



An Orange-Headed Ground Thrush and a Death's-Head Moth on a Purple Ebony Orchid Branch, Shaikh Zain al-Din, 1778

The Logic of the Birds

For my father, the poet Babatunde Ogunnaike

There is magic in eloquence and wisdom in poetry.

— *Hadith*¹

What is poetry? The song of the bird of the intellect.

What is poetry? The similitude of the world of eternity.

— *Jāmī*

Since your love was kindled in my heart
Apart from your love, all that I have has burned
My heart put reason and study and books on the shelf
And was taught poetry and ghazals and quatrains
— *Rūmī, Dīvān-i Shams, Ghazal 6161*

When I speak of poetry I am not thinking of it as a genre.
Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of
relating to reality. So poetry becomes a philosophy to guide a
man throughout his life.
— *Andrei Tarkovsky*

What the Islamic tradition calls the “licit magic” (*sihr ḥalāl*) of poetry seems to be almost universally recognized throughout human history around the world. The power of poetry—language shaped and patterned by rhythm, music, beauty—to produce profound effects both within human beings and without is prominent in all cultures with which I have some familiarity, save perhaps certain sad segments of modernized cultures, which (for reasons we will explore later) have tried to push poetry into obscurity. To give but one contemporary example, when asked to define poetry, a contemporary South Asian poet retorted, “That’s like a fish trying to describe the sea”;² the questioner later noted that “the rhythmic word is widely regarded as *ruh ki giza* or food for the soul in Muslim South Asia.”³ Moreover, poets and writers as disparate as Aimé Césaire and Amīr Khusrau, Jāmī and Jacques Maritain, Shelley and Bulle Shah, Audre Lorde and Aquinas, Liu Xie and Lal Ded, Bashō and Aḥmadu Bambā have advanced the idea of a distinct mode of *poetic knowledge* that animates and undergirds poetry and much more. Indeed, the biologist Edward O. Wilson called *Homo sapiens* “the poetic species” because our cognition depends so much on language, analogy, and association.⁴ Communications theorist Eric McLuhan expanded upon this insight, noting that “words are modes of

experience, and are themselves experiences; a language is an organ of perception (poetic knowledge)."⁵ As the great Welsh poet Dylan Thomas said, "A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him."⁶ That is, poetry is not mere sing-song rhymes and pretty words but of the greatest intellectual significance. Little wonder, then, that poetry has been at the heart of Islamic and other traditional educational and cultural formations—for most of human history, poetry (whether oral, written, or both) has been central to the ways in which we define and understand ourselves and our world.

As the poet Charles Upton explains, "Poetry... is not entertainment. It is not self-expression. It is not propaganda.... Poetry is a way of knowing based on the cultivation of symbolic, or *anagogic*, consciousness, expressed through the medium of human language. The games it plays are not sporting events but serious hunting expeditions carried out in the face of collective mass starvation."⁷ Or in the words of Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.... Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives."⁸ But what is this poetic knowledge behind the meters and rhymes? Why is it so important? Why is it that so many of the best poets of most languages are so-called mystics? And what does it mean that some of us have lost touch with this poetic knowledge?

The Qur'an, Poetry, Ineffability, and Wonder

Although the Qur'an explicitly declares itself not to be poetry, it is exceptionally poetic, as are most sacred texts and orature.

If the Qur'an seems to take a dim view of poets and poetry in certain passages, it is precisely because of the remarkable power of poetry and poets in pre-Islamic Arabia, a power that could either compete with or support the new dispensation, which needed to differentiate itself from this poetic context. As in neighboring cultures, Arab poets were believed to be inspired by spirits, or jinn,⁹ and their poetry was considered oracular—defining, embodying, and reproducing cultural ideals and structures—thereby making and breaking reputations and fortunes. Like the staff of Moses that swallowed those of the Pharaoh's magicians, the Qur'an had to "clear the ground" and differentiate its divine revelation through the Holy Spirit/archangel from the poetic inspiration of the jinn.¹⁰ Parts of Plato's infamous attack on poetry in the *Republic* can be understood in a similar way, as an attempt to carve out space for a distinct worldview and conception of humanity, in a cultural context dominated by powerful poetic traditions whose relationship to the truth and virtue could be precarious.

In its critique of poetry, the Qur'an proclaims, "Shall I inform you upon whom the satans descend? They descend upon every sinful liar, they listen eagerly, but most of them are liars. And as for the poets, the errant follow them. Have you not seen that they wander in every valley and that they say what they do not do? Except those who believe and perform righteous deeds and remember God much, and help one another after having been wronged" (26:221–227). The Qur'an castigates the Arab poets for being "all over the place," for listening to lying spirits, for not living up to their speech, for not "being as good as their words"—for abusing the power of poetry. Instead of their craft bringing together truth, action, goodness, and people, their words separate them. But the last verse defines good poets inversely, as those who bring together¹¹ truth, action, people, and good speech, implicitly connecting poetry to invocation (*dhikr*), another spiritually

efficacious use of rhythmic speech. Dhikr also names the recitation of the Qur'an, which Seyyed Hossein Nasr insightfully describes as "the spiritual force behind the poetry and music of all Islamic peoples."¹²

In these Islamic contexts,¹³ the art of poetry is often referred to by the Qur'anic term "the language of the birds" (*manṭiq al-ṭayr*) from verse 27:16, in which Solomon says, "O people, we have been taught the language of the birds, and we have been given of all things. Truly, this is the clear (*mubīn*) bounty!" As Muslim scholars and poets throughout the ages have noted, the word *manṭiq* in this verse, commonly translated as "speech" or "language,"¹⁴ also means "logic," expressing the close relationship between logic and poetry,¹⁵ while the second half of the verse conveys the all-encompassing nature of the latter as a bounty of clarifying exposition (another meaning of the term *mubīn*) and wisdom, uniting all things. As sura Śād describes the poetry of the Psalms of David: "We compelled the mountains to hymn with him at nightfall and sunrise, and the birds gathered, each oft-turning to Him. And We strengthened his kingdom and gave him wisdom and decisive speech" (38:18–20). Here, the fixed and the earthly (the mountains, the pillars of the macrocosm) and the flying and heavenly (the birds, symbolizing the angelic pillars of the metacosm) are united in the poetic act of the *khalīfa* (38:26), the vicegerent David (the microcosm), at the liminal times of nightfall and sunrise, uniting the day (manifestation) and the night (the unseen). This triad of meta-macro-microcosm, or heaven-earth-human, plays an important role in framing the understanding of poetry and poetic knowledge in many contexts.

From this perspective, many Islamic poets, particularly Sufi poets, advanced the idea of this "language" or "logic" of the birds as a kind of all-comprehensive mode of expression

capable of communicating and synthesizing forms of knowledge that other media cannot. The famous poet-scholar Amīr Khusrau of Delhi wrote, "Science is like water in a cask: draw ten sound conclusions, and its volume decreases. Poetry, however, is an ever-flowing spring—and should you delve into it even a hundred times, it cannot diminish."¹⁶ One reason for this dynamic is that poetry cultivates wonder and awe. As Lara Harb writes,

*The evocation of wonder was the main goal of classical Arabic poetry according to classical Arabic literary theorists, such as al-Jurjani. Wonder is this unique experience that is located on the cusp between ignorance and knowledge. It is a response to the unknown, unexpected and unfamiliar that spurs one into a search for and discovery of knowledge. In this sense, wonder is the foundation of philosophical, scientific and metaphysical enquiry. It is due to wonder that human beings began to philosophise, as Aristotle declared in his Metaphysics.*¹⁷

Al-Jurjānī explained how, through its linguistic and aesthetic techniques, poetry stops the train of ordinary thought and "defamiliarizes" the familiar, causing us to discover it afresh, to see it in a new light and savor the joy of discovery. He wrote, "The pleasure of the soul is based on being lifted from the hidden to the visible, being presented with the plain after the enigmatic, being moved from the known to the better and more intimately known."¹⁸ In a similar vein, Charles Baudelaire defined poetic genius as the "capacity to recover childhood" and perceive a given thing "in all of its freshness, as the very symbol of reality."¹⁹ Or as the English poet William Blake writes, both describing and illustrating this poetic perception:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.²⁰

In more prosaic terms, the same poet writes, “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”²¹ True poetry participates in this “cleansing” of the perceptual faculties by sweeping aside the cobwebs occluding the hidden passages connecting all things, polishing phenomena to reflective translucence, granting us an experience of the One in everything and everything in each one—the universality of things in their particularity, and their particularity in their universality.²² As James C. Taylor writes in *Poetic Knowledge*, “Poetic experience indicates an encounter with reality that is nonanalytical, something that is perceived as beautiful, awful (awe-full), spontaneous, mysterious. It is true that poetic experience has the surprise of metaphor found in poetry, but also found in common experience, when the mind, through the senses and emotions, sees in delight, or even in terror, the significance of what is really there.”²³

Moreover, this poetic wonder or awe is the response to that which cannot be fully encompassed or tied down by conceptual definition or analysis—it can be expressed and alluded to but exceeds explanation. As the great Egyptian Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ wrote, “In allusion, there is meaning not contained in plain expression.”²⁴ This notion of “suggestion” or “resonance” (*dhvani*) was central to the influential poetics of the Kashmiri Shaivite philosopher Abhinavagupta, who argued that the indirect suggestion of aesthetic experience (*rasadhvani*, literally “the resonance of taste/flavor or juice/essence”) is the “soul of poetry.” Prefiguring Amīr Khusrau, he writes:

*Aesthetical experience takes place, as everyone can notice, by virtue, as it were, of the squeezing out of the poetical word. Persons aesthetically sensitive, indeed, read and taste many times over the same poem. In contradiction to practical means of perception, that, their task being accomplished, are no more of any use and must then be abandoned, a poem, indeed, does not lose its value after it has been comprehended. The words, in poetry, must therefore have an additional power, that of suggestion, and for this very reason the transition from the conventional meaning to the poetic one is unnoticeable.*²⁵

Using the example of the phrase “a village in/on the Ganges” (*gaṅgāyām ghośāḥ*), Abhinavagupta explains that given that the literal sense is impossible (the villagers would drown), the phrase evokes a different mode of cognition, in which the artistic expression itself, its connotations and affective resonances, and not its denotation, becomes the primary object of an elevated aesthetic experience and enjoyment, in addition to the “decoded,” more literal meaning of “a village on the banks of the Ganges river”:

*“A village on the Ganges” suggests the beauty, peacefulness, and holiness of the village. These suggestions spring from the primary sense of the word “Ganges,” not from the secondary, or shifted, sense of “bank,” which we need in order to make sense of the expression. It is logic that demands the secondary sense. The suggestion, the poetry, springs directly from the primary.*²⁶

Thus, the faint or imperceptible suggestion (*dhvani*) of poetry subtly resonates with the memories of experiences and feelings in the mind of the reader the way certain smells or locations or half-heard songs can evoke memories and feelings without our being directly aware of them (e.g., the

smell of a particular kind of cloth brings back memories of my childhood in Nigeria and my grandfather, and the word *teeth* can subtly evoke memories and feelings about particular smiles, barking dogs, or the dentist's office—but usually at the edges of my awareness). Once aesthetically evoked, these ordinary feelings or states of mind (*bhāva*) can saturate the consciousness of the listener and are transformed into the heightened aesthetic experience of *rasa*, the feeling or quality evoked and transfigured by artistic craft and aesthetic delight.²⁷ Abhinavagupta describes this experience of *rasa* as a kind of refinement or distillation of particular, everyday feelings and states by removing their limiting and individualizing barriers, producing an aesthetic experience that opens up onto universal consciousness of the divine Self.²⁸ For example, he argues that unlike ordinary pleasures—which are inevitably combined with self-interest (such as the desire for the continuance of the pleasure, or various other desires)—at its rapturous peak, the aesthetic “savoring” of *rasa* is its own goal, virtually escaping the individual self-interests and desires of the listener, whose particular memories and feelings are abstracted or elevated to the more universal level of *rasa*. As he writes, “A poem’s having the efficacy (*bhāvakatva*) to create *rasas* is nothing more than a poem’s power of making the *vibhāvas* [feelings], etc., universal.”²⁹



Like al-Jurjānī, Abhinavagupta describes in great detail the various linguistic and poetic features that produce this kind of heightened aesthetic experience, which he also associates with wonder, surprise, awe, and astonishment;³⁰ he places greater emphasis on the psychological processes that create this elevated aesthetic experience through the unique power of evocative suggestion (*dhvani*), whose addition to the ordinary denotative functioning of language allows us to “squeeze the juice” out of words, savoring their expressions of the ineffable evoked in our consciousness. As one scholar summarizes Abhinavagupta’s theory: “When language serves art, it neither negates nor dispenses with linguistic apprehension. Rather, it delivers more than language can: the ineffable essence of the subject who experiences love, compassion, grief, the comic, and more, including quietude.”³¹

Similarly, the Arabic verb *shaʿara*—from which the word for *poetry* (*shiʿr*) is derived—names a kind of indirect, subtle perception, awareness, feeling, or intuition (*shuʿūr*). It also has the same root as *shaʿr*, which means “hair,” and poets and etymologists have linked this to their shared qualities of fineness and subtlety—the indirect perception we have of things, such as the wind through the hairs on our body and the feeling of our “hair standing on end”—that can accompany this kind of obscure awareness and moving poetry.³² The following verses of Emily Dickinson beautifully convey and portray this dynamic of wonder, surprise, pleasure, ineffability, and the necessity of allusion:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—³³

Thus the inexhaustibility of the ineffable finds a home in the allusions, aporias, ambiguities, epistrophes, paradoxes, and coincidence of opposites that characterize poetic speech³⁴ and prevent it from being frozen into a static set of definitions and referents; these subtleties, the indefiniteness of poetic suggestion, and its capacity to inspire awe are what make poetry an “ever-flowing spring” leading to the ocean and not a “cask of water.” As Abhinavagupta writes, “By this road of *dhvani* (resonance) and of subordinated suggestion, which has been shown, the imagination of poets can be indefinitely extended... a further result is an infinite extension of the poet’s imagination!”³⁵ As opposed to a simple picture or photograph, a true poem is more like an open window through which we can contemplate the ever-changing internal and external worlds, and through which these worlds meet, mingle, and transform each other.³⁶ In short, poetry leads beyond itself. Like music, poetry is perpetually vanishing into the silence that is its origin and destination. As the influential Song dynasty poetry critic, Yan Yu wrote, “Like an echo in the void, and colour in a form, the moon reflected in water, and an image in a mirror, the words come to an end, but the meaning is inexhaustible.”³⁷ Similarly, Tu Wei-Ming wrote of Chinese poetry in the Wei-Chin (ca. fourth-century) period, “What the poet evokes, in the Wei-Chin sense of lyricism, far from being an unrestrained enthusiasm for a passing phenomenon, is a penetrating insight into the enduring pattern of things. The

words, so long as they are pointers to the poetic vision of such a pattern, are a necessary instrument for disclosing the Tao. As soon as the Tao is revealed and the meaning understood, they must fade away so that the ineffable Tao can be experienced directly."³⁸ Or as Bashō wrote, both illustrating and expressing this dynamic:

A cicada shell;
it sang itself
utterly away.³⁹

Similarly, Abhinavagupta posits that the ninth *rasa* of "tranquil quietude" (*śanta rasa*) is a kind of "rasa of rasas," running through them all like the thread of a necklace, or like the white light within all colors, and he argues that all successful art should resolve itself into this *rasa*, which is the end goal of all poetry, of all aesthetic and human experience, as it is the fulfillment and thus the end of all desires; in this regard, he cites the following verses of the Mahābhārata:

The joy of pleasure in the world
and the greater joy of pleasures found in heaven
are not worth a sixteenth of the joy
that comes from the dying of desire.⁴⁰

And likewise, the final stanza of San Juan de la Cruz's beautiful "Noche oscura del alma" (Dark night of the soul) reads:

I abandoned and forgot myself,
Laying my face on my Beloved; All things ceased;
I went out from myself,
Leaving my cares
Forgotten among the lilies.⁴¹

Or consider the testimonies of Rumi's pen:

Love has come and covered my mouth:
"Throw away your poetry and come to the stars!"⁴²

And

I think of poetic rhyme while my Beloved
Tells me to think of Him and nothing else
What are words that thou shouldst think about them
What are words but thorns of the wall of the vineyard?
I shall put aside expressions, words and sounds,
So that without all three I shall carry out an intimate discourse
with thee.⁴³

And

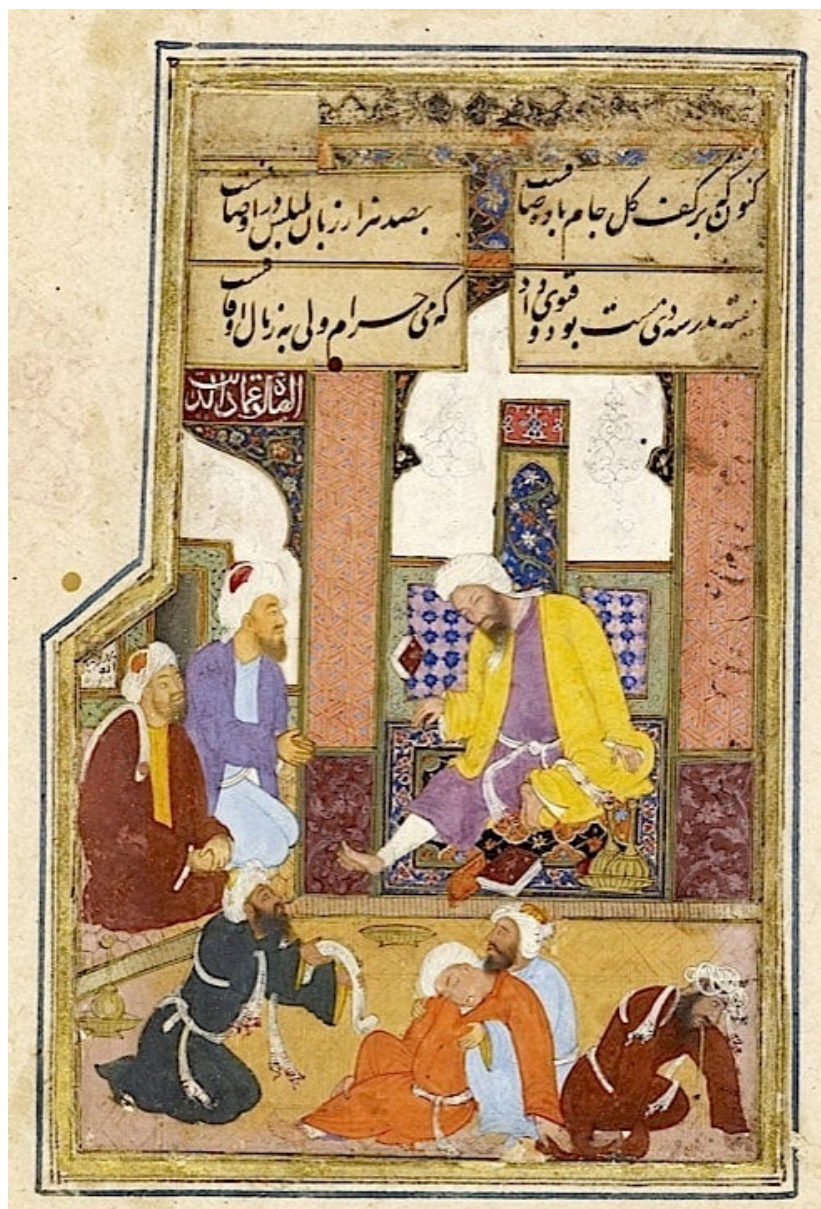
Whatever description or explanation I give of love
when I reach love, I am ashamed of it
Although the description of the tongue clarifies,
love that is tongueless is of greater clarity
As the pen hastened to write
when it came to love, it split on itself.
In describing love, reason becomes mired like an ass in mud.
It is love alone, it is love alone
which has explained love and being in love.⁴⁴

Or in one of my own poems:

Words are just folds in
 the bedsheets, un-tight
Reminding us of
 what we did last night
Calling us back to
 our silent delights

But instead of passing over the ineffable in silence, Sufi

and other traditional, spiritual poets have gone a different way than the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus and seem to have adopted the motto "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must sing."



Page from painting by Muḥammad Riżā, ca. 1611

Poetry: The Pattern of the Words and Worlds

As alluded to above, poetry is particularly effective at leading us beyond itself, transforming us and the world, due to its embodiment of the resonant harmonies between the realms of the cosmos, the human soul, and the transcendent Real, in the realm of human language. As Tu Wei-Ming explains, "The paradox that the Tao is ineffable but can be experienced directly is predicated on the belief that there is always an internal resonance between human beings and the natural order of things."⁴⁵ In Qur'anic terms, this can be seen in the symbolic ambiguity of the Qur'anic term *āyāt*—which means both the symbols of God "on the horizons and in our souls" (41:53) and the verses of the Qur'an—illustrating the doctrine of "the three books" of the human soul, the cosmos, and revelation/scripture that reflect and illuminate each other, conveying the divine message of the nature of the Real. Ibn al-ʿArabī states, "We emerged from speech. That is His word, 'Be!,' so we came to be. Silence is a state of nonexistence, and speech is a state of existence." Commenting on this, William Chittick writes, "Created things are the speech of God, and the words they speak are spoken through them, not by them."⁴⁶ If the entire cosmos is speech, and speech ordered by meter and rhyme is poetry,⁴⁷ then the ordered speech of the cosmos and our souls is a kind of existential poetry, and the poetry we recite is an echo of this creative act. As Ibn al-ʿArabī writes, "All of the world is endowed with rhythm, fastened by rhyme, on the Straight Path."⁴⁸ Synthesizing these perspectives, Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains:

*According to the traditional doctrine, the inner reality of the cosmos, which unveils itself to the inner eye or to intellectual vision—for which the inner eye is the instrument of perception—is based upon a harmony which imposes itself even upon the corporeal domain. This harmony is, moreover, reflected in the world of language, which is itself a reflection of both the soul of man and of the cosmos.... Harmony is always present, but as its imprint upon the word or substance of language becomes more marked and profound, poetry comes into being, poetry which through its re-echoing of the fundamental Harmony of things is able to aid man to return to the higher states of being and consciousness.*⁴⁹

A similar perspective is found in Liu Xie's influential work on Chinese poetics, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, in which he posits pattern/order (*wen*) as the unifying constitutive principle underlying the various phenomena of the classic Chinese cosmological triad of heaven, earth, and humanity. Rafal Stepień explains:

Wen is the manifestation of the Way in the world of appearances; it is thus not external decoration (waishi) but the externalization of an internal necessity....

*Having thus proposed wen as the ordering principle of heaven and earth in the very first sentences of his treatise, Liu Xie immediately goes on to position humanity as the third member of this cosmic triad. Humanity is nothing less than "the mind of heaven and earth" (tiandi zhi xin). How so? Because humanity is endowed with consciousness (xingling): the ability to discern the constitutive pattern or wen of things... and, crucially, to give it expressive voice.*⁵⁰

After describing the emergence of *wen* from the undifferentiation of the supreme ultimate (*taiji*) and its

appearance in the patterns of heaven (e.g., *tianwen*, astronomy, astrology) and earth (*diwen*, geography), Liu Xie turns to the emergence of the patterns of humanity: *renwen*, meaning culture, cultivation, learning, and literature. Starting from the legendary origins of the Chinese writing system from the observation of bird tracks—another account of the “language of the birds” that symbolically unites heaven, earth, and humanity in a natural process—Liu Xie explains, “When mind arises, language abides. When language abides, literature enlightens.”⁵¹ That is, just as mind naturally emerges from the process of manifestation as that which must recognize and be aware of *wen*, the pattern or nature of reality, language naturally emerges from mind as the medium through which *wen* can be expressed. Stephen Owen explains, “Language is the fulfillment of the process, the knowing that makes known, and that fulfillment will be human *wen* [cultivation/literature].”⁵²



A page from an illustrated manuscript of The Diwan of Hafiz, Abd al-Samad Shirin-Qalam, ca. 1582

Connecting this process to spiritual enlightenment, Liu Xie writes, "Therefore we know that through the sages the way

transmits *wen*, and that the sages rely on *wen* to manifest the way," and Stepien comments, "This means that, by authoring works of *wen*, those engaged in literary craft embody, manifest, enlighten (*ming*) the way inherently at work in all nature."⁵³ That is, properly patterned literature, such as good poetry, both reflects and emerges from the very nature of reality. It is the full flowering of the "mind of heaven and earth," the fruit containing the seed from which the entire cosmic tree emerged.⁵⁴ Liu Xie contrasts this true literature of the titular "carving dragons" (*diaoalong*), which naturally expresses and completes the very pattern of the fabric of reality, with the pejorative "carving insects" (*diaochong*), the shallow artifice of "frippery poetastery,"⁵⁵ concluding his classic work with the following verse:

If literature conveys the mind
My mind has been delivered.⁵⁶

Birds are also central to the mythical origin of Sanskrit poetry, according to which the first verse (*shloka*) was composed as the sage Vālmīki was happily watching a pair of mating cranes in the river, when suddenly, a hunter's arrow killed one of the birds, and thereupon its mate gave a piercing, mournful cry and died of grief. Moved by this tragic scene and spotting the hunter, Vālmīki extemporaneously proclaimed the first verse of Sanskrit poetry, which became the model for the structure of the Rāmāyaṇa:

You will find no rest for the long years of Eternity
For you killed a bird in love and unsuspecting.⁵⁷

Later writers, such as Abhinavagupta, explain the process by which this first verse of the first poet came into being as the transmutation of the bird's grief and cry, in the clear heart of the sage through "a melting of his thought" into the universal

form of *rasa*, which “then like the spilling over of a jar filled with liquid, like the pouring forth of one’s emotion into a cry of lament, this [grief now transformed into the *rasa* of compassion] found its final form in a verse cast into fixed form of meter and into appropriate words.”⁵⁸ That is, it took a visionary sage to perceive the universal, underlying structure of reality revealed in the particular event and transform it in the “clear mirror” of his own heart (which was already structured according to the same universal pattern of reality) into the generalized *rasa*. This state could then be expressed in appropriate speech of poetry, whose patterns of suggestion or resonance (*dhvani*) evoke the same universal consciousness of aesthetic perception, of *rasa*. As Abhinavagupta’s teacher wrote:

*It has been said that no non-seer can be deservingly called a poet, and one is a seer only by virtue of his vision. Vision is the power of disclosing intuitively the reality underlying the manifold materials in the world and their aspects. To be termed a “poet” in the authoritative texts it is enough to be possessed of this vision of reality. But in everyday speech the world accords that title to him alone who possesses vision as well as expression. Thus, though the first poet (Vālmīki) was highly gifted with enduring and clear vision, he was not hailed as a poet by people until he embodied it in a descriptive work.*⁵⁹

A similar understanding based on the Platonic and Aristotelian notion of mimesis (imitation/representation) of the forms of nature is echoed in Taylor’s aforementioned *Poetic Knowledge*, where he writes, “Poetry, and poetic knowledge, discovers the invisible principles in real things without destroying the thing itself.”⁶⁰ Similarly, one scholar describes Gerard Manley Hopkins’s central notion of “an inscape,” based on the Neoplatonic philosophy of Duns Scotus: “To Hopkins,

an inscape was something more than a delightful sensory impression: it was an insight, by divine grace, into the ultimate spiritual reality, seeing the pattern, air, melody, in things from, as it were, God's side."⁶¹

Hopkins's poetry has always strongly reminded me of traditional Yoruba poetry, whose general poetics (in the broad sense of the term, including all forms of art)⁶² is most clearly encapsulated in the concept and genre of *oríkì*, which are "collections or strings of name-like attributive epithets, 'praises' which are neither narrative nor descriptive, but vocative. They are addressed to their subject or 'owner,' and are felt to encapsulate, and evoke in some way, that subject's essential powers and qualities."⁶³ *Oríkì* literally means to "call," "evoke," or even "provoke" the *orí* of a thing, which is at once its "head," "inner reality," "guardian spirit," and "destiny," chosen in heaven before it comes down to earth.⁶⁴ The numerous myths about *orí* describe it as a kind of nexus where each individual thing meets the supreme Being and Creator (*Olódùmàrè/Ọlọrun*); one priestess describes *orí* as "that part of one's complex identity which is an imperishable part of God," and another sage characterizes it as "the act of the self [*ẹmí*] when it is with the supreme deity (*Ọlọrun*)."⁶⁵ Thus, the poetry of *oríkì* functions to call forth the universal, spiritual essence (*orí*) of a particular thing, which is also a particular power or quality of the universal sacred (*Olódùmàrè/Ọlọrun*), manifested through the descent of the divine word (*ọrọ*).⁶⁶

In these anthropocosmic conceptions of poetry, the poet imitates, or extends, and ultimately participates in the creative act of the Creator, patterning human language so as to sympathetically resonate with the related underlying patterns of the world and consciousness. Aimé Césaire describes this process:

*But one man... puts humanity back in the universal concert, one man unites the human flowering with universal flowering; that man is the poet.... In other words, poetry is full bloom. The blossoming of mankind to the dimensions of the world; giddy dilation. And it can be said that all true poetry, without ever abandoning its humanity, at the moment of the greatest mystery ceases to be strictly human so as to be truly cosmic. There we see resolved, and by the poetic state, two of the most anguishing antinomies that exist: the antinomy of one and other, the antinomy of Self and World.... He speaks and returns language to its purity. By purity I mean not subject to habit or thought but only to the cosmic thrust. The poet's word, the primal word: rupestral design in the stuff of sound. The poet's utterance, primal utterance, the universe played with and copied.*⁶⁷

Thus, in true poetry, the walls that separate subject and object, self and other, nature and culture, language and reality, the Real (al-Ĥaqq) / ultimate reality / Self and creation (al-khalq) / conventional reality / self are porous (if they can be said to exist at all), leading to a distinct form of "poetic knowledge" that is clearly described by Bashō:

*Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one—when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well-phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is not natural—if the object and yourself are separate—then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit.*⁶⁸

Or, as Wallace Stevens writes in "The Snow Man":

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;⁶⁹

Poetic Knowledge

As Jacques Maritain argues, this kind of poetic, unitive knowledge is closely related to the notion of "connatural knowledge" in the Thomist tradition, which he defines as "knowledge through affective union."⁷⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas used this term to refer to direct mystical knowledge born of contemplation, not study, and the knowledge of virtue that comes from being virtuous, not from studying moral philosophy.⁷¹ Similarly, al-Ghazālī contrasted the existential, direct knowledge of the Sufis from merely conceptual knowledge, writing, "How great a difference there is between your knowing the definitions and causes and conditions of health and satiety and your being healthy and sated! And how great a difference there is between your knowing the definition of drunkenness... and your actually being drunk!"⁷² In the terminology of Sufism, this kind of direct, existential knowledge is known as *maʿrifah* ("gnosis" or "recognition") or more poetically as *dhawq* ("tasting"), due to its directness and the fact that it is what accompanies the existential incorporation of a thing by eating or drinking.

Maritain characterizes this poetic knowledge: "In this knowledge through union or inclination, connaturality or congeniality, the intellect is at play not alone, but together with affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will, and as guided and shaped by them. It is not rational knowledge, knowledge through the conceptual, logical, and discursive exercise of reason. But it is really and genuinely knowledge,

though obscure and perhaps incapable of giving account of itself.”⁷³

However, clear accounts of this and related forms of knowledge are found in the Islamic philosophical tradition, particularly that of the Ishrāqī tradition inaugurated by Suhrawardī and its later development in the works of Mullā Śadrā and others, where this kind of knowledge is described as knowledge by presence (*al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*)—the presence of the known in the consciousness/soul of the knower, who thus knows it through direct self-knowledge, in contrast to knowledge by representation (*al-ʿilm al-rasmī*), in which the object of knowledge is known indirectly, as through a definition.⁷⁴ Poetic knowledge is thus a knowledge born of love, intimacy, and union, the knowledge of a seemingly other as self. As the poet said:

If not for You, we would not know Love If not for Love, we would not know You. ⁷⁵

Taylor describes it as “knowledge from the inside out, radically different in this regard from a knowledge about things.”⁷⁶ It is one thing to read about the dimensions of the Grand Canyon in a textbook; it is quite another thing to be awestruck as the rising sun illuminates its grandeur. Modern science can give biological facts about why moths dance around a flame, but it takes poetic knowledge to see this as a symbol or sign (*āyah*), to delight in the gleams of the reality of love that shine through this event, to know what it means and discloses about the nature of the Real. It is one thing to know the genome of a horse or dissect its cadaver, and quite another to grow up tending to and being tended to by one, or to have the horse as one’s totem or animal guide. Such *connaturality*, or having the same nature, yields *co-naissance*, a knowledge that is a “co-birthing” of the reality of the object of knowledge within us.

The poet's capturing of this inner reality in the creation or birthing of language adequate to it sets it free in the listener/reader. As I have written:

To Read a Poem Is to Free a Bird

Within bold rhythm's bars and rhymes
wait wingèd words, like souls, to fly
in through your eyes, one at a time
and lift your body from inside

pupils dilate, locks melt like ice

and birds in murmuration rise
like swarms of smoke into the sky
they rise and dip and float and dive
as free as light, wild as the wise

Such knowledge both requires and is the fruit of the profound, existential, spiritual transformation of love, of becoming "connatural," having the same nature as that which is known. As Ṣadr al-Dīn Ṣadr wrote:

We are all really three butterflies
In the world of love, we are a legend
The first came near the candle and said
"I have found the meaning of love"
The second fluttered its wing near the flame and said,
"I've been burned by the fire of love"
The third threw himself into the fire
Yes, yes, this is the meaning love.⁷⁷

And in the words of Rūmī:

This becoming is necessary condition for seeing
the real nature of anything
Until you become it, you will not know it completely, whether it
be light or darkness
If you become Reason, You will know Reason perfectly
If you become Love, You will know Love's flaming wick⁷⁸

And

The Sufi's book is not composed of ink and letters,
It is naught but a heart white as snow
The scholars' provisions are the marks of the pen.
What are the Sufi's provisions? The footprints of the saints

My knowledge is substance not accident. This precious thing
is not to be used for every aim
I am a mine of candy, a plantation of sugar cane—it grows up
within me and I eat of it myself.⁷⁹

And

"Whatever mate you desire, go! Become obliterated in your
Beloved! Assume the same shape and attributes!"⁸⁰

And

From the first I heard the story of love
I wore out soul, heart, and eyes on its path
I said, "perhaps lover and beloved are two"
But both were one, and I was only cross-eyed.⁸¹

Such a knowledge involves not just the intellect but also the
imagination, emotions, senses, and body, as Maritain notes:

*And because poetry is born in this root life where the powers of the soul are active in common, poetry implies an essential requirement of totality or integrity. Poetry is the fruit neither of the intellect alone, nor of imagination alone. Nay more, it proceeds from the totality of man, sense, imagination, intellect, love, desire, instinct, blood and spirit together. And the first obligation imposed on the poet is to consent to be brought back to the hidden place, near the center of the soul, where this totality exists in the state of a creative source.*⁸²

This totality can be seen in the form of poetry itself, which moves us from the depths of our heart to the tips of our hairs, in the case of the greatest poetry, speaking to us at all levels of our being. As former US poet-laureate Robert Pinsky explains:

*Poetry is a vocal, which is to say bodily, art. The medium of poetry is the human body.... In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing. Moreover, there is a special intimacy to poetry because, in this idea of the art, the medium is not an expert's body, as when one goes to the ballet: in poetry, the medium is the audience's body.... The artist's medium is my breath.*⁸³

Poetry is able to synthesize and unite these different aspects of the human being, and being itself, due to its quality as a *barzakh*, a liminal reality that both unites and separates opposites. Breath, or language, the medium of poetry, is a *barzakh* between the inside and outside of a human being, and between the body and the spirit/intellect—this is why it plays such an important role in so many spiritual exercises from various traditions. Poetry is a *barzakh* between the silence of the ineffable and speech, between music and prose, between feeling and thought, between *adhawāq* ("tastings," direct experience) and *awrāq* ("papers," discursive expression). This

quality can be discerned in the form of poetic language itself; the rhythms and meters of poetry are a *barzakh* between eternity and time, stillness and motion; rhyme is a *barzakh* between one sound and many; figurative language is a *barzakh* between the thing signified and its signifier; the wonder evoked by poetry is a *barzakh* between ignorance and knowledge. Poetry itself is a *barzakh* between everyday thoughts and feelings and the realization of ultimate reality. In the Sufi tradition, the human being is itself a *barzakh* between Being and nothingness, and as God's *khalīfa* (vicegerent), a *barzakh* between the Real (al-Ĥaqq) and Its creation (*al-khalq*).

This is why, in traditions such as Sufism, poetry is a privileged means of conveying spiritual realization, the fulfillment of the human potential,⁸⁴ the direct, existential knowledge of and conformity to the Real. While not all who attain this realization compose poetry, and not all poets attain this realization, both the foundation and highest pitch of this poetic knowledge are none other than the direct knowledge of spiritual realization (*maʿrifah*). As Rūmī writes:

Between the realized saint and the imitator are great differences,
for the former sings like David, while the latter is but an echo.
The saint's words rise up out of burning passion,
but the imitator has memorized some old sayings.⁸⁵

To give an example from the world of Arabic poetry, the following famous verses of Abū Firās al-Ĥamadānī were written to his cousin, the Emir Sayf al-Dawlah, imploring him to ransom him from prison:

As long as you're sweet, let life be bitter
As long as you're pleased, let people be mad
As long as there's a bond between me and you
Let all between me and the worlds be in ruins
If truly you love me, then all things are easy
And let all that's over the dust, be dust.⁸⁶

Because of the universal chord they struck, these verses have become a favorite among lovers and Sufis in particular, who, rather than separating human and divine love, understand all loves and longings as delimited forms of Love itself, and all beauties as delimited forms of divine beauty. So in the particular, practical, plaintive cry of Abū Firās to escape captivity, they hear the cry of every sincere soul longing for deliverance from delimitation into the arms of the Absolute Beloved. For most Sufi poets, there is no beauty and no meaning but God, but this is an inclusive, and not an exclusive, unity (or rather, an inclusivity that includes both inclusion and exclusion). Ibn al-Fārid writes:

If I say, I have each and every passion for you
He says, all beauty is mine, and every loveliness is in me.⁸⁷

And

That I could hear my acts with a seeing ear
And witness my words with a hearing eye
So when the nightingale mourns in the tangled bush
And the birds in the trees warble in reply
Or when the flutist's notes quiver in accord
With the strings plucked by a singing girl's hand
As she sings poetry whose every note
Moves hearts to fly to their lotus tree
Then I delight in the traces of my art declaring my union
And company free from the idolatry of difference
By me the invoker's assembly is the ear of one who reads with care
For me, the open tavern is the eye of the soldiers on patrol.⁸⁸

Similarly, Abhinavagupta's teacher, Bhaṭṭa Totta, defines poetic intuition/imagination (*pratibhā*) as "a form of intuitive consciousness, *prajñā*, which is an inexhaustible source of new forms. It is by virtue of this intuition alone that one deserves the title of 'poet,' of one, that is, who is 'skillful to express.'" To his teacher's definition, Abhinavagupta adds that "*pratibhā* does not exhaust itself in the poetical intuition, but is, in a broader sense, the same consciousness, the same Self [as the Creator]. In the majority of men, it does not succeed in liberating itself from the chain of relationships and practical interests which condition and constrict it, but, in the poet, it burns with a purified light—to shine out finally in all its fullness in the intuition of the saints."⁸⁹ As a translator of Abhinavagupta's works concludes, "Artistic intuition is a particular hypostasis of universal or total intuition, that is to say, of consciousness as a force which creates and continually renews the Universe."⁹⁰

Likewise, contrasting the poet and the sage, Tu Wei-Ming insightfully observes:

*It is true that the poet, unlike the sage, cannot embody the Tao in its all-embracing fullness. However, even though he cannot experience the Tao in the same profundity as the sage can, he articulates the subtlety of the Tao holistically through concrete symbolization. The ability of the poet to do so, like the sage in this case, emanates from a penetrating insight into the inner structure of a thing, be it natural scenery, social condition, or human feeling. The procedure, comparable to the idea of hitting the target on mark, mentioned above, is to embrace the whole by first grasping what the heart of the matter is. To emerge from the core, as it were, involves total immersion radically different from detached observation. The detached observer may choose to move cautiously from the periphery to the center, whereas the lyric poet of the Wei-Chin style must live through the center before he can make sense out of the whole thing, for the relevance and the meaningfulness of the periphery depends on the experiential encounter.... [which] is not out there in the sky, but, like the "music of Heaven," exists here and now at the center of our lived experience.*⁹¹

This bears a strong resemblance to Goethe's poetic/scientific "tender empiricism" (*zarte Empirie*): "There is a tender empiricism that intimately merges with its object and through this very identification becomes the actual theory. This heightening of intellectual faculties, however, belongs to a highly cultivated age."⁹²

The Decline of Poetic Knowledge and Poetry in the Modern West

However, Goethe's "highly cultivated age" hardly describes the climate in which most of us now live, which is characterized by

an opposition between the poetic and the scientific, with the former viewed as fundamentally subjective, expressive, and emotive, and the latter as objective, analytic, intellectual, and true. As Nasr writes, "As a result of the continuous parting of ways between art and thought, intellectuality and sensuality, and logic and poetry which has taken place in the West since the Renaissance, the traditional doctrine according to which poetry and logic refer to a single Reality that binds and yet transcends them has been almost completely forgotten."⁹³

This eclipsing and denial of the possibility and/or significance of mystical and poetic knowledge in the modern West, coinciding with the closing off or flattening of the human subject in Cartesian and Kantian formulations, led to the rampant reductionism that emphasizes quantitative models over the qualitative realities of things, rendering even human consciousness itself an "object"—an epiphenomenon of brain chemistry.⁹⁴ As can be expected, this decline of poetic knowledge has had a profound effect on poetry and its readers, and poets, as the singing canaries in the mineshaft, have long sounded the alarm.

One of the most eloquent and profound of these poetic jeremiads can be found in Aimé Césaire's speech "Poetry and Knowledge," which begins, "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge.... Science affords a view of the world, but a summary and superficial view.... It is poor and half-starved.... To acquire the impersonality of scientific knowledge mankind depersonalized itself, deindividualized itself. An impoverished knowledge, I submit, for at its inception—whatever other wealth it may have—there stands an impoverished humanity."⁹⁵ The Senegalese poetic novelist Cheikh Hamidou Kane similarly wrote, "[Modern science] makes you the masters of the external, but at the same time it exiles you there, more and more."⁹⁶ In response to this crisis, Césaire proposed a "new" (but actually old) "science of the

Word," wedding the precision of scientific natural laws with the richness and profundity of myth and poetry, which he described as "that process which through word, image, myth, love and humor establishes me at the living heart of myself and of the world."⁹⁷ This sentiment is echoed in the penultimate verses of William Carlos Williams's "Asphodel":

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
Yet men die miserably every day
For lack
of what is found there.⁹⁸

James Baldwin declaimed a similarly insightful diagnosis: "The poets are finally the only people who know the truth about us. Soldiers don't. Statesmen don't. Priests don't. Union leaders don't. Only poets.... [This is] a time... when something awful is happening to a civilization, when it ceases to produce poets, and, what is even more crucial, when it ceases in any way whatever to believe in the report that only the poets can make."⁹⁹ The desensitization to poetry and poetic knowledge, what Abhinavagupta called a "hardening of the heart," was achieved largely through initiation into modern forms of education, labor, life, and leisure, and alienated people not only from nature and the Creator but also from each other and themselves.

Poets and poetry played a central role in the reactions against many of these trends, such as the Anglo-German Romantic movement of the nineteenth century; however, like most reactionary movements, the Romantic and other reactions and counter-reactions against the rationalist and reductionist tendencies of secular modernity were profoundly shaped by that against which they rebelled. As Talal Asad has demonstrated, the emergence of a secular self assumed by

rationalists, romantics, and other modern intellectual-aesthetic movements had a profound effect on the conception, composition, and form of poetry.¹⁰⁰ Poetry was increasingly conceived of as a work of individual genius, the subjective mending of a shattered world or the creation of a new world, in the mind of the poet. Due to this individualization and cutting off of the human subject from the Divine and creation, from heaven and earth, the divine or angelic inspiration of the muse or jinn and the literal magic of poetry to change the world and transform the soul was reduced to a matter of subjective metaphor and psychology. With some notable exceptions, in this new secular climate, cut off from the spiritual root of poetic knowledge and experience, the flower of poetry (like religion) wilted and withered—either into the empty artifice of mannerism that sought to preserve the form without the inner content to which it corresponded or, as a reaction against this decadence, the intentional breaking of classical forms in search of sincerity and profundity of feeling and truth. Relatedly, with the closing off of the human subject, modern poetry became less universal and more individual and subjective, fracturing into a “high-art” poetry for the elite, educated classes, read silently or quietly off a page individually or in small groups, and the “folk” poetry of songs, which retained the traditional structures that facilitated its public and communal performance with music and dance. This divide did not fully occur in cultures where traditional poetry still thrives; for example, musically reciting Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s “Naẓm al-sulūk” or al-Būšīrī’s “Qaśīdat al-burdah” in a group is a very different experience from reading Eliot’s “The Waste Land” in a library or armchair, and is in many ways more akin to singing along to Aretha Franklin at a church concert.¹⁰¹

The following poem by Herman Hesse strikingly illustrates both the alienated modern poet’s nostalgia for and subjective, metaphorical, romantic re-appropriation of the traditional

poetics of a Bashō or Abhinavagupta:

Sometimes when a bird cries out,
Or the wind sweeps through a tree,
Or a dog howls in a far-off farm,
I hold still and listen a long time.

My world turns and goes back to the place
Where a thousand forgotten years ago,
The bird and the blowing wind
Were like me, and were my brothers.

My soul turns into a tree,
And an animal and a cloudbank.
Then changed and odd it comes home
And asks me questions.
What should I reply?¹⁰²



A folio from an illustrated manuscript of *The Conference of the Birds*, Habiballah of Sava, ca. 1600

But among traditional, nonsecular poets, as Tu Wei-Ming points out, "the idea of an ontological alienation of humanity from the Creator, on the one hand, and the rest of the world, on the other, is totally absent; indeed, it is not even a rejected possibility."¹⁰³ Or as Rūmī writes, illustrating the futility of the

attempt to achieve poetic knowledge through reason and sentiment alone,

Even if you are able to discern the language of the birds,
how can you discern what they want to say?
If you learn the call of a nightingale,
what will you know of his love for the Rose?
And if you try to understand through reasoning and surmise,
that will be like a deaf man's conjectures concerning the
movements of a person's lips.¹⁰⁴

The same uncanny contrast can be seen between the description of the poet as a sage-seer (*rishi*) put forward by Abhinavagupta's teacher and the following account by Rimbaud, perhaps the greatest modern French poet:

*I say that one must be a seer, make oneself a seer. The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious, and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessences. This is an unspeakable torture during which he needs all his faith and superhuman strength, and during which he becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed—and the great learned one!—among men.—For he arrives at the unknown! Because he has cultivated his own soul—which was rich to begin with—more than any other man! He reaches the unknown; and even if, crazed, he ends up by losing the understanding of his visions, at least he has seen them! Let him die charging through those unutterable, unnameable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where he has succumbed!*¹⁰⁵

As the Arabic proverb says, "What a difference there is between the two Yazīds!" To paraphrase Seyyed Hossein Nasr,

the traditional poet and poetry are “pontifical,” a brilliant bridge between heaven and earth, God and creation, ultimate and conventional reality, the universal and the particular, the objective and the subjective, while the secular or modern poet tends toward the “promethean,” attempting to storm and eavesdrop at the gates of heaven like the jinn described in the Qur’an (15:17–19), or toward the “imprisoned,” struggling to escape the limited and limiting confines of modern subjectivity and alienation by any means possible.¹⁰⁶ Every poet is a bit of a magician and a would-be sage—hence the tragic fates of so many poets trapped in these climates dominated by hard hearts, technology without truth, and wizards without wisdom.

Nevertheless, even in such hostile climes, poetry continues to wield immense, although typically invisible, influence. As the explorers of human experience, poets and poetry function as the advance scouts for modern science, whose bulldozer-like methods tend to follow in their wake, bringing usefulness and mathematical precision to these vistas. As Césaire wrote, “On the whole, modern science is perhaps only the pedantic verification of some mad images spewed out by poets.”¹⁰⁷ Even among scientists and mathematicians, the process of discovery typically begins with and by a kind of poetic knowledge—through deep intuition, dreams, flashes of insight that are only later confirmed through more deductive methods. As the great French mathematician Henri Poincaré wrote, “It is by logic that we prove, but by intuition that we discover,”¹⁰⁸ and Einstein proclaimed, “There is no logical path to these laws; only intuition resting on sympathetic understanding of experience can reach them.”¹⁰⁹

Similarly, in his “A Defense of Poetry,” Percy Shelley called poets “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” due to the fact that they make the categories, metaphors, idioms, and proverbs through which we both experience and interpret

reality. In what is, perhaps, an example of such pedantic verification, recent scientific work across a number of fields has echoed Shelley's thesis of the power of language to shape our experience of ourselves and our worlds,¹¹⁰ and since poets are among the most influential masters of language, they make the words through which we sense and know and change the world. As Rūmī wrote, "Hurry! Speak fresh words, so that the two worlds may be refreshed."¹¹¹

However, for Hafez, the prophet of poets, it is not necessarily the poets but rather the masters of the poetic knowledge of *maḥrifah*, the dervishes, who are the "unacknowledged legislators" of the world, as he sings:

The garden of eternity is in the retreat of the dervishes
the very essence of grandeur is the service of the dervishes
The treasury of glory that is sealed by the talisman of wonders
opens at the merciful glance of the dervishes
The castle of paradise for which *Rizwan* is the doorkeeper
is but a view from the lawn of the dervishes
That which by its radiance turns black hearts to gold
is the alchemy that is the company of the dervishes
That before which the sun lays down its crown of glory
is the greatness that comes from the grandeur of the
dervishes
The empire (*dawlat*) whose decline need never be feared
without exaggeration, is the power/state of the dervishes
The kings are the *qibla* to which we direct our needs
and this is because they are the slaves of the dervishes
That which kings seek to achieve in their prayers
is manifested in the mirror of the countenance of the
dervishes
From shore to shore is the army of tyranny,
but from beginningless eternity to eternity without end is the
time of the dervishes
O rich man, don't sell us so much vanity
for your health and wealth are in the hands of the resolve
(*himmat*) of the dervishes
Korah's treasure, which still is still sinking from heaven's
severity
is an effect of the wrath of the dervishes
Hafez, if you're seeking the eternal water of life
its spring is the dust of the retreat of the dervishes
I am the slave of the Asaf of my time
because he has the looks of a nobleman and the character
of the dervishes.¹¹²

Conclusion

Poetry is a precious treasure. Like all art, poetry can express what resists explanation and analysis, but poetry is perhaps unique among the arts for its distinctive synthetic quality¹¹³ that allows it to combine seeming opposites—such as passion and intellect, ambiguity and precision, body and soul—into a totality that mirrors that of our own being. Whereas movies and theater surround and engulf us, poetry subtly impregnates and saturates our whole being from within, producing effects all the more powerful due to their subtlety. As Saʿdī wrote, “With a sweet tongue and kindness and silence, can you catch an elephant by a hair.”¹¹⁴ Like lullabies that put us to sleep, poetry more generally has the power to profoundly shift our consciousness, our bodies, our entire being. However, in traditional poetics, whether that of Yoruba *oríki*, Abhinavagupta’s *rasa* theory, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s cosmopoetics, or Liu Xie’s carving dragons, true poetry functions to awaken us to or awaken within us a heightened consciousness of reality and reality of consciousness. As such, poetry both emerges from and embodies a “poetic knowledge,” which, while not being limited to poetry, is, as Maritain writes, “the kind of inherent knowledge that is immanent in and *consubstantial* with poetry, one with its very essence.”¹¹⁵ Although Plato spoke of (and perhaps even helped inaugurate) an “ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy,”¹¹⁶ poetic knowledge is not opposed to philosophical or logical knowledge but rather complements or even integrates their universal and abstract perspectives into one in which the universal and particular, the inner/subjective and the outer/objective, the spiritual/intellectual and the sensual are united in their common root.¹¹⁷ Indeed, since philosophy arises from wonder, and poetry is the language of wonder par excellence, poetry can be said to be the mother of philosophy.¹¹⁸ Islamic folklore holds that after God “taught Adam all the names” (2:31), the first humans spoke poetry—a speech whose patterns mirrored and resonated with those of the inner and outer worlds made up of

the words of divine speech. Or as Ibn al-ʿArabī says, poetically employing technical Aristotelian terminology, "Poetry is the substance, and prose is the accident."¹¹⁹

Poetic knowledge is knowledge not abstracted from but rather integrated with sensation, imagination, feeling, intuition, spirit, and awe. The Qurʾānic prayer "My Lord, increase me in knowledge" (20:114) is echoed in the prayer for poetic knowledge attributed to the Prophet, "My Lord, increase me in bewilderment in you!"¹²⁰ and the opening line of Ibn al-Fārid's famous *qasida*, "Increase my share of love for you, bewildered." It is characterized by the bewildering "shock of the Real," the awe-inspiring encounter with the transcendent formless in immanent form that stops time and everyday thought and description, as the Qurʾān says: "We hurl the truth against falsehood and it dashes its brains out, and behold, it vanishes. And woe to you for that which you describe!" (21:18).

In the terms of Sufism, poetry is the language of *baqāʾ* (subsistence), the annihilation of the annihilation in God (*fanāʾ al-fanāʾ fī Allāh*), which, like the descent of the Prophet's *miʿrāj*, returns the knower (*ʿārif*) to the world while bringing him paradoxically closer to God.¹²¹ Just as God transcends His transcendence to manifest His immanence in or as all things, and He silences the primordial silence to bring forth the worlds through divine speech, poetry similarly expresses the ineffable by "hearing" or "seeing" its manifestations in and through limited concrete forms, tracing these forms back to their origin and then remanifesting them in sounds and words crafted to tie it all together and take the listener on a similar journey of realization astride the steed of beauty. It is a journey of seeing and experiencing the ineffable Real on the horizons and in ourselves, and the horizons and ourselves in God. As Shakespeare wrote in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "The poet's

eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven; and as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet's pen turns them to shape, and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name; such tricks hath strong imagination."¹²² Poetry echoes and participates in the divine act of creation, which is why so many of the best poets have been adepts of spiritual disciplines that mold and harmonize their consciousness and bodies according to sacred models, and why the composition and recitation of poetry is often practiced as an important spiritual discipline. As St. Gregory Nazianzus, one of the greatest of Greek-language and early Christian poets, wrote in his poem "On Matters of Measure":

First, with measured labor, I discipline my soul;
For writing lines can measure my unmetered mind and keep
my greedy pen in check.
Instead I spend my sweat on metric form.
Second, I write for youths and for whoever takes a deep
delight in words.
My verses read like sugar with elixir mixed;
They can win men to virtue's work and discipline
By sweetening with art, the bitterness of law:
Think how a pulled-back bowstring loves to be let loose.¹²³

A few lines later, responding to critics of his verse, he retorts:

You criticize the meter, understandably so, for you are without
measure,
a writer of invective, creating malformed offspring.
For who, being blind, could recognize one who can see?¹²⁴

That is, the harmony and discipline of poetic language both emerge from and help to cultivate the harmony and discipline of soul, which also characterize the fullness of poetic

knowledge.

Like us, poetry is a rainbow bridge of breath, sound, rhythm, feeling, thought, imagination, and spirit running between heaven and earth, the Real and creation, the Absolute and the relative, the eternal and the temporal, the inner (*al-bāṭin*) and the outer (*al-ẓāhir*), the universal and the particular. Without reducing one side to the other, it permits us to go back and forth between the two shores and view each afresh. Its formal features of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, allusion, paradox, and so on are not mere ornamentation but rather the very music of the "language of the birds": that which makes the "licit magic" of poetry work, what opens it up onto that which is beyond form.

While the upheavals of modernity have cut off some poetry from its traditional source of inspiration¹²⁵ and hardened the hearts of its audiences, traditional poetry still survives, and in some places (typically wherever serious spirituality survives) even thrives.¹²⁶ As Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes of traditional poetry, summarizing much of what has been discussed above,

*It is precisely because such poetry is the fruit of spiritual vision that it is able to convey an intellectual message as well as to cause what might be called an "alchemical transformation" in the human soul. Poetry, then, is similar to logic in that it is a means and vehicle for the expression of the Truth, and complements logic in that it deals with forms of knowledge which are inaccessible to the unaided logical faculties of "fallen man." Also poetry brings about a transformation of the soul and its sensibilities in a manner which is not possible for a purely logical work. Such poetry has the effect of causing consent to the truth within the human soul, a consent that is related to certitude and complements the consent which results from the exercise of man's logical faculties. It might be said that in logic words have the power of both denotation and connotation, while in poetry they also have the power of suggestion and awakening of an already existing possibility for intuitive knowledge in the soul, an awakening which corresponds to a transformation of the state of the soul.*¹²⁷

Good poetry feels like truth, true poetry sounds beautiful, beautiful poetry "tastes" good, and all decent poetry is perfumed by the scent of wonder and awe, making us see things anew. Poetry makes tangible and existentially realizable the union of the transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness; poetry allows us to experience the harmony of the very qualities of Being (and even sense the ineffable quality of no-qualities of Beyond Being) in ourselves and in every being. As Wallace Stevens concludes the "The Snow Man":

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.¹²⁸

In a similar vein, Patrick Laude calls poetry "a form of the Formless," and Keats wrote,

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all.
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Similarly, Bashō advises, “What is important is to keep our mind high in the world of true understanding, and, returning to the world of our daily experience, to seek therein the truth of beauty. No matter what we may be doing at a given moment, we must not forget that it has a bearing upon our everlasting self which is poetry.”¹²⁹

I wish to close with a few stanzas that suggested themselves to me while writing this essay—perhaps for the reasons mentioned above, they will serve as a better conclusion than the preceding prose of this essay:

Beyond the din of screeching pens
Between the lines’ definitions
Lies what our words can’t quite pen in
Truth without shore roars like oceans

A bee seeds the flowers
The birds sing the trees
These words that you speak are
What we are and breathe

Not all who sing are poets
and not all poets sing
Truth is—beyond and yet within
the wind stirred up by wings—

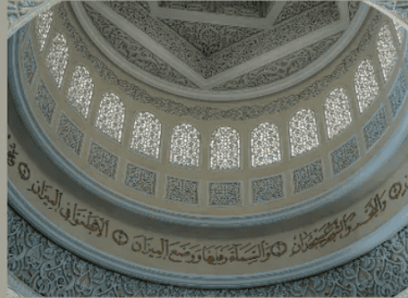
Within all songs, silence is found—
loud flower’s sky and quiet ground
the black of night, the bright of day
in your eyes’ vibrant depths are drowned—

And so Love hides inside my poems
to kiss your lips as you recite them
falling into a place beyond time
beyond space where I am yours and you're mine

*This work was supported by a grant from the Templeton
Religion Trust.*

Renovatio

THE JOURNAL OF ZAYTUNA COLLEGE



“Those with Authority Among You”

VOL. 6, NO. 1



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Endnotes

- 1 Al-Adab al-Mufrad, "Chapter: Someone saying, 'There is magic in eloquence,'" accessed January 25, 2022, <https://sunnah.com/adab:872>.
- 2 Nosheen Ali, "From Hallaj to Heer: Poetic Knowledge and the Muslim Tradition," *Journal of Narrative Politics* 3, no. 1 (2016): 4, <https://jnp.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/article/view/59/61>.
- 3 Ali, 5.
- 4 Edward O. Wilson and Robert Hass, *The Poetic Species: A Conversation with Edward O. Wilson and Robert Hass* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2014).

- 5 Eric McLuhan, *The Sensus Communis, Synesthesia, and the Soul: An Odyssey* (New York: BPS Books, 2015), 10–11.
- 6 Dylan Thomas, *On the Air with Dylan Thomas: The Broadcasts*, ed. Ralph Maud (New York: New Directions Books, 1992), 61.
- 7 Charles Upton, *What the Poets Used to Know* (Kettering, MI: Angelico Press, 2016), 1.
- 8 Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxane Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 4–5.
- 9 Even famous poets from the Islamic era, such as Abū Nuwās and al-Mutannabī, were rumored to have jinn who inspired and taught them their poetry. See Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 128–33.
- 10 See Qur'an 21:5, 36:69, 37:36, 52:30, 69:41. This dynamic even extended to the early poets who represented the nascent Muslim community in poetic duels, with the Prophet praying that the Holy Spirit support and inspire them against their poetic foes. For example, a hadith related by al-Nasā'ī states, "ʿUmar passed by Ḥassān b. Thābit while he was reciting poetry in the mosque and glared at him. He said: 'I recited poetry when there was someone better than you in the mosque.' Then he turned to Abū Hurayrah and said: 'Did you not hear the Messenger of God when he said: "Answer back on my behalf. O God, help him with the Holy Spirit!"' He said: 'Yes, by God'" (Al-Nasā'ī #716). Other accounts note that the Prophet sometimes told his companions to compose poetry in response to the idolaters, for example, saying to Ḥassān b. Thābit, "Versify against them, for Gabriel is with thee" (Al-Bukhārī #3213, #4123; Muslim #2486). During the

conquest of Makkah, ʕAbd Allāh b. al-Rawāḥah recited verses against the idolaters. He was rebuked by ʕUmar for reciting poetry in the environs of the Kaaba, but the Prophet said, "Leave him be, O ʕUmar, for it [the verse] goes through them [the idolaters] faster than an arrow" (Al-Tirmidhī #2847).

- 11 In this regard, it is helpful to remember that the etymological origin of "symbol," the Greek *sym-bolon*, literally means "to throw/bring together," while its opposite, *dia-bolon* (just as "synchronic" is opposite to "diachronic" and "symmetrically" to "diametrically") means "to separate, to throw apart, to attack or accuse" and is the origin of the English "diabolic." So this verse can read as contrasting "diabolical" poets and poetry with "symbolic" poets and poetry.
- 12 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 76. Nasr elaborates, "The rhyme and rhythm of Persian poetry reflects a 'spiritual style' that relates it to the form of the Quran as the message of this poetry is related to the content of the Quranic revelation.... Persian poetry in its rhyme and rhythm reflects the echo of the Sacred Book in the minds of men and women who created this poetry. In its turn this poetry causes a reminiscence of this echo in the minds and souls of the men who read it, and returns them to a state in which they participate in its paradisaical joy and beauty. Herein lies its alchemical effect. The person who enjoys this poetry or can create such poetry is still living potentially in the paradise which it creates through the grace issuing from the Quran. To appreciate Ḥāfiẓ fully is to be already in the proximity of the Divine" (76–77).
- 13 And others as well, as illustrated in the rest of this essay. Also see René Guénon, "The Language of Birds," *Studies in Comparative Religion* 3, no. 2 (1969): 80–82.

In Egyptian Arabic, hieroglyphics are known as the "alphabet of the birds," which the ancient Egyptians themselves called "the language of the gods," being revealed by the bird-headed god Thoth. In medieval and Renaissance alchemy, the "language of the birds" named a "perfect language," whose form perfectly corresponded to the cosmos, and from which one could learn all of the mysteries. This is somewhat similar to the notion of the Syrian language (*al-lughah al-suryāniyyah*) in certain schools of Sufism, which the great shaykh of Fes, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Dabbāgh, describes as "the language of the spirits and the Friends of God who are members of the Diwan. Syriac was the language of Adam in Paradise and is the most compact of languages because its letters by themselves are like words that communicate numerous meanings at once. Only those human beings who have received the great illumination can speak it. All the other languages in the world were derived from Syriac after the death of Idris (Enoch). The speech of breastfeeding babies and small children preserves words from Syriac. Examples are: *ugh*, *būbū*, *ʿaʿa*, *mūmū*, etc. Finally, the angels who carry out the interrogation in the grave speak in Syriac." John O'Kane and Bernd Radtke, *Pure Gold from the Words of Sayyidī ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Dabbāgh* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 20.

- 14 Or, in the case of the title of ʿAṭṭār's famous poetic epic, it is often translated as "Conference of the Birds."
- 15 As Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains, "poetry and logic refer to a single Reality that binds and yet transcends them," and while logic in its various forms governs the abstract movement of the human intellect/heart/mind from the known to the unknown, "poetry deals with human language as molded by the principles of harmony and rhythm, which also govern the cosmos. These two

disciplines or activities of the human mind or soul have nearly completely parted ways in the modern West while they have preserved their complementarity and close association in theory and practice wherever Oriental traditions survive. There has always been in the Orient a logical aspect to poetry and a poetical aspect to the great expressions of logical thought. Still today, in many Oriental languages, works of a logical nature are studied in poetic form that facilitates their mastery while there is an innate logic to traditional poetry to the extent that this type of poetry is used instead of a strictly logical argument to prove a logical point." Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 87–88.

- 16 Sonam Kachru and Jane Mikkelsen, "The Mind Is Its Own Place: Of Lalla's Comparative Poetics," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2019): 125.
- 17 Lara Harb, "The Meaning of Cowardly Dogs and Other Puzzles of Arabic Poetry," *Psyche*, August 30, 2021, <https://psyche.co/ideas/the-meaning-of-cowardly-dogs-and-other-puzzles-of-arabic-poetry>.
- 18 Harb, "The Meaning of Cowardly Dogs."
- 19 Patrick Laude and Barry McDonald, eds., *Music of the Sky: An Anthology of Spiritual Poetry* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), 13.
- 20 William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," in *Poets of the English Language* (Viking Press, 1950), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>. As this poem suggests, this awe-inspiring aspect of poetry is also connected to the unique temporality of poetry that is echoed, felt, and partially produced by its rhythms. As Sufi commentators such as al-Qushayrī have pointed out, fear and hope are directed toward the future, grief and nostalgia are directed toward the past, while awe is rooted firmly in the present moment, and its dazzling gleams banish the shadows of

past and future. As Charles Simic writes, "The secret wish of poetry is to stop time." Simic, *The Life of Images: Selected Prose* (New York: Ecco, 2015), 30. This poetic present or perpetual moment (*al-ān al-dā'im*) of awe or bewilderment (*ḥayrah/taḥayyur*) is a shadow of the state of the saints (*awliyā'*), of whom the Qur'an says, "They neither fear nor grieve" (10:62, 2:38, 2:62, 2:112, 2:277, 3:170, 5:69, 6:48, 7:35, 39:61, 46:13). As T. S. Eliot writes in "Little Gidding," the last of his *Four Quartets*, "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, 1988), 59.

- 21 William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 39.
- 22 James C. Taylor writes, "Poetry, and poetic knowledge, discovers the invisible principles in real things without destroying the thing itself." Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 70.
- 23 Taylor, 6.
- 24 T. Emil Homerin, trans., *Umar ibn al-Fārid: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 187.
وفي الإشارة معنى ما العبارة حذت
- 25 Raniero Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience according to Abhinavagupta* (Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1968), xxxiii. He also writes, "As this matter is most essential, it is given by suggestion rather than by direct statement, for an essential matter carries far greater luster by not being stated in so many words. For it is common knowledge among intelligent and well-educated circles that one should suggest rather than state in so many words the matter which one has most at heart." Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, trans. and ed. Daniel Ingalls, Jeffrey

Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 693.

- 26 Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka*, 186.
- 27 To the eight traditional *rasas* enumerated in the classical Nāṭya Śāstra—*śrinigara* (romantic love), *hāsya* (humor), *raudra* (anger), *kārunya* (compassion), *bībhatsa* (disgust), *bhayānaka* (terror), *vīra* (heroism), *adhbhuta* (wonder)—Abhinavagupta added a ninth, *śānta* (the permanent, peaceful joy of spiritual deliverance from ignorance and desire).
- 28 He writes, "Once a *rasa* has been thus realized, its enjoyment (*bhoga*) is possible, an enjoyment which is different from the apprehensions derived from memory or direct experience and which takes the form of melting, expansion, and radiance. This enjoyment is like the bliss that comes from realizing (one's identity) with the highest Brahman, for it consists of repose in the bliss which is the true nature of one's own self, a nature which is basically *sattva* but is intermingled with the diversity of *rajas* and *tamas*. It is this aesthetic pleasure (*bhoga*) alone that is the major element [i.e., the purpose of poetry] and it is something already (eternally) accomplished (*siddharūpa*)."
Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka*, 222.
- 29 Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka*, 222. Similarly, as Raniero Gnoli writes, paraphrasing the Kashmiri sage, "Art is not absence of life—every element of life appears in the aesthetic experience—but it is life itself, pacified and detached from all passions" (Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience*, xl); Maritain similarly defined poetry as "the divination of the spiritual in the things of sense, which expresses itself in the things of sense." But it is in the words of the great Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky that we find an aesthetic theory that seems to have the greatest resonance with that of Abhinavagupta, "The

allotted function of art is not, as is often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as example. The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good. Touched by a masterpiece, a person begins to hear in himself that same call of truth which prompted the artist to his creative act. When a link is established between the work and its beholder, the latter experiences a sublime, purging trauma. Within that aura which unites masterpieces and audience, the best sides of our souls are made known, and we long for them to be freed. In those moments we recognise and discover ourselves, the unfathomable depths of our own potential, and the furthest reaches of our emotions." Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 43.

- 30 Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience*, xlv.
- 31 Lisa Widdison, "The Power of Suggestion: Rasa, Dhvani, and the Ineffable," *Journal of Dharma Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019), 1. In Abhinavagupta's own words, "Rather, poetic words are of an altogether different nature from ordinary words, thanks to their threefold operation. Their denotative power (*abhidhāyakatva*) operates within the limits of the literal meaning; their aesthetic efficacy (*bhāvakatva*) operates in the area of the *rasas*, etc.; and their efficacy of aesthetic enjoyment (*bhogakṛttva*) operates within the sensitive audience. The working of a poem consists of these three operations.... Therefore there is a second operation known as the efficacy (*bhāvanā*) of *rasa* (i.e., the ability to create *rasa*), thanks to which denotation assumes a new dimension." Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka*, 221–22.
- 32 Moreover, poetry works based on the resonances of the subtle connections (*raqā'iq*), often described as hairlike filaments, between all things. See Claude Addas,

"The Ship of Stone," *The Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* 19 (1996): 5–24, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/poetry-imagination-futuh-at-claude-addas/>. Ibn al-ʿArabī similarly describes the obscure, "subtle perception" of *shuʿūr* (which he likens to our awareness of someone being behind a door without knowing how we are aware) as the source of poetry (*shiʿr*): "The Prophet was not forbidden from using poetry because of its being contemptible, degrading or in any way inferior, but rather because of its basis in allusions (*ishārāt*) and symbols (*rumūz*), since poetry springs forth from subtle knowledge (*shuʿūr*). It is incumbent upon the Prophet to be clear for everyone and to use expressions as straightforward as possible" (23). However, elsewhere he describes true poetry as a treasury of divine wisdom and *maʿrifah* (in which the only obscurity is due to the "black light" of its overwhelming brightness), explaining that the allusiveness and symbolic nature of poetry protect and veil this "hidden treasure" (24).

- 33 Helen Vendler, *Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 431.
- 34 As Michael Sells writes, "The paradoxes, aporias, and coincidences of opposites within apophatic discourse are not merely apparent contradictions. Real contradictions occur when language engages the ineffable transcendent, but these contradictions are not illogical. For the apophatic writer, the logical rule of non-contradiction functions for object entities. When the subject of discourse is a non-object and no-thing, it is not irrational that such a logic be superseded." Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3–4.
- 35 Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka*, 678.
- 36 The Greek *poiesis*, the origin of the word *poetry*,

literally means “to make” or “to create,” and Aristotle’s *Poetics* primarily analyzed dramatic poetry through the lens of *mimesis*, or imitative representation. This framing of the subject led to an understanding of poetry as a kind of artifice, a representation of the world, which for Platonists is already a representation of the archetypal world of forms. This view of poetry as a poor copy of a poor copy of reality significantly undercut its intellectual import. However, in Islamic, Dharmic, and other traditions, poetry is more conceived of as a means of perception, as a form of knowledge, and as a means of communicating or cultivating this knowledge. This, in part, accounts for the greater intellectual, spiritual, and cultural significance of poetry in these traditions. However, even in Plato’s works, this latter conception of poetry is exemplified in the poetic structure and features of his Dialogues, and the Socratic account of *poiesis* of the soul through the cultivation of virtue and knowledge in the *Symposium*.

- 37 Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037–1101) to Tung Ch’i–ch’ang (1555–1636)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 44.
- 38 Tu Wei-Ming, “Profound Learning, Personal Knowledge, and Poetic Vision,” in *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shih Poetry from the Late Han to the T’ang* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 28.
- 39 Robert Hass, trans., *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, and Issa* (New York: Ecco, 1994), 27.
- 40 Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka*, 520.
- 41 Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2017), 114. The verses in the original Spanish are as follows: *Quedéme y olvidéme, el rostro recliné sobre el Amado, cesó todo y*

*dejéme, dejando mi cuidado entre las azucenas
olvidado.*

- 42 Rūmī, *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, in William Chittick, ed., *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983), 226.
- 43 Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 94.
- 44 Mathnawī I: 113–17, in Nasr, trans., *Rumi: Lament of the Reed* (Istanbul: Asr Media, 2000).
- 45 Tu Wei-Ming, "Profound Learning," 28.
- 46 Chittick, "The Sound of Silence," *Renovatio* (Fall 2019), 17.
- 47 While metered, Sanskrit poetry, the Hebrew Psalms, Greek and Latin poetry, and most early European-language poetry was not strictly end-rhymed, the rise in the importance of end-rhyme in European-language poetry seems to have resulted from the influence of Arabic poetry, especially through the troubadour tradition.
- 48 Denis McAuley, *Ibn 'Arabī's Mystical Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 45.
- 49 Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 89. Further clarifying this point, he explains, "According to this doctrine, everything in the macrocosmic world consists of both an external form (*śūrah*) and an inner meaning (*ma'nā*). This is also true of human language which has come into being as a result of the imposition of *ma'nā* upon the very substance of language or its *śūrah*. As this impression of *ma'nā* upon *śūrah* increases, the external form becomes more transparent and reveals more readily the inner meaning. With poetry or poetic language in general, this process reaches a higher degree of intensity until in the case of inspired poetry, *ma'nā* dominates completely over *śūrah* and remolds the outward form completely from within (without of course, destroying the poetic canons)" (89).

- 50 Rafal Stepień, "The Original Mind Is the Literary Mind, the Original Body Carves Dragons," in *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature*, ed. Rafal Stepień (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020), 238, 240.
- 51 Stepień, 232.
- 52 Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 189, quoted in Stepień, "The Original Mind," 241.
- 53 Stepień, "The Original Mind," 242–43.
- 54 Similarly, poet Charles Upton says, "In some ways poetry is the end of the line—the line being the creative act of God. God brings forth the universal order; inspired by the exalted archetypes and constants of that order, and in some cases under the direct inspiration of God Himself, the poet creates." Upton, *What the Poets Used to Know*, 176–77.
- 55 Stepień, "The Original Mind," 238.
- 56 Stepień, 246. Stepień concludes, "The original mind is the literary mind in that literature, pattern, *wen*, is the very reality the mind discerns. And the original body carves dragons in that this carving, this act of properly literary writing, is precisely the natural functioning of phenomenal reality—the phenomenal reality that turns out to be nothing other than the ultimate, naturally" (245).
- 57 William Buck and B. A. van Nooten, trans., *Ramayana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 7.
- 58 Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka*, 115.
- 59 Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience*, xlviii–iv.
- 60 Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge*, 70.
- 61 W. H. Gardner, "A Note on Hopkins and Duns Scotus," *Scrutiny* 5, no. 1 (July 1936): 28.
- 62 As Rowland Abiodun explains, "Broadly speaking all verbal and visual invocations qualify as *oríkì* in Yorùbá

culture. *Oríkì* affirm the identity of everything in existence. Thus, *oríkì* extend beyond our traditional categories of two and three-dimensional arts and color. They include architectural space, dress, music, dance, the performed word, mime, ritual, food, and smell, engaging virtually all the senses." Abiṣṣun, *Yorùbá Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5.

- 63 Karin Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow: Oríkì, Women, and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 1.
- 64 In this regard, the myths of *orí* bear many similarities to the ancient Greek *daimon* and the Roman/Latin *genius*; see Oludamini Ogunnaiké, "Myth and the Secret of Destiny: Mircea Eliade's Creative Hermeneutics and the Yorùbá Concept of *Orí*," *Journal of Comparative Theology* 3, no. 1 (2012): 4–42.
- 65 Ogunnaiké, *Deep Knowledge: Ways of Knowing in Sufism and Ifá, Two West African Intellectual Traditions* (College Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2020), 360.
- 66 Abiṣṣun, *Yorùbá Art and Language*, 26–31.
- 67 Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," trans. A. James Arnold, *Sulfur* 5 (1982): 24–25.
- 68 Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, trans. Nobuyuki Yuasa (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 33.
- 69 Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," *Poetry Magazine* (1921), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45235/the-snow-man-56d224a6d4e90>.
- 70 He writes, "In other words, the primary requirement of poetry, which is the obscure knowing, by the poet, of his own subjectivity, is inseparable from, is one with another requirement—the grasping, by the poet, of the objective reality of the outer and inner world: not by

means of concepts and conceptual knowledge, but by means of an obscure knowledge which I shall describe in a moment as knowledge through affective union."

Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 114.

- 71 Maritain observes, "A virtuous man may possibly be utterly ignorant in moral philosophy, and know as well (probably better) everything about virtues—through connaturality." Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 117. However, Aquinas and Maritain distinguish mystical connatural knowledge from poetic knowledge, with Aquinas ranking the poetic as the lowest form of knowledge due to its imprecision, obscurity, and ability to "seduce" one into accepting pretty falsehoods. While Maritain values it more highly, he still characterizes it as "obscure" and distinguishes it from metaphysics proper.
- 72 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, trans. Richard McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 18.
- 73 Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), 23.
- 74 See Muhammad Faruque, *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 60–142; Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992); Ibrahim Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mulla Sadra on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jari Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Mehdi Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Maritain alludes to a similar intuition, although underdeveloped, in the

following passage: "'Je est un autre,' Rimbaud said: 'I is another.' In poetic intuition objective reality and subjectivity, the world and the whole of the soul, coexist inseparably. At that moment sense and sensation are brought back to the heart, blood to the spirit, passion to intuition. And through the vital though nonconceptual actuation of the intellect, all the powers of the soul are also actuated in their roots." Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 113.

- 75 ولو لا الهوى ما عرفناكم لو لاكم ما عرفنا الهوى
- 76 Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge*, 6.
- 77 جملگی در حکم سه پروانه ایم در جهان عاشقان افسانه ایم اولی خود را به شمع نزدیک کرد گفت هان من یافتم معنای عشق دومی نزدیک شعله بال زد گفت هان من سوختم در سوز عشق سومی خود داخل آتش فکند آری آری این بود معنای عشق
- 78 Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Mathnawi Ma'navi*: Book 6, trans. R.A. Nicholson, ed. Hamid Eslamian (Dallas, TX: Persian Learning Center, 2021), 97.
- 79 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 131. Similarly Ibn al-Fārīd writes, "For beyond tradition there is a knowledge too subtle to be grasped by the farthest reach of sound minds; I learned of it from me, and taught it to myself, as my soul endowed me with my gift." Homerin, "Poem of the Sufi Way," in *Umar ibn al-Fārīd*, 267.
- 80 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 212.
- 81 Rumi, *The Quatrains of Rumi*, trans. Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi (San Rafael, CA: Sufi Dari Books, 2008), 282.
- 82 Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 111.
- 83 Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2014), 8.
- 84 According to the popular Sufi tradition, God says, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creatures that they might know me." And Ibn ʿAbbās famously commented on the Qurʾanic verse, "I

only created jinn and humans to worship me" (51:56), explaining "'to worship me' means 'to know me.'"

- 85 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 131. Likewise, Ibn al-Fāriḍ compared himself with other poets, "If someone other than me is content with the mere specters of his imagination, then I am he who is not content even with reunion with the Beloved."
- 86 فليتك تحلو والحياة مريرة وليتك ترضى والأنام غضاب وليت الذي بيني وبينك عامر وبيني وبين العالمين خراب إذا صح منك الود فالكل هين وكل الذي فوق التراب تراب
- 87 إِنَّ قُلْتُ عِنْدِي فِيكَ كُلَّ صَبَابَةٍ قَالَ الْمَلَأْتُ لِي، وَكُلُّ الْحُسْنِ فِي
- 88 Homerin, "Poem of the Sufi Way," 282–83.
- 89 Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience*, li.
- 90 Gnoli, lii.
- 91 Tu Wei-Ming, "Profound Learning," 28.
- 92 John McCarthy, *The Early History of Embodied Cognition 1740–1920: The Lebenskraft-Debate and Radical Reality in German Science, Music, and Literature* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 321. Translation modified by the author based on the German original.
- 93 Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 87.
- 94 For a magisterial account of this process, see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989). It is a remarkably absurd paradox that human consciousness, in modern times, has created a view of itself that excludes itself.
- 95 Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," 17–18.
- 96 Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, trans. Katherine Woods (New York: Heinemann, 1972), 78.
- 97 Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," 29–30.
- 98 William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," in *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower and Other Love Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1962), <https://poets.org/poem/asphodel-greeny-flower-excerpt>.
- 99 James Baldwin, "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity"

(1963), in *The Cross of Redemption*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 51.

- 100 Asad writes, "The self's secularity consisted in the fact that it was the precondition of transcendent (poetic or religious) experience and not its product." Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 52.
- 101 In contrast to this division, the nonsecular "high" classical poetry of the likes of Ibrāhīm Niasse, al-Būṣīrī, Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Yūnus Emre, Hafez, Amīr Khusrau, Lal Ded, Kabir, Tulsidas, Ghālib, Du Fu, and Bashō are still celebrated and recited among both beggars and bankers. For a contemporary English poet to compare to these icons she would need something like the lyrical dexterity and rhythmic genius of Biggie Smalls, Black Thought, or Gerard Manley Hopkins, the technical creativity of MF Doom, Lil' Wayne, e.e. cummings, or Emily Dickinson, the sensitivity of Wordsworth, the musicality of Keats or Dylan Thomas, the imagery of Yeats, the vision of Blake, the erudition of Milton or Eliot, and the profundity of Donne or Shakespeare.
- 102 Kocku von Stuckrad, "Making Senses: Poetic Knowledge of Nature in Science, Art, and Shamanic Ritual," *Counterpoint* (2018), <https://www.counterpointknowledge.org/making-senses-poetic-knowledge-of-nature-in-science-art-and-shamanic-ritual/>. Similarly, Wordsworth's famous "Ode: Intimation of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" begins:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
 Turn wheresoe'er I may,
 By night or day.
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimation of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood>. This process of disenchantment and its relationship to language, thought, and poetry are profoundly explored in Owen Barfield's work, particularly his *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

- 103 Tu Wei-Ming, "Profound Learning," 28. Due to the dominance of secular modernity over so many aspects of life and thought, this alienation can even be detected in the best of modern religious poets, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, as clearly evinced in poems like his "Nondum," whose desperate cry is similar to, but profoundly different from, the lovelorn longing verses of contemporaneous Sufi poets, due to their profound differences in cosmology.
- 104 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 132.
- 105 Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, ed. Oliver Bernard (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 11.
- 106 One could also mention a third category, "the petty" or "the prosaic," whose verse hardly deserves the name and does not rise above uninspired wordplay, sloganeering, and an idiosyncratic rummaging through the basement of the writer's own psyche. It is no accident that so many of the best contemporary poets in European languages hail from or heavily draw upon more traditional poetic cultures.
- 107 Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," 28.

- 108 Henri Poincaré, *Science and Method*, trans. Francis Maitland (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010), 129.
- 109 Albert Einstein, "Principles of Research," in *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010), 226. He also wrote, "When I examine myself and my methods of thought I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge." Ronald Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 118. And "Our age is proud of the progress it has made in man's intellectual development. The search and striving for truth and knowledge is one of the highest of man's qualities—though often the pride is most loudly voiced by those who strive the least. And certainly we should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead, it can only serve; and it is not fastidious in its choices of a leader. This characteristic is reflected in the qualities of its priests, the intellectuals. The intellect has a sharp eye for methods and tools, but is blind to ends and values. So it is no wonder that this fatal blindness is handed from old to young and today involves a whole generation." Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (New York: Citadel Press, 1956), 260.
- 110 For example, see Mark Lakoff and George Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010); Kathryn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Lera Boroditsky, "How Language Shapes Thought," *Scientific American* 304, no. 2 (2011): 62–65.
- 111 *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, <https://ganjoor.net/moulavi/>

- 112 Reza Saberi, *The Divan of Hafez* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 62.
- 113 In a certain sense, poetry can evoke all the other arts in our imagination.
- 114 Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 273 n135.
- 115 Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 112.
- 116 Which, as Origen noted, is resolved in the person and work of the philosopher-poet. Moreover, Aristotle argued that poetry was closer to philosophy than history, because the former deals with universals while the latter concerns itself with particulars. But it is probably Proclus who best resolves this "ancient quarrel" through his analysis of inspired poetry as "symbolic" as opposed to "mimetic," writing, "How, moreover, could the term "mimetic" be applied to that poetry which interprets the divine by means of symbols? For symbols are not imitations of those things they symbolize. Things could never be imitations of their opposites (good imitating bad, natural imitating unnatural), but the symbolic mode [ἡ . . . συμβολικὴ θεωρία] indicates the nature of things even by means of their complete opposites. Therefore, if a poet is inspired and reveals to us through symbols the truth about things that are, or if he uses systematic knowledge to reveal to us the order of things, this poet is not an imitator and cannot be found wanting by the arguments we are discussing." (Proclus, *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems: Essays 5 and 6 of His Commentary on the Republic of Plato*, trans. Robert Lamberton (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2012), 295).
- 117 While Maritain contrasts poetry and metaphysics, insisting on their distinction, in traditions such as Sufism

and some schools of Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese philosophy, such a divorce has not occurred with the metaphysics suffusing the poetry, and the poetry the metaphysics. Maritain argues, "Whereas metaphysics stands in the line of knowledge and of the contemplation of truth, poetry stands in the line of making, and of the delight procured by beauty. The difference is an all-important one, and one that it would be harmful to disregard. Metaphysics snatches at the spiritual in an idea by the most abstract intellection; poetry reaches it in the flesh, by the very point of the sense sharpened through intelligence." Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 128. But as is characteristic of much modern, Western thought, Maritain has conflated a kind of metaphysical ideation with metaphysical contemplation and realization, which is not delimited by abstraction. As I've written in a poem:

More abstract than thought
more concrete than bone
Farther than the stars
and closer than home

Too sensual for kisses
too subtle to teach
Too fluent for silence
too profound for speech

No matter how high
My words seem to fly
Our love runs too deep
For any to reach

- 118 Indeed, many of the earliest recorded works of

philosophy, such as the fragments of Parmenides and Egyptian wisdom literature, are poems or highly poetic (e.g., the Tao Te Ching and Heraclitus's book).

- 119 Furthermore, the Prophet of Islam declared that "there is nothing left of prophecy but the true dream," and poetry, as the symbolic language of the birds, of heavenly symbolism, of imagination, is spoken in the language of dreams, and thus true poetry is a kind of echo of prophecy. Hence the close relationship between the masterpieces of Islamic poetry and the Qur'an and hadith (e.g., Jāmī called Rūmī's *Mathnawī* "the Qur'an in Persian").
- 120 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 199, 381.
- 121 As the Qur'an says, "He drew near and drew nearer / went down" (53:8).
- 122 William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Russ McDonald (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 72.
- 123 Timothy Bartel, "Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Ordered Soul through Metered Verse," Poetry Corner (podcast), October 13, 2017, <https://thesaintconstantineschool.podbean.com/e/poetry-corner-saint-gregory-of-nazianzus-an-ordered-soul-through-metered-verse/>.
- 124 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Autobiographical Poems*, trans. Caroline White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.
- 125 Remembering the etymology of *inspiration* as "in-breathing" reveals that this disconnect is what gives so much of modern poetry its "bad breath."
- 126 Testifying to the enduring human thirst for verse, even modern poetry seems to be making something of a comeback in the United States in recent years, which, in

addition to the popularity of vulgarized versions of Rūmī, have witnessed poets appearing on popular television talk shows, performing at sporting events, and even poetry books cracking the *New York Times* bestseller list.

- 127 Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 127.
- 128 Stevens, "The Snow Man."
- 129 Basho, *The Narrow Road*, 28.

