’ this ‘apophatic’ discourse, that is, a discourse that ‘mentions without mentioning’, by arguing that basically one can not think of not speaking; that moment you ‘think’ of silence, you are no more silent, you have actually never been silent if you think, because you are *always already* a thinking being: ‘... at the moment when the question “How to avoid speaking?” arises, it is already too late. There was no longer any question of not speaking. Language has started without us, in us, and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary, to speak’. (29)

It may be obvious that Derrida may be trying to test the claim to the unspeakability of mystical experience through a philosophical unthinkability of the possibility of not speaking. Nevertheless, the question remains as to what allows Derrida to talk directly about the Greek and Christian negative theology and mention *tasawwuf* only tangentially, *en passant*, apophatically, that is, mentioning it by not mentioning it.

Derrida divides his discussion of negative theology into three paradigms each of which he deals in a separate section in the essay: the Greek, the Christian, and the one that according to him is ‘neither Greek nor Christian’. Derrida sees a certain complicity between the Greek and the Christian paradigms, that is why when he starts the last section of his essay he recalls that his ‘first paradigm was Greek and the second Christian, *without yet ceasing to be Greek*. The last will be neither Greek nor Christian’ (my italics).<sup>11</sup>

What is this paradigm that is neither Greek nor Christian? Earlier on in the preamble to the discussion of these three paradigms Derrida vaguely suggests that that this third paradigm is the traditions of Jewish and Islamic mystical thought: ‘what do I understand by negative theology and its phantoms in a tradition of thought that is neither Greek nor Christian? In other words, what of Jewish and Islamic thought in this

regard?’<sup>12</sup> But the final section of the essay, curiously enough, is neither on Jewish nor on Islamic mystical thought, but on Heidegger. Would that mean that Heidegger for Derrida would stand as a ‘phantom’ of Christian mysticism in Jewish and Islamic thought? What is it that Heidegger says so that he becomes a ‘phantom’ in relation to *tasawwuf*? It may be interesting to recall here that Ian Almond in his discussion of Sufism in relation to deconstruction keeps Eckhart as a ‘phantom third figure’ who is ‘felt’ throughout his comparison, but Derrida focuses only upon the ‘phantom’ itself, only apophatically mentioning *tasawwuf*, or in other words *tasawwuf* remains probably a ‘phantom third figure’ for Derrida in his comparison of Heidegger with the Greek and Christian paradigms of negative theology.

Why would Heidegger’s be a ‘phantom’ relationship with *tasawwuf*. Probably because on the one hand he says something about religion and faith which is somewhat similar to what we have been saying about *tasawwuf* throughout: that it should not be philosophized. Derrida quotes and interprets Heidegger:

“A Christian philosophy”, he (Heidegger) says, “is a squared circle and a misconception”. It is necessary to distinguish between, on the one hand, onto-theology or theiology, and, on the other hand, theology. The former concerns the supreme being, the being *par excellence*, ultimate foundation or *causa sui* in its divinity. The latter is a science of faith or of divine speech, such as it manifests itself in revelation.

Heidegger continues, “Faith has no need for the thinking of Being”.

“At the interior of thought, nothing could be accomplished that would prepare for or contribute to determining what happens in faith and in grace. If faith summoned me in this manner, I would close down shop. ---Of course, interior to the dimension of faith, one yet continues to think; but thinking as such has no longer a task”.<sup>13</sup>

But on the other hand Derrida feels that ‘in effect that theology (in the sense in which Heidegger links it to faith and distinguishes it from theology and from metaphysical onto-theology) is rigorously excluded from his texts. It is well defined there but excluded, at least in what ought to *direct* it, namely the movement of faith’.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Derrida is suggesting that if Heidegger prioritizes faith over philosophy, this prioritizing itself is philosophical and intellectual. That is why Derrida locates Heidegger also in a *threshold* position, that is, no matter how much Heidegger considers ‘Christian philosophy’ as an oxymoron, he inevitably succumbs to writing himself a ‘Christian philosophy’, can not ultimately ‘close down shop’. One could notice that the summoning of faith and hence closing the shop (of philosophy) comes to Heidegger only as an imaginary condition, the second case of the conditional used: ‘If faith summoned me in this manner (it hasn’t really), I would close down shop (it is actually still open)’ (parenthetical insertions mine). Thus for Derrida Heidegger remains ‘in and beyond a platonic or Neoplatonic tradition. But also in and beyond a Christian tradition of which Heidegger—while submerged in it, as in the Greek tradition—never ceased claiming ... that it could in no case entertain a philosophy’.<sup>15</sup>

For Derrida the shop would always remain open. The *failure* for Derrida would not lie in the inability to ‘close down shop’, but in the misrecognition of its possibility of closure, in not acknowledging that it can only always remain open, at least in the *topoi* Derrida selects for any detailed discussion directly. The Greek, the Greco-Christian, and the Heideggarian tradition that seeks to wrench religion from philosophy are all intellectual, philosophical discourses themselves for Derrida. They are all, including his own, the *threshold* discourses.

As for *tasawwuf* that claims to rely solely upon revelation and faith, ‘theology’ in the Heideggarian sense to the exclusion of philosophy, Derrida obliquely relates it to a ‘resonant space of which, nothing, *almost nothing*, will ever be said’ (italics mine),<sup>16</sup> that is, within the intellectual tradition of philosophy, from the location of the *threshold*. By coupling ‘nothing’ with ‘almost nothing’, Derrida is suggesting that even in not talking about *tasawwuf*, he in some apophatic way *is* talking about it. But this is the only way one can ‘talk’ about it while on the threshold.

Within the main body, the inflated belly, the *batn* of his essay, there are at least three instances where Derrida obliquely, figuratively, apophatically mentions *tasawwuf*, once in the preamble and twice in the last section on Heidegger. But at the back, the *zahr* of the essay, that is, in the notes, he gives us relatively more literal, direct, straightforward, more *zahir* reasons for not talking about *tasawwuf* more directly: ‘lack of capacity, competence, or self-authorization’.<sup>17</sup> But of course for critics like Almond, for whom the ‘literal’, the *zahir* has no real meaning, to look for something in the endnotes of the essay would be a futile activity.

Derrida as a true philosopher, the arch-antiplatonist, the arch-platonist, the true heir of Plato who can deconstruct Plato by answering and questioning Plato in Plato’s own terms, thus lays bare the limits of philosophy, the *margins of philosophy*, as goes the title of one of his major works. It looks as if Derrida understand philosophy and its limits much better than its neo-orientalist users. As a genuine philosopher he would be in a better position to appreciate Rumi’s warning: ‘The philosopher has not the stomach (courage) to breathe a word: if he utter a word, the true religion will confound him’.<sup>18</sup>

## II

Ebrahim Moosa has some other thoughts.

If Heidegger and Derrida, two representative philosophers of the twentieth century, would desist from talking about Christianity and Judaism, their own respective religious traditions due to ‘lack of capacity, competence, or self-authorization’ by virtue of being on the threshold, Moosa feels that the threshold position allows him to talk freely about Islam and *tasawwuf* without any qualms.

Fascinated, as it would seem, beyond himself by somehow grubbing out (Moosa is concerned with the ‘archeology’ of Ghazali’s thought) from the remote recesses of the ‘unconscious’ of Ghazali’s texts a term that would suit Moosa’s own postmodernist designs of philosophizing religion and *tasawwuf*, Moosa violently locates along with himself

Ghazali in particular, and by implication the whole tradition of *tasawwuf*, in the *dihliz* (the threshold).

One may be reminded here of Rumi's parable of the parrot who mistook the bare-headedness of a *dervish* for its own baldness caused by the beating of a greengrocer for spilling oil in the shop. There is something strange and rather risky about Sufi writings. Drawing their inspiration from the Qur'an, they also reflect the Book's attributes. They offer you all *ratb* and *yabis* (the wet and the dry); they can cause guidance to some and misguide the others. They are like Rumi's *nay*, the reed's lament: 'Every one became my friend from his own opinion (*zann*); none sought out my secrets from within me'.<sup>19</sup> The Qur'an reminds us to be cautious as some *zann* falls in the category of sin (49: 12). *Zann* does not help much too in the matters of truth (53: 28). Any approach that we are calling here 'literary terrorism', the approach that seeks *fitnah* (discord) and *tawil* (hidden meanings) would never let go any self created opportunity of pouncing upon any fleeting metaphor, any figure of speech that would suit its own purpose of accommodating any discourse within the conditions of its own subjectivity.

No wonder Ghazali offered Moosa all Moosa was looking for—a metaphor for Moosa's own threshold location—*dihliz*. It's interesting to see that Moosa comes to note, and then cling to, this marginal metaphor by way of *zann* (opinion based on conjecture/ fancy/ suspicion), through a translation of Ghazali's text in French, a language that has incidentally been responsible for producing a whole range of postmodernist 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (such as Derridean deconstruction or Lacanian psychoanalysis etc.). In his earlier (one only has to trust Moosa for his reading of the original Arabic text before consulting the French translation) reading of the original he 'had not been attentive' to the metaphor that 'became enormously significant in "translation"'.<sup>20</sup>

No wonder this *violent* 'translation' of Ghazali and *tasawwuf* into French hermeneutics has 'utterly delighted' Moosa (he is actually so delighted that he has created a whole blog by the name of *dihliz*. Ironically you can not enter even this *dihliz*, forget about the inside, without having a user-name and a pass-word!). In a signature post-structuralist intrigue for the marginal, the figurative and the rhetorical at

the expense of the literal, an intrigue for the *mutashabih* against the *muhkam*, to use the Qur'anic terms, the *dihliz* for Moosa becomes 'the key to the Ghazalian secret'.<sup>21</sup> From the whole oeuvre of Ghazali, Moosa manages to capture this fleeting secret, the one that seems to have defied the perception of a tradition of scholarship on Ghazali, in a 'single line—almost an orphaned line—that is tantalizingly intriguing, like a reply from a Delphic oracle'.<sup>22</sup>

Ebrahim Moosa's *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* can become a good example of explaining what we mean by violence of literary mediation. The cover of the book displays a characteristic postmodernist penchant for devising singularly striking titles. To some the title might appear 'literary' or 'poetic', but it certainly defies the poetic standards of at least Keats who wanted poetry to surprise by a 'fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance'.<sup>23</sup> Moosa's title seems to be aiming at 'de-familiarizing' the reader of the way he might have known Ghazali so far, especially the one who has known Ghazali as a *shariah* loving Sufi. Instead of making the reader remember, it focuses more upon making him 'forget' the traditional Ghazali who saved theology from becoming theiology or onto-theology, but to rethink and 're-imagine' Ghazali as a dialogical thinker who was 'open to Aristotelian reasoning and elements of Hellenic thought' and 'did not allow any particular system of thought or discipline to colonize his thinking',<sup>24</sup> a thinker who 'held together in delicate tension Ash'arite onto-theology and Neoplatonic mysticism laced with subtle iteration of Aristotelian philosophy'.<sup>25</sup> As for *tasawwuf* to which Ghazali adhered, Moosa would suggest that it was basically Sufism that made Ghazali a 'dialogical' thinker, *adihlizian* figure: 'He did adhere to forms of logocentric doxology (*shariah*), but he also embraced aspects of heterology via sufism'.<sup>26</sup> Actually Moosa thinks that '[I]f there is one area of his copious writings and reflections where Ghazali's thinking was not shaped by the liminal space of the *dihliz*, then it is his theological and political writings. It is as if he could not shake off the absolutism of his time. It is a pity that Ghazali's best intentions in theology did not lead to the flowering of the intellectual diversity. While his five-level interpretive framework aimed at lessening heresy-mongering and social upheaval, it is not exactly a

theological Rosetta stone, and it had negligible impact on Sunni Islam.<sup>27</sup>

For Moosa it was this ‘heterology of mysticism’ that ‘goes against the grain of logocentrism’, that is, adherence to orthodox *shariah*, law and ethics in Ghazali. By implication, *tasawwuf* for Moosa would be something that defies *shariah* and since Ghazali was caught between the two, he becomes, just like Moosa himself (that is the implied intent), a ‘bricoleur’, the one ‘who takes ideas from many different sources and experiences in order to contemplate how their underlying and interlinking meanings make sense in a larger pattern of ideas and world-views ...’<sup>28</sup>

Despite all the weariness and aversion Ghazali himself shows towards Aristotle and the rest of the philosophers, Moosa forcibly ‘couches’ his reading of Ghazali ‘within an understanding of the Aristotelian notion of *poiesis*’.<sup>29</sup> Poetics in the Aristotelian sense for Moosa would mean constructing a narrative by weaving a plethora of ideas and insights into a coherent but profoundly refigured whole’, a task which Ghazali successfully accomplished. But one could always argue that it was this same notion of Aristotelian poetics, depending upon ‘the law of probability’ that has led to the notion of a postmodern, free-floating imagination, to identity-less poetic character, in Keats’ words, that ‘enjoys light and shade; lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, rich or poor, mean or elevated’,<sup>30</sup> one who lets his mind be ‘thoroughfare of thoughts’ never making up mind about anything.<sup>31</sup> It is in the context of this forced Aristotelian reading of Ghazali that Moosa calls him a ‘bricoleur’, the one ultimately on the *dihliz*, open to all influences and accommodating them within his own subjectivity. Since Moosa thinks that it was basically Ghazali’s Sufi leanings that helped him become a heterologist and a bricoleur, it would follow that *tasawwuf* is a discourse that is open to philosophy also. To illustrate and consolidate his idea of bricolage that he applies to himself and Ghazali alike, Moosa brings the Qur’anic example of the bees who are inspired to draw from a ‘variety of sources—pollen and nectars—in order to produce a synthetic product that reflects all the colors and fruits of its immediate habitat’.<sup>32</sup> ‘We constantly borrow ideas and inspiration’, Moosa adds, ‘from a variety of sources (like bees) towards certain emancipatory and libratory ends’.<sup>33</sup>

If the example of the bees from the Qur'an becomes for Moosa an example of the act of bricolage, then the extension of this example to the Aristotelian 'poetics of imagination' needs some questioning. The Aristotelian 'poetics of imagination' can certainly offer some misleading parallels between the Qur'anic and the Sufi spiritual paradigms of creativity, parallels that have evidently misled Moosa to confuse philosophy with *tasawwuf*. Here we will consult Aristotle's *Poetics* by way of exploring and exposing the underlying assumptions of two key phrases from Moosa's passage: 'a variety of sources' from where the 'imagination' of certain 'poet' gets inspiration and secondly, the nature of 'emancipatory and 'liberatory ends' towards which such an inspiration leads; the question remains for us: emancipation and liberation from what?

Aristotle in *Poetics* talks about *mimesis* or imitation, the act of creativity (*poesis*) in two ways: generally, and with particular reference to various modes of imitation. Generally speaking, *mimesis* for Aristotle is 'instinctual' in human nature. By implication, all human art and discourse is an act of *mimesis*, as the postmodernists have aptly demonstrated. In general, *mimesis* in itself is pleasure generating: 'Objects, which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies'.<sup>34</sup> So even if the 'immediate habitat is ugly, the poetic *mimesis* of that ugliness would render it pleasurable. It was, one might recall, precisely relying upon this Aristotelian premise that T. S. Eliot defended Burns against Arnold's criticism of creating 'ugly' poetry because his 'immediate habitat', that is, the Scottish conditions were ugly.

But for Aristotle, not all imitations are same. The difference between various modes of imitation Aristotle maintains in three respects: 'the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation'.<sup>35</sup> The question one can ask based on this Aristotelian premise is how the philosophical *mimesis* (or poetic *mimesis*, for poetry for Aristotle is a 'philosophical thing')<sup>36</sup> different from the *mimesis* of *tasawwuf*, if one was compelled to use this term for *tasawwuf* anyhow. How are these two 'bricolages' different?

One way of seeing whether an Aristotelian model of poetic imagination can be applied to the Sufi discourse is to look at the two through their ultimate function or purpose. For Aristotle the highest function of poetic imagination is gained through tragedy, which is to affect ‘a proper purgation’ of pity and fear. On the other hand the function of Sufi ‘imagination’ to be achieved through their texts is to bring the readers closer to Allah, to help them traverse the path to attain the status of *aulia*, the friends of Allah, about whom Allah says in the Qur’an that they have neither *khauf* (fear) nor any *huzn* (grief) (10: 62).

Looking apparently somewhat similar in terminology, do the Aristotelian poetic mimesis and Sufi ‘mimises’, the two kinds of bricolages, to use Moosa’s terms, share anything in common? Does the Aristotelian theory of poetic imagination have anything to do with spirituality?

One could see, in Rumi’s words, ‘hundreds of thousands of such likenesses’, but the reality of the matter is this that the Aristotelian ‘poetics of imagination’ remains from the Sufi spirituality at a distance of, to complete Rumi’s couplet, ‘a seventy years’ journey’. Twentieth century investigations into the Aristotelian *katharsis* have shown that the concept has little to do with even pathology and morality, let alone spirituality. ‘For Aristotle’, Leon Gordon writes, ‘all forms of *mimesis* ... have as their goal the evocation of *intellectual* pleasure’ (my italics) ... [A]ll forms of mimesis ... come into existence because of a fundamental *intellectual* impulse felt by all human beings’. Observing that ‘[T]he idea of *katharsis* as purification in ... moral sense, like purgation, has no supporting evidence in the text of the *Poetics*’:

It is only when we turn to the cognitive interpretation of *katharsis* that we find explicit supporting evidence in the *Poetics*. This evidence has been most fully explored by Kurt von Fritz, Pedro Lain Entralgo, and Leon Golden. First we recall the important passage in chapter 4 (1448b4-17), where Aristotle tells us that mimesis is by nature a part of human experience from childhood on, that is the basis for our first learning experiences, and that all human beings derive pleasure from it. This pleasure does not derive from the nature of the object

represented in the mimesis, for as Aristotle says, we take pleasure in *imitated* objects such as “despised wild animals and corpses,” which would cause us pain if we saw them in reality. For Aristotle, the pleasure arising from mimesis is the pleasure of learning and inference, which “is not only most pleasant to philosophers” but pleasant to all others as well, though in a more limited way.<sup>37</sup>

Hence for an Aristotelian ‘poetics of imagination’, in which Moosa obviously himself is working and also tries to force it upon Ghazali, the ‘emancipatory and liberatory ends’ would at the most be intellectual, an *intellectual* liberation from ‘totalizing ways of existence’<sup>38</sup>. What about the spirit? Is Islam and *tasawwuf* only an *intellectual* affair?

How can an idea of bricolage based upon an Aristotelian ‘poetics of imagination’ be compared to the Qur’anic idea of inspiration? Isn’t the question of the heterogeneity of the sources of inspiration relevant? And what about the question of the ‘immediate habitat’, in Aristotle’s terms, ‘the medium, the objects, the manner and mode of imitation’?

Was it not that Ghazali thought it necessary to change his ‘immediate habitat’ by resigning from the *Nizamiyyah*, a place glowing with intellectual vigour, where he felt that ‘he was engaged with such areas of knowledge which are of no value and can not benefit by way of the hereafter’, where he felt that his intention behind all such intellectual engagement was not purely for Allah, but basically for position and fame? Can such a self-imposed ‘exile’ be equated with the ‘exile’ of the neo-orientalists ensconced comfortably in their cozy offices in American universities? Was Ghazali during this period of ‘exile’ drawing inspiration from the likes of Mikhail Bakhtin, Paulo Frere, Walter Mignolo or Jacque Derrida, from a variety of philosophical or intellectual sources, spending his time in various universities, thousands of dollars per annum from universities, still hanging around the various academic loci of the *dihliz*? What was Ghazali’s ‘immediate habitat’ in this period of ‘exile’, the Sufis or the various intellectual heirs of Plato and Aristotle?

How can an intellectual, philosophical/poetic bricolage be equated with the Sufi ‘bricolage’? Has there to be no difference between the bee that produces honey, inspired by Allah to determine its ‘immediate habitat’ among all fruits accordingly, and the fly Rumi talks about, who sitting on a blade of straw and a pool of ass’s urine considers himself as the pilot of a ship in a sea. This fly, Rumi says, is the *shahib tawil*, the false interpreter, ‘like the fly, his imagination is ass’s urine and his conception a straw’.<sup>39</sup>

Shouldn’t the question of determining the ‘variety of sources’ be raised? Has anybody seen a bee sitting on dung?

Still Aristotle?

### III

As the general editor of the ‘Studies in Islamic Philosophy’ (shouldn’t we concur with Heidegger’s notion of a squared circle?), the series under which the book appeared, S. Nomanul Haq has done a fine job in writing the foreword. ‘This book’, he tells the readers, ‘is as much about the intellectual giant Abu Hamid al-Ghazali as it is about its author Ebrahim Moosa’.<sup>40</sup> And here I think lies the rub. Intended obviously as a compliment, the remark actually reveals the essential problem with the book, in Rumi’s terms, ‘measuring the actions of holy men by (the analogy) of yourself’. This reminds me of Muhammad Hasan Askari’s essay ‘Ibn Arabi and Kierkegaard’. Askari compares the account of the episode of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son given in Ibn Arabi’s *Fusus al-Hikam* and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. ‘Before reading Kierkegaard’s book’, Askari writes, ‘we will also have to remember that this book (*Fear and Trembling*) was written within, and in order to overcome, an emotional storm. Kierkegaard felt that God does not want him to marry his beloved, so he broke his engagement. But at the same time the hope that the beloved will return kept alive in his heart. The reflection of his own personal conflict he saw in the episode of Abraham. Whatever be the worth of this book from a philosophical point of view, the fact remains that this interpretation and exegesis of the Abrahamic episode comes from the author’s own personal and emotional problem. Whatever ideas he has attributed to Abraham, they

are in fact an outcome of his own personal complexities ... It means that he has tried to understand Abraham through his own personality'.<sup>41</sup>

Such Kierkegaardian 'terrorist' interpretation, Moosa himself confesses, though not by way of confession but as an intended intellectual consolidation, 'haunts' him: 'Abraham faced the impossible dilemma of flouting the universal prohibition against murder, speaking white lies, and neglecting his responsibility, all in order to reach *a personal truth, a truth that only benefited him as an individual* (italics mine). Was this not the challenge that confronted Ghazali and countless others caught in agonistic dilemmas?<sup>42</sup> It could no doubt be a challenge to 'countless others' like Moosa himself, but to say this about a Prophet and a Sufi that they wanted only to reach 'a personal truth' is indeed violent. Like Kierkegaard, as Askari points out, who considers Abraham 'as a common man, whose psychology is no different from that of a common man',<sup>43</sup> Ebrahim Moosa also thinks that Ghazali (in effect Moosa himself who thinks that Ghazali must have thought the same way as he does) 'found in Abraham the paradigmatic figure who is constantly on trial and struggle with his emotions and inner self in order to gain proximity to God.'<sup>44</sup> Ironically in the sentence immediately preceding this remarkable 'insight', Moosa has already quoted Ghazali saying that 'the subtleties of Abraham's discourse can only become apparent ... if one can have access to the spiritual illumination derived from the world of prophecy'. Now if one felt that in equating himself with Ghazali, Moosa has actually got access to 'the illumination derived from the world of prophecy', how could one explain the presence of Freud in this audaciously astonishing statement coming from the illuminated world of Moosa's 'poetic imagination': 'In the end, he (Abraham) became a sincere lover and friend of God. Abraham thus made the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle.'<sup>45</sup>

Courtesy Nomanul Haq's paratextual *glossia*, we come to know that Moosa has actually treated Ghazali as a mirror, a mirror on which one would think the rust of centuries of a tradition of learning has accumulated, a tradition that, in Moosa's words, has 'mummified' owing to the 'intellectual perfidy' in the 'bastions of Muslim traditional learning'. Moosa mentions some of these centres of 'intellectual perfidy' by name: al-Azhar in Egypt, Dar al- Uloom Deoband in India, the many *madrasas* in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the many *hawzias* in

Iran and Iraq, and similar institutions around the globe.<sup>46</sup> The Ghazalian mirror, so to say, because of this ‘intellectual perfidy’ has become so rusty that the contemporary man can not see his own face in it. So Moosa has, Nomanul Haq tells us, ‘skillfully reconstructed and polished’ this mirror in which he looks at his own image.

Brandishing, reconstructing, polishing—this reminds me of a Sufi analogy—and I will remain here *strictly* within the limits of the analogical sense as Rumi’s foregoing story of the fly from the *Mathnawi* can afford—the analogy that centralizes again the question of the determination of the ‘variety of sources’, it goes like this: the heart is like a mirror. If the mirror gets rusted, the rust has to be washed away in order to see any reflection. You can either use rose water to remove the rust, or you could as well use urine, the rust will go away any way—but would there be no difference?

Nomanul Haq thinks that Moosa’s ‘greatest contribution’ is the grubbing out of the term *dihliz*. Both of them should listen to Rumi:

*Bedan ke zirakiye aql jumleh dihlizast  
Ager be ilm-e-falatun bavad berun-e-sarast*<sup>47</sup>

Know that the cleverness of the intellect all belongs to the *dihliz* (threshold); even if it be with the knowledge of Plato, it is (still) outside the palace.

## Notes

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1 Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, in *Language of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, (eds.) Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 53.

2 *Ibid.*, 15.

3 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (Delhi: Penguin, 2001) 21.

4 *Ibid.*, 20.

5 Derrida, *W & D*, 369.

6 Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

7 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (London: Vintage, 1994) XXVI-XXX.

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- 8 Frederick Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, (NY: Vintage, 1968) 424.
- 9 Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, I/ 334.
- 10 *Ibid.* , V/ 2999.
- 11 Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', 53.
- 12 *Ibid.* , 31.
- 13 *Ibid.* , 55-62.
- 14 *Ibid.* , 61.
- 15 *Ibid.* , 54-55.
- 16 *Ibid.* , 31.
- 17 *Ibid.* , note 13, 66.
- 18 *Ibid.* , I/ 2151.
- 19 *Ibid.* , I/ 6.
- 20 Ebrahim Moosa, *Gahazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, (Karachi: Oxford, 2005), 47.
- 21 *Ibid.* , 45.
- 22 *Ibid.* , 47.
- 23 John Keats, Letter to John Taylor, February 1818, quoted here from, *The Sayings of John Keats*, ed. J. L. C. Peerless, (London: Duckworth, 1995), 15.
- 24 Moosa, *Gahazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 50.
- 25 *Ibid.* , 261.
- 26 *Ibid.* , 30.
- 27 *Ibid.* , 208.
- 28 *Ibid.* , 36.
- 29 *Ibid.* , 38.
- 30 John Keats, Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 1818, 15.
- 31 *Ibid.* , Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, September 1819, 38.
- 32 Moosa, *Gahazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 37.
- 33 *Ibid.* , 52.
- 34 Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, (NY: Harcourtbrace, 1992), 51.
- 35 *Ibid.* , 50.
- 36 *Ibid.* , 55.
- 37 Leon Golden, 'Aristotle', in *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Michael Groden & martin Kreiswirth, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 42-43.
- 38 Moosa, *Gahazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 34.
- 39 Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, I/ 1088.
- 40 Moosa, *Gahazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, IX.
- 41 Muhammad Hasan Askari, *Majmu'ah Muhammad Hasan Askari*, (Lahore: Sang-e-meel, 2000) 587. The English translation of the original Urdu passage is mine.
- 42 Moosa, *Gahazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 136.
- 43 Askari, *Majmu'ah*, 589.
- 44 Moosa, *Gahazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 135.
- 45 *Ibid.* , 135.
- 46 *Ibid.* , 61.

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47 Rumi, Kulliyat-e-Shams, ed. Badiuzzaman Faruzanfar, (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 1344 H), vol. 1, 281.

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### ***Abstract***

*The extent of the reception of Sufi poetry and thought for the past few decades in North America has been phenomenal. The nature of this reception, however, needs some evaluation. Reviewing in some detail Ebrahim Moosa's Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination (2005), hailed in 2005 as a New Statesman Book of the Year and Choice Outstanding Academic Title, and in 2006 as the Best First Book in the History of Religion by the American Academy of Religion, the paper argues out the violence inherent in any forced application on Sufi thought of critical categories the philosophical rigour of whose mediation seems to be diametrically opposed to the aversion Sufis themselves have shown towards philosophy. Such violence, in a Derridian sense of "a forced entry ... possible only at the moment when the space (to be violated) is shaped and re-oriented by the glance of the foreigner", inevitably instead of reflecting, refracts, that is, bends the actual image through the only and rigorously philosophical angle it affords for one discourse (Sufi thought) to enter the other (criticism).*

*The paper also draws attention to the fact that behind such violent attempts at identifying Sufi thought through a characteristic American "literary mediation", lies the question of the identity of its exponents themselves. Most of these exponents are immigrants, like Moosa himself, who much in similar way in which Edward Said (a Palestinian-American) in Culture and Imperialism critically locates himself in a "threshold" position, tries to fit in even Ghazali into his own hyphenated subjectivity, in the dihlizian space, a central metaphor for Moosa in the book.*